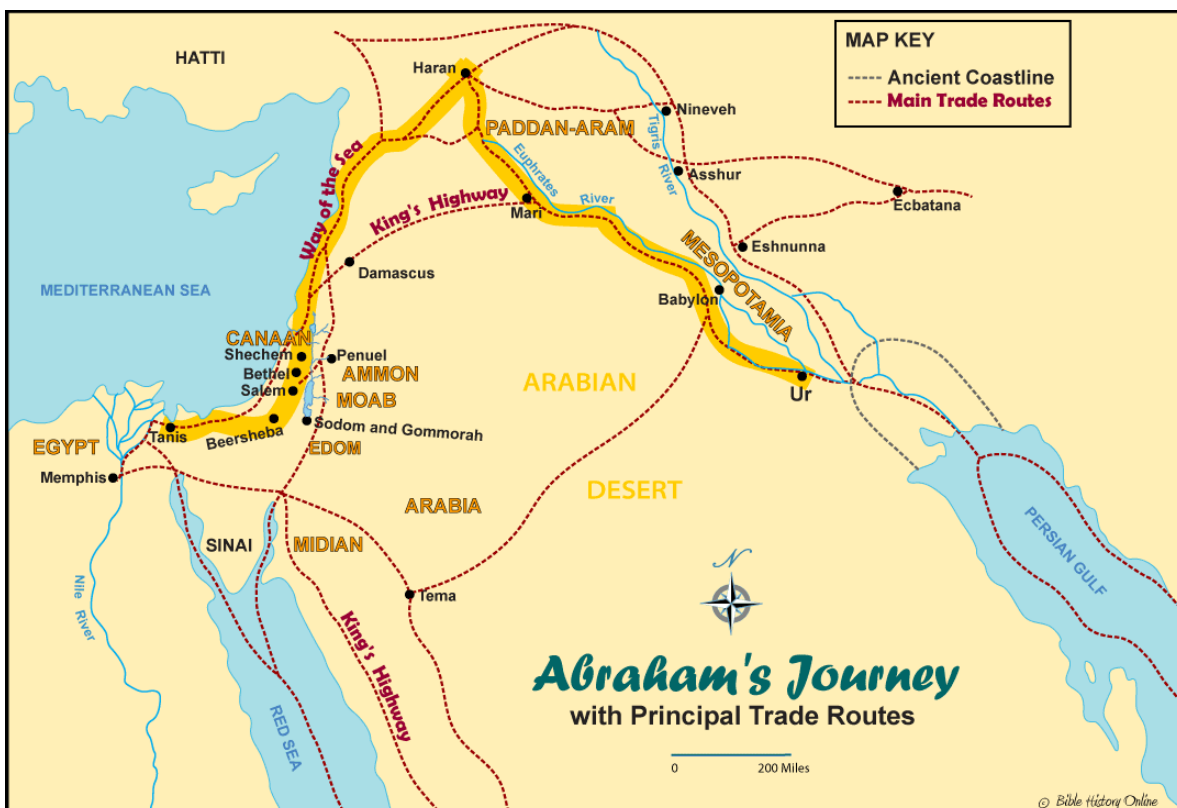


Survey of the Bible
Notes from 11-17-19 Class

We're going to review just a teenie bit... We are now surveying Genesis 2-50 and Exodus 1-20, which I diagnosed genre-wise as a saga, and structure-wise as initially a series of myths (stories that disclose a world view of a people), which were Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Ark, and the Tower of Babel. These myths give way to actual legendary history (which is history passed generation to generation deemed to be historical, but not verifiably so). These legendary histories, which bring us to the end of Genesis, are essentially the histories of the Patriarchs of the bible: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (although occasionally Joseph is included as a Patriarch, but he is not technically one). We subdivided this structure a little more, because there are a lot of legendary histories, and the story of Abraham is a legendary history which is a journey narrative. And that's where we ended off last time, with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and the Christological implications of God stepping in to save Abraham's son from death where he did not intend to spare his own.

As we move on to Isaac's story then, the question would be: What type of legendary history are we dealing with now? And the answer would be...? That's the answer, question mark. There is so little information on Isaac that it doesn't even rise to the level of having a genre named for it. There's only one small account, and it provides some continuity between the patriarchs, but it's not really substantive. We will look at it though just so we don't have any gaps in our knowledge of the patriarchs. So let's turn to Genesis chapter 24. This narrative begins when Abraham is old, and after God has blessed him in many things, and Abraham says to his servant (and at these times a head servant wasn't just some lackey, he was a person of intelligence and some means, almost like a second in command) "place your hand under my thigh (and the bible here is explaining an old testament 'handshake', because the hand was placed under the thigh "at or near the organs of reproduction") and I will make you swear by the Lord that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I live." Remember that Abraham originally hailed from Ur, but they made their way through Haran and then they came down to sojourn in the land that would someday be Israel (see map below).



So what Abraham is saying is go back to Ur to find a wife for Isaac, don't let him marry into these indigenous Canaanites. So the servant swears he's not going to cut corners after Abraham dies and go out in the backyard and find him any old wife. The servant loads himself up with ten camels (to bring back the bride and her retinue) and all kinds of choice gifts for the new bride, and he set out for Ur. When he got there he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well.

Now we talked about the well of a town quite a bit last time. The well was where all the community engagement happened. Because of the heat in this region of the world, people would get up very early and get all their work done around the house or property, before the sun came up too high. Then they would go back inside and have breakfast and take a nap on the flat roof of their home, under awnings that could keep the sun off. Then later in the day literally everyone would go down to the well to get water for themselves and their flocks. And this is where all of the community activities would go on, especially after sunset. The matchmaking would happen, and families would get together and talk and trade stories, etc. Everybody did everything at the well, every night. It's too bad we don't do that anymore, because it is a great way to relieve social isolation.

So Abraham's servant kneels his camels down outside the city by the well, toward evening, and he is a little perplexed about the responsibility of having to find a wife for his master's son, so he prays to God for a sign, saying, "Please grant me success today and show me hessed (which is covenantal grace from God) to my master Abraham. I'm standing here by this spring of water, and the daughter's of the townspeople are coming out to draw their water. Let the girl to whom I say 'please offer your jar that I may drink' and who says back 'drink, and I'll water your camels too', let that be the one whom I should choose." He's asking God for a sign; he doesn't want the whole responsibility of choosing this wife to fall on him. He's saying the sign will be that if I say to a girl "give me some water", she does it willingly and also offers to water his camels as well. So before he even finishes speaking this prayer, Rebekah comes out with a jar of water on her shoulder. So then he runs his script that he told God he would do, his sign. He says, "Please let me sip a little water from your jar," and she says, "Drink." And then when he is finished drawing water from her jar, she says she'll draw water for his camels as well. So the servant is amazed, because, wow, he got the sign that he asked for.

When the camels had finished drinking, the servant took out a gold nose ring and two gold bracelets and gives them to her, and asks her to identify herself, which she does, and then she runs off and gets her family. She has a brother named Laban, and father, Bethuel, who she ran and told about the stranger, and they bring him to the house and take care of his camels and give him some food. He puts off the food and instead tells them about his errand, which is to come find a wife for his master, and about asking God for a sign and getting it when Rebekah came out. The two men of the family sort of agree, the sign was fulfilled, so they say he should take Rebekah for his master's son. So they have dinner, and the next morning the servant asks the father's permission to take Rebekah and go back to his master (because he would have needed permission to leave), and the family wants to delay a little, at least ten days, so that Rebekah can say her good byes and what not, but the servant says no. He needs to get back. They decide to put the question to Rebekah and she decides it would be fine to leave right away.

So then the servant and Rebekah and her retinue go all the way back, and they come upon Isaac out walking in the evening for the breeze (an activity so common that even God was said to do it in the garden of Eden), and Rebekah asks who the dude is that is coming out to meet them. The servant tells her that it's Isaac, his master's son whom she is supposed to marry, so right away Rebekah covers her face as if she's so modest. Which you can't help but smirk over, because – aside from Bathsheba who we heard about today in our service, and who orchestrated the murder of King David's rightful heir so that her son could be king – Rebekah is probably the biggest stinker of all the women in the bible, and the fact that at this stage of the game she's pretending she a bit modest and demure strains credulity to say the least. We'll meet her really well in the Jacob account.

Needless to say Isaac was happy to have her for a wife because she was beautiful, and he had to have a wife anyway so a beautiful one may as well do the trick. And took her into his mother's tent, and he loved her and was comforted by her after his mother's death, but that's it. That's all we ever hear or know about Isaac.

From there we can move quickly on to Jacob. And here, with Jacob, we can put something more than a question mark. The story of Jacob is a set of Eponyms. Remember when we were originally discussing all the different genres and structures and what not, we said that an eponym is a history or a story of the individuals for whom peoples and nations are named. We don't have any modern-day examples... or do we? Supposedly America was named America because the first guy to explore beyond Europe and find Brazil and the West Indies was Amerigo Vespucci. So that's a modern-day example of an eponym. Of course if you would read up on Native American histories you would find loads of eponyms there.

The story of Jacob is an eponym for Israel. Now that seems to contradict what I just said, because Israel is called Israel, not Jacob. If Jacob is an eponym for Israel, shouldn't Israel be called Jacob? It's not because Jacob gets his name changed, during his story, to Israel (which you will recall happens quite a bit in those days, because people are named for what is essential to their nature, which changes over time). Likewise, the story of Esau (Jacob's firstborn son) is an eponym for the Edomites. Once again, why wouldn't Esau be named Edom if he is an eponym for the Edomites? And we can find the answer for that in the bible. If we turn Genesis 25:24 (and don't worry that we're skipping ahead a little), we see that when it was Rebekah's time to give birth to the twins in her womb, the first came out red. The word for red in Hebrew is 'edom'. And his body was like a hairy mantle. The word for hairy mantle in Hebrew is 'ser'. The Edomites lived in the land of Ser. So in English it doesn't seem obvious, but in Hebrew it's clear as a bell why the Edomites would be named for Esau.

Then the twelve sons of Jacob are eponyms for the twelve tribes of Israel. The way this thing is structured is around its eponymous nature. The way the Abraham story was structured was around the fact that it's a journey narrative, and we end up with a lot of episodes along the journey. The way this one is structured is according to its eponymous nature. What we're about to encounter here is this: there a set of eponyms involving Jacob and Esau, and then there is a theophany (which is an appearance of God). This first theophany is the so-called Jacob's Ladder (which we'll unpack later when we get to it). After that there is a series of eponyms involving Jacob and his father-in-law Laban, and then there is another theophany. This second theophany is called Jacob Wrestles with the Angel, or Jacob Wrestles with God. This second theophany is the punchline of the Jacob stories. If you'll recall we have seen various punchlines throughout our discussions. We saw a punchline in Noah, we saw a punchline in Abraham. These punchlines are the one main thing that each story boils down to. With Noah it boiled down to the fact that humankind is sinful, and that God intends to look beyond our sin and fulfill promises or covenants because he loves us in spite of our sin. In Abraham the story boiled down to the fact that Abraham's faith all along is what made him worthy of the promises God made him. Not because he was inherently good or brave or what have you, but because he had complete faith in God he was counted as righteous. Likewise, we'll see that Jacob's punchline comes to us in this second theophany.

After the second theophany, there's the resumption and conclusion of the Jacob/Esau eponym. With that much background, we can jump into the story, and we're about to meet Pastor Becca's namesake, which does not do her proud.

Now we turn to Genesis 25:19, which starts out "These are the generations of Isaac..." and I think I told you that wherever you see the words, "these are the generations of..." or "these are the descendants of..." that's the bible's way of saying, "once upon a time...". It triggers the beginning, and acts as connective tissue between the different histories.

As we saw, Abraham is the father of Isaac. He gave all that he had to Isaac. Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, who we just saw was the daughter of Bethuel and the sister of Laban. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because lo and behold she was barren, and the Lord granted his prayer and Rebekah conceived. And there were two of them in there, and they struggled with each other even in the womb. Rebekah griped to the Lord about the difficult pregnancy, and the Lord said to her: "Two nations are in your womb." Obviously there's nothing subtle about the fact that this history is an eponym, they're beating you over the head with it. God tells her point blank, "Two nations are in your womb. Two peoples born of you shall be divided." God goes on to say, "One shall be stronger than the other and the elder shall serve the younger." Now that never happens. The oldest always, always got everything. This notion of Primo Genitor was the only way for people at this time to keep their land and other asset holdings together in a large, strong unit. It was safest for everyone.

in Genesis 26:24 we read, when Rebekah's time to give birth was at hand she gives birth to the twins. The first to come out was edom and ser (red and hairy in Hebrew), so they called him Esau (which was a sort of combining of the two words into one). Afterward his brother came out gripping the heel of the first baby, so he was named Jacob (Yaakov in Hebrew), which means the heel grabber. That has also come to mean the supplanter, as we will see when we get a little further along. So we already have some sibling rivalry alluded to here just in their births.

By the next paragraph the sibling rivalry has deepened. In 25:27 we read that when the boys grew up Esau was a skillful hunter and a man of the field. He was an alpha male, a guys guy, today's football player. And Jacob was an introvert. He lived in the tents, spent a lot of time with his mom. So that's going to exacerbate the rivalry, and this next thing is going to make it even worse. Isaac, not surprisingly loved Esau best because he was a man's man, and also because Isaac liked to eat and Esau was a good food provider. Rebekah on the other hand preferred Jacob who shared her domesticity.

So now Jacob is going to supplant his brother, but in order to do that he's going to have to steal his birthright as well as the blessing that confers it. The first theft is easier than the second, because for the first theft, stealing the birthright, he just has to deal with Esau. To steal the blessing he has to deal with Isaac too; he has to somehow get Isaac to confer the blessing on him rather than his brother the patriarch.

Straightaway he gets to stealing the birthright. After Esau has been out toiling in the fields one day and was famished, he comes in to find Jacob making some stew. He says to Jacob, "Give me some of that red stuff for I'm famished." Jacob says, "Sure I'll give you some stew, but first sell me your birthright." Which seems like an odd trade, but Esau is so hungry (and there were apparently no snickers bars available at the time), that he says, "What do I care about my birthright? Take it and give me some stew." The bible says at this point then, that Esau despised his birthright. This is one of the earliest examples of sour grapes. Esau had foolishly and hastily sold off his birthright for some bread and a bowl of lentil stew, so now he's saying he didn't want it anyway, he despised it.

Chapter 26 gives us a little more of that "E" narrative we talked about early on. A story of Isaac going to sojourn in a strange land and telling everyone that his wife is actually his sister because she's so beautiful and he doesn't want to be killed so that some king or magistrate can have her. Though it seems unlikely that the exact same thing happened to Isaac that happened to Abraham, twice, the editor of the bible includes this story along with the "J" narrative probably because he did not want to lose any of the existing stories and decided that inclusion was better than lost to history forever and worked it in. So we'll skip this part because, as I said before, we could read only the "J" attributed sections of the bible and they would stand on their own, but the "E" sections just can't. (google the documentary theory of the Pentateuch – specifically Wellhausen – if you'd like more information on that topic).

We turn to the second bit of thievery then, in chapter 27. In this chapter Jacob now has to steal the blessing from Isaac that conveys the birthright, and we're going to see Rebekah's colors, and they aren't pretty. When Isaac was old and blind, he called his older son Esau and said, "I'm old now, I don't know how much longer I'm going to live, so take your weapons and go out to the field and hunt some game for me and then prepare me some of the savory foods you make so well, that I may bless you before I die." Now Rebekah was eavesdropping when Isaac spoke to Esau, so when Esau leaves to go hunting Rebekah says to Jacob, "I heard your father tell Esau to go out and hunt some game and prepare me savory food so that I may bless you before I die. Therefore, my son, obey my word. Go out and get a two choice kids from the flock and make a stew for your father instead, and you will get the blessing." Esau had to go out into the wild and hunt some game, and she knew he would be gone a while, and she was telling Jacob to just run to the backyard and grab a couple kid goats which would be much faster.

Even Jacob was a little sheepish about doing something so brazen though, and argued with his mother telling her that he could never fool his father because Esau is a hairy man and Jacob was smooth skinned. He knew Isaac would feel him and know it wasn't Esau. He was afraid that Isaac would think he was mocking him or the blessing or whatever, and would instead curse Jacob. He thought it was just too risky. Rebekah told him not to worry about it, she said, "Let your curse be upon me." So Jacob must have decided that shuttling the potential curse to his mother was good enough risk management, and he went out and got two kid goats and Rebekah prepared savory foods just like Isaac liked. She also took the best garments that Esau had (which would smell like Esau) and put them on Jacob. Then she put the skins of the slaughtered kid goats on Jacobs arms and neck so that he would feel like a hairy man. She gave him the savory food and the bread she had prepared, and sent him in to steal his brothers blessing.

Jacob went in to his father's tent and gave him the food and when Isaac asked him who he was he said he was Esau. Isaac wasn't convinced, and asked, "How was it you found the food so quickly?" Jacob lied and said it was because the Lord gave him quick success. But then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near, so I can feel you, so I can make sure it's you." So Jacob goes over and lets his father feel his hairy arms, and then Isaac smells his clothes and decides surely it must be him because even though he sounds like Jacob, he smells and feels like Esau, so he gives him the blessing.

So now we move on to Genesis 27, chapter 30. No sooner had Jacob walked out with the blessing, but Esau comes in with the wild game he caught and prepared, and he says to Isaac, "Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game," and Isaac says, "Who are you?!!" Esau says he's Esau, and Isaac of course is very upset and says, "Who was it then who hunter game and brought it to me and took the blessing??" Apparently the blessing was irrevocable, because they are both quite upset about it. Isaac says that blessed Jacob will be, rather than Esau. When Esau hears his father's words he cries out in a very distressed manner, and begs his father to bless him also. But Isaac says Jacob came to him already (deceitfully though it was), and already took the blessing and there's not one thing he can do about it. Isaac says, "I've already made him your lord. I've given him all your brothers as servants, and with grain and wine I've sustained him. What could I do for you?" Esau exclaims that Jacob was rightly named (the supplanter), because first he took away Esau's birthright, and then he stole the blessing that goes with it. He begs Isaac again to come up with some kind of blessing, any sort, but Isaac just throws down this really crummy thing in place of an actual blessing. He says, ""Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restless you shall break his yoke from your neck." Which, I'm sorry, seems more like a curse. Esau would have been better off with nothing over that thing.

Some scholars have described Jacob as a trickster. A trickster is someone who is in a power down position, and so can't gain any ground or advantage through physical force. They have to use their wits instead to gain an

advantage. Robin Hood was a trickster. The roadrunner in the coyote cartoons was a trickster. But here we probably shouldn't agree with that, because normally there's an element of wit or humor involved with the things a trickster does to gain an advantage, but here with Jacob we see that this isn't all that funny. He flat out stole this birthright and blessing just because he could.

Needless to say though, Esau is in a rage, and exclaims that he hates his brother and will kill him as soon as his father is dead and buried. Once again Rebekah is eavesdropping and hears Esau say this, and so she quickly packs Jacob off to go live with her brother before Esau can work out his rage on Jacob. This is where we'll pick up again next time, and we'll see that Rebekah was an amateur at deceit compared to the rest of her family.