

### 3. Isaac and Rebekah: Rearing Rivals

**Biblical material:** Gen. 26-28.

#### Quotes

- We must love one another, yes, yes, that's all true enough, but nothing says we have to like each other. It may be the very recognition of all men as our brothers that accounts for the sibling rivalry, and even enmity, we have toward so many of them. *Peter de Vries*
- If you avoid rivalry and dispute, God will protect you. *Sri Sathya Sai Baba*
- The rivalry is with oneself. I try to be better than is possible. I fight against myself, not against the other. *Luciano Pavarotti*
- The petty man is eager to make boasts, yet desires that others should believe in him. He enthusiastically engages in deception, yet wants others to have affection for him. He conducts himself like an animal, yet wants others to think well of him. *Xun Zi*

#### Questions

How is it that Isaac repeats the exact sin of his father Abraham in claiming his wife is his sister? Is it true that the only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn anything from history? To what extent are the parents responsible for the rivalry between Jacob and Esau? What of God's predictions as to what would happen? How does God look in this story?

#### Discussion/Comment

One key verse is not in this week's biblical material: Genesis 25:28—Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. While sibling rivalry is not uncommon, the choice of favorites by parents compounds the matter. The sad tale of "rearing rivals" reveals not only the personalities of the brothers in conflict, but also those of the parents. The arrival of twins was problematic enough in a society that gave precedence to the firstborn son, and wise parents would have surely tried to find a way to defuse the sense of injustice that could be felt by the secondborn. Yet it appears that Isaac was only too pleased with his wild hunter son, while Rebekah favored the quieter home-boy Joseph.

Isaac was not a man that enjoyed confrontation. In his dealings with Abimelech of Gerar, Isaac followed his father Abraham in identifying his wife as his sister. When the locals caused problems over wells, he just moved on until they pursued him no longer. And later, when Abimelech came to make a treaty, saying they had never mistreated Isaac, Isaac did not complain but agreed to the treaty.

Nor did he seem to complain about Esau's choice of wives from the Hittite people, even though the record notes they were a source of grief to Rebekah and Isaac. In fact it is Rebekah who complains later to Isaac that she does not want Jacob marrying a local woman.

Rebekah's choice to deceive Isaac by representing Jacob as Esau may have been motivated by favoritism of a son she felt was unfairly treated by the system. She may have even argued to herself that she was just fulfilling God's predictions that he had made clear from the birth of the two brothers. Nevertheless her plan, that Jacob follows, was foolish, for it only served to enrage Esau and confirm him in his antagonism. From that time on the family was irrevocably divided, and never were they ever together again.

Some interesting insights revealed in the account: 1. Rebekah tells Jacob to do as she tells him, and when he worries about being cursed instead of blessed, she calls for any curse to come

upon her. How tragically that statement came true! 2. When Isaac asks Jacob how he managed to hunt so quickly, Jacob replies that “the Lord *your* God gave me success.” It seems faith has not been transmitted across the generations. 3. Jacob’s threefold lie—he claims he is Esau, he claims to have had hunting success, and he repeats again he is Esau in direct response to Isaac’s precise question.

Jacob reveals that he is quite willing to use deceit and misrepresentation for his own good. Yet neither Rebekah or Jacob seem to have thought through the consequences, which tear apart the family, and lead to Jacob being “expelled” to save his life from his murder-talking brother. Jacob lives the life of the exile, and Rebekah never sees him again.

At home, the situation was surely terrible. Rebekah is distraught that Jacob has had to leave. Esau is furious at the deception practiced by Rebekah and Jacob. And Isaac lives out the rest of his days as the dupe. The only change is Esau’s attempt to ingratiate himself with his father by marrying an “acceptable” wife—with whom he lives along with his first two “heathen” wives!

Jacob begins the long journey—not only traveling far away, but also the long road to God whom he encounters at Bethel. Though it is a long process, and a hard road, Jacob starts to learn.

### **Ellen White Comments**

Esau took two idolatrous wives, which was a great grief to Isaac and Rebekah. Notwithstanding this, Isaac loved Esau better than Jacob. And when he thought that he was about to die, he requested Esau to prepare him meat, that he might bless him before he died. Esau did not tell his father that he had sold his birthright to Jacob, and confirmed it with an oath. Rebekah heard the words of Isaac, and she remembered the words of the Lord, “The elder shall serve the younger,” and she knew that Esau had lightly regarded his birthright and sold it to Jacob. She persuaded Jacob to deceive his father, and by fraud receive the blessing of his father, which she thought could not be obtained in any other way. Jacob was at first unwilling to practice this deception, but finally consented to his mother’s plans.

Rebekah was acquainted with Isaac’s partiality for Esau, and was satisfied that reasoning would not change his purpose. Instead of trusting in God, the disposer of events, she manifested her lack of faith by persuading Jacob to deceive his father. Jacob’s course in this was not approved by God. Rebekah and Jacob should have waited for God to bring about his own purposes, in his own way, and in his own time, instead of trying to bring about the foretold events by the aid of deception. If Esau had received the blessing of his father, which was bestowed upon the first-born, his prosperity could have come from God alone; and he would have blessed him with prosperity, or brought upon him adversity, according to his course of action. If he should love and reverence God, like righteous Abel, he would be accepted and blessed of God. If like wicked Cain he had no respect for God, nor for his commandments, but followed his own corrupt course, he would not receive a blessing from God, but would be rejected of God, as was Cain. If Jacob’s course should be righteous, if he should love and fear God, he would be blessed of God, and the prospering hand of God would be with him, even if he did not obtain the blessings and privileges generally bestowed upon the first-born. {1SP 107.1}

Rebekah repented in bitterness for the wrong counsel which she gave to Jacob, for it was the means of separating him from her forever. He was compelled to flee for his life from the wrath of Esau, and his mother never saw his face again. {1SP 106-7}

