

Generations

- ¹ Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah.
² She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah.
³ Jokshan fathered Sheba [1 Kgs 10:2, 10] and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim.
⁴ The sons of Midian were Ephah [Isa 60:6], Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah.
⁵ Abraham gave all he had to Isaac.
⁶ But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country.
⁷ These are the days of the years of Abraham's life, 175 years.
⁸ Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.
⁹ Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre,
¹⁰ the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with Sarah his wife.

¹¹ After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi.
¹² These are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's servant, bore to Abraham.
¹³ These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth [Isa 60:7], the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar [Isa 60:7], Adbeel, Mibsam,
¹⁴ Mishma, Dumah, Massa,
¹⁵ Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah.
¹⁶ These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes.
¹⁷ (These are the years of the life of Ishmael: 137 years. He breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.)
¹⁸ They settled from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria. He settled over against all his kinsmen.

¹⁹ These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac,
²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife.
²¹ And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.
²² The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.
²³ And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger."

Genesis 25:1-23

Generations

I love Star Trek. I guess that makes me a nerd. This week it was reported that William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy may very well reprise their roles as Kirk and Spock together for the first time since 1991 in the upcoming third Star Trek film in the new series. This has been impossible until now, because in the aptly named 1994 film *Generations*, Kirk was permanently stuck in an extra-dimensional realm where he met Captain Picard who was born many years after Kirk supposedly died. The writers basically **predestined Kirk into future Star Trek oblivion**. But now, the new Star Trek has rewritten the entire time line of all the TV shows, thereby making it possible once more for old Kirk and Spock to meet with young Kirk and Spock in the new timeline. Does your brain hurt yet? That's the wonderful world of Star Trek, which loves to make the impossible possible by having all of the generations of characters meet one another.

The text we will look at today does not offer any kind of strange time loops, but it does want us to know about many different generations of people that come from Abraham. Then it tells us something about those various generations and their futures. Many are **used to thinking that Abraham had only two sons: Ishmael and Isaac**. Our story teaches us that this is not even close to the truth. Much of the text today returns to Genesis' well known genre of the **genealogy**.

There are three sections in today's text. First, we will learn about a number of other sons of Abraham, as we—sadly—**close out the Abraham cycle**, thereby losing our dear friend and Father in the Faith to old age. Because Ishmael helps to bury his father along with Isaac, we will tidy up the loose ends of Ishmael's genealogy too, a necessity in order to help us see that God has been **faithful to his promises even to this non-elect son**. This will put us into the shortest of the 10 natural *toledoth* or “generations of” sections in the book of Genesis (25:12-18). It is **the sixth** such section. Finally, we will begin the **seventh toledoth** section, which will introduce us to the generations of Isaac. This section goes from **Gen 25:19-35:29**. Most of it will give us the life, not of Isaac, but of his deceiving son: Jacob.

The structure of this last section is beautiful. It forms a grand chiasm which not only helps us interpret parallel stories later on in Genesis, but also—like that arrow tip—points us towards the center of the whole section: **the birth of Jacob's twelve sons**. That future chapter is really very important to the entire history of Israel. We will obviously not go through ten chapters today or the chapter of Jacob's twelve sons. Instead, we will focus on the generations of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac.

| Structure of the Jacob Cycle (from Wenham) | |
|--|--|
| Genesis | |
| 25:19–34 | A First encounters of Jacob and Esau |
| 26:1–33 | B Isaac and the Philistines |
| 26:34–28:9 | C Jacob cheats Esau of his blessing |
| 28:10–22 | D Jacob meets God at Bethel |
| 29:1–14 | E Jacob arrives at Laban's house |
| 29:15–30 | F Jacob marries Leah and Rachel |
| 29:31–30:24 | G Birth of Jacob's sons |
| 30:25–31:1 | F ¹ Jacob outwits Laban |
| 31:2–32:1 (31:55) | E ¹ Jacob leaves Laban |
| 32:2–3 (1–2) | D ¹ Jacob meets angels of God at Mahanaim |
| 32:4(3)–33:20 | C ¹ Jacob returns Esau's blessing |
| 34:1–31 | B ¹ Dinah and the Hivites |
| 35:1–29 | A ¹ Journey's end for Jacob and Isaac |

Generations of Abraham

The first section concludes the Abraham cycle, which is really began all the way back in **Genesis 11:27** with the “generations of Terah” (Abraham’s father). As such, it is a bit like reading about Sarah a chapter ago. A great man of faith dies. But before he dies, we learn that **he takes another wife**. Her name is **Keturah** (**Gen 25:1**). This is Abraham’s third wife, but Hagar and Keturah are merely concubines, and are not given the full status and privilege of a wife like Sarah in the ancient world.

Keturah means “**Veiled in Incense/Smoke**.” She provides six sons for Abraham (**25:2**). These are **Zimran** (**Celebrated/Singer**), **Jokshan** (**Sportsman/Bird-Catcher**), **Medan** (**Strife/Contention**), **Midian** (**Strife/Contention**), **Ishbak** (**Free/Alone/Forsaken**), and **Shuah** (**Prostration/Bow Down**). Let us look at some of these sons more closely.

Zimran possibly populated a town called Zambran near Mecca and/or another Arabian town called Zamareni. It is fairly clear that he went down into Saudi Arabia. **Medan** appears elsewhere in a South-Arabic inscription. On the other hand, **Ishbak** is located in northern Syria, perhaps up by Haran. So, these three sons settle a rather wide range of territory, perhaps over 1,000 miles from north to south in the deserts east of Israel. The other three names are more interesting.

The last—**Shuah**—lies far to the east, on the middle of the Euphrates between Babylon and Mari. It just so happens that another person in Job (see Uz and Buz in Gen 22:20), this time **Bildad** (“the Shuhite”), is from this place. Apparently, Shuah went back to the homeland of Abraham, yet somehow the knowledge of God was retained to a perverted degree by Bildad.

The last two names are interesting for more than one reason. First, both of them (**Jokshan** and **Midian**) have their lineages traced a bit further. Jokshan became

the ancestor of **Sheba** and **Dedan** (25:3). This is curious, because back in **Genesis 10:6-7** we learned that Ham had Cush who had Raamah who had Sheba and Dedan. That Sheba and Dedan came from Ham, but this Sheba and Dedan come from Abraham and, therefore, Shem.

Of course, there is a famous queen who will visit king Solomon. She is the **Queen of Sheba**, and she is so famous, Jesus even speaks of her (**1 Kgs 10:2, 10; Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31**). Jesus calls her the “**Queen of the South**.” She came to Solomon with much gold, spices, and stone. Is this the daughter of Abraham by Keturah come to pay her respects to the son of Abraham via the Chosen Seed line?

Dedan is then said to have given birth to **Asshurim**, **Letushim**, and **Leummim**. “-im” is the plural ending in Hebrew, so these probably refer to a people group rather than individuals. These are more desert dwellers in northwestern Arabia or western Syria. Josephus and Eusebius both preserve a history that goes back before the NT of three of the men/groups in our list as told by one **Cleodemus Malchus** (a Jewish historian, 200 B.C.). Of **Asshurim**, Cleodemus says that Assyria was named after him (Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.239-41; Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 9.20.2-4).¹ Therefore, he rose to become an extremely powerful person and tribe.

The other son with a lineage traced is **Midian**. Midian is probably most famous because of Moses. When **Moses** was forced to flee Egypt, he went to the land of Midian and **married the daughter of Jethro/Ruel** the Midianite. Once, when Moses found himself overwhelmed at judging the people, Jethro came and told him it would be better to divide the work by installing other elders would could hear their complaints (**Ex 3:1; 18:1–24**). It appears that Jethro may have even retained the worship of the LORD. But for the most part, the Midianites end up being enemies of Israel after that.

Midian, Sheba, and the first of Midian’s descendants mentioned—**Ephah**, are mentioned in **Isaiah 60:6** as part of **a great caravan of camels** that come to bless the LORD in the future, much like the Queen of Sheba does to Solomon. I will end the sermon with this thought, so keep it in the back of your mind for now. As part of the international spice trade all those centuries later, they still retain something of their first mother’s original name: incense and smoke. Ephah and the second son of Midian, **Epher**, are also curiously spoken of by **Cleodemus Malchus**, **Josephus**, and **Eusebius** (the names are changed to reflect the various spellings):

¹ See the discussion R. Doran, “Cleodemus Malchus: A New Translation and Introduction,” in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Expansions of the “Old Testament” and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, vol. 2 (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1985), 883-87.

| Name | Hebrew | Septuagint | Josephus | Eusebius |
|-------------|---------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Asshurim | šwrym | Assourieim | Sour n | Assouri |
| Ephah | yp̄h | Gaiph̄ar | Iaphran | Aphra |
| Epher | pr | Apher | (I)apheran | Apher ² |

This is what they say. “The city of Afra and the region Africa were named after **Afera** (Ephah) and **Iafra** (Epher).” Then they add a most curious legend. “**Afera and Iafra fought with Heracles (Hercules) in his campaign in Libya against Antaios. Heracles married the daughter of Afera and had by her a son, Diodorus.**” This story was widely told by the Greeks, though without these sons of Abraham. You name him, he probably knew of and wrote of the story.³ **Antaios was a fearsome giant from today’s Morocco (northwestern Africa).**

The story goes something like this, “Setting sail then, from Krete, Herakles put in at Libya, and first of all challenged to a fight Antaios, whose fame was noised abroad because of his strength of body and his skill in wrestling, and because he was wont to put to death all strangers whom he had defeated in wrestling, and grappling with him Herakles slew the giant” (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 4. 17. 4). The tradition of Josephus has these **two sons of Abraham joining up with Hercules** to fight him. Juba II, king of Numidia who was famously married to the daughter of Cleopatra, wrote well accepted histories and says that **Heracles married the wife of the giant Antaios**. Remember, Josephus says that Heracles married the daughter of Afera (Ephah), so the tradition actually confuses a descendant of Abraham with a giant from Morocco. But many of the Greek historians do say that Hercules was accompanied on this journey by different peoples from the Middle East, so who knows.⁴ Whatever the case, giants, Hercules, and the naming of two great places as Assyria and Africa add some great color to these otherwise unknown sons and grandsons of Abraham.

We have three more names. **Hanoch** is the same name as Enoch. **Abida**, and **Eldaah** round out the list of these 16 descendants of Keturah and Abraham. Now, many of these names are **attested by great king’s** such as Tiglath-Pileser III or Shalmaneser III or by ancient **inscriptions** or by **historians** such as Pliny or Ptolemaeus, Josephus or Eusebius. They would have been well known to most Jews even as late as the end of the OT, because these tribes continues to prosper for a

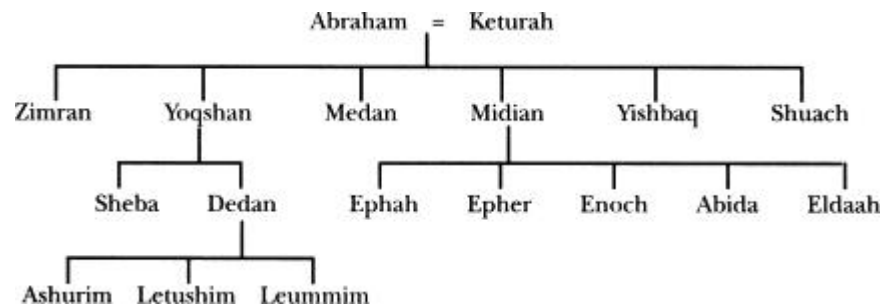
² Ibid., 884.

³ You can read a dozen or so traditions on Antaios and Hercules here:

<http://www.theoi.com/Gigante/GiganteAntaios.html>, last accessed 10-1-2014.

⁴ Sallust has the Medes, Persians, and Armenians. Strabo speaks of Indians. Juba II, according to Plutarch, mentions Olbians and Mycenaens; and Cleodemus talks of descendants of Abraham.

couple thousand years. This places [our genealogy firmly in the realm of recorded history](#). But their theological purpose goes beyond the history, as important as that is. It completes the picture of how Abraham did indeed become father of a multitude of nations ([17:4–6](#)).⁵ In other words, we learn about these sons so that our faith can be strengthened that what God had promised Abraham—that he would be the father of many nations—came to pass quite literally.



Two other sons of Abraham, however, will be traced in a moment. They are the more familiar sons: [Ishmael](#) and [Isaac](#). We meet them at the burial of Abraham, which we are told about after these names conclude. After Keturah’s genealogy is finished, it says that Abraham gave everything he had to Isaac ([Gen 25:5](#)). Remember, Isaac is not the oldest. But he is the son of the promise, and only he has a right to inherit Abraham’s promises and his blessing. Nevertheless, and this becomes [important for something we will talk about next week with Esau](#), notice that [Abraham gave gifts to the sons of his concubines](#) (Hagar and Keturah; [25:6](#)). That is, he did not despise them with some kind of hatred or malice. He took care of them. He undoubtedly gave them each great material wealth, for Abraham had accumulated much by way of material possessions and with it they were able to become mighty nations themselves.

But he did not, would not, and could not give them the promises or the blessings of God. [For it was not his to give. God had chosen whom he had chosen.](#) [The line of the Seed would go through Isaac](#) and no other son of Abraham. Isaac is Abraham’s only begotten son. Thus, Abraham “[sent away](#)” his other sons ([25:6](#)). He cast them out of Canaan (and notice) to [the east country](#)—the [direction of Cain and Nod](#), out of the Promised Land, away from the blessing of God. Abraham did this while he was still living ([6](#)).

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 158.

Abraham lived 175 years (7), breathed his last and died in a good old age, full of years, and was gathered to his people (8). There are two things I want to point out about this death narrative. The first is about life after death. He “was gathered to his relatives.” Someone says, “This could just mean that his body now rested with his relatives in the family tomb. But since this is said explicitly in v 9, it would seem more likely that the reference is to the soul of Abraham being reunited with his dead relatives in the afterlife. ‘It can only denote the union of the soul, the transfigured personality, with the souls of the forefathers.’”⁶ The point is, even from the earliest days, the Jews believed in an afterlife. This is not soul-sleep, but a being brought together with dead family. At this early stage, the idea of heaven and hell is not sufficiently developed. But we can say that they believed when you die you would be reunited with your family in Sheol—the realm of the dead.

Second, Abraham was very old. Stop and reflect upon just how long this is. If he died this year, it would mean he would have been born in 1839, almost 80 years before WWI ended, long before the Civil War started, and even before the Gold Rush or the railroad brought together our great land. Even more, since he was already 75 when he departed from Haran to Canaan (12:4), that means he lived 100 years exactly in the Promised Land. Abraham would have been living in Canaan since 1914, the year WWI started. That is a long time.

One more thing of note. If we take a strict literal reading of the life of Abraham, counting up how old he was when Isaac was born (100; Gen 21:5), how old Isaac was when Esau and Jacob were born (60; 25:26), and how old Abraham was when he died (175; 25:7), we learn that Abraham actually lived for fifteen years after Esau and Jacob were born. But we learn about the birth of Jacob and Esau after this. That means that the placement of our passage here is *not chronological*, but *theological*. The placement makes for a neat theological division, closing out the Abraham cycle before entering into the Isaac and Jacob stories. Its placement shows that everything God said about Abraham had come to pass. So Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah (25:9-10), where Sarah was buried (23:19). As one commentary concludes, the death of Abraham shows the steadfast love of God to “to thousands of those who love [him] and keep [his] commandments” (Deut 5:10) and how “his steadfast love endures forever” (Ps 136:3).

These are promises you can be sure to count on even today, for they are grounded in the life of perhaps the greatest man who lived in all of the time prior to the coming of Christ. With all of his sins, he was still a man of great faith. It was a

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 160.

faith that led to much obedience. It is faith that God looks at, faith that repents of its sins and trusts in the promises of God in Christ. With this faith, God is well-pleased. With this kind of trust, God is certain to care for his own, even if this life is filled with sadness and sorrow, it lays hold of the eternal promises of the life to come.

Generations of Ishmael

But alas, we must move on. With Abraham now behind us, we come to the **second genealogy** in our story. It is the genealogy of **Ishmael**. First, we learn that Isaac lays hold of the promise and “settles” at Beer-lahai-roi (Well of the Life of Vision; **Gen 25:11**). He settles as Abraham did, in the Promised Land. But Ishmael his brother who helped to bury their father is cast out of the land. Yet, because God gave him a great promise that he would become the father of nations, we must learn about his descendants before we can move on in the story. Not one of the promises of God must be forgotten, even if it is too the non-elect seed of Ishmael.

Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian (**25:12**) has **twelve sons**, just as Abraham’s brother Nahor had (**22:20-24**) and just as Jacob will have. His first, **Nebaioth**, is mentioned with Sheba, Midian, and Ephah in **Isaiah 60:6-7** as being among the nations that will come and praise God in a future God. Again, remember this passage. We will return to it. Nebaioth means “**High Places**” or “**Prophecy**” or “**Productive**.” Esau will end up marrying his sister (**36:3**). Ashurbanipal conquered this tribe in the 7th century B.C.

His brother **Kedar** (“Powerful” or “Dark Skinned” or “Darkness”) is also mentioned in that same Isaiah text. They were desert Arabs living between Babylon and the Transjordan. They grew to considerable power in the 4th century B.C.

Tiglath-Pileser 3 mentions conquering the descendants of **Adbeel** (“**Sorrow of God**”) in the Sinai Peninsula. **Mibsam** means “**Sweet Odor**.” They became another Arabian tribe. **Mishma** (“**Fame**”) settled in today’s Jordan. **Dumah** (“**Silence**”) has an oracle against it in **Isaiah 21:11-12**. Sennacherib said he conquered their fortress many years later. Curiously, **King Lemuel** who wrote Proverbs 31 is the king of **Massa** (“**to bear/suffer**”). Tiglath-Pileser mentions them. **Hadad** (“**Chief**”), **Tema** (“**Southerner**”), **Jetur** (“**Enclosure**”), **Naphish** (“**Refreshment**” or “**Cheerful**”), and **Kedemah** (“**Eastward**”) are all Arabs living from Edom down south in Arabia.

The point of these names is to provide background for some of these tribes that will appear later in Scripture, but even more to prove God’s faithfulness to his promises—even to someone like this. “**As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation**” (**Gen 17:20**). His descendants will be “**too many to count**” (**16:10**) It also closes out the life of Ishmael

by telling us that he lived 137 years, died, and was gathered to his people (25:17). Here we have that same phrase about going to life beyond this one.

But lest we think that because God is good to Ishmael that he is good in return, the last verse of this shortest section of Genesis tells us that the descendants of Ishmael went from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria. That is, they lived in the deserts south and east of Israel, in the direction of evil. And they settled over against all his kinsmen. But even this was prophecy and thus shows God to be faithful to his word. Ishmael would be a wild donkey who would dwell opposite his brothers (Gen 16:12), and to this very day the relations between the sons of Ishmael and the sons of Isaac are full of hostility and bloodshed. Such as the consequences of sin, even when God gives general and special blessings to people as we have seen in both of these genealogies. But I do want you to take notice of something even here, something not often noticed by commentators. None of these people in either genealogy are among the people God commands Israel to obliterate from the face of the earth later on. No. These are Abraham’s children, and Israel would not be allowed to exterminate them.

Generations of Isaac

With the passing of Ishmael, we come to the seventh “generations of” section in the book. Perhaps it is not coincidence that this seventh would coincide with the person who gets the longest treatment in the book of Genesis: Jacob. Yet, it says these are the generations of “Isaac” (Gen 25:19). So why bring up Jacob? It is because what follows concerns the birth of Isaac’s twin sons: Esau and Jacob.

Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah (20). But Rebekah was barren (21). This deliberately reminds us of ... Sarah. In fact, all that follows is written in such a way that it parallels Genesis 11:27-12:20 and the call of Abraham.

| Rebekah and Sarah; Abraham and Jacob | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| “This is the family history of” | 25:19; cf. 11:27 |
| “Abraham fathered Isaac” | 25:19; cf. 11:27 |
| “Isaac married Rebekah” | 25:20; cf. 11:29 |
| “(Rebekah) was childless” | 25:21; cf. 11:30 |
| Journey to oracle (land) | 25:22; cf. 11:31 |
| “And the Lord said” | 25:23; cf. 12:1 |
| Predictions | 25:23; cf. 12:1–3 |
| First fulfillment | 25:24–26; cf. 12:4 |
| Age of patriarch then | 25:26b; cf. 12:4b |
| Second fulfillment of prediction | 25:27–34; cf. 12:5–9 |
| Wife/sister scene | 26:1–11; cf. 12:10–20 ⁷ |

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 173.

I know I like to tell you lots of literary patterns and structure, and some of you may not understand why. It isn't to bore you. It is **to help you see how carefully the text was written**, how deliberately stories are told so that they parallel what comes before and after, how brilliantly they point you to the central point in an author's mind. We are not left at guesswork when it comes to these things. They are right here in the very way that the text is written. What could be the reason for such parallels here? It is to show us how **God keeps doing the same thing**, over and over, in order to drill it into the minds of those in the story and in order to drill it into ours that he is a God who knows what he is doing and can be trusted. **Rebekah is a new Sarah; Isaac is a new Abraham; Jacob is a new Isaac**. The promises will not stop with Abraham. Praise God!

Isaac, being a man of faith, knows about the promise to his father. But does he think that he is the Chosen Seed who will crush the seed of the Serpent? Apparently not. He prays to Yahweh for his wife, because she was barren (21). Yahweh granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived, just like Sarah finally did when Abraham finally figured out how God intended to fulfill his word. Isaac is not nearly as dense as his father. He needs something, so he will pray to God for it. His need is rooted in God's very word, so he will trust that God will provide. That is what true prayer is all about.

Suddenly, we find that Rebekah is not going to give birth to a son, but to *two* sons. **"The children struggled together within her, and she said, 'If it is thus, why is this happening to me'"** (22)? This **"struggling"** is a prophecy of the future lives of these two children. Here, the word means **"to push each other around"** or one person says they **"smashed themselves inside her."** Fighting like true brothers ... in the womb. That doesn't sound like pieces of impersonal mother's tissue to me. It sounds like two human beings in Rebekah's womb. You want a proof-text for fetus' being human, look no farther than here.

Now, I almost got to watch firsthand what it would have been like to carry twins to full term, but sadly, we lost one of our twins early on in our last pregnancy. But it must have been quite something for Rebekah, because the fighting was so intense, so violent, and so often that she went and **"inquired of the LORD"** about it (22). She is despondent, and finds herself at her wits end. Why am I even here? How can I endure such pain? This would not be the only time her two sons caused this great woman horrible pain. How cruel children can be to their parents, without even knowing it. Perhaps this is a main reason for the Fifth Commandment.

How she inquired, we are not told. But we do see that the LORD responded and answered her. The answer is more like a poetic oracle than a direct

conversation. Yahweh said, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger” (23). This is a rather veiled prophecy, and kind of difficult to understand and even more so to accept, because of what it implies. Because of this, we will conclude the rest of our story next time, for we do not have enough time to do justice to everything that follows in the short time we have remaining today anyway.

Therefore, what I want to do to finish our time together here is look at something that many people find to be a difficult doctrine, but that others have come to love and embrace. It is the doctrine revealed here in this strange oracle: “The older will serve the younger.” This passage is quoted alongside another passage by the Apostle Paul early on in his discussion of the doctrine of predestination. We will look at this other passage next week (Malachi 1:2-3).

To properly contextualize this discussion, we have to briefly describe how he got to it. The Apostle has been arguing in Romans that no matter who you are, you born with sin and as soon as you are able, you commit sin. This puts everyone in a state of rebellion against God. All are born under God’s wrath. This includes both Gentiles and Jews.

In Romans 9, he picks up the topic of Jews that he left earlier in the book. He talks about them because he has just finished raising a point about predestination saying, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:28-29) and “Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies” (Rom 8:33). Notice how election is put in positive terms here, as a comfort to Christians. The Bible tells us to make our calling and election sure, but it does not tell people who do not believe to first inquire whether they are elect. This doctrine is not given to torture people, but to aid their faith.

Now, these elect people include Gentiles, which would have been quite a shock to many Jews hearing the Gospel for the first time. “We thought Israel was the chosen race. Gentiles are evil dogs.” Think here especially of how Jews and Arabs think of one another today, and you get the idea, one that is profoundly rooted in our genealogies. So he explains that, yes, the Jews were chosen as a corporate entity for certain things. It was through them that adoption, glory, covenants, law, worship, the promises, the patriarchs, and most importantly Christ himself came (Rom 9:4-5). But this didn’t just bring salvation automatically. That

was the fatal error of the Pharisee. He thought that just because he was a child of Abraham that he was therefore automatically included in salvation. But as we have seen today, there are many children of Abraham, aren't there? Many who came not from Isaac at all.

And so the Apostle turns from the corporate people who were given temporary blessings that would be vehicles through which salvation would come to the world, to **individual people** who were given eternal promises and who, by faith, would inherit salvation. He uses the promise through Isaac to introduce the topic. He explains, “**Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring (seed) be named’**” (9:6-7). Isaac is an individual, not a nation.

Again, what the Jew failed to remember is that Abraham had other children too! We have seen over a dozen of them today. Everyone knows of Ishmael, but Midian, Sheba, Dedan, and many others were also his children. Yet, any good Pharisees would regard these people as Gentiles, excluded from salvation unless they became Jews.

What is the reason for this difference? It does not reside in the person, because all people are evil. It does not reside in the nation, because the nation was the least among all nations. Rather, **it resides in the good pleasure of God in election.** This is what makes people so angry, though, frankly, I'm convinced that what really makes them angry is that in order to accept this doctrine, you must first accept the utter sinfulness of your own sin and of everyone else's.

But people do not want to do that. Yet, until you come to the absolute end of yourself and any supposed goodness that you think you have, even the tiniest inkling that you think that there is something good in you that would actually want to turn to God apart from him first giving you a new heart, this doctrine will only torment you, and you will flee from it or turn it into anything but what it actually is. Have you come to the end of yourself or are you still clinging to some pretended goodness, even some neutrality that you think dwells in your heart, or the hearts of other people that you see that make you question God's goodness and fairness when you think about predestination? No friend, there is no one good, no not one. There is no one who seeks God. That is why he must first seek us. And that is what this doctrine is all about.

Election is first put into terms of “**promise.**” The Apostle says, “**This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring (seed)**” (9:8). What was that promise? It was **a miracle from God of an impossible birth.** “**For this is what the promise said:**

‘About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son’” (9:9). That son was Isaac, born of the impossible way rather than the natural way.

Here is where understanding the parallels between Sarah and Rebekah, Isaac and Abraham, and Jacob and Isaac become so important. Next he says, “And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might continue, not because of works but because of him who call—she was told, ‘*The older will serve the younger*’” (10-12). There’s our verse.

The “but also” connects Rebekah to Sarah and Isaac to Jacob. In the same way it was true of one, so it is true of the next, and so on. **Both women were barren. God miraculously opened both of their wombs.** They could not have children unless God did this. God did this because he had sworn a promise to Abraham. Now, this promise is put into terms of election.

What is “election?” This about the meaning of the word. When someone is elected into office, it is by others, not yourself. Here is it defined as **God’s choice of a person that has nothing whatsoever to do with his works**—good or bad. So often we hear that God predestines based upon looking into the future to see the choice a person will make. Let me say two things about this. First, yes, everyone does make a choice. Hear this well. But this choice is always to run from God. Second, this kind of idea is the exact opposite of what the Scripture says. A choice for God would be a good choice, wouldn’t it? And a choice against him would be a bad choice, would it not? But God doesn’t elect based upon anything a person does good or bad. These twins were not even born yet. Such a view is actually a form of theft. It robs God of his glory to keep his promises, and such promises cannot be kept unless he keeps them completely apart from us.

Make no mistake, it is **God’s glory that is at stake.** For the next thing he says is that he tells Moses, “**I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and will have compassion on whom I have compassion**” (15). God does not owe anyone mercy or compassion. The wonder of election is that God shows mercy and compassion to anyone.

Then it adds one more individual: **Pharaoh.** “**For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth**” (17). This is God’s right. This is done by God’s power. This is done apart from us. This is predetermined before any of us are even born.

And so salvation “**does not depend on human willing or running, but on God who has mercy**” (9:16). Taking it back to our text, we see again that God tells

Rebekah that two nations are in her womb, that they would be divided, that one would be stronger, but that the older would serve the younger. Why? [So that God's purpose in election might stand](#). To set up a little bit of the discussion for next week, what we will see throughout the Jacob and Esau stories is that Esau is actually the better human being most of the time. Jacob is a scoundrel, a deceiver, a schemer. He is hardly the man you would choose if you were looking at works.

Why would God do this? Well, he chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. [He chooses what is weak to shame the strong, and what is low and despised—the things that are not—to bring to nothing the things that are. He does not choose because one is more righteous than another. He chooses so that our faith in him may not rest in our own goodness, but in the power of the LORD who delivers us from our own evil.](#) So says David in Brian Godawa's upcoming novel on the same character. This is why you must come to the end of yourself, for only then have you reach a foolish enough place for God to save you. Because this isn't about what you do, but what he does. He desires the poor, the helpless, the orphan, the widow, the minority, the last, the sinner, the tax-collector, the publican.

That is ultimately what all of these people we have looked at today teach us. We have seen several generations of Abraham. Keturah had many sons. But what becomes of them? A scant few may have retained the faith of Abraham for a short time, but in the end, all turn away from God, not towards him. Hagar had only one son, but Ishmael was blessed by God with a dozen princes, and an uncountable number of descendants. But what becomes of them? They crawl off into the desert, where demons and unclean things live. And the worship of the LORD, if they ever had it, is wiped away by their sinning. Their genealogies end up going nowhere in the Bible, and that is the way of man's striving, of his planning, and of his multiplying.

We will see the same end for Esau, who has entire books dedicated to prophecies about his great demise, a demise that is personified in his descendant [Herod the Great](#), called "a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis," "the evil genius of the Judean nation," and "prepared to commit any crime in order to gratify his unbounded ambition."⁸ His greatest evil? Trying to murder the Messiah before he ever left infancy.

No, only the line of Jacob will continue, but not because of anything intrinsically good in Jacob—The Heel Grasper, The Deceiver! Rather, purely for God's good pleasure in keeping his promises, promises to bring a Messiah who

⁸ See the citations on Herod's wiki. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great#cite_note-Spino-9

would in turn bring salvation to many, including those who are far off, including even the long forgotten sons of Abraham.

Isaiah, predicting the future sings,

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.

And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip.

Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.

All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house.

Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows?

For the coastlands shall hope for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the LORD your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has made you beautiful.

(Isa 60:1-9)

God has said it, and in Christ he is bring it to pass this very hour. Hear the word of the LORD, all you with ears to hear. Hear and come and sing and rejoice. Give praises to God who has rescued you from yourselves, to the God who has kept his promises and more to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob ... and to Ishmael, and has welcomed any who will humble themselves through Christ to enter his palace with thanksgiving. May He be glorified in his church today.

