

Toledoth of Ishmael. Continuation of the Church. Two-fold Seed.

Genesis 25:12-34

Descendants and History of Ishmael

1. After Abraham, Ishmael, being the oldest of the well-known sons, is first to get a turn in the historical narrative of Genesis. The word “toledoth,” which we find ten times as a heading in the original text of Genesis, indicates: the posterity *and* the history of that posterity (compare Outline 4).

But, in the following chapters, as in the above, we have to take note of the fact that the Bible is not a secular history book in which the origins and story of the nation Israel are expounded, along with those of Ishmael, Edom, Egypt, the Canaanite nations, and many later nations; what we have is not World History, Part One, covering Ancient Times; nor is it part of the national history of the Jews; here we find: “history of salvation,” that is: *history of the coming of God’s salvation, as it has been fully revealed in the bringing of salvation, the Lord Christ.*

This history of salvation, then, moves on in the descendants of Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve patriarchs, fanning out still further in the nation Israel, chosen by God as His possession out of all peoples of the earth. Thus, the history of salvation is prophetic (Also the *historical* books of the Bible are prophetic!), that is, it has not become known by archaeological finds, by ancient writings, or by priestly books, but by divine revelation! God has made His salvation known by facts of history, miracles, appearances, and words; and what He revealed by these means in the past, He now reveals to us through the inspired Scriptures.

The descendants of Ishmael and Esau *are* mentioned briefly, for they are brother-nations of Israel to whom promises are *also* given (pertaining to this earthly life), but who are let go by God, in His righteous judgment, to fulfill the desires of their evil hearts because they, following their fathers, do not honour the God of revelation or acknowledge His decree of salvation.

2. The detailed heading in 25:12 is remarkable. There Ishmael is once again named as son of Abraham —the covenant child, but also as born of Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maid. Why is this stated in such detail, reminding us of something we already know?

The answer is: because this heading does not only give us the *start* of Ishmael's lineage, but is in the first place an indication of the *importance* of this lineage *in its subsequent history*. In all of its history the Egyptian spirit would reveal itself, even to the present day.

In verses 13-16 Ishmael's twelve sons are named. Some of these are mentioned again one or more times, such as *Nebaioth*, the oldest, whose sister Mahalath later married her first cousin Esau (28:9); *Kedar*, the most famous, the father of the traitorous, troublemaking Kedarites (Psalm 120) who later traded with Tyre (Ezekiel 27:21); *Jetur and Naphish*, whose descendants belonged to a league of nations terrorizing in the region across the Jordan and who were defeated by Saul (1 Chronicles 5:10, 19); and *Tema*, whose descendants are named, among others, in Jeremiah 25:23; the Hagarites named in 1 Chronicles 5:19ff. probably being a separated group naming themselves after Hagar.

Making a comparison with the twelve sons of Jacob, we notice a peculiar difference. *Ishmael's* descendants fell apart into twelve nations, each with its own ruler, its own place of residence in the vast deserts, its own settlements and encampments, forever divided into political units. This is the way it still is, realizing, of course, that these nations in the course of time have mingled with other desert dwellers. But the posterity of *Jacob*, bound together by the *one* covenant of God, developed as *one* people, in *one* country, with *one* history. And even when, by the violation of God's covenant, the unity was broken, *one* church re-

mained, led by God's special revelation, with the promise of a restored unity in Christ (Ezekiel 34:23, 24; 37:24ff.).

3. Next we read that Ishmael lived to become 137, thus surviving Abraham by 48 years. They were circumcised on the same day, Abraham being 99 and Ishmael 13. Abraham died 76 years later, and Ishmael 124 years after his circumcision, thus living $124 - 76 = 48$ years after Abraham died.

His descendants lived in the Arabian deserts to the south and to the east of Israel's land, outside the promised land. They had no part in the land of their brother-nation. There they lived over against, that is, in the sight of, their brethren, close to their borderlands (compare 1 Chronicles 5:10, 19).

Scripture makes mention of this to show us how God has kept His Word (Genesis 16:12; 17:20; 21:10, 12, 18). As a son of Abraham, Ishmael, in this life, received the blessings of old age, many descendants, and a country of his own, but it remained an outgrowth of created life that had been spoiled by sin. His descendants fell into utter heathendom, maintained until the "half-moon" rose to shed its faint light in the seventh century. Still, also from this line came some who went on to serve God, through His grace, in New Testament times, as Isaiah predicted in the Old Testament tradition (Isaiah 60:7, compare Genesis 12:3b).

Continuation of the Church

These words were used by Calvin to describe the following history, and correctly, for now we come to the *toledoth of Isaac*.

Now again we are given a *heading*, which is followed by a few very important notes about what comes next. Again these notes indicate the way in which the story will develop (25:19, 20). And this is, in contrast to that of Ishmael, the *history of salvation*.

The starting point, that Abraham begot Isaac, is important. Unlike his half-brother, he was going to follow in the footsteps of his father. The addition of the name of his mother is not necessary; Sarah and Hagar did not share the same rights. Hagar belongs in the *toledoth of Ishmael*,

while Sarah's name can be left out here, especially because the mother does not place her mark on the rest of the story, as Hagar has done in the case of Ishmael.

A second important point is that the relatives in *Paddan-Aram* are involved here, those with whom the service of the true God has not yet died out. This family would contribute to the building of Abraham's seed, for Isaac married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the *Aramean*(!), and the sister of Laban the *Aramean*(!). And so the *channel* through which the stream of God's revelation of salvation would find its way is marked out. The use of the name "Aramean" is remarkable. They did not belong to the wicked Canaanites, but they were not free from the worship of idols (Joshua 24:2). There was already some degeneration, from which Rebekah was withdrawn by her marriage to Isaac and incorporated into the church as it then existed.

This is new information: that Isaac, when he married, was 40 years old, having matured enough through education and experience to manage that which he had inherited from his father. Let us not think too lightly of this: the total number of members of his camp has been estimated at 2500: domestic servants, shepherds, security personnel (who numbered 318 at the time of Abraham's arrival in Canaan), and, of course, the women and children. *Rebekah's* age is not given but considering that girls usually married early, we can safely estimate it to be about 20.

She was barren. It is remarkable that this applied to all the women of the patriarchs. The seed, numbering millions, would come forth from the promise to Abraham. Knowing this, it does not surprise us to read that God made Rebekah fruitful in answer to prayer. We read that Isaac prayed for his wife, probably in a public sacrificial prayer service.

During her pregnancy it happened that the children came into violent contact with each other in her womb. That this was an important action of God's part requires no exposition. Rebekah, however, became afraid, thinking it was a bad omen. She therefore went to the place of worship near the camp to ask of the LORD, "If it is thus, why do I live?" or "If it is like this now, what will my life be like later?"

God's answer came, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

Malachi (1:2, 3) reveals God's word, "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau," primarily applying to the two nations, of whom the LORD accepted the one as His people, whereas He loathed the other. And Paul, in Romans 9:10-13, goes on to display the sovereign good pleasure of God, of which He gives no account to us. God is *God*.

At the time of birth (when Isaac was 60 and Rebekah about 40), the child called Esau (that is, the hairy one) came first. He was reddish and his whole body was covered with hair. This indicated power; he would prove to be the strongest. The second child, that held on to his brother's heel, was called Jacob—a play on words related to the heel that was grasped. Later Esau called him "heel" in the sense of "deceiver," something certainly not meant by his parents. In reality it meant that he wanted to surpass his brother. Symbolically it points to the grasp for the birthright (Hosea 12:4). The struggle for this blessing had already started in the womb, before the children were even aware of it.

Two-fold Seed

This heading has already been used in Outline 14. Isaac and Ishmael, however, came forth from two mothers; one born of sinful flesh, the other of the promise. But now both have come from the same set of parents; the same mother, and the same father who had been born of the promise, "our father Isaac." Of Ishmael we can still say that the bad influence of his mother caused him to go astray, but in the case of Esau this cannot apply. Besides, God had made His *choice* already, before the children had been born, before they had had the chance to do good or evil. At that time God had informed Rebekah of His acceptance of Jacob and his line as His people, and His rejection of Esau and the nation descending from him.

Both boys grew up. Both had a godly upbringing. Both received the sacrament of circumcision. Both belonged to the covenant. Esau received the full amount, like Jacob. He possessed the birthright and was allowed to keep it as long as he did not cast it away, without caring.

But Esau proved to be different from Jacob in growing up. Their ways of life grew apart. Esau was caught up by the freedom, the lack of ties of a life in nature. As young as he was, he became a hunter who went his own way; later he became the leader of a fierce band of vagabonds, the terror of the desert.

Jacob, on the other hand, was a “quiet man.” The exact meaning of these words is: “upright,” namely, in his religious life; upright before his God. The addition, “dwelling in tents,” indicates that he was aware of his status as stranger (Hebrews 11:9). His parents had a less noble characteristic: Rebekah loved Jacob, but Isaac especially loved Esau . . . because of the tasty game he always took along for the enjoyment of his father. Still, this does not detract from Esau’s responsibility for his course of life. God measures men by His covenant rules, requiring a life of faith, as known by Abraham, as well as by Isaac, in spite of the weakness of Isaac’s character.

What Scripture mentions next about Jacob and Esau’s youth is important. As we will see, they were about twenty years old. Esau once returned from hunting, tired and hot. With longing he gazed at the dish of lentil broth which Jacob had prepared for himself. “Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!” he said, somewhat roughly, and his motive is his fatigue — he cannot prepare some himself. The wording gives the impression of youthful carelessness, voicing the desire to attack, without delay, a plate of good food.

Jacob, cunningly taking advantage of the situation, demanded the birthright in exchange (as if it were merchandise!). And Esau sold it, even confirming it with an oath when Jacob insisted. What did it matter to him? Sooner or later he would die anyway in his dangerous desert employment, and then what would the birthright mean to him? Later Scripture emphatically calls it a deed of irreligiousness (Hebrews 12:16). But here Jacob also is not free from sin. And still there is a difference. Jacob was concerned about the blessing of the first-born. He will have heard from his mother that it was destined for him. Jacob wanted to appropriate the blessing by usurping the right to it. That certainly was not an act of faith. He could not wait. He grasped for it, as he would later grasp the blessing by deceiving his father.

On the one hand we are shown how much Jacob desired to receive the patriarchal blessing, but on the other hand we see the wicked paths he was willing to tread in order to satisfy his desire. And the *means* to the end are of importance!

Let it still be noted that Esau was given the name Edom (that which is red), a permanent reminder to him and his posterity.

Questions

1. Who is meant by David in Ezekiel 34:23?
2. When was the religious division formed in Israel, and by whom?
3. May we call God's promise regarding Ishmael a covenant promise?
4. What does Hosea 12:3 mean?
5. What was wrong with Esau's life as a hunter?
6. When we read that Jacob was a quiet man, is that to be taken in a social or a religious sense?
7. Was the birthright really transferred to Jacob by the barter, or not?
8. If not, did Esau still possess it?
9. What impression do we receive concerning the life of Isaac's family?