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## **Abhor not the Edomite**

**Genesis 36:1-37:1**

Fr. William Klock

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The first verse of Chapter 36 is another of what should be, by now, familiar introductions to a new act in the story of God's dealings with the patriarchs:

**These are the generations of Esau (that is, Edom).**

The story of each new generation in redemptive history begins this way. Chapter 35 tied up the loose ends of Jacob's story. Now the baton of faith is passed on to his sons. In fact the account of the generations—or sons—of Jacob is the last act in the story of Genesis. But we're not *quite* ready for the last act yet. One of the themes in Genesis is the distinction between the children of God and the children of the serpent—the contrast between God's kingdom and the world's kingdom. The story started with humanity's rejection of the life God had given us. We wilfully rebelled against our Creator in an act of cosmic treason. The story from that point forward has shown how God has been at work to redeem his rebellious creatures and to draw them back to himself. As sinful humanity multiplied, Genesis shows us God selecting specific people, calling them into covenant, and building a distinct people for himself. Genesis is full of names and families and genealogies, but all for the purpose of showing us God's work in one particular family.

Have you ever traced your own line through a descendants chart or a family tree? Several of my relatives

have written books on parts of my family. They wrote about the history of the various inter-related branches of the family and included charts showing lines of descent. There was one book in particular, written by my grandmother's cousin, that interested me a lot when I was young. The book had a chapter each on the different families in the small Southern community she was from, but none of those other chapters interested me. I was only interested in the chapter titled, "The Middleton Family". That was *my* family—or, at least, my grandmother's family, descended from a shipwright who settled in Jamestown, Virginia about a decade after it was founded. I can remember looking at the charts of his descendants and tracing the line with my finger that led down, page after page, to my mother's name—and in a later edition, to my own name. None of those other names was important to me. I had no interest in those chapters about the Lyon or the Dudley families. But then, as an adult, I picked up the book again and read the whole thing. I discovered that those other names and other families were interesting too, but more importantly, I discovered that most of them were my relations and that I couldn't truly understand that one, solitary line I traced through the family tree from Jamestown down to myself without understanding the other people and families that were connected to it, that interacted with it, and that contributed their own genes and their own histories to my own. Those other families gave context to my own—they helped give it a place in the world.

And just so with these genealogies in Genesis. If all we follow is the righteous line of Seth through the family tree, ultimately to Jesus, we'll never truly understand its place in the world. We need the big picture in order to see what God is doing in all of this. And so with each

"generation" in Genesis, we've seen that before the story of God's work with his elect is told, the narrator tells about the nonelect members of the family and how they take their place in the kingdom of the world. He told us about Cain and his move to the "east"—which in Genesis symbolises movement away from God—before he told us about Seth and his righteous descendants. We read about Ham and Japheth before learning how God worked through Shem and his family. Before we read Abraham's story, we were told about the other two sons of Terah, Nahor and Haran. Before Isaac's story could be told, we read how Ishmael teased Isaac and was sent away from the chosen family. And now as Jacob's story closes, we can't move on to the story of his sons without waving goodbye to Jacob's twin brother, Esau.

We know a good bit about Esau already. We know that before he and Jacob were born, God had declared that the older, Esau, would serve the younger, Jacob, despite the cultural conventions of the day. When the boys were born, neither was portrayed in a positive light. Esau was a "hairy monster" and Jacob was a "back-stabber". Esau grew up to be a passionate, violent, rough-and-tumble outdoorsman and hunter who placed no value on the things of God. But Jacob wasn't much better. He grew up to be a conniving schemer, who manipulated others for his personal gain. He valued the things of God, but he valued them as ends in themselves. He didn't particularly value God. But as the story unfolded, we saw that Jacob's life was transformed by the grace of God. And that's the difference between these two brothers. Jacob has been transformed by grace; Esau may have matured over the years, but he's never learned to value God's kingdom. And that

distinction is the focus of these verses.

In the next chapter we'll read about the early days of Israel, the nation descended from Jacob, but here we read about Edom, the nation descended from Esau and the point here in Chapter 36 is to show how radically different these twin nations are. One is a holy nation of God's covenant people; the other is a worldly nation outside that covenant. Esau and Edom represent the Gentiles—the non-Jewish peoples—and in that the world can find hope, as we'll see later.

We were told back in chapters 26 and 28 about Esau's wives, but the narrator tells us again to remind us how Esau's choice of wives reveals his character. Look at verses 2-5:

**Esau took his wives from the Canaanites: Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah the daughter of Anah the daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, and Basemath, Ishmael's daughter, the sister of Nebaioth. And Adah bore to Esau, Eliphaz; Basemath bore Reuel; and Oholibamah bore Jeush, Jalam, and Korah. These are the sons of Esau who were born to him in the land of Canaan.**

The names here don't match the names given in chapters 26 and 28, probably because these passages were drawn from different sources. It may simply be that these women and their fathers went by different names at different times, just as Jacob and Esau were also known as Israel and Edom. Whatever the case, all three passages tell us that Esau married two Canaanite women and one Ishmaelite. The point is that Esau chose poorly when he married. His Canaanite wives, no doubt taken against the wishes of his parents, became an increasing point of

frustration and friction for them. Rebekah complained to Isaac that these two women made her life unbearable. Abraham and Isaac were both concerned that their sons not marry outside the family. Abraham sent his servant back to his own people to find a wife for Isaac and when it was Jacob's time to marry, Isaac sent him back to those same relatives to find a wife. They knew that God had called them to a very different sort of life and faith from the life and faith of the Canaanites. One of their greatest fears was that their sons might intermarry and lose that identity and calling. And that's just what we see with Esau. Marrying these Canaanite women not only shows his disrespect for the godly traditions of his father and grandfather, but it also shows how he cuts himself off from the chosen people.

After Isaac sent Jacob back to Paddan-aram to find a wife, Esau awoke to the reality that his parents weren't please with his choice. He thought he could make them happy by marrying a cousin. The problem is that in looking for someone "inside the family" to marry, he went to Ishmael's clan. Yes, Ishmael was family, but he was part of the family that rejected the covenant and moved away from the Promised Land. Esau thought he was doing the right thing, but in fact, he simply further confirmed his rejection of God and the covenant by intermarrying with his relatives who had already done the same. Esau thought it was just a superficial matter of sticking with family; he didn't understand that the *real* goal was a matter of sticking with God's covenant.

Now, not only did Esau abandon the covenant family by marrying two pagans and then a third woman who was something of a patriarchal-age apostate, he also abandoned the land

that God had promised and that was the central focus of the covenant. Look at verses 6-8:

**Then Esau took his wives, his sons, his daughters, and all the members of his household, his livestock, all his beasts, and all his property that he had acquired in the land of Canaan. He went into a land away from his brother Jacob. For their possessions were too great for them to dwell together. The land of their sojournings could not support them because of their livestock. So Esau settled in the hill country of Seir. (Esau is Edom.)**

Esau's nomadic lifestyle had already taken him temporarily to Seir. That's where he was living when Jacob returned home. But with Jacob now back in Canaan, Esau leaves for good. His reasoning was that the land was simply not able to support both his flocks and Jacob's. But Esau didn't have to leave Canaan entirely. He could have relocated to some other spot, further away from Jacob. Canaan itself was plenty big for both of them. But this simply serves to underscore Esau's abandonment of the land. God had given a promise of the land and of his provision in it. Esau saw greener pastures and trusted in what he could see. He didn't walk by faith. He didn't live his life trusting God to provide. And so in leaving permanently to settle in Seir, Esau removes himself from the covenant community, just as Lot had. His leaving profoundly contrasts with Jacob's staying. And that's the emphasis of 37:1. Verse 8 tells us that "Esau settled in the hill country of Seir." In verse 1 of the next chapter we read:

**Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.**

Originally, these two verses stood back to back. Esau placed no value in the things of God. He didn't walk with God. And all this is symbolised by his leaving the Promised Land. In contrast, Jacob saw how God's promises had been fulfilled for his father and grandfather in that land, and he stayed there, walking with God and trusting for the rest of his promises to come to pass. Bruce Waltke writes, "The patriarchs of the holy people, who stake their future on God's promises, move toward the Promised Land, but the nonelect, who live by sight (i.e., focused on the social, political, and/or economic), not by faith, move away from it."<sup>1</sup>

As I said, originally 36:8 and 37:1 stood back to back. At a later time an editor inserted verses 9-43. These verses give a more detailed look at Esau and his family. In verses 10-19 the names of Esau's wives and sons are given again, followed by the names of his grandsons; then we're told that all *twelve* of them became "chiefs" in the land of Edom—paralleling Jacob's *twelve* sons.

Verses 20-30 then list the sons of Seir the Horite. These were the clans that controlled the land of Seir when Esau and his sons took control of it. When Jacob had blessed Esau, he had said, "By your sword shall you live," and that seems to be what happened. Deuteronomy 2:12 records that when it came to the aboriginal inhabitants of Seir, "Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them from before them and settled in their place." And yet these verses also suggest that Esau didn't destroy them entirely. His sons intermarried with the Horites that remained.

Finally, in verses 31-43 we're given a list of "kings who reigned in the land of Edom." But these aren't dynastic kings. Their monarchy doesn't pass from father to son. It seems to parallel the judges in Israel, with these kings, like the judges, being charismatic rulers who took control of the nation for certain periods of time during crises. In fact, the timeline seems to suggest that these Edomite kings roughly parallel the period of the Israelite judges hundreds of years later. And this is what gives us a rough date for this material that was inserted.<sup>2</sup> Verse 31 tells us that these were the "kings who reigned in the land of Edom, *before any king reigned over the Israelites.*" David, Israel's second king, conquered Edom and brought it under his control. The most likely explanation is that these lists of Esau's sons and grandsons and the kings that rose from them came from the royal archives of Edom after it was conquered by David and added it to his empire. It obviously couldn't have been inserted before Saul's reign, and since it doesn't portray the Edomites in a negative light, it's safe to assume that it didn't originate in the period when Genesis was being finally edited after the Exile. By that later time, relations between Judah and Edom were very bitter as we see in Obadiah's prophecy and in Psalm 137:7-9.

So what's the point of all this? Yes, Genesis has this consistent pattern giving a few details about the nonelect seed of the serpent before moving on with the more important story of the seed of the woman, who would one day crush the serpent's head. We can see the contrast between Esau's walking by sight and Jacob's walking by faith. But

there's more to it than that. This may be a collection of genealogies and lists of chieftans and kings, but it's been placed here in Chapter 36 as a result of the Spirit's inspiration and, as St. Paul tells us, what the Spirit inspires is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

First, Esau and his sons illustrate God's covenant faithfulness. Right from the birth of Esau and Jacob, God obligated himself to bring about Edom's conquest and subjugation by Israel. But it doesn't happen right away. In fact, as the story unfolds, Jacob is the one forced to run away. Jacob is the one who leaves the Promised Land, while Esau remains with the covenant family and grows rich and prosperous. Esau is the one who meets his brother with a force of 400 armed men and it's Jacob who bows before him in fear. And the balance of power only tilts more in Esau's favour as we see here. While Jacob's twelve sons end up in Egypt and their descendants become slaves, Esau's twelve "sons" become tribal chieftans in Edom, eventually conquering the native Horites, and becoming kings themselves while the Israelites have no king and find themselves living under the rule of one pagan oppressor after another. All this points to God's power behind Israel at the time of Saul and David. God blessed Esau and made him a powerful nation, but he eventually raised up an even more powerful Israel to conquer Edom.

And brothers and sisters, consider how we see God's promises fulfilled in Edom. Esau becomes the great nation God had promised while Rebekah was still pregnant, and despite the power of that nation, it would be subjected to serve its younger brother in the days of King David. If God's promises are

<sup>1</sup> *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 483-484.

<sup>2</sup> Claus Westerman, *Genesis 12-36*, trans. J. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1995), vol. 2, p. 561.

fulfilled here, how much more can we expect the greater promises he made to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob to be fulfilled too! If Esau's sons became kings, consider all the reason we have to trust that Jesus Christ will reign until "he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25). And consider the reason we have to trust that, indeed, there will come a day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:11). If God is faithful to fulfil his promises to Esau—to a man who walked away from the covenant—how much more will he be faithful to his covenant people and to his own Son?

Finally, there's something here, too, that speaks to us about God's grace. Esau was circumcised. By his circumcision he was a member of the covenant and had a claim to all its gracious rights and privileges. But Esau never valued the things of God and rejected that covenant. He chose to walk apart from God's grace. In that, he and the nation descended from him represent us all. And as I said earlier, we should find hope in Esau's story, because despite his rebellion, God gave his children a future in his covenant. In Deuteronomy 23:7, God warned the Israelites:

**You shall not abhor the Edomite, for he is your brother....Children born to them in the third generation may enter the assembly of the LORD.**

God called on his people to look with grace on their brothers. While Esau had turned his back on God, there was still a place for his children to be welcomed back into his presence. Their being allowed into the assembly of the Lord in the third generation looked forward to

the day when Jesus Christ would open the kingdom to the gentiles. The remnant of Edom has now been reconciled to Israel through the incarnation and through the death and resurrection of Jesus and we can trust that sons and daughters of Esau stand in that great multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands" (Revelation 7:9).

Brothers and sisters, if there is hope of redemption in Edom, there is hope of redemption for every sinner. Through Esau's story, God calls us into his presence through the Cross of Jesus Christ. And through Esau's story, he also reminds us that our duty is not to despise sinners, but to declare the Gospel to them. Consider that Jacob was no better than Esau. Both of them were sinners. The difference between them was God's gracious and sovereign calling. Israel had nothing to boast in. He did not choose God; God chose him and poured his grace into him that he might be a witness to the world. Israel's duty was not to condemn Edom for its sin, but to invite it to repent and enter the presence of God. And so with us. You and I are only here because of the gracious and sovereign calling of God. Our duty is not to judge or to condemn sinners, but to declare the Gospel, to baptise and make disciples of them, and to bring them into "the assembly of the LORD".

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we give you thanks and praise for the hope you give us through Esau. As we see the fulfilment of your promises in the lives of the patriarchs, strengthen our faith in the promises you have made to us, we ask. And let us live in hope through Jesus Christ as we consider that

because of the Cross, there is room in your presence even for the rebellious children of Esau. We ask these things through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.