

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A.

Ninth Week -- Saturday

JACOB AND THE BIRTHRIGHT

"Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, 'Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.' Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, 'Sell me your birthright as of this day.' And Esau said, 'Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?' Then Jacob said, 'Swear to me as of this day.' So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright" (Genesis 25:29-34).

The careful and thoughtful reader of Scripture has many gratifications which escape him whose reading is but cursory. Thus, the consideration of dates and ages is wholly overlooked by readers of the easy class, but they are carefully noted by the true student, who derives from them much interesting information. Let us see, for instance, how this applies here.

Abraham survived Sarah thirty-eight years. Isaac was thirty-seven years old when his mother died, and as he was forty years old when he married Rebekah, we learn that the camp of Abraham remained for three years without a mistress. Again, Isaac was sixty years of age before his sons Esau and Jacob were born. Thus, for more than twenty years the heir of the promises remained childless; and Abraham, but for his faith, must have been sorely tried by this second long protraction of the hope he most cherished. This trial of his faith is not recorded and only discovered by the comparison of dates. Again, as Abraham's death is recorded before the birth of Isaac's sons is mentioned, nine readers out of ten probably consider that Abraham was dead before his grandsons were born.

But by looking at Abraham's age when he died and comparing it with the age of Isaac when his sons entered the world, we see that Abraham not only waited twenty years before his grandsons were born, but actually lived to see them seventeen or eighteen years old; so that it is almost beyond a doubt that Jacob and Esau had much intercourse with their venerable grandfather. Whether the elder of the two profited much by this advantage does not appear; but it is probable that Jacob, the younger, owed much of his strong faith in the Lord's providence to the example and instructions of the patriarch.

The intended preference of the younger, Jacob, over the elder, Esau, was disclosed to the

mother before the children saw the light, and was probably the source of the special regard in which she always held Jacob, while the feelings of the father inclined as strongly to his firstborn. The character of the two men, as they grew up, is very strongly distinguished. The eldest was rough, ruddy, and hairy--a description which implies great bodily strength and a temperament which would incline him to exciting and hazardous pursuits. The appearance of Jacob is not described, but the silence implies that he was the reverse of his brother--smooth, tender, and sensitive. The difference also was shown in their pursuits. The quiet occupations and interests of pastoral life suited well the quiet temper of Jacob. Esau gave his days to the chase, the excitement and great exertions of which supplied the kind of rough stimulant which his impulsive temper required, and his strong and active frame demanded.

Esau's character is well described by Samuel Turner in his *Notes on Genesis*:

Esau, it would seem, belonged to the class of rough sensual natures--men who, acting under the influence of present impulse, have no steadiness of character. They are distinguished by an imposing directness of conduct, the very opposite to anything deceitful or cunning. They have feeling and kindness; they readily forget an injury and cherish no malice. Those amiable qualities are associated, however, with levity, sensuality, and passion, leading to acts of violence as circumstances may prompt.

Esau, returning one day unsuccessful, weary, and famished from hunting, saw Jacob preparing a most savory mess of red-looking pottage. It was made of those red lentils which at the present day form a dish highly relished in Syria and Egypt. Esau knew not its name, for his rough roving life left him but little knowledge of domestic cookery. But the sight of it was pleasant, and the odor overpoweringly engaging to a man ravenously hungry. He cried impatiently, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary." Jacob senses that the opportunity might be employed for securing an object he had much at heart. Truly he must have had no very exalted opinion of his brother's sense of self-control when he made the extraordinary proposal of exchanging this stew for his birthright. But Jacob knew his brother. He knew Esau to be of the kind on whom the remote and the ideal make no impression.

The result does more honor to Jacob's penetration than to his brotherly love. Esau says to him, "*Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?*" (vs. 32). The full effect of this statement has not been well understood by those unacquainted with the East. We are apt to think that Esau might have taken some bread and cold meat, anything at hand, to refresh himself and stay his appetite till a more substantial meal should be ready; and hence the whole burden of his declaration is made to rest on his special fancy for Jacob's red pottage. Now, it is true that he liked the pottage. But it would seem that his great desire for it was because it was the only food ready to appease his rage of hunger.

We have already explained that there is never any food ready in eastern tents, and scarcely in the houses, for a sudden demand. All has to be prepared if a need arises between meal times.

Hence Esau knew that unless he obtained this stew he should have to wait some time--an age to a famishing man--until some food was prepared for him or until the next mealtime came round. This was probably the last meal of the day, since Esau had just returned from hunting. And since it was usually expected that he would provide for himself from the game he had shot, no preparation had been made for him. Unless he obtained Jacob's supper, or endured the delay of preparing another for himself at a late hour, he would have gotten no food until the morning. This was enough to urge on a man who lived so much for the present and had so little value for his birthright. Esau consented, and at Jacob's demand confirmed the transfer of his birthright by an oath.

It is impossible to approve of Jacob's conduct in this matter. It was sinister and unbrotherly, and even more, it was unfaithful. He knew that all he sought had been promised to him by One of whose faithfulness in all his promises he must often have heard from his grandfather. It was therefore his duty to have left the accomplishment to Him, in his own time, without seeking to aid the purposes of God by paltry underhanded policies. But we must view the character of Jacob in its progress of development and formation. We are at fault when we view men as being of the same character all through life; for in reality there is seldom little resemblance between the same man in youth and in mature age. So the Jacob of advanced life--taught of God at Bethel, Mahanaim, and Peniel, matured by experiences and tried by sorrows--is found to be a different man in many respects from the Jacob dwelling in his father's tents and under the influence and training of a sharp and unscrupulous mother.

But what was this birthright which Jacob so greatly coveted and which his brother so lightly esteemed? The ordinary privilege of the firstborn consisted in precedence over the other brothers and in a double share of the paternal estate. But the early Jewish writers, who naturally felt much interest on the subject and were well able to investigate it, think that the privilege which Jacob desired and obtained had nothing to do with present secular advantage but had reference to that heritage of the promises made to Abraham, which was supposed to go to the eldest born. They appeal to facts which are decidedly in their favor. "As to power and authority," says Abarbanel,

Jacob never exercised any over Esau, but, on the contrary, humbly and submissively addresses him as *my lord*, and styles himself Esau's *servant*, Gen. 32:5. And as to the double portion of Isaac's property, so far from obtaining it Jacob not only declares, *with my staff I passed over this Jordan*, but surrenders a considerable portion of his own property in the shape of a gift to Esau.

In fact, Esau, who "despised his birthright," received his possessions earlier than Jacob; and he founded a nation without subjecting his progeny to any disgrace like that which the Israelites sustained in Egypt.

To be the heir of the promise, to acquire possession of Canaan, to be associated with God in Abraham's covenant, and under it to be the instrument of imparting a blessing to all the earth--

these were matters on which Jacob's thoughts were fixed. It was not his own personal worldly advantage to which he looked but to the future welfare--temporal, spiritual, and eternal--of his progeny. In this he is entitled to our respect, however deeply we may deplore and censure the unkind and ungenerous manner in which he acquired a human claim to that which had been his by divine right before his birth.