

NOTES ON GENESIS 25:19-34

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At the surface level this passage from Genesis is an account of the competition between the two brothers, which starts even in the womb. Curiously, the sense of competition seems to be entirely on one side of the relationship, Jacob's. Traditional interpretations, which usually moralize about the behaviors of Esau and Jacob – seeing one as a short-sighted dupe and the other as a self-centered, grasping trickster, remain at this level of a story of individual persons. However, on multiple occasions the story clearly signals that the two individuals represent groups – two nations even, so this is really an account about the interactions between groups, not between individuals.

Moreover, Esau and Jacob each represent more than one group. First, in political terms Esau is clearly linked to the small nation of Edom, situated to the south of Israel, represented by Jacob. Second, in socio-economic terms, Esau, described as a hunter, represents those fully nomadic social groups that sustained themselves as a hunter-gatherer society. Jacob, on the other hand is identified as a shepherd, representing social groups that sustained themselves through a pastoralist economy, moving in a limited regular annual pattern following the grass and water their flocks needed, much like the Navajo nation of the American Southwest. Both groups operate in the open spaces between settled agricultural communities, but the pastoralist society is more stable economically and has greater reserves to sustain itself over the long-term whereas the hunter-gatherer society necessarily has fewer reserves and addresses sustainability within a more short-term time horizon. Third, Esau as first-born has privileges, social status, and economic advantages not shared by his younger brother Jacob. Esau is the group upon whom law and social custom smile and who may reap the advantages that accrue to them as a matter of birth rather than achievement. Jacob is the marginalized group, lower on the social ladder, dependent on and subservient to the privileged.

This is more than simply a story about competition between these groups. It is also a story of how one displaces the other, so this is also a story about change. God's message to Rebecca in v 23 brings this into focus, "the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." In terms of the distinctions between the groups named in the story, this signals a dominance of Israel over Edom, of the newcomers with more staying power over the traditionalists with less, and of the legally and socially marginalized over the privileged.

The statement, "the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger," may be read in two ways. On the one hand, it is merely descriptive of future reality. That future reality is not brought about by God, but is embraced within God's purposes. Change is not created by God, but is encompassed within God's purposes. God uses the choices humans make, the changes they bring about, to achieve God's ends. On the other hand, the statement can be read as prescriptive, that is, as God bringing this reality into being. In this case, God takes the side of the upstarts, those on the margins of society, those without society's privileges and preferences. God is the bringer of social change as part of God's overall purpose to return the creation and all its inhabitants to the state of wholeness originally intended for them.

Similarly, Esau's attitude toward his birthright, seen in vv 32 and 34, has two sides depending on which social dimension of the difference between the "brothers" you bring into focus. If "birthright" signals Esau's privilege, then is "his" attitude the carelessness of a group accustomed to and confident in its

privilege, of a group that assumes its privilege will always be there? If “birthright” signals the way of life into which Esau was born, then is “his” despising of that way of life the rational decision of a group that sees that the old ways will no longer sustain them, but leave them “famished,” and that the new group’s way of life is a more sustainable way to live in the long run?