

ESAU AND JACOB
GENESIS 25:19 – 36:43

God's fidelity and human weakness

Abraham is held up to the reader as a model, a flawed one who had a lot to learn, but one who reached a heroic degree of faith and obedience, such that we can look to him as our 'father in faith' (Romans 4:16). Not so Jacob. This is a story, not so much about Jacob as about God who is faithful to his promises and his blessing, brought about through the weak human beings that he has chosen.

This is a story of a family with plenty of family conflicts. As we will see, it begins in conflict. Jacob and Esau are twins. Esau is the first one born, and so by convention is in a key position of power in the family as regards authority and inheritance. However, even in the womb there is a struggle and this struggle dominates the narrative. And there is much more to the struggle than this. The drama plays out because it is God who has ordained it to be this way, and we have no idea why. We are so used to claiming God for the way things are, for the positions of power that are set up by human convention (see Deuteronomy 21:15-17), that we ought to be scandalised by this story. It is about God who will not be bound by our conventions.

This is about God who is free, for whom 'the first will be last, and the last first' (Matthew 19:30). This is a story about God who chooses 'what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are' (1 Corinthians 1:28). This is a story about God who has a preferential option for the poor and who hears their cry. The authors of Deuteronomy remind Israel:

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that YHWH set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because YHWH loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that YHWH has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that YHWH your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty.

– Deuteronomy 7:7-9

This is a story of God's blessing that, like the wind, 'blows where it wills' (John 3:8). Nor does the blessing mean an untroubled life. Jacob is always in conflict: with Esau throughout the narrative; with his uncle, Laban (29-31); with his wife Rachel (30:1-2); with his sons (34:30); and, most significantly of all, with God (32:22-29). The prophet Hosea sums up his life: 'In the womb he tried to supplant his brother, and in his manhood he strove with God' (Hosea 12:3). Yet, throughout his troubled life, Jacob encounters God, just as the people of Israel, throughout their troubled history, experienced the guiding hand of the God who has chosen them in love, for a mission to the world God loves. The authors of the narrative and their readers have lived through and were part of a history of human unfaithfulness. They have also experienced proofs of YHWH's faithfulness through it all. This is a major theme of these stories.

The favoured position of Rachel's sons, Joseph and Benjamin, and the significant role of Bethel suggest this important sanctuary of the northern kingdom of Israel as a likely centre for the gathering and propagation of stories about Jacob. This is supported by the fact that the prophet Hosea in the latter part of the 8th century BC shows that he is acquainted with a number of the stories found here in Genesis.

In words of warning to the southern kingdom (Judah) and the northern kingdom (Jacob), Hosea has this to say:

YHWH has an indictment against Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways,
and repay him according to his deeds.

In the womb he tried to supplant his brother, and in his manhood he strove with God.

He strove with the angel and prevailed, he wept and sought his favour;

he met him at Bethel, and there he spoke with him.

YHWH the God of hosts, YHWH is his name!

But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice,
and wait continually for your God ...

Jacob fled to the land of Aram, there Israel served for a wife,
and for a wife he guarded sheep.

– Hosea 12:2-6, 12

The authors of Genesis are drawing on these ancient stories.

It is also possible that there is a link between the way Jacob is portrayed and the way Moses is portrayed in the early chapters of Exodus. Like Jacob, Moses has to flee because of his actions (compare Genesis 27 and Exodus 2:11-15). Like Jacob, Moses has a mysterious encounter with YHWH in a sanctuary where he is given a mission from God (compare Genesis 28:10-12 and Exodus 3:1 - 4:7). Like Jacob, Moses is told that he is to return to the place from which he is fleeing (compare Genesis 31:13 and Exodus 4:18-20). Like Jacob, Moses has a mysterious encounter at night (compare Genesis 32:22-32 and Exodus 4:24-26). Do these parallels witness to the way in which the ancient stories were re-shaped when they were blended into the Torah?

The authors of Genesis have fitted together ancient stories from Israelite folklore to produce an engaging narrative of Abraham's grandchildren, Esau and Jacob, and of God's blessing that issues in the twelve sons of Jacob, and so in the tribes that would one day form the people of Israel.

¹⁹These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.

²¹Isaac prayed to YHWH for his wife, because she was barren; and YHWH granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.

²²The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of YHWH. ²³And YHWH said to her, "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 the younger serve."

²⁴When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. ²⁶Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents.

²⁸Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

The story begins with a genealogy. We have already been introduced to Bethuel and his children Rebekah and Laban (Genesis 22:23, 24:15,29).

Rebekah, like Rachel before her (11:30), is unable to have children. God alone can ensure the continuance of the promise and the blessing. We are told that Isaac was forty when he married (25:20), and sixty when he had children (25:26). We are left to imagine the longing and the anguish over the twenty years of waiting – a theme already developed in the Abraham saga. Rebekah has twins and the struggle between them, a struggle that will dominate the whole narrative, begins in the womb (25:22). Rebekah is having a difficult pregnancy, and turns to YHWH, wondering why. Why me?

YHWH's response is addressed not to Rebekah but to the reader. Here we learn that it is God's will that the younger will prevail and the people born of him (Israel) will dominate over the people born of his older brother (Edom). No reason is given. As already noted in the introduction to these stories (see pages 150-151). God is free, and is not bound by human convention. Yet the final words of verse 23 are mysteriously ambiguous!.

The elder has a ruddy complexion ('admōnî) - from the same root as 'Edom', the people just to the south of Judah. He is also hairy (sē'ār) - Sē'îr is another name for Edom (see 14:6; 32:3). The origin of the name 'Esau' is uncertain, but the authors have clearly linked him with Edom. The name Jacob (ya'qob) is linked here to the word 'heel' ('āqēb; see also 27:36, where Jacob is linked with the word 'devious', 'aqeb). In fact Jacob means 'May YHWH protect'.

Even the parents take different sides. The father is following convention. The mother is in tune with the mystery of what YHWH is doing in the lives of her children.

The Esau portrayed here bears no resemblance to the Esau of the rest of the narrative. We seem to have a story of how the older civilisation of the hunter-gatherer gave way to the more 'modern' life of the shepherd who moved from settlement to settlement with his domesticated animals. The names Jacob, Esau (and Edom) have been inserted into the traditional story for the purposes of our narrative.

The hunter-gatherer (see 25:27) is being caricatured (to the delight of the shepherd). The word 'shove down my throat' occurs only here in the Bible. 'Red stuff' translates the Hebrew 'ādôm 'ādôm (repeated), with links to Esau (see 25:25) and 'edôm (25:30). Esau is portrayed as having no interest in the contents of the stew (it turns out to be lentils, 25:34). All he can think of is instant gratification.

Jacob sees an opportunity for his future, and, unlike Esau, he can wait (later he will wait an extra seven years for Rachel, 29:30). He gives the stew to Esau on condition that Esau takes an oath that he will give his younger brother the rights he has as the firstborn (Deuteronomy 21:17-21; Numbers 27:1-11). For the purpose of this narrative we are witnessing the first step in the carrying out of the designs of YHWH (foretold in 25:23).

Israel, too, must learn to wait, for God can be trusted to carry out his designs: 'those who wait for YHWH shall renew their strength' (Isaiah 40:31).

In the Letter to the Hebrews, Jacob is lauded as one who believed in God's blessing (Hebrews 11:21). We are encouraged to be 'imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises' (Hebrews 6:12). Esau, on the other hand, is portrayed as 'an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal' (Hebrews 12:16).

In his reflections on this story, Paul casts the Jews in the role of Esau and the young Christian community in the role of Jacob, and he quotes God's words to Moses: 'I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy' (Romans 9:14; Exodus 33:19). God was free when he chose Jacob. God remains free. God is faithful, but it is not for us to lock God into our institutions. God's fidelity is something we must trust. It was because the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day failed to realise this that they failed to listen to Jesus. All they could think of was to get him out of the way (see Mark 3:6 and Luke 19:47).

²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was *almost dying of hunger*.

³⁰Esau said to Jacob, "Let me *shove some of that red stuff down my throat, for I am almost dying of hunger!*" (Therefore he was called Edom.)

³¹Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright."

³²Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

¹Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar, to King Abimelech of the Philistines.

²YHWH appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you. ³Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, ⁵because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."

⁶So Isaac settled in Gerar. ⁷When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister"; for he was afraid to say, "My wife," thinking, "or else the men of the place might kill me for the sake of Rebekah, because she is attractive in appearance."

⁸When Isaac had been there a long time, King Abimelech of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw him fondling his wife Rebekah. ⁹So Abimelech called for Isaac, and said, "So she is your wife! Why then did you say, 'She is my sister'?" Isaac said to him, "Because I thought I might die because of her." ¹⁰Abimelech said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." ¹¹So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, "Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death."

Chapter 26 is the only section of the patriarchal narrative that has Isaac as the central figure. The only traditional material available to the authors seems to have been a record of Isaac's journeys, including his relationship with Abimelech, and, most important of all, a record of the wells. The rest is a theological reflection on Isaac as an inheritor of the promise – a promise which leads to blessing, especially material prosperity and peace.

A link is made with the famine experienced by Abraham (see 12:10), and the blessing given to him (see 12:2-3; 22:15-18). As in 18:19 and 22:15-18, the accent is on Isaac's obedience. The language of verse five is that of Deuteronomy.

The key point in verses 2-5 is to demonstrate that YHWH is faithful to the promise he gave Abraham concerning his son (see 17:19).

The story in 26:7-11 echoes that of Abraham, Sarah and the Pharaoh (see 12:10-20). The feeling here, however, is gentler. Abimelech could hardly be portrayed in a more positive light. There is no question of his even desiring Rebekah. In this it differs, too, from the other parallel story of Abimelech and Sarah (see 20:1-18).

In referring to Abimelech as a Philistine the authors are telling the story in terms familiar to their readers. The Philistines entered Canaan in the thirteenth century BC - long after the patriarchal period.

The description of Isaac's great wealth (as well as the repetition of a reference to the Philistines) does not fit with the patriarchal times. Verses 12-17 link YHWH's blessing (26:12) with material prosperity. There is nothing otherworldly about this blessing.

Verse 15 is awkward. It is picked up in verse 18 where it refers to the wells in the wadi of Gerar where Isaac settled, not in the region ruled by Abimelech. A wadi is a dry river bed with water only when there is a flash flood in the rainy season.

Verses 19 to 23 represent the oldest layer of the material available to the authors. It was obviously critical for a nomad people moving with their flocks to know wells along the way, and to be able to claim right to use them.

Esek is derived from the verb 'āśaq ('to dispute'). Sitnah (šitnâh) means 'accusation' (related to the word 'šātān', the one who accuses).

The climax comes with the exultation that breaks into praise of YHWH when they have a well that is not disputed. Rehoboth derives from the verb rāhab ('to make space') by releasing from constriction ('You gave me room when I was in distress', Psalm 4:1). The blessing of YHWH makes them 'fruitful in the land'.

Beer-sheba means 'seven wells' or 'wells of the oath' (see 21:31).

¹²Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. YHWH blessed him, ¹³and the man became rich; he prospered more and more until he became very wealthy. ¹⁴He had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. ¹⁵(Now the Philistines had stopped up and filled with earth all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham.)

¹⁶And Abimelech said to Isaac, "Go away from us; you have become too powerful for us." ¹⁷So Isaac departed from there and camped in the *wadi* of Gerar and settled there.

¹⁸Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them. ¹⁹But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, ²⁰the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herders, saying, "The water is ours." So he called the well Eseq, because they contended with him. ²¹Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also; so he called it Sitnah.

²²He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, "Now YHWH has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."

²³From there he went up to Beer-sheba.

²⁴And that very night YHWH appeared to him and said, "I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham's sake." ²⁵So he built an altar there, called on the name of YHWH, and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well.

²⁶Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army.

²⁷Isaac said to them, "Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?"

²⁸They said, "We see plainly that the YHWH has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you ²⁹so that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of YHWH." ³⁰So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. ³¹In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths; and Isaac set them on their way, and they departed from him in peace.

³²That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well that they had dug, and said to him, "We have found water!" ³³He called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day.

³⁴When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; ³⁵and they were a provocation to Isaac and Rebekah.

The faithfulness of YHWH to Abraham is continuing in his faithfulness to Isaac. 'Do not be afraid' echoes YHWH's words to Abraham (15:1) and to Hagar (21:17). 'I am with you' repeats the assurance given to Isaac in 26:3. It echoes Abimelech's words to Abraham in whom he recognised God's presence (see 21:22). The promise of 26:4 is repeated here. Isaac's response is modelled on that of Abraham (see 12:8).

Verse 26 picks up from verse 17. Phicol was with Abimelech when Abimelech went to Abraham (see 21:22,32). The presence of these two high officials with the king is a way of portraying Isaac as at least Abimelech's equal. The non-aggression pact recalls that made with Abraham, also at Beer-sheba (see 21:25ff).

The authors are highlighting the peace (26:31) that existed between Isaac and Abimelech, no doubt hoping to encourage the same between the descendants of both in their own day.

The word Shibah (šibâh), derived from the word 'seven', means 'abundance', an adaptation by the authors to fit their main theme, which is the abundant prosperity that flows from God's blessing.

Verse 34-35 are from a genealogy from the Priestly School, and are continued in chapter 27:46ff.

Verse thirty-five introduces a sour note into the Genesis account of Esau, an account that is generally very sympathetic.

Isaac is dying. He has one last duty to perform, and a most sacred one. He is to bless his first born son, ensuring the peaceful handing on of authority, power and inheritance in the patriarchal family. The Hebrew word translated 'I' in 'that I may bless you' is *nepeš*. Following convention, the father in a solemn family ritual is handing on his 'life force', his 'longings', his 'heart and soul' (his 'élan vital') to his first born.

So he calls Esau, who has already been introduced to us as 'a skilful hunter, a man of the field' and as his favourite: 'Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game'(25:27-28).

So far everything seems straightforward, except that we have heard the oracle spoken by YHWH to Rebekah: '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'(25:23). YHWH has a design that cannot be controlled by human conventions, however basic to society, and however much we might like to think of them as expressing God's will.

On the human level we find nothing attractive about Rebekah's plan to deceive her husband. We know that Jacob is her favourite (see 25:28), but that does not justify her determination that Isaac will bless Jacob in place of Esau: 'so that he may bless *you* before he dies'(27:10).

However, we are aware that something is happening here that is beyond the plans of either Isaac or Rebekah. God's will is not bound by human convention. Neither is it determined by human attractiveness or not attractiveness. Is this the point being made when Rebekah repeats Isaac's words: 'that I may bless you before I die'(27:4), and adds: 'before YHWH'(27:7)?

¹When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." ²He said, "See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. ³Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. ⁴Then prepare for me savoury food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die."

⁵Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, ⁶Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father say to your brother Esau, ⁷'Bring me game, and prepare for me savory food to eat, that I may bless you before YHWH before I die.' ⁸Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. ⁹Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savoury food for your father, such as he likes; ¹⁰and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies."

Jacob follows his mother's instructions

¹¹But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, "Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin. ¹²Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing." ¹³His mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me."

¹⁴So he went and got them and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared savory food, such as his father loved. ¹⁵Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob; ¹⁶and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. ¹⁷Then she handed the savoury food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob.

¹⁸So he went in to his father, and said, "My father"; and he said, "Here I am; who are you, my son?" ¹⁹Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me." ²⁰But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because YHWH your God granted me success." ²¹Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." ²²So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." ²³He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him.

Jacob's behaviour is no more attractive than that of his mother. He does not balk at the deception. His only hesitation is about whether it will succeed or fail.

Rebekah accepts the full weight of the risk they are taking, so determined is she to get *her* boy blessed.

The deception is working.

We have here a fascinating insight into an ancient family ritual in a nomad society. After settlement we see that it is possible for all twelve sons of Jacob (that is, each of the twelve tribes of Israel) to receive a blessing (see Genesis 49). For a family of nomads, however, everything goes to the first born.

The steps of this solemn ritual are spelled out. The first step is the establishment of the identity of the eldest son (27:24). Isaac believes Jacob, and so is deceived.

The second step is a meal (27:25). The dying father is to be strengthened to hand on his full vitality to his son.

The third step is an embrace (27:26-27).

Finally, the solemn blessing, which here consists in five elements. The first is material prosperity, though the language of 27:27-28 comes from a later period of settlement. The second asserts domination over other peoples, though this, too, has Israel in view. The third is authority over your 'brothers'. Note the plural, which also fits a later period. The fourth is the respect and obedience of his sons. The fifth casts a curse over his enemies and a blessing over his friends.

24He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am."

25Then he said, "Bring it to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you." So he brought it to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank.

26Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son."

27So he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garments,

and blessed him, and said, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that YHWH has blessed. **28**May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine.

29Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"

³⁰As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of his father Isaac, his brother Esau came in from his hunting. ³¹He also prepared savoury food, and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, "Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game, so that you may bless me." ³²His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am your firstborn son, Esau." ³³Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall be!"

³⁴When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, me also, father!" ³⁵But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." ³⁶Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he *has acted deviously towards me* these two times. He took away my birthright; and look, now he has taken away my blessing." Then he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" ³⁷Isaac answered Esau, "I have already made him your lord, and I have given him all his brothers as servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?" ³⁸Esau said to his father, "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!" And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.

³⁹Then his father Isaac answered him: "See, the fat places of the earth can still be your dwelling, and the dew of heaven on high.

⁴⁰But by your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck."

Our sympathy goes out to the dying Isaac. The deception wrought by his wife and younger son has meant that he is powerless to do what every father wants to do, indeed must do, to ensure the peaceful handing on of his life and all that he has worked for. When he was a boy YHWH intervened to save his life (Genesis 22). It is too late for that now. He has given the blessing, and there is no taking it back: 'blessed he shall be'(27:33).

Our sympathy goes also to Esau. He pleads for a blessing, knowing that it cannot be given. The struggle that went back to the womb (25:22) has come to this. In the earlier scene Jacob was linked to the word 'heel'('āqēb). Now it is linked with the word 'devious'('aqeb).

Reference is made back to 25:27-34, when Esau gave up his birthright. 'He took away my birthright (b^ekorâ); and look, now he has taken away my blessing (b^erākâ).'

Isaac cannot hand on to Esau what he has already given to Jacob, 'the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth'(27:28). But the blessing points to God's abundance. There is enough for all to have some! Isaac promises Esau 'you shall live', and though he must serve his brother as his lord, he will cast off the yoke one day (see 2Kings 8:22).

There are echoes here of the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:8).

Esau's anger threatens Rebekah's plans for her son (and the design of God). She organises for Jacob to flee to her brother in Haran 'and stay with him a while' (27:44). She does not know that it will be 20 years before Jacob returns, and by that time she will have died. She will never see her son again. Her scheming means that she does 'lose both of you in one day' (27:45). Nothing is gained by deception, but God can work even through deception to achieve his design.

God's ways are beyond our comprehension. We are reminded of the question asked by the religious leaders of Jesus' day: 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' (Luke 5:30). The question is a valid one, but not their stubbornness in holding on to their own traditions and rejecting the God revealed in Jesus' astonishing actions.

We can imagine the astonishment of the leading Pharisee with whom Jesus was dining, when he was told: 'When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind' (Luke 14:13). One can hear him saying: 'But these are being punished by God for sin. How can they be blessed?' Equally astonishing to the religious leaders were the parables addressed to them by Jesus, one of which saw the younger sinful brother welcomed with great feasting (Luke 15:24). The astonishment is understandable. Not so the refusal to listen to Jesus and to thank God for God's wonderful mercy. Not so the refusal to accept the invitation to participate in the celebration.

God is not rewarding Jacob because he is a better person than his brother, Esau. In this story the opposite is surely the case. The designs of God are beyond our comprehension. It is for us to cast ourselves upon God in trust that all will be well.

⁴¹Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob."

⁴²But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. ⁴³Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, ⁴⁴and stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away— ⁴⁵until your brother's anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?"

⁴⁶Then Rebekah said to Isaac, “I am weary of my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women such as these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?”

^{28:1}Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, “You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women. ²Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother’s father; and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother. ³May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples. ⁴May he give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien—land that God gave to Abraham.”

⁵Thus Isaac sent Jacob away; and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob’s and Esau’s mother. ⁶Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he charged him, “You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women,” ⁷and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram.

⁸So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please his father Isaac, ⁹Esau went to Ishmael and took Mahalath daughter of Abraham’s son Ishmael, and sister of Nebaioth, to be his wife in addition to the wives he had.

Rebekah knows Jacob must leave and flee from his brother’s murderous intent (27:43). She presents Isaac with a different reason for sending his son away. This story is being composed at a time when ‘Hittite’ and ‘Canaanite’ had lost any practical significance. It is really a teaching about avoiding mixed marriages – something that was of special significance in exile as well as in the post-exilic period (see Ezra 10:9-17; Nehemiah 13:23-27). Survival of their religion seemed to demand avoiding any accommodation to the surrounding culture.

Verses 2-4 recall Abraham’s concern for Isaac. Jacob is being sent into exile to preserve the purity of the tradition – a message not lost on the Babylonian exiles.

Isaac now gives Jacob the blessing intended for him: the blessing of the covenant. There was no need for deception, no need for Jacob to supplant his brother, Esau. Offspring and land are linked as in 17:7-8. Isaac is passing on to his son the blessing given to Abraham.

On the use of ‘God Almighty’ (El Shaddai) in the Priestly School, see the commentary on 17:1.

We come to one of the key stories in the Jacob cycle. It may also offer an example of how stories grow. It is suggested that the oldest layer of the story concerns the origin of a sanctuary at Bethel (28:18-19). To this story were added the names of YHWH and Jacob to legitimise the use of the sanctuary by the people of Israel. Then was added the part about the vow and the tithe (28:20-22) to associate these later practices with the patriarchs. Finally, the authors of Genesis created the narrative we have, placing this encounter of Jacob with God as he fled from Beer-sheba to Haran. The promise made to Jacob here (28:15) is the key theme of the Jacob cycle, just as the promise of a son is the key theme in the Abraham cycle.

Jacob is in flight from his brother who is resolved to kill him (27:41), and is sleeping in the open, totally vulnerable. The stone is all he has by way of protection should he be attacked in the night in this strange place. It is here, when everything is at risk, that YHWH intervenes in the life of this refugee. He does so by way of a dream.

First the stairway and the divine messengers, indicating that this is a holy place where God communicates with the earth from a place that is beyond Jacob's fears, loneliness (and guilt?).

Jesus refers to this scene when he presents himself as the one through whom God is revealing himself to the poor, to the disenfranchised, to those, like Jacob, who are in flight: 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man' (see John 1:51).

The key significance lies in the words spoken to Jacob by YHWH who reveals himself as 'the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.' Jacob is given the same promise of land that was given to Abraham (12:7; 13:15) and to Isaac (26:3-4). He is given the same promise of a multitude of descendants that was given to Abraham (12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 22:17) and to Isaac (26:3-4). And he is given a promise, already given to Abraham (12:3; 18:18; 22:18) and to Isaac (26:4): 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring'.

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran.

¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it *at his head* and lay down in that place.

¹²And he dreamed that there was a *stairway* set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

¹³And YHWH stood beside him and said, "I am YHWH, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring;

¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.

The promise given to Jacob

**¹⁵Know that I am with you
and will keep you wherever you go,
and will bring you back to this land;
for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."**

This promise is special for Jacob and it is the key to the plot of the Jacob cycle. It is a promise attached to a journey. YHWH wants Jacob to 'know that I am with you.' Jeremiah received the same assurance when he, too, was facing opposition:

They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says YHWH, to deliver you.

– Jeremiah 1:19

We think, too, of the assurance given to Israel by YHWH:

Do not fear ... you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you ... for I am YHWH your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

– Isaiah 43:1-3

And we recall the last words of Jesus to his disciples:

Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

– Matthew 28:20

YHWH promises Jacob: 'I will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land.' Psalm 23 picks up the reassurance of this promise:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me.

– Psalm 23:4

Psalm 121 speaks again and again of God as the one who 'keeps' Israel.

Finally YHWH promises: 'I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' How the Jews in exile needed to hear these words. Similarly for those who returned to their homeland and had to live under Persian rule. How we all need to hear these words. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds his readers: 'He said: I will never leave you or forsake you' (Hebrews 13:5).

We are reminded of Mary of whom Elizabeth said:

Blessed is she who believed that what was promised her by the Lord would be fulfilled.

– Luke 1:45

On waking, Jacob knows from his dream that this is not *any* place. This is a sanctuary, a holy place where God (YHWH) reveals his presence: the ‘house of God’ (bēt ’lohîm), the ‘gate of heaven’ (ša‘ar haššāmāyîm). His feeling is one of profound awe.

This moment proves to be the beginning of a new life for Jacob, overwhelmed as he is that YHWH would appear to *him* and call *him* to carry on the mission given to Abraham and Isaac. We might think of the experience of Paul on the road to Damascus who became convinced that ‘although I am the very least of all the saints’ (Ephesians 3:8), ‘nothing can separate [me] from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Romans 8:39). Jacob now lives with the knowledge that YHWH is with him, will protect him, and will ensure that the promises made him will be fulfilled.

Verse 18 may contain remnants of an ancient magical notion that a stone could be a medium for revelation. In any case, starting with the stone Jacob constructs a pillar marking the spot as sacred (see later 31:45-49; 35:14-14) – something forbidden in Deuteronomy 16:22. The pouring of oil is an act of consecration.

Jacob names the place to record his experience, as we saw in the case of the well where Hagar experienced the divine (16:14). Likewise Abraham (22:14). ‘Luz’ means ‘almond tree’, possibly referring to the pre-Israelite name for what was originally a tree sanctuary.

Jacob’s vow commits him to act on what he has been given in this experience. It matches the promise of verse 15. In response to YHWH’s assurance: ‘I am with you’, Jacob makes a solemn and binding promise (for himself and his descendants): ‘YHWH shall be my God’. He also sets up what was to become a temple (see Amos 7:13; 2Kings 23:15-20), thereby committing himself (and his descendants) to worship. He promises to give a tithe, thereby committing himself (and his descendants) to the recognition that the land belongs to YHWH, who has given it into Israel’s care.

The authors of Genesis want their contemporaries to keep these same promises. The same principles apply to us Christians who ‘are children of the promise, like Isaac’ (Galatians 4:28).

16Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely YHWH is in this place—and I did not know it!”

17And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

18So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

19He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

20Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, **21**so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then YHWH shall be my God,

22and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you.”

¹Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east. ²As he looked, he saw a well in the field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it; for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, ³and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.

⁴Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran." ⁵He said to them, "Do you know Laban son of Nahor?" They said, "We do." ⁶He said to them, "Is it well with him?" "Yes," they replied, "and here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep." ⁷He said, "Look, it is still broad daylight; it is not time for the animals to be gathered together. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them." ⁸But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep."

⁹While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. ¹⁰Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban.

¹¹Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud.

¹²And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father.

¹³When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, ¹⁴and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month.

Verse one continues on from 28:10. Jacob is journeying northeast from Beer-sheba to Haran.

There are obvious parallels between this scene and the meeting by a well of Rebekah and the servant who was dispatched to get a bride for Isaac (24:11-33).

After all the intrigue, deception and conflict, this idyllic scene comes as a welcome respite. As we will soon see, the respite does not last.

Jacob introduces himself and asks after his uncle's well-being (*šālôm*). The appearance of Rachel (29:9) reminds us that in those days girls helped in keeping the sheep and moved quite freely among the men.

Jacob shows off his strength to impress Rachel, and she is more than happy to greet him in the manner customary among cousins.

The Israelites would have enjoyed telling this old love story. Perhaps especially the way it portrays the shepherds of Aram (Israel's constant rival) as pretty hopeless and lazy.

Laban welcomes Jacob with open arms and all appears to be well. For the expression 'bone and flesh' see 2:23.

Leah (lē'â) means 'cow'. Rachel (rāḥēl) means 'ewe'.

Jacob is penniless and away from home. He wants to show how much he has to offer and also how much he wants Rachel, so he offers to work for Laban for seven years.

However, he has met his match in Laban and gets some of his own back. Jacob tricked Esau so that he, the younger, would inherit everything from his father. Now he himself is deceived. Rachel, the younger, must wait her turn, and so must Jacob. He cannot get his way against custom all the time. Only when YHWH wills it.

This is a story of how circumstances beyond our control can come in the way of what could have been an ideal love affair. How many migrants have had to suffer in similar ways, powerless as they are to assert their real value in a land where they have no history and no rights.

Having agreed – if he wants Rachel he has no choice – to not embarrass his uncle, and to go through with the wedding celebrations with Leah, Jacob does get Rachel (29:30), but has to work another seven years for Laban.

What appears straightforward: 'Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah' recalls an earlier split between Isaac and Rebekah (25:28). This, and the deception of Laban, prepares us for more conflict.

¹⁵Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"

¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah's eyes were *without lustre*, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

¹⁹Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me."

²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed."

²²So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. ²³But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.)

²⁵When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"

²⁶Laban said, "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years."

²⁸Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

²⁹(Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.)

³⁰So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

³¹When YHWH saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.

³²Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, "Because YHWH has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me."

³³She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because YHWH has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also"; and she named him Simeon.

³⁴Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons"; therefore he was named Levi.

³⁵She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise YHWH"; therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing.

Here we begin the centrepiece of the Jacob-Laban saga which runs from 29:1 to 31:55. Jacob's children (except for Benjamin) are born in exile.

The opening verse reminds us that behind the narrative YHWH is acting in history. Leah is described as 'unloved' (šāna'; literally 'hated'). This is a Semitic idiom. When 'love' and 'hate' are put together, they refer to the one who is chosen in preference to the other. We find the same usage when Jesus says:

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

– Luke 14:26

Jesus is not demanding that we have bad feelings towards our family (any more than Jacob is being described as having bad feelings towards Leah). Jesus is saying that we must 'seek *first* the kingdom of God'. If we don't our 'love' for our family will be distorted. Jacob's first love is for Rachel in preference to Leah. YHWH has mercy of Leah, enabling her to have children. As with Sarah (11:30) and Rebekah (25:21), Rachel is unable to have children. YHWH will have to intervene to make it possible.

Jacob's first four sons are from Leah and are named. The author plays on the sound of the names to find meaning in them in order to enhance the story. The first born is Reuben, combining the verb 'to see' (rā'â) with the word 'son' (bēn). The second is Simeon, from the verb 'to hear' (šāmā'). YHWH has seen her condition and heard her cry. The third is Levi, from the verb 'to be joined' (lāwâ). The fourth is Judah, linked here to the verb 'to praise' (yādâ).

It is interesting to note that the tribal areas named after these first four sons are all in the south. Judah is the large southern tribe. Levi did not have a tribal area, for it was to be the tribe of priests. At the time of writing these were centred in the Temple of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. Reuben was the southernmost tribe on the other side of the Dead Sea from Judah, and Simeon was a small tribe within the borders of Judah.

Leah ceased bearing. It will appear shortly that this is because Jacob is not sleeping with her.

The scene is set for conflict between the two sisters, reminiscent of the conflict between Sarah and Hagar (16:4ff). A mother longing for children but unable to fall pregnant will understand Rachel's cry (compare that of Hannah in 1Samuel 1).

Jacob seems unable to avoid conflict. Here we find him in conflict with the wife he loves so dearly. The point he makes, however, takes us to the central issue of the drama. In the midst of these very natural family happenings, our focus is to be on what God is doing, through and beyond the hopes, plans and scheming of the humans involved.

In her desperation Rachel has recourse to her maid, as did Sarah in the same circumstances (see 16:2). The first son born for Rachel by her maid is called Dan, from the verb 'to judge' (dîn). The second son is Naphtali, from the verb 'to struggle' (pātal). Rachel sees herself vindicated by God in her struggle with her older sister.

Leah has had four children, but she still feels the pain of being unable to fall pregnant again. She, too, seeks to have more through her maid, who bears two sons for her. The first is Gad, originally the name of a god of good fortune (see 'Baal-gad' in Joshua 11:17). The second is Asher, from the word for 'happiness' ('āšār).

Three of the tribes who are named after these sons are in the extreme north, in Galilee. The fourth, Gad, is on the east of the Jordan, just above Reuben. Leah's final words recall Mary's words, expressing her joy that, miraculously, she has conceived the Messiah:

My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the
lowliness of his servant. Surely, from
now on all generations will call me
happy..

– Luke 1:47-48

¹When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!"

²Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"

³Then she said, "Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her."

⁴So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife; and Jacob went in to her.

⁵And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. ⁶Then Rachel said, "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son"; therefore she named him Dan.

⁷Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son.

⁸Then Rachel said, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed"; so she named him Naphtali.

⁹When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. ¹⁰Then Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. ¹¹And Leah said, "Good fortune!" so she named him Gad. ¹²Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. ¹³And Leah said, "Happy am I! For the women will call me happy"; so she named him Asher.

Rachel has a son, Joseph

14In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." **15**But she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" Rachel said, "Then he may lie with you tonight for your son's mandrakes."

16When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him, and said, "You must come in to me; for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night.

17And God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son.

18Leah said, "God has given me my hire because I gave my maid to my husband"; so she named him Issachar. **19**And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. **20**Then Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honour me, because I have borne him six sons"; so she named him Zebulun. **21**Afterwards she bore a daughter, and named her Dinah.

22Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. **23**She conceived and bore a son, and said, "God has taken away my reproach"; **24**and she named him Joseph, saying, "May YHWH add to me another son!"

Mandrakes were considered aphrodisiacs (see Song of Songs 7:13). *dōdā'îm* (mandrakes) sounds like *dōdîm* (lovemaking). Rachel decides to try some magic in the hope that the mandrakes will cause her to fall pregnant.

Her attempt fails and backfires for it is Leah who conceives and produces two more sons and a daughter. The first, her fifth son, is called Issachar, from the verb 'to hire' (*šākar*). The second, her sixth son, is called Zebulun, from the verb 'to honour' (*zābal*). The tribes of Issachar and Zebulun are two small tribes in lower Galilee. She also has a daughter, Dinah, from the same root, 'to judge' (*dîn*), as her brother Dan (30:6). Leah has had seven children. Her maternal role has reached its fullness.

As it was with Noah (8:1) and Abraham (19:29), the turning point for Rachel does not come from something she does. It comes because 'God remembered Rachel' (30:22). The authors are reminding the returned exiles that their only hope is in YHWH who promised: 'I will not forget you' (Isaiah 49:15). Rachel conceives and gives birth to a son after whom the largest and most powerful of the tribes will be called, covering the mountain territory of Samaria and stretching east beyond the Jordan. She calls him Joseph, by sound association with both 'take away' (*'āsaḅ*) and 'increase' (*yāsaḅ*).

Jacob's fourteen years of service are up. He wants to return home. However, he is not independent, and in Laban's house, Laban has rights over Jacob's wives and children. Laban readily admits that 'YHWH has blessed me because of you' (30:27), and he is too shrewd to lose Jacob's service. So he asks Jacob to name the wages he wants to stay on and continue working for him.

Jacob sees that there is no way that Laban is going to let him go, so, having reinforced the fact that 'YHWH has blessed you wherever I turned' (30:30), he changes tack and states that it is time for him to start becoming independent. He has a plan, and if Laban agrees to it, he will continue working for Laban.

He asks for so little. Nearly all the sheep are white. Jacob asks for the rare black, speckled and spotted ones. Most of the goats are dark. Jacob asks for the rare ones that have white spots.

Laban takes advantage of what appears to him to be Jacob's naive offer, and he hastens to agree. He is assured of Jacob's continued willing service, and stands to lose only a very small part of the flock – or so he thinks.

²⁵When Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. ²⁶Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know very well the service I have given you."

²⁷But Laban said to him, "If you will allow me to say so, I have learned by divination that YHWH has blessed me because of you; ²⁸name your wages, and I will give it."

²⁹Jacob said to him, "You yourself know how I have served you, and how your cattle have fared with me. ³⁰For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly; and YHWH has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?"

³¹He said, "What shall I give you?" Jacob said, "You shall not give me anything; if you will do this for me, I will again feed your flock and keep it: ³²let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. ³³So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen."

³⁴Laban said, "Good! Let it be as you have said."

³⁵But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in charge of his sons; ³⁶and he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban's flock.

³⁷Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the rods. ³⁸He set the rods that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, ³⁹the flocks bred in front of the rods, and so the flocks produced young that were striped, speckled, and spotted. ⁴⁰Jacob separated the lambs, and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and the completely black animals in the flock of Laban; and he put his own droves apart, and did not put them with Laban's flock. ⁴¹Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob laid the rods in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the rods, ⁴²but for the feebler of the flock he did not lay them there; so the feebler were Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. ⁴³Thus the man grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, and male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys.

The cunning Laban makes doubly sure that Jacob will not be able to interfere in the breeding process, by himself separating out the few goats and sheep that will go to Jacob according to the bargain. He moves them three days journey away, so there is no chance of their breeding with the dark-coloured goats or the white sheep. Then he tells his own sons to guard them. He can sit back now, for he is confident that there is no way that Jacob can outwit him.

We can only assume that there existed a herdsman's tale that the progeny were affected by what the goats or sheep were looking at at the time they mated. Or perhaps this is just a far fetched part of the yarn that was meant to get anyone who knew anything about breeding to burst out laughing.

In any case, Jacob contrives some spotted switches and sees that the goats are looking at them while mating. And it works. They produce 'striped, speckled and spotted' kids.

Then he makes sure that the only things that the white sheep can see when they are mating are the black or striped animals in the herd. This works, too.

Moreover, he followed this strategy only with the stronger animals, so that they had spotted progeny, while the weaker ones kept their colour and so went to Laban.

This is not like the deceit that he carried out on his brother (Genesis 27). This is the ingenuity of a powerless man making the best of what is clearly an unjust situation.

He prospers. YHWH has obviously blessed him.

Just as the situation is becoming more and more dangerous for Jacob, YHWH intervenes to tell him to return home, and promises once again to be with him. We recall the promise given by YHWH at Bethel (see verse 13), twenty years before:

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

– Genesis 28:15

Jacob needs the consent of his wives, for they are Laban's daughters. He reminds them of what has been happening, accenting the fact that 'the God of my father has been with me' (31:5), and that it was God who arranged things so that Jacob's ruse with the sheep and goats was successful (31:9; see 30:37-43). He claims that the idea itself came from a dream (31:10), and so from a revelation.

Once again, YHWH is portrayed as the one who intervenes in favour of those who are the victims of unjust exploitation.

¹Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's; he has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father." ²And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favourably as he did before.

³Then YHWH said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you."

⁴So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was, ⁵and said to them, "I see that your father does not regard me as favourably as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me. ⁶You know that I have served your father with all my strength; ⁷yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not permit him to harm me. ⁸If he said, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore speckled; and if he said, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore striped. ⁹Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father, and given them to me.

¹⁰During the mating of the flock I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats that leaped upon the flock were striped, speckled, and mottled.

¹¹Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!' ¹²And he said, 'Look up and see that all the goats that leap on the flock are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. ¹³I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and return to the land of your birth.'"

¹⁴Then Rachel and Leah answered him, "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house?

¹⁵Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has been using up the money given for us. ¹⁶All the property that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you."

¹⁷So Jacob arose, and set his children and his wives on camels; ¹⁸and he drove away all his livestock, all the property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

¹⁹Now Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. ²⁰And Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean, in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee. ²¹So he fled with all that he had; starting out he crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.

²²On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. ²³So he took his kinsfolk with him and pursued him for seven days until he caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead.

²⁴But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night, and said to him, "Take heed that you say not a word to Jacob, either good or bad."

Rachel and Leah share Jacob's resentment against their father. He has used them for his own profit, sharing with them none of the benefits that have come to him through their marriage. They formally renounce their father's house, and are now part of a new house: the house of Jacob.

With their consent Jacob prepares to leave with his family and 'the possessions that he had acquired in Paddan-aram'(see 25:20; 28:2ff). Jacob does not know that his father Isaac has died (31:18).

Before recounting the flight, the authors highlight two things that were to aggravate Laban's reaction. The first is that Rachel stole her father's household gods (31:19). These are small images in human form that were understood to provide protection and blessing. We will see soon that she has not the slightest compunction about taking them. She considers them as compensation for what her father should have given her. The second is that Jacob left without the courtesy of telling Laban he was going.

Laban is identified as an "Aramean", setting the stage for a border settlement between neighbouring nations. Gilead is on the eastern side of the Jordan.

Laban finds out 'on the third day'(31:20). We met this expression earlier (22:4). It prepares us for a significant turn of events, often (as in 22:4) involving divine intervention. The classical text is Exodus 19 where the expression occurs four times. God intervenes here and warns Laban in a dream to be careful how he treats Jacob.

Laban is obviously influenced by his dream – he reports it here to Jacob (31:29). He never mentions his real concern (the loss of his prosperity), but restricts his accusations to the two matters already noted in verses 19-20. Jacob has offended against the laws of hospitality in not allowing Laban to send him off with the customary celebrations, not even allowing him to say farewell to his daughters and grandchildren. He accuses Jacob of being a fool. No slight insult in their culture. Jacob has also offended against religion by stealing Laban's gods.

Jacob explains why he judged he had to leave without telling Laban (verse 43 will prove that his fears were justified). He rejects the accusation that he has stolen the gods, and stakes his life and that of anyone in his company on his innocence.

The scene in Rachel's tent includes a hardly veiled mockery of the household gods. They are hidden in a rather undignified place and are shown to be powerless in protecting Laban's interests. We recall Isaiah's mocking words:

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops,
their idols are on beasts and
cattle; these things you carry
are loaded as burdens on weary
animals. They stoop, they bow
down together; they cannot
save the burden, but themselves
go into captivity.

– Isaiah 46:1-2

²⁵Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsfolk camped in the hill country of Gilead.

²⁶Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done? You have deceived me, and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword. ²⁷Why did you flee secretly and deceive me and not tell me? I would have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre. ²⁸And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? What you have done is foolish. ²⁹It is in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Take heed that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.' ³⁰Even though you had to go because you longed greatly for your father's house, why did you steal my gods?"

³¹Jacob answered Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. ³²But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsfolk, point out what I have that is yours, and take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods.

³³So Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent, and entered Rachel's. ³⁴Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle, and sat on them. Laban felt all about in the tent, but did not find them. ³⁵And she said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me." So he searched, but did not find the household gods.

³⁶Then Jacob became angry, and upbraided Laban. Jacob said to Laban, "What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me?

³⁷Although you have felt about through all my goods, what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsfolk and your kinsfolk, so that they may decide between us two.

³⁸These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. ³⁹That which was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself; of my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. ⁴⁰It was like this with me: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes.

⁴¹These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. ⁴²If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labour of my hands, and rebuked you last night."

⁴³Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about their children whom they have borne?

⁴⁴Come now, let us make a *pact*, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me."

The debate has the form of an official legal proceeding: accusation and defence followed by counter accusation and the calling of witnesses to determine the truth of the matter on the facts.

Jacob lays out his case against Laban, stressing the 'twenty years' (verses 38 and 41) of hard labour that, if Laban had his way, would have gone unrewarded. He completes his case on a high note (verse 42). Isaac's God is one who takes the side of the oppressed against those who would unjustly exploit them.

Jacob's words in verse 42 are frequently echoed in the psalms:

If it had not been YHWH who was on our side —let Israel now say— if it had not been YHWH who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; then the flood would have swept us away.

— Psalm 124:1-4

This is at the heart of the religion of Israel, founded as it is on YHWH's intervention against Pharaoh when they were slaves in Egypt.

After referring to God as 'the God of my father, the God of Abraham', Jacob adds: 'the Fear of Isaac' (see also 31:53). He also reminds Laban of the rebuke given him by Jacob's God. His point seems to be to stress the protective power that is given him by his God, such that it should cause fear to anyone who stands in the way of God's will.

The threat is effective. Laban maintains his rights over his family and possessions, but admits that he is powerless to enforce them. He suggests a pact.

The Hebrew text of verses 45 to 49 is disturbed. However, the general idea is clear. On one level we have a story of a pact between Jacob and Laban that involved Jacob respecting Laban's daughters. On another level, however, we are dealing with recognisable border posts between Israel and Aram that are a reminder of a non-aggression pact between the two peoples.

The name 'Jegar-sahadutha' is Aramaic for a heap of stones that witness. The name 'Galeed' is the equivalent word in Hebrew and links to two words: *gāl* (heap) and 'ēd (witness). Mizpah (*mišpâh*) means 'watch-tower'. A number of places in the Bible have this name.

Each swears by his own god. On the 'Fear of Isaac' as a name for God see verse 42. This is the first time in Genesis that we have met the word 'sacrifice' (*zābaḥ*, verse 54), as distinct from offering up burnt offerings ('*olâh*, see Noah in Genesis 8:20). This, followed by a common meal, sealed the pact. If either person broke it, his own god would punish him.

Laban farewells his family and disappears from our story.

⁴⁵So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar. ⁴⁶And Jacob said to his kinsfolk, "Gather stones," and they took stones, and made a heap; and they ate there by the heap. ⁴⁷Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha: but Jacob called it Galeed. ⁴⁸Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." Therefore he called it Galeed, ⁴⁹and the pillar Mizpah, for he said, "YHWH watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. ⁵⁰If you ill-treat my daughters, or if you take wives in addition to my daughters, though no one else is with us, remember that God is witness between you and me."

⁵¹Then Laban said to Jacob, "See this heap and see the pillar, which I have set between you and me. ⁵²This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. ⁵³May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor"—the God of their father—"judge between us." So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac, ⁵⁴and Jacob offered a sacrifice on the height and called his kinsfolk to eat bread; and they ate bread and tarried all night in the hill country.

⁵⁵Early in the morning Laban rose up, and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home.

¹Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; ²and when Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's camp!" So he called that place Mahanaim.

³Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; ⁵and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'"

⁶The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

⁷Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, ⁸thinking, "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape."

When Jacob was fleeing from home empty handed, God promised him:

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

– Genesis 28:15

Now he is returning home at God's command:

Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you.

– Genesis 31:3

There is much more at stake here than Jacob's returning home. He and his family are about to enter the land promised to Abraham (12:1), and to settle there. Encountering the angels, Jacob is reassured that God is, indeed, with him. We should imagine an army of the heavenly host, for he calls the place Mahanaim, plural for the Hebrew word for an army camp (mah^anê). There is an interesting parallel in Joshua 5:13-15. Also Psalm 34.

The angel of YHWH encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.

– Psalm 34:8

Everything is moving towards the encounter with Esau, and tension is high. For the link between Edom and Seir see the commentary on Genesis 25:25. Verses four to five are a classical example of the style of message customary in pre-literate societies. The herald uses the first person. He is the mouth for the one sending him. We see this all the time in the oracles of the prophets: 'Thus says YHWH ...'.

The news Jacob gets fulfils his worst nightmares. This is the Esau whom their blind father foresaw would live by his sword (27:40). Jacob fears the worst and begins to make preparations. He cannot flee and he is powerless against a force of four hundred men.

In his need, Jacob turns to the God of his family, whom the readers know is YHWH, and he reminds God that he is journeying in obedience to God's promise (28:15) and command (31:3 and 13). The returned exiles reading this prayer would have remembered the words spoken to them through God's Prophet (read Isaiah 40:1-11 on the following page), encouraging them to do what Jacob is doing in this scene: to undertake a hazardous journey from exile to the Promised Land.

Jacob has learned much in the twenty years of his exile. This is not the Jacob who would go to any lengths to get what he wanted, no matter what customs were broken in the process. This is a humbler Jacob, who remembers how he left with nothing, and is unworthy of the bounty that God has poured out upon him. He speaks of God's steadfast love (plural of *hesed*) and faithfulness (*'emet*), echoing the prayer of Abraham's servant:

Blessed be YHWH, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master.

– Genesis 24:27

The classical text is found in Exodus 34:6:

YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Then comes the plea in verse 11, a plea for deliverance, so typical of the psalms. It recalls the words of Amos, referring to the people of Israel:

O Lord YHWH, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!

– Amos 7:2 and 5

Jacob is afraid of his brother, and of the horrors of violence in which the innocent are always caught up. The authors of Genesis are also pleading with their contemporaries to avoid violence. Jacob is to be presented as a model who worked for a better solution to conflict, and was willing to pay the price of reconciliation.

Jacob ends his prayer as he began it: reminding God this time of God's promise that Abraham's offspring would be 'as the sands of the sea' (22:17; compare 28:14).

⁹And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O YHWH who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,'"

¹⁰I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies.

¹¹Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children.

¹²Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'"

Israel will return home

As Jacob prepares to enter the promised land, we might read these words spoken to his descendants in exile, encouraging them to return:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from YHWH'S hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of YHWH,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of YHWH shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of YHWH has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of YHWH blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.
Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
See, the Lord YHWH comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

– Isaiah 40:1-11

Two things are happening in this scene. Firstly, Jacob is hoping to soften any bitterness that Esau may have by sending him massive gifts in stages, each one greater than the last, and including in his message each time that he, Jacob, is on his way to meet Esau.

Secondly, and more subtly, he is acknowledging Esau as the first born: acknowledging that he is Esau's servant and Esau is his lord.

The word translated 'appease' in verse 20 is the Hebrew *kipper*, which is used when a person wants to make atonement for what he has done wrong, and which always includes an acknowledgment of guilt. Jacob is seeking forgiveness for his deceit in depriving Esau of his father's blessing, and is making up for it by the 'offering' (32:14,19,20,21), that he is sending on ahead. The abundance that is the fruit of the 'blessing' is rightly Esau's. Hence the extravagant offering.

¹³So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, ¹⁴two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.

¹⁶These he delivered into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me, and put a space between drove and drove."

¹⁷He instructed the foremost, "When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?' ¹⁸then you shall say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover he is behind us.'"

¹⁹He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him, ²⁰and you shall say, 'Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me."

²¹So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp.

22The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man *struggled* with him until daybreak.

²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he *touched* him on the *thigh*; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he *struggled* with him.

²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. ³²Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he *touched* Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Jacob is about to cross into the Promised Land and to meet his brother, Esau. We are already aware of the high stakes involved in this journey, but we are not prepared for what happens this night. Nor is Jacob. He is alone. Before crossing the gorge he must face his demons. He never discovers the name of this being with whom he struggles all night long (32:29), and we never discover it either. This is how it is in the night.

Jacob emerges from the struggle with a new wound (32:25), but also a new name (32:28), and a new 'blessing'(32:29), which can only mean a sharing in the strange 'divine' power of the one with whom he is struggling. The three belong together.

The new wound, linked in verse 32 with a food law not found elsewhere in the Bible, concerns the 'thigh'. It is possible that the intended reference is to the genitals. The life that Jacob will hand on will always bear the marks of the struggle that he had this night on the borders of the Promised Land. We might recall Paul's words: 'The Lord said to me: My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'(2Corinthians 12:9).

The new name is 'Israel'(32:28), linked here with the verb 'to struggle', and the word 'God'. His life and the life of the 'Israelites'(32:32) is one of constant struggle 'with God and with humans'. God will be with Israel. It will prevail. In the words of the prophet Hosea: 'Jacob strove with the messenger and prevailed'(Hosea 12:5).

One element of the ancient story that is the source of this narrative is an 'explanation' of the name Jabbok'(yabboq, 32:22), linked with the verb 'struggle'('ābaq, 32:24,25); and 'Peniel/Penuel'(32:30,31), linked to the words 'face'(pānîm) and 'God'('ēl). Jacob saw nothing, but he knew that he had prevailed because of the protective presence of God.

Jacob sees his brother coming – and we are reminded that Esau has four hundred men with him. Tension has reached breaking point. Jacob makes last minute preparations, putting Rachel and Joseph last in the procession, and then goes to meet Esau in the most solemn and deferential manner in which a vassal meets his lord.

Esau greets Jacob as a brother greets a brother after a long separation. The tension breaks as they embrace and weep. Esau asks who are these women and children approaching him in procession. Jacob's first words in greeting his brother are significant: he speaks of them as God's gift to him (compare 32:12).

The solemn procession continues, each group in turn offering respect and submission to Esau as to their lord. When asked by Esau the meaning of this solemn procession, Jacob tells him that it is 'to find favour with my lord' (33:8). The word 'favour' (hēn) can include the notion of 'forgiveness'. Jacob continues to address Esau as 'lord', while Esau addressed Jacob as 'brother' (32:9). The word 'gift' in verse 11 translates the Hebrew b'rākâ which has occurred numerous times in the Genesis text, always with the meaning 'blessing'. Jacob deceived Isaac into giving him his blessing' (27:28-29). Esau rightly complained: 'he has taken away my blessing' (27:36).

In his struggle with God at the Jabbok, Jacob discovered his true identity. He did not need the blessing he took from his brother by deception, and here he returns it to its rightful owner, his brother Esau. The only blessing he needs is God's and that is about land and children, not power and wealth.

¹Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. ²He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

⁴But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

⁵When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant."

⁶Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; ⁷Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down.

⁸Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favour with my lord." ⁹But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." ¹⁰Jacob said, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favour. ¹¹Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want." So he urged him, and he took it.

¹²Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you."

¹³But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; and if they are overdriven for one day, all the flocks will die. ¹⁴Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir."

¹⁵So Esau said, "Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me." But he said, "Why should my lord be so kind to me?" ¹⁶So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir.

¹⁷But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house, and made *sheds* for his *livestock*; therefore the place is called Succoth.

¹⁸Jacob came to *Salem* the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram; and he camped before the city.

¹⁹And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for one hundred pieces the plot of land on which he had pitched his tent.

²⁰There he erected an altar and called it El-elohe-israel.

There is a good deal of unspoken intent in the final dialogue. Esau is ever the welcoming host. Jacob, in the most polite way possible, knows he must keep his distance and find separate living space.

They part in peace, but to their separate lands: Esau back to Edom (Seir), and Jacob to the heart of Canaan, near Shechem in the mountains of Samaria. The significance of verse seventeen is not to be missed. This is the end of the period of the nomad patriarchs, always on the move. Jacob 'built himself a house'. This is the beginning of settlement. Israel as a people is born, and at the heart of the Promised Land.

A note is included giving the meaning of Succoth (sukkot), the plural of sukkâ, a covering in the open made by weaving boughs together.

Verses 18 to 20 are an addition, part of an old journey account. Salem may be a place name (compare John 3:23). Others translate 'in peace' or 'safely'. The point that Jacob purchases land (see verse 17) is reinforced (see chapter 23 where Abraham does the same).

The erection of the altar is significant. Jacob is staking a claim that 'El, the supreme god of Canaan, is the God of Israel.

This appears to be a contrived narrative to examine the complex problem of Israel in its relationship to Canaan. On the one hand there are indications that a peaceful accommodation could be, and in some cases was, achieved. On the other there is the uncompromising prescription of Deuteronomy:

When YHWH your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy ... and when YHWH your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them ... for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods.

– Deuteronomy 7:1-4

Shechem defiles (ṭimmēʿ) Dinah, Jacob's daughter (30:21). 'Defile' is a strong word with overtones of ritual impurity. It is her brothers' responsibility to decide what is to be done. Their reaction is a mixture of grief at the evil done (this word is used of God prior to the flood, 6:6), and religious zeal at the 'outrage against Israel'.

Hamor, the Hivite (see 10:16), does not mention his son's treatment of Dinah. Rather, he speaks of Shechem's genuine affection for her, and, in the manner of the time, he offers them free movement in his land. His offer, however, is directly against Deuteronomy which forbids inter-marriage.

Shechem offers to pay the customary gift to the family of the bride as well as the gift to the bride herself. They can name the price, 'only give me the girl to be my wife.'

¹Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to *look around* among the women of the region. ²When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force. ³And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her. ⁴So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, "Get me this girl to be my wife."

⁵Now Jacob heard that Shechem had defiled his daughter Dinah; but his sons were with his cattle in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came.

⁶And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him, ⁷just as the sons of Jacob came in from the field. When they heard of it, the men were *aggrieved* and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done.

⁸But Hamor spoke with them, saying, "The heart of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. ⁹Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. ¹⁰You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it."

¹¹Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, "Let me find favour with you, and whatever you say to me I will give. ¹²Put the marriage present and gift as high as you like, and I will give whatever you ask me; only give me the girl to be my wife."

An accommodation is reached

¹³The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah.

¹⁴They said to them, "We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. ¹⁵Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be circumcised. ¹⁶Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live among you and become one people. ¹⁷But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and be gone."

¹⁸Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor's son Shechem. ¹⁹And the young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob's daughter. Now he was the most honoured of all his family.

²⁰So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city, saying,

²¹"These people are friendly with us; let them live in the land and trade in it, for the land is large enough for them; let us take their daughters in marriage, and let us give them our daughters.

²²Only on this condition will they agree to live among us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised.

²³Will not their livestock, their property, and all their animals be ours? Only let us agree with them, and they will live among us."

²⁴And all who went out of the city gate heeded Hamor and his son Shechem; and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city.

We are warned that the response of the brothers is going to be a deceitful one. We have to wait to find out how.

They appear to be willing to intermarry, but they demand that Shechem be circumcised as a condition of being part of the family. They go further and demand the circumcision of 'every male among you'. The second requirement has echoes of the legal prescription of Exodus 12:48.

Shechem is delighted and submits immediately to circumcision, so keen is he to have Dinah as his bride.

The second condition obviously needs the consent of the city council. This part of the narrative portrays what must have been a common way of a city welcoming a nomadic group. The requirement of circumcision, as we will now see, is necessary for the narrative.

The conditions are laid out. For the city council the persuasive argument is at the end (verse 23): economic benefit to the city. The conditions are accepted, and 'every male is circumcised.'

This is a terrible scene of irrational passion, which, under the guise of religious zeal, has corrupted Jacob's sons to wreak their revenge on the innocent citizens, and to covet the property of those who would be their neighbours.

Yet there is more to this scene than that, for their behaviour is supported by the command of Deuteronomy 7:1-4 (quoted earlier), and by many similar passages in the Bible. Perhaps even the expression 'on the third day' (32:25) is a suggestion that God is supporting this behaviour (see 22:4; 31:22). Yet we are forced to pause because Jacob is portrayed as not being in agreement with his sons, even if it is only because he fears repercussions.

The authors of Genesis are struggling with the issue. It was clearly an important issue in the post-exilic world, and it is still an important issue, for the habit of claiming God to support violence is still all but crippling our world two and a half millennia after this text was composed.

The answer is given us clearly by Jesus who will have none of this behaviour or this twisted thinking. For him the issue is simple: we must love our enemies and behave towards them after the manner of God, our common Father (see Matthew 5:43-48).

Texts like that of Deuteronomy are concerned with not compromising Israel's communion with God and mission – something that was of special importance to the Jews who were exiled in Babylon with its many attractions, and also those who returned from exile and were tempted to accommodate to the life-style of their Persian overlords. However, as I have suggested in the Introduction to this book (see page 27), the key oversight that finds expression in texts like that of Deuteronomy is that they presume that Israel's enemies are also God's enemies, and so religious zeal required of them that they must 'utterly destroy them' (Deuteronomy 7:2).

The authors of Genesis had still to learn an appropriate response of faith. True security is not attained by wars of aggression such as we see in this narrative, nor is God's mission furthered by them.

²⁵On the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males.

²⁶They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away.

²⁷And the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled. ²⁸They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field.

²⁹All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and made their prey.

³⁰Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household."

³¹But they said, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?"

¹God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel, and settle there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.”

²So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him,

“Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes;

³then come, let us go up to Bethel, that I may make an altar there to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.”

⁴So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak that was near Shechem.

God instructs Jacob to fulfil the vow he made at Bethel during his flight from Esau: ‘this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God’s house’(28:22).

Jacob’s instructions (35:2-3) are the authors’ way of linking later cult practice with patriarchal tradition. There are echoes of the call to pilgrimage: ‘Let us go to God’s house’(Psalm 122:1), and of the temple priests summoning the congregation to purify (tāhar) themselves before engaging in the cult. The classical text of the latter is in the command of YHWH on Sinai:

Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day YHWH will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

– Exodus 19:10-11

The tenacity of these rituals is seen in the Christian baptismal ceremony, in which those to be baptised are called to put away whatever might inhibit their living the new life of the Christian community (‘Do you renounce Satan ...?’).

Put to death whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed ... These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.

– Colossians 3:5,7

Rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

– James 1:21

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

– Hebrews 12:1

The newly baptised are instructed to ‘change your clothes’:

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

– Ephesians 4:22-24 (see 6:13-17)

They are ‘dressed in white’(Revelation 3:4), because God is clothing them in the radiance of the risen Christ:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

– Galatians 3:27

Scholars suggest that verse 5 is misplaced and would suit better as a conclusion to chapter 34.

Verses 6-8 record an old story handed down in the tradition. We have already seen that Luz was the pre-Israelite name for the city called by the Israelites 'Bethel' (see 28:19). As in 33:20, Jacob is laying claim to an ancient sanctuary for Israel. The supreme God of Canaan ('El) is the God of Israel.

Deborah, the nurse of Jacob's mother, Rebekah (24:59), dies and is buried. The name 'Allon-bacuth' is a combination of the word for oak ('allōn) and 'weeping' (bākūt). Judges 4:5 speaks of the 'palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim.'

Verse ten assures us that the new name given to Jacob at the Jabbok River (32:27-28) is according to God's will. We think of the words of the Isaiah School in exile:

Thus says YHWH, he who created you,
O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I
have called you by name, you are mine.

– Isaiah 43:1

Verses 11-12 echo the earlier words of God to Jacob at Bethel (28:13-14). God introduces himself as 'God Almighty' ('El šadday) – the title reserved by the Priestly School for the time of the patriarchs (see 17:1 and 28:3). 'Be fruitful and multiply' recalls 28:3. It also takes us back to the creation narrative, also from the Priestly School (1:28). The promise of land echoes the promise given to Abraham (17:8), and repeated to Isaac (26:3).

⁵As they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities all around them, so that no one pursued them.

⁶Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, ⁷and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother.

⁸And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So it was called Allon-bacuth.

⁹God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and he blessed him.

¹⁰God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he was called Israel.

¹¹God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you.

¹²The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you."

¹³Then God went up from him at the place where he had spoken with him.

¹⁴Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it. ¹⁵So Jacob called the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

¹⁶Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labour.

¹⁷When she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to her, "Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son."

¹⁸As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. ¹⁹So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), ²⁰and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day.

To the account given in 28:18-19, this text adds the pouring of a 'drink offering' (an element of the temple cult: frequent references in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers).

Verses 16-20 incorporate an old story from the tradition. It is a poignant story of the death of Isaac's favourite wife in childbirth. God is answering her prayer, for, she named her first child Joseph, saying, 'May YHWH add to me another son!' (30:24). Because of the pain she experiences in giving birth, she names the child 'Ben-oni' (ben 'ōnî), from the words ben ('son') and 'āwen ('sorrow'). She dies in giving birth and Jacob changes his name to Benjamin, from the word for 'son' and the word for 'right hand' (yāmîn). yāmîn also means south, for when one faces east the right hand points to the south (see Yemen). The tribe of Benjamin was the southernmost tribe of the northern kingdom, between Joseph on the north and Judah on the south.

The Ephrath where Rachel is buried (32:19) is near Ramah, on the border of the tribal boundaries of Ephraim and Benjamin (see 1Samuel 10:2 and Jeremiah 31:15). 'Bethlehem' in verse 19 is a mistaken gloss that found its way into the text. The sadness attached to Ramah is recalled by Jeremiah when he witnessed his countrymen being taken off into exile:

Thus says YHWH: A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.

– Jeremiah 31:15

Matthew uses this text from Jeremiah in his story of Herod: a midrash on the suffering of the young Christian community at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD (Matthew 2:17-18).

For the first time Jacob is referred to simply as ‘Israel’ (verses 21-22) – something that will recur in the Joseph saga which follows.

Verse 21 is from an old travel story. Watch towers were common, but the location of the one at Eder is not known.

Reuben is Jacob’s firstborn son. His action in verse 22 is more than a sexual crime (condemned in Deuteronomy 22:30). It is an attempt to seize power. ‘Israel heard of it’ is a way of saying that the attempt failed. We have already heard of the behaviour of Simeon and Levi (34:25-26). Now Reuben. What might Judah do?

Then comes the listing of Jacob’s twelve sons (those already mentioned in 29:31 - 30:24, plus Benjamin (35:19)

In the stories we have recounted thus far, it has been assumed that Isaac is long dead. He was old and blind (27:21) when he mistakenly gave his blessing to Jacob twenty years before Jacob returned, and Jacob’s children are now all adults except Benjamin. The authors are concluding the Jacob story with the death of Isaac. Mamre has been associated with Hebron since ‘Abram moved his tent, and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron’ (13:18), and Kiriath-arba has been associated with Hebron since the account of Sarah’s death (23:2).

Jacob has come home to Isaac, who is buried with Abraham in Hebron.

²¹Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

²²While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine; and Israel heard of it.

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. ²³The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob’s firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun.

²⁴The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin.

²⁵The sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s maid: Dan and Naphtali.

²⁶The sons of Zilpah, Leah’s maid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

²⁷Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had resided as aliens.

²⁸Now the days of Isaac were one hundred eighty years. ²⁹And Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

¹These are the descendants of Esau (that is, Edom).

²Esau took his wives from the Canaanites: Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite, Oholibamah daughter of Anah son of Zibeon the Hivite, ³and Basemath, Ishmael's daughter, sister of Nebaioth.

⁴Adah bore Eliphaz to Esau; Basemath bore Reuel; ⁵and Oholibamah bore Jeush, Jalam, and Korah. These are the sons of Esau who were born to him in the land of Canaan.

⁶Then Esau took his wives, his sons, his daughters, and all the members of his household, his cattle, all his livestock, and all the property he had acquired in the land of Canaan; and he moved to a land some distance from his brother Jacob. ⁷For their possessions were too great for them to live together; the land where they were staying could not support them because of their livestock. ⁸So Esau settled in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom.

⁹These are the descendants of Esau, ancestor of the Edomites, in the hill country of Seir.

¹⁰These are the names of Esau's sons: Eliphaz son of Adah the wife of Esau; Reuel, the son of Esau's wife Basemath.

¹¹The sons of Eliphaz were Teman, Omar, Zepho, Gatam, and Kenaz. ¹²(Timna was a concubine of Eliphaz, Esau's son; she bore Amalek to Eliphaz.) These were the sons of Adah, Esau's wife. ¹³These were the sons of Reuel: Nahath, Zerah, Shamah, and Mizzah. These were the sons of Esau's wife, Basemath.

¹⁴These were the sons of Esau's wife Oholibamah, daughter of Anah son of Zibeon: she bore to Esau Jeush, Jalam, and Korah.

From here on the Bible is the story of Israel (and so of the descendants of Jacob). Before continuing the story into the fourth generation (the sons of Jacob), the authors of Genesis give this list of the descendants of Jacob's brother, Esau. It may well have found written form quite early as part of King David's administration of the conquered territory of Edom (2Samuel 8:13-14).

The fact that the list is here is witness to the universal vision of the authors of Genesis. The Edomites are Israel's next of kin. In spite of the historic rivalry between the two peoples, this kinship must never be forgotten: 'You shall not abhor any of the Edomites, for they are your kin' (Deuteronomy 23:7).

The first fourteen verses are a family genealogy. First mentioned are his three wives (35:2; a different tradition from that recorded in 26:34 and 28:9). Then come their sons, born in Canaan (35:4).

The genealogy is expanded by a note referring to Esau's move to the hill country of Seir/Edom (36:6-8).

The names of his sons are repeated in verse 10ff in order to list the names of the third generation, Esau's grandchildren born in Edom. "Teman" (36:11) is mentioned as a locality of Edom in Amos 1:2; Jeremiah 49:7,20; Ezekiel 25:13 and Job 2:11.

A comparison of verses 15-19 with verses 10-14 shows that the names are identical. It is not, however, simply a repetition. It marks the transition from the family to the clan or tribe.

Of interest is that the word translated here as 'clan chief' is 'elep, a word that will come to be used for 'thousand'.

Verses 20-28 are of particular interest in that they preserve a genealogy of the original inhabitants of the area, prior to the coming of Esau, and so it is pre-Edomite. In Deuteronomy 2:12 we read:

The Horites had formerly inhabited Seir, but the descendants of Esau dispossessed them, destroying them and settling in their place, as Israel has done in the land that YHWH gave them as a possession.

The genealogy here shows that the Edomites did not 'destroy' the local inhabitants (any more than the Israelites destroyed the inhabitants of Canaan).

The names are Semitic, and so Horites are not to be confused with the Hurrians, a non-Semitic people found spread throughout the ancient Near East.

Verses 29-30 function in the same way as verses 15-19, marking the transition from family to clan.

¹⁵These are the *clan chiefs* of the sons of Esau. The sons of Eliphaz the firstborn of Esau: the *clan chiefs* Teman, Omar, Zepho, Kenaz, ¹⁶Korah, Gatam, and Amalek; these are the *clan chiefs* of Eliphaz in the land of Edom; they are the sons of Adah.

¹⁷These are the sons of Esau's son Reuel: the *clan chiefs* Nahath, Zerah, Shammah, and Mizzah; these are the *clan chiefs* of Reuel in the land of Edom; they are the sons of Esau's wife Basemath. ¹⁸These are the sons of Esau's wife Oholibamah: the *clan chiefs* Jeush, Jalam, and Korah; these are the *clan chiefs* born of Esau's wife Oholibamah, the daughter of Anah.

¹⁹These are the sons of Esau (that is, Edom), and these are their *clan chiefs*.

²⁰These are the sons of Seir the Horite, the inhabitants of the land: Lotan, Shobal, Zibeon, Anah, ²¹Dishon, Ezer, and Dishan; these are the *clan chiefs* of the Horites, the sons of Seir in the land of Edom. ²²The sons of Lotan were Hori and Heman; and Lotan's sister was Timna. ²³These are the sons of Shobal: Alvan, Manahath, Ebal, Shepho, and Onam. ²⁴These are the sons of Zibeon: Aiah and Anah; he is the Anah who found the springs in the wilderness, as he pastured the donkeys of his father Zibeon. ²⁵These are the children of Anah: Dishon and Oholibamah daughter of Anah. ²⁶These are the sons of Dishon: Hemdan, Eshban, Ithran, and Cheran. ²⁷These are the sons of Ezer: Bilhan, Zavan, and Akan. ²⁸These are the sons of Dishan: Uz and Aran.

²⁹These are the *clan chiefs* of the Horites: the *clan chiefs* Lotan, Shobal, Zibeon, Anah, ³⁰Dishon, Ezer, and Dishan; these are the *clan chiefs* of the Horites, clan by clan in the land of Seir.

³¹These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites.

³²Bela son of Beor reigned in Edom, the name of his city being Dinhabah. ³³Bela died, and Jobab son of Zerah of Bozrah succeeded him as king. ³⁴Jobab died, and Husham of the land of the Temanites succeeded him as king. ³⁵Husham died, and Hadad son of Bedad, who defeated Midian in the country of Moab, succeeded him as king, the name of his city being Avith. ³⁶Hadad died, and Samlah of Masrekah succeeded him as king. ³⁷Samlah died, and Shaul of Rehoboth on the Euphrates succeeded him as king. ³⁸Shaul died, and Baal-hanan son of Achbor succeeded him as king. ³⁹Baal-hanan son of Achbor died, and *Hadad* succeeded him as king, the name of his city being Pau; his wife's name was Mehetabel, the daughter of Matred, daughter of Me-zahab.

⁴⁰These are the names of the *clan chiefs* of Esau, according to their families and their localities by their names: the *clan chief* of Timna, the *clan chief* of Alvah, the *clan chief* of Jether, ⁴¹the *clan chief* of Oholibamah, the *clan chief* of Elah, the *clan chief* of Pinon, ⁴²the *clan chief* of Kenaz, the *clan chief* of Teman, the *clan chief* of Mibzar, ⁴³the *clan chief* of Magdiel, and the *clan chief* of Iram; these are the *clan chiefs* of Edom (that is, Esau, the father of Edom), according to their settlements in the land that they held.

The final section of the genealogy of Esau marks the transition from clan to kingdom, from tribe to nation-state. Note that we are not dealing with a dynasty. Each reigning king is separate and remains in his own region, supported by his own clan.

'Bozrah'(36:33) is found elsewhere in the Bible for a region in Edom (Amos 1:12; Isaiah 34:6; Jeremiah 49:13,22).

The last king in the list is Hadad. Hadad II was king when Edom was defeated by King David (2 Samuel 8:13-14), and is mentioned as instigating a revolt against David's son, Solomon (1 Kings 11:14).

Verses 40-43 are an appendage. Perhaps it was in these places that David built the garrisons mentioned in 2 Samuel 8:14.

'Elah'(36:41) is possibly Elath on the north coast of the gulf of Aqaba.

'Pinon'(36:41) may be the same as 'Punon' mentioned in Numbers 33:42-43.

As noted at the beginning of the commentary on chapter 36, this genealogy is a witness to the universal vision of the authors of Genesis. Israel is especially chosen, but as an instrument of God's revelation to the whole world. It stands as a warning to those who too readily forget Jesus' words: 'I have other sheep, too, who are not of this fold'(John 10:16).

This commentary, along with most others on this topic, owes a debt of gratitude to the magisterial three-volume commentary on Genesis by Claus Westermann. Volume Two covers Genesis 12-36. It was first published in German in 1981, and an English translation by the Australian Jesuit, John J. Scullion, was first published in 1985 by Fortress Press, Minneapolis. I conclude my commentary on these chapters with a passage from Westermann's conclusion (pages 575-577):

The patriarchal community draws its life from the blessing; it is due to God's blessing that children are born and grow up, that work is crowned with productive work and expansion, that watering places are found and preserved, that the labour of the herdsmen is fruitful. What is peculiar to the Abraham story is that in the anguish of childlessness the child is promised and the blessing is linked with the promise; what is peculiar to the Jacob-Esau story is that the father's blessing becomes the occasion of the conflict between the brothers, that at the climax of this conflict pardon accompanies God's blessing, a pardon that presupposes the confession of guilt before the brother and the giving back of the blessing.

The blessing is not conditional, as it is in Deuteronomy, nor is the promise (except in the late passages that presuppose Deuteronomy, Genesis 22:15-18; 26:3-5). Blessing is never counterbalanced by curse (as in Deuteronomy 28), promise never by the announcement of judgment; as far as the patriarchs are concerned, God's judgment and punishment are almost entirely absent.

There emerges one characteristic which links the patriarchal stories with the later religion of Israel: God intervenes in a special way for the weak, the disadvantaged, the outcast (chapters 12; 16; 21; 32) ...

Prayer is taken for granted in the patriarchal stories as a constitutive part of one's relationship to God. There are short, simple cries to God in the form of praise, lament, or petition arising out of those situations that make them appropriate, e.g., the lament of Abraham (15:2-3) or Rebekah (25:22), or Jacob's petition to be saved (32:12). The narrative of the wooing of Rebekah is completely shot through with prayer (chapter 24) ...

The most significant element in worship in the patriarchal stories is the absence of an institutional cult and the cult mediator; the action or talk between God and the person takes place directly ...

The patriarchal story is linked with the Old Testament as a whole through the promise. The promises made to and fulfilled in the patriarchs themselves are extended in promises which refer to the history of the tribes and then of the people of Israel, particularly those concerned with increase and the possession of the land. The programmatic promise of 12:1-3 extends beyond to the nations of the world.