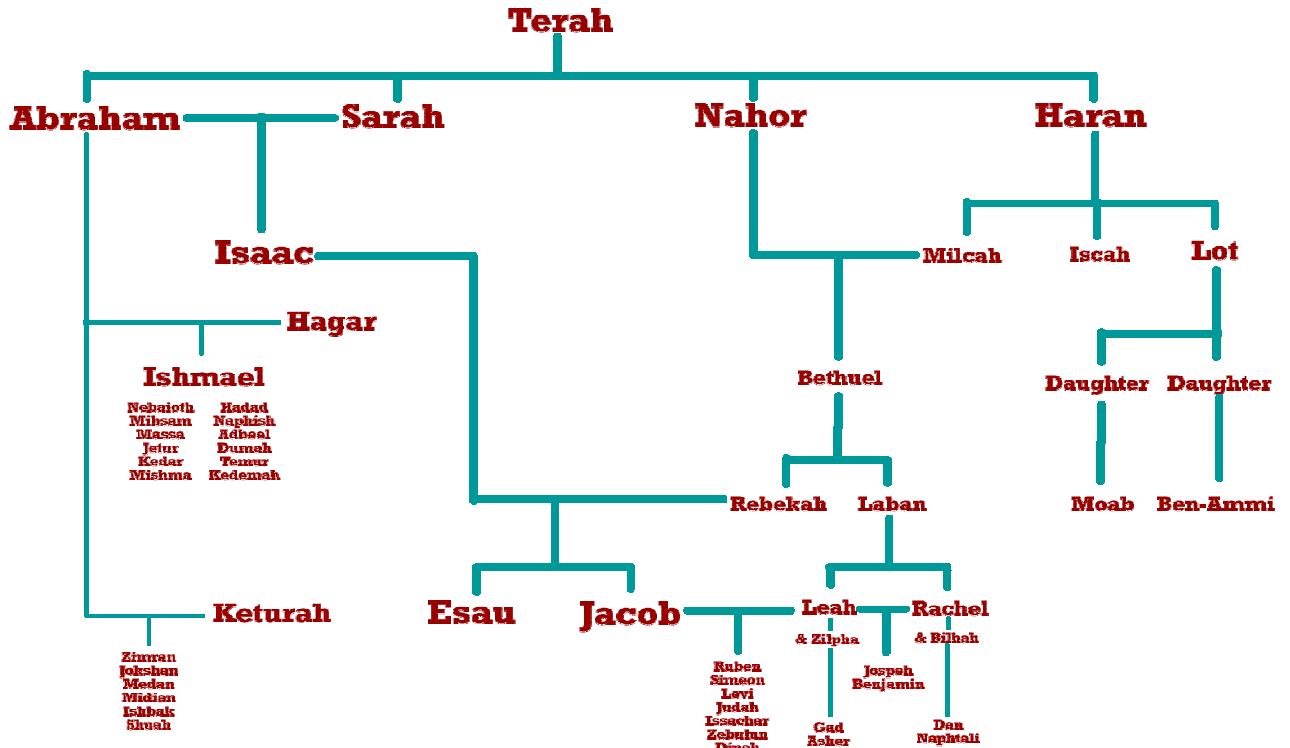


Genealogy of Terah



Unpacking Jacob
 The nature of Jacob
 The promises to Jacob
 The descent of Jacob

It is significant that the author of Genesis spends ten whole chapters on Jacob. He only spent 11 chapters describing the period from creation to the flood to the tower of Babel. He spends 14 chapters on Abraham (12-25). Jacob's life began with a struggle even before he is born. As a twin in Rebekah's womb with Esau, he jostled for position and was born grasping his brother's heel. Jacob's name is translated as "he deceives" (Genesis 25:26). When his mother, Rebekah, asked God during her pregnancy what was happening to her, God told her that there were two nations within her womb who would become divided. One would be stronger than the other, and the older would serve the younger (Genesis 25:23).

Esau, being a hunter, was his father's favorite as Isaac loved the wild game Esau brought home, while Jacob was favored by his mother (Genesis 25:28). This destructive favoritism would follow the family into the next generation, most notably with Jacob's son Joseph. Jacob's messed up family life helped shape him into being a manipulative person. Jacob's style of relating was one of manipulating others. He tried to control life and depended on himself, not God.

In Chapter 25 Jacob blackmails his bother for the family birthright, all for a bowl of stew (“Esau despised his birthright.”). Then, when Isaac was old and his eyesight faded, he realized he was near to his death and made arrangements with Esau to pass on to him the blessings due to the firstborn son (Genesis 27:1-4). On hearing this, Rebekah hatches a plan to deceive Isaac into blessing Jacob instead. Thus, Jacob received his father’s blessing, and as Esau discovered, this was the second time he had been deceived by his brother (Genesis 27:36). Esau vowed he would kill Jacob for this as soon as the period of mourning was over for his father’s death (vs. 41). If we keep going we will see in Genesis 28 Jacob has a dream or vision of angels ascending and descending on a ladder (Jacob’s ladder) and then he goes into hiding with his mom’s family to avoid being killed by his brother. His father-in-law cheats Jacob and Jacob ends up with two wives and two mistresses. Jacob is a bit of a rascal and not someone you want as a role model for your 12 year old son I wouldn’t think.

[Editorial – on God using dysfunctional people and families to do his purposes on earth.]

The Promises to Jacob at Bethel

Genesis 28:14

And your seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in you and in your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Genesis 28:20

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.”

The Descendants of Jacob: Jacob has twelve sons with his two wives, Leah and Rachel and each of their handmaids, Zilpha and Biliah. These sons (will become the chosen people, the family of Jacob or as we know it through history, the nation of Israel). These are the 12 son’s names: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph and Benjamin.

I think that this is enough to get us up to speed and I tell you all that so that we can see the importance of this story in the context of God’s promises and intentions for the saving of humanity. The next story is dripping with meaning for us.

Genesis 32:22-32

²² The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. ²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” ²⁷ And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel (Hebrew variant of Peniel), limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew

of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

Jacob sends his family ahead to face Esau alone. Maybe he intended to spend the night in prayer before meeting Esau. Maybe he was scared. At any rate the narrative goes to great lengths to isolate Jacob on one side of the river. The question of his plans is irrelevant to the story. The important point is that he was alone. And he gets into a fist fight of sorts.

The Fight

Genesis 32:24-25 And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.



Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli (Il Morazzone), Jacob Wrestling the Angel, c. 1610

Only four sentences in the Hebrew are dedicated to this 'fight' - no details are given, for the fight is just the preamble to the most important part—that is the dialogue and the transaction between Jacob and his adversary. Yet the fight was real and physical. The verb used to describe the wrestling is rare, being found only here in verse 24 and in verse 25. Since the word is “dust,” it perhaps carries the idea of “get dusty” in wrestling.

At this point we know this adversary simply as ‘a man.’ Jacob perceived only that a male antagonist was closing in on him. As we read the account we learn his identity as Jacob did—by his words and actions. And the time of the match is significant. The struggle was at night. Darkness concealed the adversary’s identity. The fact that he wished to be gone by daylight shows that he planned the night visit. As it turned out, had the assailant come in the daytime, Jacob would have recognized the man’s divine authority and Jacob might have tried his old tricks. God does the trickery this time. The turning point of the all night bout is after the man “touched” Jacob. The effect of this is clear. The assailant was always more than a match for Jacob. The one who might be expected to take advantage of the other was himself crippled by a supernatural blow from his assailant. Jacob now came against something for which he was totally unprepared.

[Wrestling example of father and son]

Jacob had spent his entire life wrestling with God, resisting Him, making deals with him, trying to cheat Him and ignoring Him. He wanted to be blessed, but on his own terms. During this all night battle of wills, Jacob’s will is finally broken. He gave up his tantrum and simply said “I am ready for your blessing now.”

The Blessing

Gen 32:26-28

²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

The true nature of the nameless adversary began to dawn on him as the physical darkness began to lift. He is the One who has power over the affairs of men! Jacob had been transformed from a devious fighter into a forthright and resolute man. He held on for a blessing. He said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (v. 26). God wanted to bless Jacob. He wanted to save the world through his ancestors. But God had to know that Jacob wanted it. God wanted Jacob to know that Jacob wanted it. God wanted Jacob to know that he knows that he knows who His God is. He was finally ready for the divine blessing so long promised by God, not settling for the stolen one he took from Isaac in his brother Esau's place.

The blessing for which Jacob pleaded finds expression in a changed name. The assailant first asked the patriarch, "What is your name?" Of course God knows his name, it is a rhetorical question. The object was to contrast the old name with the new. When one remembers the significance of names, the point becomes clear: a well-established nature, a fixed pattern of life must be turned back radically! In giving his name, Jacob had to reveal his nature. Here the "heel-catcher" was caught and had to identify his true nature before he could be blessed.

"And he said, 'Not Jacob shall your name be called from now on, but Israel, for you have fought with God and man and have prevailed.' This renaming of Jacob is an assertion of the assailant's authority to impart a new life and new status (cf. 2 Kings 23:34; 24:17).

What is the meaning of the name "Israel"? Both Genesis 32:28 and Hosea 12:3 interpret the meaning of the name with a verb "to fight." "The meaning of 'Israel' would then be defined as "God contends."

Beth-el: House of God

Peni-el: Face of God

Isra-el: Strives with God or God fights for me

So the narrative signifies that the name in Hebrew means "God fights." One writer said Jacob's new name Israel is as if to say "God Rules." It is saying - with God's help Israel would fight the entire world and God almighty would bless Him.

The Transformation

Gen 32:29-30

²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

The impact of the encounter was life changing for Jacob. Seeing God was something no man survived. Thankfully God came in the dark so His face was hid, but this appearance of the “man” guaranteed deliverance for the patriarch. God had come as close to Jacob as was imaginable. Jacob exclaimed, “I have seen God face to face and I have been delivered”. His prayer for deliverance (vv. 9–12) was answered by God in this face-to-face encounter and blessing. Meeting God “face to face” meant that he could now look Esau directly in the eye. Instead of sending his family ahead, Jacob now runs ahead to humbly meet his brother and to take his punishment like a man.

Every good story has an epilogue. This is where the writer enters in and tells the fate of the characters, the “So what?” or “How did it really end?”

Epilogue

The truth is, Jacob’s life was a train wreck. Born with the name ‘cheater,’ he lived by deception and self-effort. His relationships with his father and mother were unhealthy and he envied and feared his brother. He knew God, or at least his dad and grandpa did, but God was a back burner relationship. He had treated God as an adversary and so God became one in the middle of a lonely night. Jacob prepared to meet Esau, whom he had deceived, but the patriarch had to meet God first. God broke Jacob’s strength before blessing him with the promise of real strength.

Finally, what Jacob had surmised for the past 20 years now dawned on him—he was in the hands of the One against whom it is useless to struggle. Now crippled in his natural strength he became bold in faith. His faith became a show of faith and courage. Jacob won a blessing that changed his name and changed his life.

What is the ‘Epilogue’ in your life story?

Prayer Invitation

We are all striving, longing to deal with our pasts and to make sense of today. Only you God can do that for me. Until I see things from your perspective, life here will have only confusion.

- I was lost but now I am found
- I was blind but now I see
- I was in the dark and now I see the light
- I was a slave but now I am free
- I was dead but now I live

Discussion Questions

What is your impression of Jacob? It was God’s plan all along to bless the second born child of Isaac and Rebekah? Does that seem fair? As Jacob grows do you suspect you would have been his friend?

What is your impression of Esau? In your opinion, is he the over compliant first born and Jacob the under-compliant second born? Or is Esau more to blame for his life circumstances by his own choices?

What do you think of this family system of Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Esau? Have you ever met a family with the kind of issues that this family faces?

Dave talked about how all of us wrestle with life. What kinds of things do you regularly wrestle with? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us not to worry about things like clothes. Is that an unreal expectation?

Have you ever wrestled with God? How did that turn out? Dave spoke of a father holding his son or daughter all wrapped up in his arms tightly till their tantrum was over? Has God ever done that to you . . . how so?

Or does everything God says to you or expects from you make sense or come easy? Tell us about that. Do you think that the longer you live in Christ, a life of obedience to Him is easier?