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A BROUHAHA IN THE MAKING

(Genesis 25:19-34)

Sometimes one catches glimpses of trouble that will not fully erupt until much later. For example, in my own country (USA), Patrick Henry, one of its slave-owning founding fathers, admitted that slavery contradicted the ideals of the American Revolution. And in 1790 James Madison called slavery a ‘deep-rooted abuse’ and the arguments used to support slavery ‘shamefully indecent.’¹ Long before 1861 and the bloodshed of the War Between the States, there was already, at least among some, an ‘uneasy conscience’ over slavery; there were indicators of what might be coming down the road. Likewise, here in this text one doesn’t see the ‘brouhaha’ yet – only the ingredients that indicate it is coming: fetuses smashing each other in the womb (v. 22), parental favoritism (v. 28), and the birthright sale (vv. 29-34).

Here at 25:19 we arrive at the ‘generations’ of Isaac. The word is *toledoth* and it occurs over ten times in Genesis in

1. Thomas S. Kidd, *American History, Volume 1* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2019), p. 69; and Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot’s History of the United States* (New York: Sentinel, 2004), p. 115.

headings like this. 'Generations' doesn't convey the sense very well. The word is from the root *yalad* (to bear, beget, give birth) and refers to what is produced or what develops from a person. So the *toledoth* of Isaac here does not have much to do with Isaac (except a bit here and in chapter 26) but primarily refers to what *developed* from Isaac, namely Jacob and matters relating to him. So too in 37:2, when the text speaks of 'the *toledoth* of Jacob,' the focus is on Joseph and his brothers – i.e., what developed out of Jacob. Something like 'developing story' or 'ensuing story' might best capture the idea.² In any case, 'the *toledoth* of Isaac' takes in 25:19–35:29 and mostly focuses on Jacob. This is our chunk of text. More specifically, now we focus on 25:19-34 and simply want to ask what it is that we are meant to see here.

First off, we run into **the typical difficulties of God's people** (vv. 19-21). Here are Isaac and Rebekah, but Rebekah is 'barren' (v. 21). Looks like a re-run. Sarah was barren (11:30) and it took up ten chapters of Genesis before Isaac was born (chapter 21). Now Rebekah repeats the pattern. And it's really difficult to become a 'great nation' (12:2) without a biological starter kit. Unlike Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah do not use some facsimile of the 'Hagar method' (chapter 16). Instead Isaac resorts to prayer (v. 21a). John Currid notes that the Hebrew terminology indicates that Isaac did more than pray 'for' his wife, but that he prayed 'in front of' her, in her presence.³ Yahweh granted the request; Rebekah becomes pregnant. Verse 20 says that Isaac was forty when he married Rebekah, and verse 26 says he was sixty when the twins were born – hence twenty long years of childlessness.

2. Cf. TWOT, 1:380.

3. John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Genesis*, 2 vols. (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2003), 2:12.

At this point you should glance at the *context*. Look at 25:12-18, ‘the *toledoth* of Ishmael.’ Granted, it’s not the greatest devotional section; you are not particularly fascinated with Mishma, Dumah, and Massa, for example. But do you see the stark contrast? Here is the non-chosen line of Ishmael with twelve sons; Ishmael’s line has fertility coming out of its ears. Isaac’s line can’t even become a line until, after twenty years, there is one conception. How often it seems that the prospects for the people of God in this world are pretty hopeless.

James Humes asks us to imagine interviewing a job applicant. The young man sitting in front of you not only stutters but has a lisp. You look at his resume and find he has no college degree, in fact has never attended college. Then you hear from an associate that this fellow had fainted out of fear in one of his first public appearances.⁴ He’s referring to Winston Churchill, but at that point things looked pretty bleak. And the writer’s point here is that the people of God in this world often seem like that – weak and fragile and apparently fruitless and of little account, an unimpressive lot. That is so often still the case for Christ’s church. The Belgic Confession (1561) captures both the hope but also the realism in this:

This Church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects. This holy Church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world, *although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man* (From Article 27; emphasis mine).

‘Very small and as extinct’ – but *there*. God so frequently begins His work with next to nothing and continues it in repeated episodes of apparent hopelessness.

4. James C. Humes, *The Sir Winston Method* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), p. 15

Secondly, we see here **the surprising announcement of God's decision** (vv. 22-23). Well, it was a nasty pregnancy. The lads 'kept smashing one another' in the womb (v. 22a). One is tempted to offer Rebekah some comfort with: 'They're not kicking you, Rebekah, they're punching one another.' It causes Rebekah much anguish and distress. Her question in verse 22b is choppy and hard to translate. One wonders if the pain affected her coherence. Why this kind of pregnancy? She's baffled and goes to 'inquire of Yahweh' (v. 22c). Who knows what that involved? Did she go to some prophet? A priest? At any rate, Yahweh's answer was:

Two nations are in your womb,
 and two peoples coming out of you will be divided;
 and one people will be stronger than the other
 – and the older will serve the younger (v. 23).

The twist comes in the climactic line – a reversal of the expected. Yahweh tends to be unconventional; He does not necessarily follow society's expectations or kowtow to its standards. 'The older will serve the younger.' Paul picks up on this in Romans 9:10-12, underscoring what a sheer sovereign decision it was – declared before their births, before either had done any actual good or bad. God does not have to consult us; His decisions are not subject to our discussion.

I know I have alluded to it somewhere before, but this 'sovereignty' brings to mind that anecdote Seymour Morris, Jr., tells of Abraham Lincoln. Seems President Lincoln was finding himself at odds with his cabinet over some matter under debate. So, at the end of the disagreement he was tallying up how things stood: 'Seven nays, one aye; the ayes have it.' He could say how it would be, because, after all, he was the president.⁵

There is that 'sovereign' note in this text (v. 23d) – and it is a sovereignty that goes against the stream, against the way

5. In *American History Revised* (New York: Broadway, 2010), p. 232.

man would normally do things. What we must see is that it's only because of this unconventional pattern in God's ways that we have hope. You remember how Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians? What he calls 'the foolishness of God'? He tells the Corinthians to look around at themselves – they will not find many wise by human standards, not many mighty, not many bluebloods. And why? Because 'God chose the foolish things of the world ..., God chose the weak things of the world ..., and God chose the insignificant things ... the despised things, the things that are nothing ...' (1:27-28). So we have hope because of this surprising, sovereign God.

Next, I think the writer also wants us to see **the natural folly of God's servants** (vv. 27-28). The twins' births are recorded, but the next note (v. 27) introduces them as grown-ups ('Now when the lads had grown up ...'). Gobs of time and experiences are omitted. The writer doesn't provide a detailed biography but only notes what we need to know. And apparently, we need to know that Esau was an expert hunter, an outdoorsman, and that Jacob may've been more of a homebody, perhaps focusing on livestock. In any case, we're told that Isaac loved Esau because he was addicted to the game Esau killed and cooked up, while Rebekah loved Jacob (v. 28). Apparently, this was obvious. This favoritism will bring on trouble come chapter 27 – just as Jacob's favoritism will in chapter 37.

Kulula Airlines used to have a take-off on one of those traditional airline announcements: 'In the unlikely event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure, an oxygen mask will drop down ...' The announcement goes on to instruct anyone traveling with a child to arrange one's own mask first before tending to the child's. Then Kulula raised the ultimate dilemma: 'If you're traveling with more than one child, pick your favorite!' Isaac and Rebekah would be in no doubt of theirs.

Isn't the text raising a blinking yellow light about parental favoritism? Isn't it implying that we need to exercise wisdom in this matter? Some interpreters might say that we need to keep our eyes on what 'preaches Christ' in an Old Testament text and not get caught up in moralistic points. No, we don't want to bog down in some morass of moralism, only looking for lessons or examples that we can pull out of an Old Testament narrative. But what if such a passage *wants to make* a moral or ethical or exemplary point? If the writer doesn't want to do so, then why did he include verses 27-28? They certainly don't 'preach Christ' as 'Christocentric' interpreters much prefer. Are these verses, however, meant as a warning to covenant people to avoid such folly in their own households? It can be easy to slip into such a practice – it's such a *natural* folly. So shouldn't the text goad us to prayer? Shouldn't we be begging the Lord to keep us from doing anything so blatantly stupid in the life of our family?

Lastly, our chapter highlights **the casual attitude toward God's gifts** (vv. 29-34). Here we zero in on Esau.

I've already noted how verse 27 immediately skipped to the twins' grown-up years – and verses 29-34 provide, at this point, but one anecdote from that time. Jacob is cooking and Esau has been hunting; Esau comes in 'famished' (v. 29b). Just how famished 'famished' connotes we'll have to wait and see. Esau begs, 'Let me gulp down some of the red stuff, this red stuff, for I'm famished' (v. 30). Esau sees stew, Jacob sees opportunity. So Jacob sets a price on the stew: 'Sell me right now your birthright' (v. 31). Esau claims he is 'about to die,' what possible use would a birthright be to him? (v. 32). But Jacob won't budge – he wants Esau to make it 'legal' – to go on oath about it – and he does (v. 33). And stew is served.

This 'birthright' normally belonged to the first-born, though it was transferable, and – at least later in Israel (Deut. 21:17) – involved receiving a double portion of the inheritance; he would also assume family leadership upon the

father's death.⁶ It entailed both provision and position. The 'blessing' (see chapter 27) was distinct from the birthright; however, the birthright seems to have been the normal pathway to the blessing.

How are we to construe this incident? It's easy for some expositors to malign Jacob for taking unfair advantage of Esau in the latter's dire distress. But just how 'dire' was Esau's distress? If he is 'famished' (vv. 29, 30), does that mean on the brink of starvation or simply that he's terribly hungry? In the same way, is his 'I'm about to die' (v. 32) a statement of literal and imminent fact or a piece of hyperbole similar to some of ours? The post-stew verbs in verse 34 suggest Esau's condition was not so catastrophic: 'so he ate and drank and got up and went on his way.' If anything, they imply a rather casual, nonchalant, business-as-usual demeanor. At any rate, we don't have to guess because the writer himself gives us the authorized interpretation in verse 34b: 'So Esau despised the birthright.' That is how we are to look at it. He didn't give a rip. The problem is not the conniving of Jacob but the apathy of Esau. He may carry on later (27:36) but the writer knows where the blame belongs.

Perhaps the situation is analogous to that of the much-lauded missionary-explorer, David Livingstone. He married Mary Moffat, apparently not out of romantic passion, for he described her as 'sturdy' and 'matter-of-fact.' In something like a half-dozen years, through their various journeys, she delivered five children. She gave birth to the fifth in September 1851, and in his journal Livingstone bemoaned her 'frequent pregnancies.'⁷ And we must be pardoned for asking, 'Who, pray tell, was responsible for those?' In like manner, our text

6. See Currid, 2:21; and B. K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 363-64.

7. Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 158-59.

here says that Esau was 'to blame.' The writer of Hebrews agrees and when he recalls that Esau 'sold his birthright for a single meal', he calls him 'profane' (*bebelos*, Heb. 12:16). I recall hearing Dr. J. O. Buswell remark that he would translate the term as 'secular.' That was the problem. Esau's style of life didn't really matter. It didn't matter that, to analogize, he sat by his Coleman camp stove, cooking game and reading the latest copy of *Field and Stream* magazine with his rifle stashed in the gun rack in his old pick-up truck. No, he was secular; he had no interest or concern about covenant matters, about divine promises or divine privileges. That 'despised' (v. 34) is a strong verb. And there have always been Esaus who've said, 'No thanks, I really prefer the outer darkness.'