

# Esau

E'sau (Hebrews *Esav'*, אֶשָׁע, *hairy* [see [Ge 25:25](#); his surname EDOM was given him from the *red* pottage, [Ge 25:30](#)]; Sept. and N.T. Ἔσαῦ), the eldest son of "Isaac, Abraham's son" ([Ge 25:19](#)) by Rebekah, "the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian, of Padanaram, the sister to Laban the Syrian." The marriage remaining for some time (about 19 years; comp. [Ge 25:20,26](#)) unproductive, Isaac entreated Jehovah, and Rebekah became pregnant. Led by peculiar feelings "to inquire of Jehovah," she was informed that she should give birth to twins, whose fate would be as diverse as their character, and, what in those days was stranger still, that the elder should serve the younger. On occasion of her delivery, the child that was born first was "red, all over like a hairy garment; and they called his name Esau." Immediately afterwards Jacob was born. B.C. 2004. This was not the only remarkable circumstance connected with the birth of the infant. Even in the womb the twin brothers struggled together ([Ge 25:22](#)). Esau was the firstborn; but, as he was issuing into life, Jacob's hand grasped his heel. The bitter enmity of two brothers, and the increasing strife of two great nations, were thus foreshadowed ([Ge 25:23,26](#)). From the special attention drawn to his hairy appearance, one would suppose that the name Esau (אֶשָׁע), or Esav, was intended to give expression to that quality. So have many learned men in recent as well as former times held, though they are obliged to resort to the Arabic for the etymological explanation; a word very similar in Arabic, signifying *hairy*. The older Hebrew commentators, however, derived it from the verb אָשָׁע, *asuh'*, to *make*, and explained the word as signifying "made," "complete," "full-grown" — viewing the hair as an indication of premature manly vigor. But the Jews of the present day seem more disposed to fall in with the other

derivation (for example, Raphall in loco). The unusual covering of hair, which not only distinguished Esau as a child, but kept pace with his growth, and in mature life gave his skin a kind of goat-like appearance (Ge 27:16), was undoubtedly meant to be indicative of the man; it was a natural sign, coeval with his very birth, by which his parents might descry the future man-as one in whom the animal should greatly preponderate over the moral and spiritual qualities of nature-a character of rough, self-willed, and untamed energy. From the word designating his hairy aspect, *sear* (שָׂעֵר), it is not improbable that the mountain-range which became the possession of his descendants was called Mount *Seir*, though it is also possible that the rough, wooded appearance of the mountain itself may have been the occasion of the name. SEE *SEIR*.

In process of time the different natural endowments of the two boys began to display their effects in dissimilar aptitudes and pursuits. While Jacob was led by his less robust make and quiet disposition to fulfill the duties of a shepherd's life, and pass his days in and around his tent, Esau was impelled, by the ardor and lofty spirit which agitated his bosom, to seek in the toils, adventures, and perils of the chase his occupation and sustenance; and, as is generally the case in natures like his, he gained high repute by his skill and daring, which allied him to the martial exercises of the Canaanites (Ge 25:27). He was, in fact, a thorough *Bedawy*, a "son of the desert" (so we may translate שָׂעֵר, *man of the field*), who delighted to roam free as the wind of heaven, and who was impatient of the restraints of civilized or settled life. His old father, by a caprice of affection not uncommon, loved his willful, vagrant boy; and his keen relish for savory food being gratified by Esau's venison, he liked him all the better for his skill in hunting (Ge 25:28). A hunter's life is of necessity one of uncertainty as well

as hardship; days pass in which the greatest vigilance and the most strenuous exertions may fail even to find, much less capture game (see Thomson, *Land and Book*, 2:399). The hunting tribes of North America often find themselves, after severe and long-continued labor and watching, unprovided with food, and necessitated to a length of abstinence which would be fatal to persons bred in towns or living by the ordinary pursuits of the field. Esau had on one occasion experienced such a disappointment, and, wearied with his unproductive efforts, exhausted for want of sustenance, and despairing of capturing any prey, he was fain to turn his steps to his father's house for succor in his extremity. On reaching home he found his brother enjoying a darefully prepared dish of pottage: attracted by the odor of which, he besought Jacob to allow him to share in the meal. His brother saw the exigency in which Esau was, and determined not to let it pass unimproved. Accordingly, he put a price on the required food. Esau was the elder, and had, in consequence, immunities and privileges which were of high value. The surrender of these to himself Jacob made the condition of his complying with Esau's petition. Urged by the cravings of hunger, alarmed even by the fear of starvation, Esau sold his birthright to his younger brother, confirming the contract by the sanction of an oath. Jacob, having thus got his price, supplied the famishing Esau with needful refreshments. Jacob took advantage of his brother's distress to rob him of that which was dear as life itself to an Eastern patriarch. The birthright not only gave him the headship of the tribe, both spiritual and temporal, and the possession of the great bulk of the family property, but it carried with it the *covenant blessing* ([Ge 27:28-29,36](#); [Heb 12:16-17](#)). Yet, though Esau, under the pressure of temporary suffering, despised his birthright by selling it for a mess of pottage ([Ge 25:34](#)), he afterwards attempted to secure that

which he had deliberately sold ([Ge 27:4,34,38](#); [Heb 12:17](#)). It is evident the whole transaction was public, for it resulted in a new name being given to Esau. He said to Jacob, "Feed me with that same *red* (*אַרְםָה*); therefore was his name called *Edom*" (*אֵדוֹם*; [Ge 25:30](#)). It is worthy of note, however, that this name is seldom applied to Esau himself, though almost universally given to the country he settled in, and to his posterity. *SEE EDOM*. The name "Children of Esau" is in a few cases applied to the Edomites ([De 2:4](#); [Jer 49:8](#); [Ob 1:18](#)), but it is rather a poetical expression.

Arrived now at forty years of age, Esau married two wives in close succession. B.C. cir. 1963. Some unhappy feelings appear to have previously existed in the family; for while Esau was a favorite with his father, in consequence, it appears, of the presents of venison which the youth gave him, Jacob was regarded with special affection by the mother. These partialities, and their natural consequences in unamiable feelings, were increased and exaggerated by Esau's marriage. His wives were both Canaanites, and, on account of their origin, were unacceptable to Isaac and Rebekah. The latter was especially grieved. "I am weary," she said ([Ge 27:46](#)), "of my life, because of the daughters of Heth." Esau thus became alienated from the parental home. Even his father's preference for him may have been injuriously affected. The way was in some measure smoothed for the transference of the coveted birthright to the younger son.

⇒[Bible concordance for ESAU](#).

There is much apparent confusion in the accounts of Esau's wives and their relatives and posterity, as given in [Ge 26:34](#); [Ge 28:9](#); [Ge 36:2-5,430, 40-43](#); [1Ch 1:35-42,51-54](#), which may be adjusted by the following combination:

**(1.)** His first wife was Adah, the daughter of Elon the Hittite ([Ge 36:2](#)), or an aboriginal Canaanite. *SEE HITTITE*. In [Ge](#)

**26:34**, she is incorrectly called Basemath, apparently by confusion with the name of his third wife, although her parentage is correctly given. Her only child was Eliphaz, who was therefore Esau's first-born (**Ge 36:10,15; 1Ch 1:35**).

⇒ See also the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

**(2.)** Esau's second wife was Aholibamah, the daughter of Anah, as all the accounts agree except that in **Ge 26:34**, where, by some error or variation of names, she is called Judith, the daughter of Beeri the Hittite. This Anah, in **Ge 36:2,14**, is called the daughter of Zibeol, but from verses 20, 24, 25, and **1Ch 1:38**, it is evident that he was the son of Zibeon, his brother being Ajah, and his only children a son Dishon and this daughter Aholibamah. We may also remark that this Anah and this Dishon had each an uncle of the same name respectively (**Ge 36:20-21**), and the name Aholibamah belonged subsequently to a chieftain of an Edomitish-tribe (verse 41). Zibeon was a son of Seir, the original settler of the mountain which went by his name. His descendants were properly called Horites (**Ge 36:20,29**), but in verse 20 he is called a Hivite, a term frequently interchangeable for heathenish tribes, as Hittite, in **Ge 26:34**, is twice used for the same purpose. This connection of Esau with the original inhabitants of Idumaea will explain his subsequent removal to that region, and the eventual supremacy of his descendants there. His children by Aholibamah were Jeush, Jaalam, and Korah.

**(3.)** Esau's third wife, taken, not like the former, from foreign families, but from kindred stock, was Basemath (otherwise called Mahalath), sister of Nebajoth and daughter of Ishmael, who bore him Reuel (**Ge 36:3-4; Ge 28:9**). This elucidation substantially agrees with that proposed by Prof. Turner (*Companion to Genesis*, page 323), after Hengstenberg. These sons of Esau rose to the importance of sheiks ("dukes") in

their respective families (those by Ahoe libamah being especially so styled, [Ge 36:18](#)) and this was naturally more emphatically the case with his grandsons ([Ge 36:15-16](#), where the name Korah is an interpolation, and Amalek is reckoned along with the legitimate children of Eliphaz; comp. the parallel account in [1Ch 1:36](#), where the name Timna is in like manner interpolated), who were probably cotemporaneous with the native sheiks mentioned in verses 29, 30, or but little later—the gradual superiority of the Esauites over the Horites appearing from the fact that the heirs of the latter (verses 22-28) are not named with this distinction (comp. verses 20, 21). This double line of chieftains of the respective tribes appears to have continued for a long time; for in the subsequent list of native kings (verses 31-39) and heads of the Edomitish part of the inhabitants (verses 40, 43), coming down in parallel lines to about the time of the Exode (but from what point dated is uncertain), each appears to have regularly succeeded his predecessor, not by hereditary right indeed, but by that species of common consent, founded upon acknowledged pre-eminence, which is to this day recognized in the election of Arab emirs. *SEE [EDOMITE](#).*

The time for the fulfillment of the compact between the brothers has at length arrived. Isaac is "sick unto death." His appetite, as well as his health, having failed, is only to be gratified by provocatives. He desires some savory venison, and gives the requisite instructions to Esau, who accordingly proceeds in quest of it. On this Rebekah begins to feel that the critical time has come. If the hated Hittites are not to enter with her less favored son into possession of the family property, the sale of the birthright (the original idea of which she may have suggested to the "plain man," her son Jacob) must now in some way be confirmed and consummated. One essential particular remained — the father's blessing. If this

should be given to Esau, all hope was gone; for this, like our modern wills, would hand the inheritance and the accompanying headship of the tribe to Esau and his wives. Isaac, however, had lost his sight — indeed, all his senses were, dull and feeble. It was therefore not very difficult to pass off Jacob upon him as Esau. Rebekah takes her measures, and, notwithstanding Jacob's fears, succeeds. Isaac, indeed, is not without suspicion, but a falsehood comes to aid Jacob in his otherwise discreditable personation of Esau. The blessing is pronounced, and thus the coveted property and ascendancy are secured. The affectionate endearments which pass between the deceiver and the abused old blind father stand in painful contrast with the base trickery by which the mother and the son accomplished their end. This episode in the history of Esau and Jacob is still more painful than the former, as it fully brings out those bitter family rivalries and divisions which were all but universal in ancient times, and which are still a disgrace to Eastern society. Esau, however, returns from the field, approaches his decrepid and sightless father, declaring who he is. "And Isaac trembled very exceedingly, and said, Who? where is he that hath taken venison and brought it me, and I have eaten of all before thou camest, and have blessed him? yea, and he shall be blessed." On this Esau becomes agitated, and entreats a blessing for himself — "Bless me, even me also, O my father." Urging this entreaty again and again, even with tears, Isaac at length said to him, "Behold, thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above; and by thy sword shalt thou live, and shalt serve thy brother; and it shall come to pass when thou shalt have the dominion that thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck" (Genesis 27). Thus, deprived forever of his birthright, in virtue of the irrevocable blessing, Esau but too naturally conceived and entertained a hatred of Jacob, and

he vowed vengeance. But, fearing his aged father's patriarchal authority, he secretly congratulated himself: "The days of mourning for my father are at hand, then will I slay my brother Jacob" (Genesis 27). Thus he imagined that by one bloody deed he would regain all that had been taken from him by artifice. But he knew not a mother's watchful care. Not a sinister glance of his eyes, not a hasty expression of his tongue, escaped Rebekah. Words to the above effect which Esau let drop were repeated to his mother, who thereupon felt that the life of her darling son, whose gentle nature and domestic habits had won her heart's affections, was now in imminent peril;

and she prevailed on her younger son to flee to his uncle Laban, who lived in Haran, there to remain until time, with its usual effect, should have mitigated Esau's wrath. B.C. 1927. The sins of both mother and child were visited upon them by a long and painful separation, and all the attendant anxieties and dangers. By a characteristic piece of domestic policy, Rebekah succeeded both in exciting Isaac's anger against Esau, and obtaining his consent to Jacob's departure — "And Rebekah said to Isaac, I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob take a wife such as these, what good shall my life do me?" Her object was attained at once. The blessing was renewed to Jacob, and he received his father's commands to go to Padan-aram ([Ge 27:46](#); [Ge 28:1-5](#).)

When Esau heard that his father had commanded Jacob to take a wife of the daughters of his kinsman Laban, he also resolved to try whether by a new alliance he could propitiate his parents. He accordingly married his cousin Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael ([Ge 28:8-9](#)). This marriage appears to have brought him into connection with the Ishmaelite tribes beyond the valley of Arabah. He soon afterwards established

himself in Mount Seir; still retaining, however, some interest in his father's property in Southern Palestine. It is probable that his own habits, and the idolatrous practices of his wives and rising family, continued to excite and even increase the anger of his parents; and that he, consequently, considered it more prudent to remove his household to a distance. He was residing in Mount Seir when Jacob returned from Padan-aram, and had then become so rich and powerful that the impressions of his brother's early offences seem to have been almost completely effaced. Jacob, however, feared lest his elder brother might intercept him on his way, to take revenge for former injuries. He accordingly sent messengers to Esau, in order, if possible, to disarm his wrath. Esau appears to have announced in reply that he would proceed to meet his returning brother. When, therefore, Jacob was informed that Esau was on his way for this purpose with a band of four hundred men, he was greatly distressed, in fear of that hostility which his conscience told him he had done something to deserve. What, then, must have been his surprise when he saw Esau running with extended arms to greet and embrace him? and Esau "fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept." Jacob had prepared a present for Esau, hoping thus to conciliate his favor; but, with the generous ardor which characterizes, and somewhat of the disinterestedness which adorns, natures like his, Esau at first courteously refused the gift: "I have enough, my brother; keep that thou hast unto thyself" (Genesis 33). But doubts and fears still lurked in the mind of Jacob, and betrayed him into something of his old duplicity; for, while he promises to go to Seir, he carefully declines his brother's escort, and immediately after his departure turns westward across the Jordan (Ge 32:7-8,11; Ge 33:4,12,17). B.C, 1907. The whole of this rencounter serves to show that, if Jacob had acquired

riches, Esau had gained power and influence as well as property; and the homage which is paid to him indirectly and by implication on the part of Jacob, and directly, and in the most marked and respectful manner, by the females and children of Jacob's family, leads to the supposition that he had made himself supreme in the surrounding country of Idumaea. *SEE EDOM.*

It does not appear that the brothers again met until the death of their father, about twenty years afterwards. Mutual interests and mutual fear seem to have constrained them to act honestly, and even generously towards each other at this solemn interview. They united in laying Isaac's body in the cave of Machpelah. B.C. 1883. (See Rost, *Pietas Esavi in parentes*, Bautzen, 1788.) Then "Esau took all his cattle, and all his substance, which he had got in the land of Canaan" — such, doubtless, as his father, with Jacob's consent, had assigned to him — "and went into the country from the face of his brother Jacob" ([Ge 35:29](#); [Ge 36:6](#)). He now saw clearly that the covenant blessing was Jacob's, that God had inalienably allotted the land of Canaan to Jacob's posterity, and that it would be folly to strive against the divine will: He knew also that as Canaan was given to Jacob; Mount Seir was given to himself (comp. [Ge 27:39](#); [Ge 32:3](#); and [De 2:5](#)), and he was therefore desirous, with his increased wealth and power, to enter into full possession of his country, and drive out its old inhabitants ([De 2:12](#)). Another circumstance may have influenced him in leaving Canaan. He "lived by his sword" ([Ge 27:40](#)), and he felt that the rocky fastnesses of Edom would be a safer and more suitable abode for such as by their habits provoked the hostilities of neighboring tribes than the open plains of Southern Palestine. Esau is once more presented to us (Genesis 36) in a genealogical table, in which a long line of illustrious descendants is referred to "Esau, the

father of the Edomites" ([Ge 36:43](#)). The country to which Esau, with his immense family and flocks, retired, was the tract of Mount Seir, from which they gradually dispossessed the thinly scattered population that preceded them in its occupancy, and which they continued to hold for many generations. It was a region entirely suited to the nomadic and roving character of the race. But in regard to the relationship between them and the seed of Israel, the remote descendants of Esau proved less pliant or generous than their progenitor; for from the time that Israel left the land of Egypt, when the two families again came into contact, the posterity of Esau seemed to remember only the old quarrel between the respective heads of the races, and to forget the brotherly reconciliation. A spirit of keenest rivalry and spite characterized their procedure towards Israel; through many a bloody conflict they strove to regain the ascendancy which the decree of heaven had destined in the other direction; and in the times of Israel's backsliding and weakness they showed themselves ever ready, according to the prophetic word of Isaac, "to break his yoke from off their neck," and to drive the evil to the uttermost. But it was a fruitless struggle; the purpose of Heaven stood fast; the dominion remained with the house of Jacob; and in the course of the Maccabean wars the children of Esau finally lost their independent existence, and became substantially merged in the house of Israel. The decree of Heaven, as we have said, had so fixed it; but that decree did not realize itself arbitrarily; the preference for Israel and his seed was no senseless favoritism; from the first the qualities were there which inevitably carried along with them the superiority in might and blessing; while, on the other hand, in Esau's carnalism, sensuality, godlessness, the destiny of his race was already indicated. SEE [IDUMAEA](#).  
If the historical outline now given is supported by the

scriptural narrative, the character of Esau has not ordinarily received justice at the hands of theologians. The injurious impression against him may be traced back to a very ancient period. The Targum of Jonathan (at [Ge 25:34](#)) sanctioned and spread, if it did not originate, the misjudgment by unwarrantable additions to the account given in Genesis. The reason, it states, why Esau did not at once slay his brother was lest, as happened in the case of Cain and Abel, another man-child might be born, and thus he should still be deprived of his inheritance; he therefore resolved to wait till the death of Isaac, when the murder of Jacob would leave him in safe and undisputed possession. Representations made in the Talmud are of a similar tendency (Otho, *Lex. Rabb.* Page 207; Wetstein, *N.T.* 2:437; comp. Philo, *Opp.* 1:551; 2:441, 675). The Arabians likewise commemorate him (Hottinger, *Hist. Orient.* page 53 sq.). Cedrenius gives (*Hist. Eccl.* page 34) the story of his having been killed by an arrow discharged by Jacob. The fathers of the Church, particularly Augustine, regard Esau as the representative of the damned, while they admire Jacob as that of the elect (see Stempel, *De salute Esavi*, Jena, 1678), basing these views upon an erroneous interpretation of such passages as [Ro 12:16](#); [Ro 9:13](#). (Shuckford's *Connections*, 2:174; Clarke's *Comment.* on [Ge 27](#); [Ge 35](#); Kitto's *Daily Illustr.* in loc.; Niemeyer, *Charakt.* 2:153 sq.; Baumgarten, *Allg. Welthist.* 2:50 sq.; Bauer, *Hebr. Gesch.* 1:147; Hochheimer, *Im Orient.* 1841, No. 35; Sherlock, *Works*, 5; Dupin, *Nouv. Bibl.* 4; Evans, *Script. Biog.* 1; Roberts, *Sermons*, page 134; Puckle, *Sermons*, 1:96; Simeon, *Works*, 1:211; Alcock, *Apology for Esau*, Plymouth, 1791; Townsend, *Sermons* [1849], page 253; Goodwin, *Parish Sermons*, 2:1.) **SEE JACOB.**

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