

Who was Esau in the Bible?

Esau was Abraham's grandson, the older twin born to Isaac and Rebekah (the younger was Jacob). Rebekah had a difficult pregnancy, and God told her it was because "two nations are in your womb; . . . one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23).

Esau's name means "hairy," which described him at birth (Genesis 25:25). Esau's twin was born holding Esau's heel and was named Jacob, which means "supplanter"—someone who tricks another out of something for personal gain. The twins' birth story served as a prophecy about their future.

Esau became a skillful hunter (Genesis 25:27), and his father favored him. His mother favored Jacob. Esau took his hunting seriously; one day he came in from hunting so tired and hungry that he thought he was going to die (our first indication that Esau was a whiner). His hunger, along with the tantalizing scent of the red lentil stew his brother was cooking, convinced him to give up his birthright when Jacob asked for it (verses 29-34). Because of his desire for red stew, Esau became known as "Edom," which means "red." The son with the birthright would receive a double portion of the family inheritance, so Esau's giving up his birthright was a big deal. In order to fill his belly, Esau had "despised his birthright" (verse 34).

When Isaac neared the end of his life and was blind, he told Esau he wanted to bless him. Patriarchal blessings included encouragement and prophetic words about the future. Rebekah overheard her husband and told Jacob to pretend to be Esau so he could get Esau's blessing instead. While Esau was hunting and preparing food as Isaac had requested, Rebekah fixed Isaac's favorite recipe. She had Jacob wear Esau's clothes and

put baby goat skin on his hands and neck so he'd feel hairy like Esau (Genesis 27:14-16). Jacob brought Isaac the meal and pretended he was Esau, telling his father a series of lies. Isaac believed him and gave Jacob a wonderful blessing that included a prophecy that he would be lord over his brother (verse 29).

Later, when Esau brought his meal and Isaac realized Jacob had deceived him, Isaac was horrified (Genesis 27:38). Esau resorted to whining, pleading with his father for a blessing. Isaac couldn't find much to say except that Esau would eventually "throw [Jacob's] yoke from off your neck" (verse 40). This prophecy was fulfilled when Esau's descendants revolted against Jacob's descendants (2 Kings 8:20). Bitterness filled Esau, and he vowed to kill Jacob after their father died (verse 41). Rebekah heard about the plan and intervened, telling Jacob to move away.

Years later, when Jacob returned to Canaan, he feared Esau might try to kill him and his children. So he sent a lavish gift ahead of him and asked God to save him (Genesis 32:9-15). But he was wrong about Esau: "Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept" (Genesis 33:4). The men couldn't live in the same area because God had blessed them both so much with children, possessions, and livestock, so Esau moved to the hill country of Seir, an area south of the Dead Sea (Genesis 36:7-8).

In spite of the fact that the brothers made peace, Esau's descendants, the Edomites (also called Idumeans), never got along with Jacob's descendants, the Israelites. Edom regularly opposed and fought against Israel. A big part of the problem was that the Edomites were pagans and the Israelites followed God. The prophets Jeremiah and Obadiah said God would "bring disaster on Esau" (Jeremiah 49:8) and that the Edomites would be

eventually destroyed (Obadiah 1:18).

What can we learn from Esau's life? Esau focused more on earthly things than on the things of God. He would rather have his physical cravings satisfied than receive God's blessings. The writer of Hebrews uses Esau as a negative example of godlessness: "See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done" (Hebrews 12:16-17). This passage also shows how our actions have consequences, and sometimes those consequences are permanent, even after we have seen the folly of our ways.

The fact that Esau was the older brother, yet Jacob received the birthright, carries theological significance. Esau's mother had been told before she gave birth to twins that "the older will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). So God's choice—His election—was at work before either of the twins had done anything, good or bad. Paul uses this story to show that we are saved "not by works but by him who calls" (Romans 9:12). God's sovereignty and election cannot be thwarted: "Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.' . . . It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (verses 13 and 16, cf. Malachi 1:2-3).