



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

## The Generations of Esau

Genesis 36.1–43

### Part 1: Genealogies in the OT

#### *Introduction*

1. J. W. Wright writes, “Contemporary readers often skim over the genealogical passages of the Pentateuch as uninteresting or insignificant. Western liberal-democratic societies understand genealogies as possessing private, not public, significance. Yet genealogical records in traditional societies, oral and written, possess extreme importance in defining everyday social interactions” (Wright 2003, 345–346).
2. Wright’s understatement suggests some things I considered when assigned to teach this text:
  - a. How to teach and make practical a chapter likely to be perceived as “uninteresting or insignificant.”
  - b. How to convey an ancient Eastern text to people in a modern Western democratic society.
  - c. How to succinctly survey a lengthy chapter that is repetitive and includes multiple twists and turns.

#### *Ancient Genealogies*

3. Some general statements.
  - a. Genealogies are rare in ancient Near Eastern literature, found mainly in Mesopotamian king lists and other texts dealing with political connections. But “the OT contains about 25 genealogies of varying complexity,” indicating “that genealogy played an important role in Israelite life and thought” (Wilson 1992, 929–930).
  - b. They are not just family trees, but assertions about identity, territory, and relationships; they define an ancestor’s, town’s, or a group’s position in relation to others and map out political, economic, and social allegiances of individuals and groups to each other and other groups (Wright 2003, 346).
  - c. By extension, they also sometimes are used to tell a group’s story or history; see the Genesis texts that use them to introduce narrative passages that are not in family-tree form (Gen 2.4; 6.9; 11.27; 25.19; 37.2) (Wilson 1992, 930).
4. They generally take one of two forms, though some lists incorporate both.
  - a. Linear (or vertical): lists of names connecting a successive series of individuals to an earlier ancestor; think of Matt 1.2–17; Luke 3.23–38; some of 1 Chron 1–9.
  - b. Segmented or branched (breadth): having both a vertical and horizontal dimension, tracing the relationships of successive generations *and* the relationships within a generation.
  - c. It’s important to note that genealogies are fluid; where two or more versions of the same genealogy exist, there will likely be changes in the relationship of names and/or additions or deletions of names

from list to list (Wilson 1992, 930).

### *As Structural Markers in Genesis*

5. Genesis is organized around the phrase, “these are the *generations*” (תּוֹלְדוֹת, *tolēdot*), used to mark off 10 acts in the story; there are two groups revolving around five names/descriptions (cf. Wright 2003, 347–348); the phrase appears five times in each of the book’s major sections.
  - a. In what amounts to the prologue to the main story in 1.1–11.26: heaven and earth (2.4); Adam (5.1); Noah (6.9); sons of Noah (10.1); Shem (11.10).
  - b. In the development of the promise/blessing narrative in 11.27–50.26: Terah (11.27); Ishmael (25.12); Isaac (25.19); Esau (36.1, 9); Jacob (37.2).
6. The writer also utilizes the placement of the phrase to accentuate the major characters in the story over the minor players (“minor” does not mean “unimportant”). Regarding the people named in the promise narrative:
  - a. The first, third, and fifth (Terah, Isaac, Jacob) are the ones through whom the promise will be enacted; the second and fourth (Ishmael, Esau) are the older brothers (to Isaac, Jacob) who are not chosen to advance the promise story.
  - b. Further accentuating the prominence of the major characters is the immediate transition from the *tolēdot* of Ishmael and Esau to that of Isaac and Jacob (25.12–18 → 25.19; 36.1–37.1 → 37.2).
7. J. W. Wright summarizes the above as follows:
 

Genealogies, both in the background material and in the particular narrative of the Torah, map relationships: relationships between familial groups, relationships of familial groups to all humanity. Genealogies fundamentally structure the narrative development of Genesis as God gathers specific lines of descendants amidst a particular family as a response to the debacle of God’s good creation gone bad (Wright 2003, 349).

### *Overview of Esau’s Genealogy (36.1–43)*

8. As we come to Genesis 36, the first question is why this text is here at all. “It is stunning that the long conclusion of the Jacob tradition concerns Esau” (Brueggemann 1982, 285).
9. Secondly, we can ask why it is so elaborate.
  - a. In the prior transition from minor to major actor, Ishmael’s genealogy is just seven verses (25.12–18).
  - b. But 43 verses are devoted to the transition from Isaac to Esau consisting of a short summary of Esau’s family (vv. 1–8), followed by a second title (*tolēdot*) and list of his sons (vv. 9–14), the chiefs of clans descended from him (vv. 15–19), an alternate genealogy of the people of Seir who lived in the land the Edomites came to rule (vv. 20–30), the kings who reigned in Edom (vv. 31–39), and a return to the clan chiefs (vv. 40–43).
10. We can outline it as follows:
  - a. Esau’s immediate family (36.1–8).
  - b. Esau’s sons and grandsons (36.9–14).
  - c. Clans from Esau (36.15–19).
  - d. The genealogy of Seir (36.20–30).
  - e. Kings of Edom (36.31–39).
  - f. The Clans of Esau (36.40–43) (Hamilton 1995, 391–402).

## **Part 2: Textual Questions and Takeaways**

### *Textual Questions*

11. Chapter overview: “Chapter 36 records what became of Esau. It will list both his actual descendants as

well as the people he subsumed under his tribal leadership, people who were aboriginal Edomites. The chapter is long and complicated” (Harris 2019, 36.1).

12. The chapter is a summary of the Esau/Edomite story, not a chronological advancement of the Genesis story.
- For example, verses 6–8 are unclear whether the separation from Jacob took place after Isaac’s death, was a final separation of the brothers, or an earlier separation (Hamilton 1995, 393).<sup>1</sup>
  - As the references to the Seir genealogy and then the (later) kings of Edom indicate, the chapter is arranged topically, not in a chronological order. (e.g., Esau’s grandsons were born in Seir and over a long period the Edomite nation emerges with its chiefs and then its kings) (Willis 1979, 375).
  - This is an example of a genealogy designed to show relationships: how did the people of Seir become associated with the Edomites (Wilson 1992, 931)?<sup>2</sup>
13. A immediate puzzle is that the names of the wives are different from those given earlier (vv. 2–3); i.e.:

1. Adah, daughter of Elon the Hittite (36.2)	1. Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite (26.34)
2. Oholibamah, daughter of Anah son of Zibeon the Hivite (36.2)	2. Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite (26.34)
3. Basemath, Ishmael’s daughter, sister of Nebaioth (36.3)	3. Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nebaioth (28.9)

14. Willis’s explanations for why this occurred are reasonable (Willis 1979, 376; cf. Hamilton 1995, 392).
- Scribal copyists accidentally miscopied the text in one of the passages. Cf. Samaritan Pentateuch which has “Mahalath” instead of “Basemath” in 36.3, 4, 10, 13, 17.
  - Some wives may have had more than one name.
  - Esau may have married four women, quite possible in view of the differences in the identification of Oholibamah and Judith. [cf. the different lists of the women who went to Jesus’s tomb]
15. Verses 9–19 survey the generations after Esau’s family relocated to Seir/Edom.
- The main territory taken over by the Edomites lay due south of the Dead Sea, nearly as far as Gulf of Aqabah, though it extended westward to Kadesh-barnea, at least during part of the period under Edomite control (cf. Num 20.16) (Willis 1979, 378).
  - Verses 15–19 record essentially the same list as vv. 9–14, though there are some differences.
    - Verses 15–19 extend the list to the third generation after Esau (cf. two generations in 9–14).
    - The order of two of Eliphaz’s sons is changed (evidence of the fluidity referred to above).
      - In vv. 9–14: Gatam is 4th, Kenaz is 5th.
      - In vv. 15–19: Gatam is 6th, Kenaz is 4th.
    - Verses 15–19 include Korah in the clans, resulting in seven sons of Eliphaz instead of the six named in vv. 9–14.
    - The most obvious difference is that, instead of “sons,” the clan leaders are called “chiefs” (אֲדָמָה, *allup*) in vv. 15–19, a term that appears 18 times (in the Hebrew; just 8 in ESV) in vv. 15–19. This broadens the focus from a family to a nation, appropriate for the settlement in Seir (Hamilton 1995, 396; Willis 1979, 378).

<sup>1</sup> It’s also conceivable that earlier references to Esau moving to Edom foreshadow the chronological events and are included to make a point about the relationship strains between the brothers, with the references to the resettlement in Edom included more for the benefit of the later readers of the text (cf. 32.3; 33.12ff.; and Esau’s selection of wives while in Canaan in 28.8).

<sup>2</sup> With the Israelite genealogies likely more concerned with political or geographical realignments (Wilson 1992, 931).

16. Verses 20–30 shift the focus to the genealogies of the pre-Edomite inhabitants of the region south of the Dead Sea, the “Horites” (cf. Deut 2.12, 22).
- Likely, these were Hurrians who had migrated into the district from Mesopotamia over a period of several years (Willis 1979, 378).
  - Apparently, the descendants of Esau overran and intermarried with them (cf. the references to Zibeon and Anah in Gen 36.2. 14, 18, 20, 24–25, 29).
17. Verses 31–39 shift the focus from before the Edomites dispossessed Seir to afterward, naming “the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites” (v. 31; cf. 1 Chron 1.43).
- Does this mean the kings in Edom before any Israelite king in Israel (Saul), or the Edomite kings before any Israelite king reigned over the Edomites (David)? (Cf. NET, Harris 2019, 36.31; NIV)<sup>3</sup>
    - Regardless, v. 31 had to have been written after Saul became king in Israel, and, if the latter, it cannot be earlier than David’s time (cf. 2 Sam 8.13–14; 1 Kings 11.14–17) (Willis 1979, 379).
  - Note that this is not a dynasty, but kings from different city-states in Edom;<sup>4</sup> some have noticed that this resembles the Israelite judges more than their kings (Willis 1979, 379).

### *Takeaways*

18. Esau matters.
- Throughout the narrative, the text handles Esau with care and respect.
    - We feel with him (without justifying him) at the birthright indecent, and especially when Jacob deceives Isaac to wrest the blessing from him (Gen 27).
    - He is presented nobly in the reconciliation narrative in chapter 33.
    - There is no indication of acrimony or stigma attached to Esau in 36.7 over Isaac’s property.
    - Even when Esau is criticized (26.34–35), he is later shown to be trying to make amends (28.6–9) (Bruggemann 1982, 285).
  - Problems will occur between the brothers’ descendants (cf. Num 20.14–21; 1 Sam 14.47; 1 Kings 11.14–17) and God’s prophets will pronounce judgment on Edom (cf. Jer 49.7ff; Ezek 24.12–14; Amos 1.12; Obad 9; Mal 1–2), but at times Edom is singled out as different from other nations (cf. Deut 23.7).
  - We should also remember that the sons of Jacob had their failures, too.
19. Esau was also a recipient of God’s promises, becoming a nation in his own right (Gen 27.3); he thus serves as another reminder of God’s concern for all families of the earth (cf. Gen 12.3).
- That his genealogy is included in the text (cf. 1 Chron 1.34–54) illustrates the Bible’s interest in the development and history of other nations (Hamilton 1995, 391).
  - The text thus encourages us to “recognize the large vision of Genesis” (Bruggemann 1982, 286); the Edomites are among the “other sheep that are not of this fold” (John 10.16). Israel is chosen and especially blessed (Deut 7.6–8), but Esau is also recognized as part of God’s concern:
    - “You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a sojourner in his land. Children born to them in the third generation may enter the assembly of the LORD” (Deut 23.7–8).

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<sup>3</sup> The text note in the NET reads, “Or perhaps “before any Israelite king ruled over [them].” The NIV translates, “These were the kings who reigned in Edom before any Israelite king reigned.”

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton (1995, 400) notes that, if this is the case, this is the only non-dynastic monarchy in the national states of the ancient Near East, with the exception of Saul’s election, in which no son was designated to succeed him.

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