

Parashat Tol'dot (Genesis 25.19-28.9)

Nahum Sarna: Birth of Two Nations

The second series of patriarchal narratives, that relating to Isaac, now begins. The data about him are exceedingly sparse. Much of what is preserved—his birth and circumcision, the Akedah, and his marriage—is integrated into the biography of Abraham, while other episodes belong to the large collection of traditions regarding Jacob. Nothing is recorded of the first 20 years of Isaac's marriage. Only a few isolated events in his life are preserved in the literature, where he is eclipsed by the towering figure of his father Abraham and overshadowed by the dynamic, forceful personality of his son Jacob.

Yet Isaac is more than a mere transition between Abraham and Jacob, and the biblical account does contain unmistakable elements of individuality. Isaac's name, uniquely bestowed by God, is not changed [unlike Abraham and Israel—Shammai; his pastoral wanderings are restricted to a narrow range and largely center around Beersheba; unlike Abraham, he does not live at Hebron-Kiryat Arba, but settles there only in his old age; he alone remains monogamous; he is the only patriarch to engage in agriculture [that we know of—Shammai] and the only one never to leave the promised land; finally, the unique divine name *pachad yitzchak* [fear of Isaac, 31.42] suggests some episode, not recorded, in which this particular name would have been meaningful. References in Amos 7.9, 16 to "the shrines of Isaac" and to "the house of Isaac" as an epithet for Israel seem to indicate that a more extensive account of his life once existed.

The story of Isaac, interrupted by the genealogies of chapter 25, now resumes with the main emphasis on the birth of Esau and Jacob, and the rivalry between them. These narratives present an ancient belief that the bitter hostility that marked the later relationships between the peoples of Israel and Edom had its origin in the prenatal experience of their founding fathers, who were twins. The idea that Jacob/Israel and Esau/Edom were siblings finds expression in several biblical texts. Deuteronomy 23.8 says: "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman." Numbers 20.14 reports that in the course of the wilderness wanderings Moses sent a message to the king of Edom that opened with the phrase, "Thus says your brother Israel." The prophet Ovadiah, in his indictment of Edom, also refers to "your brother Jacob" (v. 10), and Malachi (1.2) assumes it to be common knowledge that "Esau is Jacob's brother." *This tradition is so extraordinary, given the long and bitter history of enmity between Israel and Edom, that it must reflect authentic historical experience.* [Emphasis Shammai]

According to Genesis 36.6-8, the clan of Esau originally lived in Canaan, but later settled in "the hill country of Seir." The national territory of Edom lay east of the Jordan in the southernmost part of the country. It stretched from the Gulf of Eilat northward for a distance of about 100 miles to...the natural boundary between Edom and Moab. It shared a common boundary with Judea along the rift of the Arabah, which extends from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Akaba. It was this geographic reality that engendered the hostility between the two peoples. The western side of the Edomite homeland enjoyed a strategic and climatic advantage. Its steep precipices, rising to 5,000 feet above sea level, overlook the Aravah. Their westerly exposure assures the receipt of respectable amounts of precipitation, thereby sustaining agriculture and forests. The "king's highway," one of the main arteries of communication in the ancient world, traversed the country from north to south. This gave it control over the precious caravan trade from India and southern Arabia and connected it with Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia. Punon, an important copper mining and smelting site, was also situated within Edom.

On the western side of the rift lay the Aravah, arid and far from the Judean centers of population. This necessitated long lines of communication, and the hauling of supplies over considerable distances and treacherous terrain. The copper deposits of the Aravah were unexploitable without a local supply of fuel. A strategic highway led through the region from the Gulf of Akaba across the Negev to Beersheba, where it split into a network of roads joining the important towns of Judea and Northern Israel. Without control of the Aravah, the nomadic tribes that roamed the Negev were a constant menace.

Both Edom and Israel had abundant incentive to encroach upon each other's territory. It was easier for the Edomites to infiltrate westward into the Aravah than for the Judeans to penetrate Edom. The Edomites exploited their strategic advantage to the full, while the temptation to shorten communication lines, to have a supply source close by, and to have access to fuel for the copper mines as well as control over the lucrative spice trade proved irresistible to the Judean kings. It was David who defeated the Edomites, stationed permanent garrisons in their land, and made them vassals of his kingdom, as described in 2 Samuel 8.13f.

THE SALE OF THE BIRTHRIGHT

The struggle for seniority between the twins, which commenced inside the womb, continues into adulthood. Jacob now seizes an opportunity to inveigle Esau into transferring the birthright to him. His desperate endeavors to obtain this end by means fair or foul can only be understood in terms of a specific psychological situation, the elements of which were certain complex sacred realities. The firstborn son along with the first fruits of the soil and the male firstlings of the herd and the flock were considered to be possessed of a unique sanctity. They all belonged to God. The first male issue of the human womb had to be redeemed from his sacral state. Originally, he was accorded a privileged position in the cult. At a later time, the tribe of Levi displaced the first-born in Israel and appropriated his cultic prerogatives.

Being the primary guarantor of the future of the family line and, hence, of the preservation of the ancestral heritage, the first-born naturally ranked second only to the head of the family, the *paterfamilias*, whose successor he would automatically become. Isaac's blessing in 27.29 makes this quite clear. The status of first-born was bound up with responsibilities and obligations on the one hand, and with rights, privileges, and prerogatives on the other.

Two other aspects of the story of Jacob and Esau have been illuminated by ancient Near Eastern documents. We now know that a father had the right to disregard chronological considerations in determining his heirs and that an heir was able to barter away his future inheritance.

The hegemony of the older brother in the ancient world is widely attested. It is taken for granted, for example, in a Sumerian hymn....The right of the first-born to a double share of the inheritance is documented at Mari and Nuzi, in the Middle Assyrian laws, and in biblical law (Deuteronomy 21.17).

The provisions of Deuteronomy 21.15-17 establish that at some period it had been legally and socially acceptable in Israel for the father to ignore seniority of birth. We know also that Jacob deprived Reuben of his birthright...[and that he] passed over Manasseh in favor of the younger Ephraim. Added to these examples is the documentation from Nuzi, Alalakh, and Ugarit, all confirming the same sociolegal situation. Finally, the possibility of the transfer of inheritance rights is illustrated by a Nuzi tablet that records how a man parted with his future inheritance share in return for three sheep received immediately from his brother.

JACOB: THE MORAL ISSUE

Jacob as a young man is not portrayed in a favorable light. First he acquires the birthright through his heartless exploitation of his own brother's misery, then he purloins the patriarchal blessing by means of crafty deception practiced upon his blind and aged father. In both instances, the outcome is legally valid and irrevocable, notwithstanding the unsavory aspects of Jacob's actions. It is evident that the successful application of shrewd opportunism was well respected in the ancient Near East as it is in contemporary society. The two incidents also appear to betray a thoroughly formalistic conception of law in which the strict outward adherence to certain practices or principles is decisive, irrespective of the true spirit of the law and in disregard of moral considerations. It is remarkable, therefore, that the biblical narrative has succeeded in weaving the stories into the larger biography of Jacob in such a way as to add up to an unqualified condemnation of Jacob's actions.

The function of the divine oracle that Rebekah received during her difficult pregnancy is to disengage the fact of Jacob's election by God from the improper means that he employed in his impatience to formalize his predestined, independent right to be Isaac's heir. His claim rests wholly and solely on God's revealed predetermination, and the presence of the oracle constitutes a moral judgment on Jacob's behavior.

This clear, if implicit, censure is brought out all the more forcefully in the cycle of biographic tales. Scripture says of Abraham that he died at “a good ripe age, old and contented.” Isaac is similarly described as dying “in ripe old age.” But such notice is singularly and revealingly lacking in the case of Jacob. This patriarch can only report that the years of his life have been “few and hard” (47.9). The reference, of course, is to the unrelieved series of trials and tribulations that dogged his footsteps from the day he deceived his father until the last years of his life.

The quiet, mild, home-loving Jacob, favorite of his mother, was forced into precipitous flight, to be exiled for 20 years. Indeed, the catalogue of misfortunes that befell him reads like the retributive counterpart, measure for measure, of his own offenses. Just as he exploited his brother’s plight, so Laban exploits his. He took advantage of his father’s permanent darkness to misrepresent himself as his elder brother, so Laban makes use of the darkness to substitute the elder sister for the younger. When Jacob admonishes Laban with the accusatory “Why did you deceive me?” (29.25), he echoes the very Hebrew stem used about himself by Isaac to Esau (27.35). The perpetrator of deception is now the victim, hoist with his own petard.

When Jacob finally makes his escape from Haran and sets out for home after two decades in the service of his scoundrelly uncle, he finds his erstwhile employer in hot and hostile pursuit of him. No sooner has this trouble passed than he feels his life to be in mortal danger once again from Esau. Arriving at last at the threshold of Canaan, he experiences the mysterious night encounter that leaves him with a strained hip. His worst troubles await him in the land of Canaan. His only daughter, Dinah, is violated; his beloved wife, Rachel, dies in childbirth; and the first son she bore him is kidnapped and sold into slavery by his own brothers. In perpetrating this inhuman act, the brothers use an article of his clothing in order to deceive their father, just as Jacob years before had used Esau’s clothes to mislead Isaac.

All the foregoing makes quite clear Scripture’s condemnation of Jacob’s early moral lapses. An explicit denunciation could hardly be more effective or more scathing than Jacob’s unhappy biography. Nevertheless, expressions of outright censure of Jacob’s behavior are found in prophetic literature. Hosea tells us (12.3) that the Lord once “punished Jacob for his conduct,/ Requited him for his deeds.” And Jeremiah warns (9.3): “Beware, every man of his friend! / Trust not even a brother! / For every brother takes advantage,/ Every friend is base in his dealings.” It can hardly be doubted that the prophet intends to signal to the hearer an association with Jacob’s treatment of Esau, a notorious example of such base behavior.

All of the above provide ample evidence that Jacob’s duplicitous behavior with regard to the birthright was totally unacceptable to the biblical Narrator.

Parashat Tol'dot (Genesis 25.19-28.9)

Chapter 25:19-33

¹⁹ This is the story of [the line of, WGP] Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac. ²⁰ Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹ Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²² But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" [Hebrew uncertain] She went to inquire of the Lord, ²³ and the Lord answered her,

"Two nations are in your womb,

Two separate peoples shall issue from your body; [shall branch off from each other—WGP]

One people shall be mightier [shall prevail over—WGP] than the other, And the older shall serve the younger."

²⁴ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over; so they named him Esau [synonym of "Seir," play on Hebrew se 'ar, meaning "hair"]. ²⁶ Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob [play on Hebrew ekev, meaning "heel"]. Isaac was 60 years old when they were born.

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild [a homespun—WGP] man who stayed in camp. ²⁸ Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game [lit. "game was in his mouth"]; but Rebekah favored Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the open [the hunting field—WGP], famished. ³⁰ And Esau said to Jacob, "Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished"—which is why he was named Edom [play on Hebrew ' adom "red"]. ³¹ Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright [here and now—WGP]." ³² And Esau said, "I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?" ³³ But Jacob said, "Swear to me first [here and now—WGP]." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright.

POINTS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

Why was Rebekah so despondent over this pregnancy?

What was she looking for when she went to inquire of God?

What is the meaning and significance of inquiring of God?

Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

EF: Everett Fox REF: Richard Elliott Friedman RA: Robert Alter NS: Nahum Sarna CS: Chaim Stern
SRH: Samson Raphael Hirsch RASHI: Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak OJPS: Old Jewish Publication Society version
WGP: W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* TWÇ: *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

Chapter 26

¹ There was a famine in the land—aside from the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham—and Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar. ² The Lord had appeared to him [then appeared to him—WGP] and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land which I point out to you. ³ Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴ I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs—
⁵ inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings.” ⁶ So Isaac stayed in Gerar.

⁷ When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” for he was afraid to say “my wife,” thinking, “The men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful.” ⁸ When some time had passed, Abimelech king of the Philistines, looking out of the window [one day—WGP], saw Isaac fondling [fooling around with—REF; laughing-and-loving—EF; playing—RA] his wife Rebekah. ⁹ Abimelech sent for Isaac and said, “So she is your wife! Why then did you say: ‘She is my sister’?” Isaac said to him, “Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her.” ¹⁰ Abimelech said, “What have you done to us! One of the people might have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.” ¹¹ Abimelech then charged all the people, saying, “Anyone who molests [touches—REF, WGP, RA] this man or his wife shall be put to death.”

¹² Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. The Lord blessed him, ¹³ and the man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy: ¹⁴ he acquired flocks and herds, and a large household, so that the Philistines envied him. ¹⁵ And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father’s servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them with earth [dirt—REF; rubble—WGP]. ¹⁶ And Abimelech said to Isaac, “Go away from us, for you have become far too big for us.”

¹⁷ So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the wadi of Gerar, where he settled. ¹⁸ Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham’s death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them. ¹⁹ But when Isaac’s servants, digging in the wadi, found there a well of spring water, ²⁰ the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen, saying,

God warns Isaac not to leave the Land, but to go to Gerar. Yet, we were already told that “Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar.” So why command an action already taken? (Perhaps an answer lurks in Verse 6, or perhaps the standard translation is not accurate?)

God has never yet spoken to Isaac. Now, the first words He speaks warn Isaac to stay in Gerar, then offers him the patriarchal promise. Why did God choose to link the two together?

Avraham, God said, observed “My commandments [mitzvotai], My laws [chukotai], and My teachings [torotai].” Is this an anachronism?

“There was a famine in the land,” yet “Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year.” How do you that in the midst of a famine?

We are told that “the man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy,” which created “envy” among the local population. Is “envy” the right word? What is actually going on here?

“The water is ours.” He named that well Esek [Wrangle—WGP], because they contended with him. ²¹ And when they dug another well, they disputed over that one also; so he named it Sitnah [Animosity—WGP]. ²² He moved from there and dug yet another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, “Now at last the Lord has granted us ample space to increase in the land.” ²³ From there he went up to Beer-sheba.

²⁴ That night the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of My servant Abraham.” ²⁵ So he built an altar there and invoked the Lord by name. Isaac pitched his tent there and his servants started digging a well.

²⁶ And Abimelech came to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his councilor and Phicol chief of his troops. ²⁷ Isaac said to them, “Why have you come to me, seeing that you have been hostile to me and have driven me away from you?” ²⁸ And they said, “We now see plainly that the Lord has been with you, and we thought: Let there be a sworn treaty between our two parties, between you and us. Let us make a pact with you ²⁹ that you will not do us harm, just as we have not molested you but have always dealt kindly with you and sent you away in peace. From now on, be you [You are now—REF, WGP] blessed of the Lord!” ³⁰ Then he made for them a feast, and they ate and drank. ³¹ Early in the morning, they exchanged oaths. Isaac then bade them farewell, and they departed from him in peace. ³² That same day Isaac’s servants came and told him about the well they had dug, and said to him, “We have found water!” ³³ He named it Shibah [oath—WGP]; therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day.

³⁴ When Esau was 40 years old, he took to wife Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; ³⁵ and they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah.

Genesis 27

¹ When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, “My son.” He answered, “Here I am.” ² And he said, “I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die. ³ Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game. ⁴ Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die.”

In Verse 24, God repeats His promise of earlier, and again says He will fulfill it “for the sake of My servant Avraham.” Why not say “for your sake, because you heeded My word and did not leave the land”? After all, God did say earlier, “Do not go down to Egypt...; reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you....”

Why does Isaac emphasize that Esau should take his “quiver and bow”? After all, if he wants his son to hunt game for him, quiver and bow is what Esau would take.

⁵ Rebekah had been listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau had gone out into the open to hunt game to bring home, ⁶ Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying, ⁷ ‘Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with the Lord’s approval, before I die.’

⁸ Now, my son, listen carefully as I instruct [am commanding—REF] you.

⁹ Go to the flock and fetch me two choice kids, and I will make of them a dish for your father, such as he likes. ¹⁰ Then take it to your father to eat, in order that he may bless you before he dies.” ¹¹ Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, “But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned. ¹² If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing.” ¹³ But his mother said to him, “Your curse, my son, be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me.”

¹⁴ He got them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared a dish such as his father liked. ¹⁵ Rebekah then took the best clothes of her older son Esau, which were there in the house, and had her younger son Jacob put them on; ¹⁶ and she covered his hands and the hairless part of his neck with the skins of the kids. ¹⁷ Then she put in the hands of her son Jacob the dish and the bread that she had prepared.

¹⁸ He went to his father and said, “Father.” And he said, “Yes, which of my sons are you?” ¹⁹ Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau, your first-born; I have done as you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me your innermost blessing.”

²⁰ Isaac said to his son, “How did you succeed so quickly, my son?” And he said, “Because the Lord your God granted me good fortune.”

²¹ Isaac said to Jacob, “Come closer that I may feel you, my son—whether you are really my son Esau or not.” ²² So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered. “The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.” ²³ He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; and so he blessed him. ²⁴ He asked, “Are you really my son Esau?” And when he said, “I am,” ²⁵ he said, “Serve me and let me eat of my son’s game that I may give you my innermost blessing.” So he served him and he ate, and he brought him wine and he drank. ²⁶ Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come close and kiss me, my son”; ²⁷ and he went up and kissed him. And he smelled his clothes and he blessed him, saying, “Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the Lord has blessed.

What is suggested by Rebekah’s admission that she had been listening unobserved to her husband’s conversations?

Rebekah could have confronted Isaac, or simply remind him of the prophecy, but she did neither. What is suggested here about the relationship between Isaac and Rivka generally?

Of all the things Jacob should be concerned about—failing to honor his father, showing him disrespect, pulling a prank on his brother, and going along with a plan that could drive a permanent wedge between husband and wife—he’s worried about himself alone. He is mollified by his mother’s assurance that she will take the full force of any repercussion, which is not what a loving son out to protect his mother would do. So how is our forefather doing so far? Can we explain away this behavior?

Rebekah misquoted what Isaac said, so how did Jacob get it right?

²⁸ “May God give you
Of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth,
Abundance of new grain and wine.
²⁹ Let peoples serve you,
And nations bow to you;
Be master over your brothers, [Be your brother’ s superior—REF]
And let your mother’s sons bow to you.
Cursed be they who curse you,
Blessed they who bless you.”

³⁰ No sooner had Jacob left the presence of his father Isaac—after Isaac had finished blessing Jacob—than his brother Esau came back from his hunt. ³¹ He too prepared a dish and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, “Let my father sit up and eat of his son’s game, so that you may give me your innermost blessing.” ³² His father Isaac said to him, “Who are you?” And he said, “I am your son, Esau, your first-born!” ³³ Isaac was seized with very violent trembling. “Who was it then,” he demanded, “that hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover, I ate of it before you came, and I blessed him; now he must remain blessed!” ³⁴ When Esau heard his father’s words, he burst into wild and bitter sobbing, and said to his father, “Bless me too, Father!” ³⁵ But he answered, “Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing.” ³⁶ [Esau] said, “Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me [ויעקבני, this is a play on the name יעקב] these two times? First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing!” And he added, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

³⁷ Isaac answered, saying to Esau, “But I have made him master over you: I have given him all his brothers for servants, and sustained him with grain and wine. What, then, can I still do for you, my son?”

³⁸ And Esau said to his father, “Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!” And Esau wept aloud. ³⁹ And his father Isaac answered, saying to him,

“See, your abode shall enjoy the fat of the earth
And the dew of heaven above.

[Here. away from the fat of the earth will be your home,
[and from the dew of the skies above—REF]

⁴⁰ Yet by your sword you shall live,
And you shall serve your brother;
But when you grow restive,
You shall break his yoke from your neck.”

Okay, so we’ve heard the conversation between Isaac and Jacob and the blessing that followed. We’ll heard the blessing Isaac gave to Esau. As we do, consider this: Was Isaac really fooled by Jacob’s disguise?

Suggest proofs from the text for your answer?

Compare the blessing given to each son. What, if anything, seems wrong with the blessing given to the disguised Jacob?

Having compared the two blessings, is there something that should be in one of them that is not there—and what does this suggest?

⁴¹ Now Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, “Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob.” ⁴² When the words of her older son Esau were reported to Rebekah, she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, “Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. ⁴³ Now, my son, listen to me. Flee at once to Haran, to my brother Laban. ⁴⁴ Stay with him a while, until your brother’s fury subsides— ⁴⁵ until your brother’s anger against you subsides—and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will fetch you from there. Let me not lose you both in one day!” ⁴⁶ Rebekah said to Isaac, “I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?”

Genesis 28:1-9

¹ So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying, “You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. ² Up, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother’s father, and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother, ³ May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. ⁴ May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which God assigned to Abraham.”

⁵ Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau.

⁶ When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him off to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, charging him, as he blessed him, “You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women,” ⁷ and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and gone to Paddan-aram, ⁸ Esau realized that the Canaanite women displeased his father Isaac. ⁹ So Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, sister of Nebaioth.

Did Esau realize that his father was displeased with his daughters-in-law because he overheard Isaac prohibit Jacob from marrying Canaanite women—or for some other reason?

How can we explain the fact that Isaac never warned his favorite son against marrying Canaanite women, but he did so warn the son he did not favor (and actually had every reason to dislike intensely at this point)?

How angry was Esau at Jacob after he heard what his father said to baby brother? How does the text support your answer and what might it tell us about the character of Esau?

What should we make of the statement that Esau “realized that the Canaanite women displeased his father”?