

Genesis 36: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 36. These are the generations of Esau, that is Edom. Esau took his wives from the Canaanites. Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite, Aholabamah the daughter of Anna the daughter of Zibion the Hivite, and Basimath Ishmael's daughter, the sister of Nebaioth.

Nadah bore to Esau Eliphaz, Basimath bore Ruel, and Aholabamah bore Jeosh, Jalim, and Korah. These are the sons of Esau who were born to him in the land of Canaan. Then Esau took his wives, his sons, his daughters, and all the members of his household, his livestock, all his beasts, and all his property that he had acquired in the land of Canaan. He went into a land away from his brother Jacob, for their possessions were too great for them to dwell together. The land of their sojournings could not support them because of their livestock. So Esau settled in the hill country of Seir. Esau is Edom. These are the generations of Esau, the father of the Edomites in the hill country of Seir. These are the names of Esau's sons. Eliphaz, the son of Adah, the wife of Esau.

Ruel, the son of Basimath, the wife of Esau. The sons of Eliphaz were Teman, Omer, Zepho, Gatham, and Kenaz. Timnah was a concubine of Eliphaz, Esau's son. She bore Amalek to Eliphaz.

These are the sons of Adah, Esau's wife. These are the sons of Ruel, Nahath, Zerah, Shammah, and Mizah. These are the chiefs of Ruel in the land of Edom. These are the sons of Basimath, Esau's wife. These are the sons of Aholabamah, Esau's wife. The chiefs Jeosh, Jalam, and Korah.

These are the chiefs born of Aholabamah, the daughter of Anna, Esau's wife. These are the sons of Esau, that is Edom, and these are their chiefs. These are the sons of Seir the Horite, the inhabitants of the land, Lotan, Shobal, Zibion, Anna, Dishon, Ezer, and Dishon. These are the chiefs of the Horites, the sons of Seir in the land of Edom. The sons of Lotan were Hori and Himam, and Lotan's sister was Timnah. These are the sons of Shobal, Alvan, Manahath, Ebal, Shepho, and Onam.

[2 : 2 4] These are the sons of Zibion, Aiah, and Anna. He is the Anna who found the hot springs in the wilderness, as he pastured the donkeys of Zibion his father. These are the children of Anna, Dishon, and Aholabamah, the daughter of Anna. These are the sons of Dishon, Hemdan, Eshban, Ithran, and Cheran.

These are the sons of Ezer, Bilhan, Zeavan, and Akan. These are the sons of Dishon, Uz, and Aran. These are the chiefs of the Horites, the chiefs Lotan, Shobal, Zibion, Anna, Dishon, Ezer, and Dishon.

These are the chiefs of the Horites, chief by chief, in the land of Seir. These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites.

Bela, the son of Beor, reigned in Edom, the name of his city being Dinhabah. Bela died, and Jobab, the son of Zerah of Basra, reigned in his place.

Jobab died, and Husham, of the land of the Temanites, reigned in his place. Husham died, and Hadad, the son of Bidad, who defeated Midian in the country of Moab, reigned in his place.

[3 : 40] The name of his city being Avith. Hadad died, and Samla of Masraka reigned in his place. Samla died, and Shul of Rehoboth, of the Euphrates, reigned in his place.

Shul died, and Baelhanan, the son of Aqbor, reigned in his place. Baelhanan, the son of Aqbor, died, and Hadar reigned in his place, the name of his city being Powell. His wife's name was Mehetabel, the daughter of Matred, daughter of Mezahab.

These are the names of the chiefs of Esau, according to their clans and their dwelling places, by their names. The chiefs Timnah, Alva, Jetheth, Aholabama, Elah, Pinon, Kenaz, Timan, Mibzar, Magdiel, and Iram.

These are the chiefs of Edom, that is Esau, the father of Edom, according to their dwelling places in the land of their possession. In Genesis chapter 36, we have a chapter filled with what might perhaps be surprising material.

Yet we've already seen the pattern of a father dying, followed by the genealogy of his firstborn son, who was not the favoured son, and then followed by a longer textual treatment of the other son.

[4 : 56] So we see it in the case of Abraham dying, and then Ishmael's genealogy is given, followed by the story of Jacob. Here we have a similar pattern.

Esau is connected with Edom here, as he was earlier on in chapter 25. That name, Red, was given to him in the context of his selling of the birthright for the red stew.

As we get through this chapter, we'll see that Esau seems to get to everything first. He gets to kings and chiefs before Israel does, although his kings seem to be different from the kings that we see in the land of Israel.

The genealogy here is a bit complicated by the fact that it isn't just one list of names. Rather, the lineage seems to be functioning in different spheres, and there's also the descendants of the Horites that are listed.

So we have a list of sons, followed by a list of chiefs. Then we have a list of sons of Seir the Horite, followed by a list of chiefs of the Horites.

[5 : 56] Then we have the list of kings who reigned in the land of Edom. And then we have the name of the chiefs of Esau. So it's sons, chiefs, sons, chiefs, kings, chiefs.

So there's a literary pattern here. And also we can notice that this goes on quite some way into the future. Belhanan is king at the same time as David. And Hadar, or Hadad as he's called within first kings, is a king who becomes a trouble to Israel at the time of Solomon.

This suggests that this part of the text was inserted in at the time of Solomon, or maybe later. There are a few books of scripture where there is a long period of time that seems to intervene between the first writing of some of the texts that are involved in them, to the final compilation of the finished book.

We can see that in something like the book of Psalms or Proverbs, quite obviously. But also in other parts of scripture that the bulk of the book was written, and then later things were added at key points.

As I will highlight in a moment though, these insertions are, I believe, important. And they help us better to understand the meaning of the text. They are not to be seen as uninspired, certainly not.

[7 : 11] Rather they connect the meaning of the text and the import, the direction it's pointing, to events many, many years down the line from that which is originally referred to.

There are parallels to be observed between Esau and his brother. We can think about the way in which Esau prospers in the land, and the way that that's described is similar to the way that Jacob's prospering is described within the land of Laban, in chapter 31, verse 18.

Jacob prospers in the land of Laban, and then moves back into the promised land. Whereas for Esau, it's a movement in the other direction. He prospers in the land, and then moves out to the land of Edom.

Esau leaving the land is also a parting of ways that is similar to the parting of ways between Abram and Lot. In chapter 13, verse 6, the land now belongs to Jacob.

Throughout the story of Genesis, we have a number of other characters whose identities play off against those of the promised people. We can think about Lot and Abram.

[8 : 14] There's a sort of diptych between the two of them, two frames that parallel the characters and contrast them. The characters of Ishmael and Isaac are also paralleled in such a way. Cain and Abel, earlier on within the story.

And here, Esau and Jacob play off against each other. And the nations that arise from them will have a similar sort of relationship. When you think about brothers, brothers can play off against each other's identities and have rivalries.

And we see some sort of rivalry or tension between characters, such as Abram and Lot in the nations that descend from them, Moab and Ammon, and then Israel.

But we also see it in the story of Esau and Jacob and Edom and Israel. But that relationship is closer. They're not just brothers. They are twins. And twins, their identity are entangled or connected far more closely than in the case of mere brothers.

So Israel's story and Edom's story are connected in sometimes surreal ways. There are close parallels. And the more that we look at these two characters, the more we'll see that Israel is supposed to see itself in Edom, to internalize certain aspects of Edom, but also to remain distinct from and separate from Edom.

[9 : 28] That rivalry that the ancestors have, Esau and Jacob, is going to be expressed in various ways in their descendants, with this other kingdom that's very close, and at certain points becomes part of the kingdom of Israel itself.

In the story of David, where David takes over the land of Edom, and he in himself takes on characters of Esau. Note that David is the only other character in scripture apart from Esau, who's described as ruddy.

And then at other points, he seems to be like Esau. He's the one who comes with 400 men to attack Nabal. Now, Nabal is Laban backwards, but Abigail sends a wave of gifts ahead and pacifies him.

So there are relationships between David and Esau, and then between the two nations of Edom and Israel. I'll get into that a bit more in a moment. Esau seems to have conquered the land of Seir and intermarried with the Horites.

There's a merging of peoples here. Notice the presence of Anna and Zibion, the fathers of his two Canaanite wives. Timnah becomes a concubine of Eliphaz, Esau's son, which suggests a reduction in status, that the Horites have been subdued by this greater people.

[10 : 41] Now, once again, we need to remember that Esau and Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, they're not just small groups of people. They are large sheikdoms. They're surrounded with many men and women, and they're supporting great people groups that are wandering around with them.

Esau comes with 400 fighting men to meet Jacob. Even back in chapter 14, Abraham had 318 fighting men and was able to drive away kings.

Now, this suggests that these were powerful sheikdoms, and that both Esau and Jacob were able to command significant influence within their regions.

The reference to chiefs and kings underlines this fact, that these are political entities, that Esau is Edom, the nation, the political entity, and Jacob is Israel, once again, a political entity.

Edom is based below Israel, towards the southeast, and their patterns of stories are often very similar. However, Esau seems to reach some of the landmarks before Israel.

[11 : 49] They have kings before Israel. Their kings don't seem to be dynastic rulers, rather there may be chiefs set above the rest of the people. They come from different cities. They are not descended from each other.

But there are similarities. So, for instance, there is Saul of Rehoboth, or Shol, as it's written within the text here, but it's the same word as Saul.

And this Edomite king was king at the same time as Israel chose Saul. When Israel says, let us have a king like those of the nations, they end up with a king called Saul, a king that has the same name as the king of their twin nation, Edom, down south.

It might be interesting to consider why we're reading about kings at this particular point in the story. In the previous chapter, Benjamin has been born, immediately after Jacob is promised that kings will come from his loins.

Now, that promise is one that is fulfilled with the first king, a Benjamite, Saul. And there seem to be a number of connections between Benjamin, Saul, and Edom, or Esau.

[12 : 57] Who was the first king of the Edomites? Bella, son of Beal. Who was the first son of Benjamin? Bella. There seems to be a connection there. We read about someone looking after his father's donkeys and finding a spring.

In the story of 1 Samuel, it's while looking for his father's donkeys and coming to a well that Saul is led to become the king, to be selected as the one who will take the rule of Israel.

And Saul himself takes on the character of Esau. We could maybe call him Esau. He's someone who despises his birthright. There are a number of scenes within the story of Saul where he's playing out the pattern of Esau.

There is the story of him in the darkness of the cave and then again in the darkness of his sleep with the items taken from above his head. Is that your voice, David, my son?

Playing out the story of the lost blessing. And then what is his response? He lifts up his voice and weeps. The response that Esau had after he found that he had lost the blessing.

[14 : 02] And these stories are playing out against the backdrop of Genesis and in a way that connects the character of Saul, the Benjamite, with Esau.

And so Israel's identity is always playing off its twin. Maybe this is why there is so much attention given to the genealogy of Edom in this place. We can see further parallels between Edom and Israel in stories such as that of Hadar or Hadad.

If you look in 1 Chronicles 1, verse 50, you'll see him described as Hadad. If Hadad is the Hadad of 1 Kings 11, then he is someone who goes through the experience of Israel.

Joab tries to kill the baby boys of the land of Edom as David takes over that land. Hadad is brought down to Egypt where he marries and settles. And then he comes back to Edom at a later point and causes trouble for Solomon.

This is a similar pattern to Israel's experience under Pharaoh and its return to the land. So Saul ends up taking on the character of Esau.

[15 : 12] And also some of the Edomites end up taking on the character of Israel. The character of Amalek in particular is mentioned within this chapter as Amalek was the great rival, the brother that sought to destroy them as they came out of Egypt.

And the struggle with the Amalekites is one that plays out throughout the rest of Scripture in various ways. We see it in the story of the Exodus. We see it in the story of Saul.

Indeed, Saul's failure, the reason why he loses the kingdom is his, in part, his failure to deal with the Amalekites. Later on in the story of Esther, we see that Haman is an Agagite and Esther and Mordecai are Benjamites.

They have to, again, the Benjamites have to deal with the Amalekites. In the New Testament, we have another Edomite character in Herod, the Idumean. And in his opposition to Christ and John the Baptist, we may be seeing more of this old rivalry of the twins playing out.

A question to reflect upon. A number of the characters mentioned here have tantalizing connections to other characters in Scripture. We read of Bela, the son of Beor.

[16 : 25] Is that the same person as Balaam, the son of Beor? Is he connected with Balaam in some way? We don't know. Again, some people have seen in the character of Jobab, the historical character of Job.

At the very least, it would seem that Job is connected with the land of Edom. In Lamentations 4, verse 21, Edom and the land of Uz are connected together.

What other clues within this passage might connect the story of Job with the land of Edom ?

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