

“... sell me... thy birthright.”

We often do not understand the ways of God, though many today think they do. Thus, we can misinterpret what happens to us and to others and go off at a tangent (unless, that is, we constantly walk with God).

God ‘moves in mysterious ways’, so how can we be so presumptuous? There are times when an individual Christian is blessed with the meaning of an act of God, but so many folk think they continuously have ‘secret’ meanings given to them – charismatic ‘prophets’ and ‘apostles’ are a good example: these are not genuine, but are so-called ‘prophets’ and ‘apostles’ who utter lies and deception.

Whatever we think as we read about Jacob’s actions in this chapter, we have no right to condemn the man, for we are not given necessary details on which to base a conclusion. Sometimes, the very things that we call ‘bad’ are not only blessed by God, but they are brought about by Him! We are not talking here about evils like the Toronto Blessing, etc., which was/is obviously rooted in wickedness and anti-God teachings, but about times when things are not clear to us. At such times we must rely on discernment; but how many are able to do this, when their lives are so far from God?

Verses 1-4

1.

“Then again Abraham took a wife, and her name was Keturah.

2.

And she bare him Zimran, and Jokshan, and Medan, and Midian, and Ishbak, and Shuah.

3.

And Jokshan begat Sheba, and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim, and Letushim, and Leummim.

4.

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And the sons of Midian; Ephah, and Epher, and Hanoch, and Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah.”

We are not told when, but some time after Isaac married, Abraham himself married again, to a woman named Keturah ('incense'). They had six children: Zimran ('musician'), Jokshan ('snarer'), Medan ('contention'), Midian ('strife' – founder of the Midianites or most Arabians), Ishbak ('he releases' – founder of one Arabian tribe), and Shuah ('wealth').

Jokshan was the father of Sheba ('seven' or 'oath') and Dedan ('low country'). Dedan's sons were Asshurim (founder of the Asshuri tribe), Letushim ('hammered'), and Leummim ('peoples').

Midian's sons were Ephah ('gloomy'), Epher ('a calf'), Hanoch ('dedicated') – same as Chanowk/Enoch, Abida ('my father knows'), and Eldaah ('God of knowing' or 'God has called?'). These were the 'children of Keturah', where 'children' is '*ben*', meaning son, or grandsons, or simply male children of the same family.

Verses 5-11

1.

“And Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac.

2.

But unto the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastward, unto the east country.

3.

And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, an hundred threescore and fifteen years.

4.

Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years;

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and was gathered to his people.

5.

And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre;

6.

The field which Abraham purchased of the sons of Heth: there was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife.

7.

And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac dwelt by the well Lahai-roi.”

Today, we may not understand how a father could give ‘all that he had’ to one son, but we should remember the promises of God and the special place Isaac had before God. Even so it was very unusual to give the inheritance to the younger son. Isaac, then, was the heir to Abraham’s vast fortune and land, etc., and the head of the house. He was also the eldest son in terms of true lineage, for Ishmael was the son of a concubine, not a ‘full’ wife*. You will note the use of the plural, ‘concubines’, which tells us that Abraham had more than one concubine.

(* A concubine, *pilegeš*, contrary to popular guesswork, was not a mistress, but was a true wife, but of secondary rank. This is indicated in, say, Judges 19:3, which speaks of a concubine’s ‘husband’. Often men had several or many concubines, as a sign of their wealth, power and social status).

Abraham did not leave the sons of his concubines bereft, though. They were all given unspecified gifts, which were, no doubt, of considerable worth. However, he then sent them all to live ‘eastward’ or ‘toward the East’. We are not told why Abraham did this, but it is likely that he did not wish Isaac’s godly future to be hampered by rival sons, as the words ‘sent them away from Isaac’ seem to imply.

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There are times in a Christian's life when he has to 'send away' those things or people or circumstances (perhaps, in themselves, not sinful) that would impede his faith and walk. We may not understand fully, or know what the future will hold when we do this, but it must be done, and God will continue to press the conscience until it has been completed.

Abraham lived for 175 years and then 'gave up the ghost', *gava*, died. He died a 'good old age' and 'fall of years', *sabea*, meaning that he had a fulfilled and satisfying life. Ishmael returned to his father's home and, together with Isaac, took Abraham's body to the cave bought years before from Ephron the Hittite at Machpelah, and buried him there, with his wife, Sarah. After this, Isaac lived near the well at La-hairoi*, where he had first met his wife, Rebekah, and the blessings that God once gave to Abraham were now passed on to Isaac. (* Between Kadesh and Bered; 50 miles south of Beersheba, where the angel spoke to Hagar).

Verses 12-18

1.

"Now these are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's handmaid, bare unto Abraham:

2.

And these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their generations: the firstborn of Ishmael, Nebajoth; and Kedar, and Adbeel, and Mibsam,

3.

And Mishma, and Dumah, and Massa,

4.

Hadar, and Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah:

5.

These are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names, by their towns, and by their castles; twelve princes according to their nations.

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6.

And these are the years of the life of Ishmael, an hundred and thirty and seven years: and he gave up the ghost and died; and was gathered unto his people.

7.

And they dwelt from Havilah unto Shur, that is before Egypt, as thou goest toward Assyria: and he died in the presence of all his brethren.”

We are now told the names of Ishmael's 12 children: Nebajoth ('heights'), Kedar ('dark'), Adbeel (meaning unknown, but could refer to chastisement), Mibsam ('sweet odour'), Mishma ('a hearing'), Dumah ('silence' – possibly founder of the Ishmaelite tribe of Arabia), Massa ('burden'), Hadar ('honour'), Tema ('desert'), Jetur ('enclosed' – his descendants did battle against Israel in east Jordan), Naphish ('refreshment'), and Kedemah ('original').

We can see from verse 16 that the sons of Ishmael were, like Isaac and Abraham, wealthy and powerful men with towns and castles, warranting the title of 'princes'. The word 'castles', *tiyrah* also gives the impression that these sons of Ishmael were warrior-princes, for it can mean battlement or walled dwelling place. However, many towns were walled in those days, as a precaution against enemies.

Ishmael lived to the age of 137. He, too, was buried in a family tomb when he died. His whole family were around him when he died. Ishmael's descendants lived 'from Havilah to Shur', just outside Egypt's border. (Havilah or 'circle', north-western Yemen). Mainly, then, they occupied the vast desert regions south of Israel known as Arabia).

We should remember that though the sons of Ishmael were to become burdens to the Israelites, constantly warring against them, it was God Who gave them a general blessing through Ishmael. There has to be a lesson in this, and I think it may be that though we have enemies, they have been put there to be our reminders. Reminders of what? Possibly, that God is in control, or that we should never hate our enemies even if we have to fight them, or that God blesses whom He will, regardless of our personal feelings.

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Verses 19-23

1.

"And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham begat Isaac:

2.

And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan-aram, the sister to Laban the Syrian.

3.

And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

4.

And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to inquire of the LORD.

5.

And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger."

Isaac married Rebekah when he was forty years old. Interestingly, just like the mother-in-law she never knew, Sarah, Rebekah was barren. Isaac pleaded with God to give her a child, and God responded. Thus, Rebekah became pregnant. The pregnancy was not easy, for she was having twins, and they were very active in the womb.

Concerned at these physical effects on her, Rebekah prayed to God and asked why it was happening. God spoke to her, saying that within her womb were two sons, each of which would lead whole nations. One would be stronger than the other, and, against the usual traditions of heredity, the eldest son would be ruled by the youngest. That is, the descendants in particular.

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What is interesting, is that the unborn children were enacting in the womb what was to happen later in reality. How often do we receive similar warnings or heralds of what is to happen in our lives, possibly in the form of occurrences, dreams or messages?

Verses 24-27

1.

“And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.

2.

And the first came out red, all over like an hairy garment; and they called his name Esau.

3.

And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold

4.

on Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob: and Isaac was threescore years old when she bare them.

5.

And the boys grew: and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents.”

At full term, Rebekah gave birth to twins, twenty years after marrying Isaac. The first to be born had a red hairy down all over his body, and had a ruddy skin colour. This was Esau ('hairy'). His brother was born immediately afterward and, significantly, his small hand grabbed the heel of Esau, a sign of what was to come. The younger child was named Jacob ('heel holder' or 'supplanter'). Isaac was 60 years of age when the twins were born.

This episode reminds us that in life no two children are alike, and each has his own destiny. Sadly for the parents, each also has his own spiritual destiny and end, which serves God's

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purposes. Perhaps we all ought to be aware that our lives are not lived so that we may have our own ways, pleasures or good feelings, but that so that we fulfil God's plan. We are His creatures and so our lives are not our own. Just as a pen must obey the hand of the one writing, and has no other purpose, so every human being is nothing except in the hands of the Creator. Whether enemies of Christ or not, children of the same family or not, everyone is in the hand of God, as vessels of preciousness or as vessels of wrath. As we are all children, this applies to every one of us, whether older or younger.

As the children grew it was evident that Esau was to be a great and clever hunter, whilst Jacob was a 'plain man dwelling in tents'. Esau was also called a "man of the field", where 'field' *sadeh*, could mean a cultivated field, which would make Esau a farmer. But, it also means a place where wild beasts live. It is the latter that applies in this context.

Jacob was a 'plain man', *tam* – meaning, physically strong, handsome, and morally innocent. The allusion to "dwelling in tents" seems to suggest that unlike Esau, who enjoyed an outdoor life full of adventure, Jacob preferred a life closer to home, maybe tilling the ground or supervising the family's large business. It also seems that he could cook.

Verses 28-34

1.

"And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.

2.

And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint:

3.

And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint: therefore was his name called Edom.

4.

And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright.

5.

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And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?

6.

And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he swore unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.

7.

Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright.”

Sometimes, in a family, one parent prefers one child, and the other parent prefers another. In my own family this kind of difference does not exist, for we love both our sons equally, seeing them as different, not as one being ‘better’ than the other. However, Isaac loved Esau more, and Rebekah loved Jacob more. The reason for Isaac’s love of Esau may seem to us to be rather odd, but this is how it was! Isaac loved Esau because he brought home some rather good-tasting venison!

How often do we ‘love’ someone or something for outward reasons? For example, we ‘love’ a job because it gives us plenty of money, or a house because it is in a good area, or a person, because he or she gives us what we feel we want, and so on. But, are they always in God’s plan for our lives? Do they *necessarily* give us what is truly needed, or desired by the Lord?

The answer is that we must always look beyond what is apparent, so that we can see what is not obvious, or what is hidden. It does not mean we must spend anguished hours or days trying to discover hidden meanings behind everything. It just means that we should never put all our trust in what we have, for what we have is given by God, and is temporary. They may indeed be blessings from God, but they are not the end for which we were born. Our destinies are always spiritual.

“And Jacob sod pottage”...to modern man this is incomprehensible, but ‘sod’ means to boil, and ‘pottage’ is soup. Thus, Jacob made some hot soup. Esau had been out hunting. Even if he had been successful, he could not have eaten animals he had killed straight away. It seems that he

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had been out for a long time, for he was not just hungry but close to starvation, exhausted and feeling very faint.

Smelling the soup, Esau asked Jacob to give him a portion... it was made of lentils; we know this because Esau referred to 'red' soup, and red in this context means lentils. Though the text says "therefore was his name called Edom", and it suggests that it had something to do with either the redness or the soup; the meaning of 'Edom' is not known. We do know that Edom or Edomite refers to Esau's descendants. The word itself is rooted in *adom*, meaning red, or lentils.

Though his brother was close to dying of starvation, Jacob made an astounding demand. "Sell me this day your birthright"! He wanted Esau to promise him what was Esau's by right – his birthright or 'right of the first-born'. That is, everything the eldest son should receive as heir, including title of head of the house of Abraham, and, therefore, in the line of promise given by God.

Was this a ploy used by a selfish son who wanted wealth and power? Was he jealous of Esau's might as a hunter? Or, was Jacob prompted by God? And, why did Esau, who must have been tough, not just take the soup by force? We may only conclude that God's hand must have been behind this confrontation, no matter what we think of it.

Esau replied: 'What good is a birthright to me if I am going to die?' Jacob then made Esau swear an oath to transfer his birthright to himself. In no position to argue, Esau complied and was given the lentil soup, bread and something to drink. He then left the tent and went on his way. We might think that he could then have turned on Jacob and demanded that he should return his birthright. But, they were far different days, when a promise meant something.

We should also remember that though Jacob was a home-body, he also possessed physical strength of his own and was possibly a match for his brother. Either way, this, too, was in God's plan, and there was no fight. Nor did Esau pretend that he had never made the promise, for at that time such a promise was as binding as a written legal document. However, it was not until a little later that Esau realised the enormity of what he had done.

In doing what he did, Esau "despised his birthright." That is, he *bazah* – made his birthright

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worthless or held it in contempt. That is, it was now worthless to him, for it now belonged to Jacob. Esau had made a big mistake... but God has a way of achieving His ends, and those ends are always holy. Thus, even if we, today, think Jacob was acting in a very cavalier and unethical manner, it was all part of God's will, so it could not have been unethical.

We could argue that if a man could hold his brother to ransom in order to obtain a prize, then that was unethical. On the other hand, if a man is willing to hand over what is precious, to gain something else, is not he at fault for doing so? Was the fact of his starvation a factor? Can external circumstances ever warrant doing something stupid? No, they cannot. When you think about it, Esau could have torn apart any animal he had brought, and eaten it raw! But, he preferred to have something cooked and ready prepared. We could say, then, that Jacob only took advantage of a rare opportunity.

If we look at many instances in scripture, we find God's men taking advantage of circumstances, and the results were determined by God. So, this particular incident was only one of many in which a man of God craftily obtained an advantage. Indeed, we are advised by scripture to be crafty, using our intelligence to obtain certain goals. This is not the same as getting things by deception.

If another person experiences a demise because of this kind of act, then who are we to say it was unethical? If God's will is for us to have this or that, then the demise of another is not a relevant factor, for God raises up some and destroys many. Should we feel sorry for those who enter into demise in this way? No, we should not, for it is God Who instigates it.

On many occasions we have to be silent in the face of evil, so that it may pass us by. Or, we have to act in such a way as to bring down an evil person or thing, using our God-given intelligence and fortitude. By no means should we ever think that being 'crafty' is not a part of the Christian life. It may not be a usual part, but craftiness can be part of our life if necessary, and we can see evidence of this in scripture.

In normal family terms, Jacob performed an unloving action, denying his brother his birthright. But, we do not know what was behind Jacob's actions. We know that his actions were ultimately in God's will, but we are not told what was in Jacob's mind at the time. Therefore, we should not scold him for what he did, but should see the end result – God's plan coming to fruition. In the absence of any other indication, it is our only option.

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Very often in modern Christian lives, fellow believers are apt to 'tut-tut' at the actions and words of other believers. Yet, their own lives hide a multitude of sins! It is very wrong for a Christian to shun or castigate another, when he himself is guilty of the same things, or worse. Indeed, the man who does this opens himself up to God's anger.

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