

Esau's Descendants and the Early History of Edom

Genesis 36

[Genesis 36 is the record of Esau's descendants and the early history of the kingdom of Edom. We'll read only selected verses because of the many names involved. We'll cover the background notes and summarize as we read the selected verses.]

Background Notes

The first section of Genesis 36 tells us that Esau had three wives and five sons. Esau's wives are named in Genesis 26 & Genesis 28. Genesis 26:34: *When Esau was forty years old, he took as wives Judith the daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite.* And then in Genesis 28:9, we read: *"So Esau went to Ishmael and took Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebajoth, to be his wife in addition to the wives he had."*

You'll notice some variation in the names. Some commentaries favor the idea that Esau had more than three wives, but it's more likely that the wives went by more than one name, especially since these were cross-cultural marriages.

Verses 7-8 tell us of the separation between Jacob and Esau. *"For their possessions were too great for them to dwell together, and the land where they were strangers could not support them because of their livestock, so Esau dwelt in Mount Seir."* This reminds us of the separation between Abraham and Lot, doesn't it? This separation was after Jacob had come back from his 30 years of absence.

Mount Seir, where Esau migrated and founded the nation of Edom, was southeast of the Dead Sea. Esau had taken over Mount Seir even before this time, because when Esau met Jacob returning home, Esau was coming from Mount Seir with four hundred men (Genesis 33). But when Jacob returned home, it seems that Esau moved his family and all his possessions permanently over to the Mount Seir area. This may have occurred at the time of Isaac's death.

Esau grew so powerful in this new area that his name became synonymous with Edom. *"So Esau dwelt in Mount Seir. Esau is Edom" (v8).* And, *"These were the sons of Esau, who is Edom, and these were their chiefs" (v19).* Edom and Esau are inseparably linked in this chapter. Edom means "red," and this not only refers to the reddish rocks of Mount Seir, but goes back to the red lentil stew for which Esau sold his birthright. Genesis 25:30: *"And Esau said to Jacob, 'Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.' Therefore his name was called Edom."*

Verses 9-14 focus on Esau's descendants who were born after he migrated to Mount Seir (v9). In all, Esau had five sons, ten grandsons, and a number of daughters and granddaughters. One of Esau's grandsons was Amalek (v12). He was

the father of the Amalekites. The Amalekites became a *“thorn in Israel’s side”* from the time of Israel’s wilderness wanderings, right on into the time of the kings in Israel!

Verses 15-19 list the descendants of Esau who became chiefs in Edom. This list of chiefs shows the transition from a family structure to a tribal structure in Edom - similar to the period of Judges in Israel, only it occurred much earlier.

Verses 20-30 list the descendants of Seir the Horite. *“These were the sons of Seir the Horite who inhabited the land: Lotan, Shobal, Zibeon, Anah...”*

Verse 29 ends this section – *“These were the chiefs of the Horites...”* The Horites, or Hivites, as they are also called, were the original inhabitants of the land of Edom. However, when Esau took over this area, he subjugated the Horites. Deuteronomy 2:12 tells us, *“The Horites formerly dwelt in Seir, but the descendants of Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them from before them, and dwelt in their place, just as Israel did to the land of their possession which the LORD gave them.”* And Deuteronomy 2:22: *“... just as He had done for the descendants of Esau, who dwelt in Seir, when He destroyed the Horites from before them. They dispossessed them and dwelt in their place, even to this day...”* There was some intermarriage between the Horites and the descendants of Esau. In fact, one of Esau’s wives was a descendant of Seir the Horite.

Verses 31-39 list the names of some of the early kings of Edom. All these kings reigned long before there was any king in Israel. Verse 31: *“Now these were the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the children of Israel...”* There doesn’t seem to be any dynasty here, just the most powerful ruler taking over when the former king died. Again this emphasizes Isaac’s prophecy about Esau in Genesis 27:40: *“By your sword, you shall live...”*

In the final section of the chapter, verses 40-43 list the chiefs of Esau, but this list is different from the list in verses 15-19. This list seems to refer to family districts or dukedoms. Verse 40: *“And these were the names of the chiefs of Esau, according to their families and their places, by their names: Chief Timnah, Chief Alvah, Chief Jetheth...”* So Isaac’s prophecy about Esau was fulfilled: *“By your sword, you shall live”* (27:40). Esau emerged as a powerful overlord in this area.

Doctrinal Points

1. Time is the true test of spiritual blessing.

The description of Jacob in Genesis 37:1 is quite a contrast to the description of Esau in chapter 36. From all outward appearances, at that point it looked like Esau was more blessed than Jacob! He had emerged as a wealthy and powerful overlord with many people subject to him. He had founded the nation of Edom, and Edom was well on its way! It had kings long before Israel had kings.

Now look at Genesis 37:1 - *“Now Jacob dwelt in the land where his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan.”* While Esau was becoming a strong and wealthy leader in Edom, Jacob was still a stranger in the land of Canaan. It’s true that he was blessed with large flocks and herds, but he certainly didn’t have the power and the kingdom that Esau had. Up to the time of David and Solomon, Edom, the older brother, was more developed than Israel, the younger brother. But time is the true test of spiritual blessing. When King David conquered Edom many years later, the full force of the prophecy in Genesis 25:33 was seen: *“the older shall serve the younger.”* How history changes things!

And where is Edom today? Edom is no more. The book of Obadiah predicts Edom’s downfall, and the prophecies have come true. And the prophet Ezekiel wrote in Ezekiel 35:7-9: *“Thus I will make Mount Seir most desolate, and cut off from it the one who leaves and the one who returns. And I will fill its mountains with the slain; on your hills and in your valleys and in all your ravines those who are slain by the sword shall fall. I will make you perpetually desolate, and your cities shall be uninhabited; then you shall know that I am the LORD.”*

So Edom is no more - but look at Israel! Israel is once again in the Land of Promise as a modern nation - and it is a **powerful** and very prosperous nation! Israel is blessing the world with inventions and innovations in many areas, such as agriculture, medicine and technology. And Romans 11 reveals that it is only a matter of time before a spiritual revival comes to the sons of Jacob. Time is the true test of spiritual blessing.

2. Time is the true test of spiritual character.

In our studies in Genesis we have seen that Esau was not a spiritual person. Right from the start, in Genesis 25, he despised his birthright, and sold it for a bowl of lentil stew! The birthright included important spiritual privileges and family responsibilities.

Throughout his life, Esau never changed. Even though he nobly left the land of Canaan to Jacob, he never turned to the Lord. About Esau, Hebrew 12:16 says: *“...lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright...”*

On the other hand, Jacob emerged as a man of spiritual character. Even though he had to learn the hard way, and even though he had to spend many years in the School of God because of his selfish, deceitful, and crafty ways, Jacob had a desire for God. And slowly but surely, Jacob matured as a believer. I love the picture of Jacob that is given in Hebrews 11:21: *“By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.”*

Jacob did graduate from the school of God. His last years were spent in worship! Time is the true test of spiritual character.

Practical Application

Don't be discouraged if it looks like you've been left behind!

How do you think Jacob felt when Esau seemed to be more blessed than he was? God Himself had promised that Jacob would be blessed - but his brother Esau became powerful, and the head of a kingdom? Jacob was wealthy, with many flocks and herds, but he was a shepherd and a nomad. Esau, however, had a kingdom! It looked like Jacob had been left behind. That must have been a little hard to take. But God had his reasons!

God has his reasons today as well. **Spiritual blessing demands patient faith.** Waiting on God while others appear to prosper is a test of faith and perseverance! Don't be discouraged if it looks like you've been left behind!

Maybe you're in that situation right now. People you grew up with and your university friends seem to be way ahead of you when it comes to career, and material prosperity, and happy family, etc. etc. You may feel like you've lost out on the "blessing." Listen! If you are walking with the Lord, you don't have to feel bad if it looks like you have been left behind.

The story is not over yet! **It's the spiritual blessings that count in the end!**

This is a good practical application for me. Most of you know that I left my career as a senior research scientist and engineer, and went into full time ministry. Sometimes when I hear about the success and the material prosperity of my former colleagues, I have to remind myself of this lesson.

We all have to remind ourselves not to feel discouraged if it looks like we've been left behind! Remember - **it's the spiritual blessings that count in the end!**