

Today's Old Testament lesson is about a new generation—the second generation—of the covenant God made with human-kind. And doesn't this "new generation" lesson sound familiar? Haven't we heard this story line somewhere before? Recently? Maybe not these exact people, but the story line?

Isaac, the patriarch of the second covenant generation, like his father before him, was married to a relative. His father Abraham had married his half-sister Sarah. Isaac had married his cousin Rebekah, the granddaughter of his father's brother. (Technically, his first cousin once removed.)

Like his father, Isaac loved his wife. We heard this in last Sunday's lesson. And like his parents' marriage, Isaac's and Rebekah's was absent of children for a long time. Our lesson today says that Rebekah was "barren." (The Bible always blamed the woman for being childless.)

Isaac and Rebekah were married 19 years before Rebekah became pregnant. The explanation given is that Isaac "prayed to the Lord," in an ongoing sense. So, like his father Abraham, Isaac was a man who worshiped the one true God, had a relationship with and was faithful to the God of the Covenant.

But, unlike his father, Isaac is something of a blank slate, so to speak. We can project onto Isaac whatever we wish to emphasize. The Bible and even the Koran call Isaac "righteous." On the other hand, I once heard a sermon warning people of the dysfunction that would happen in their families if men were as low-key as Isaac and their wives as dominant as Rebekah. The dysfunction being warned against was that the boys who hunted would lose out to boys who cooked.

Make no mistake, though, Rebekah WAS the main actor in this story. If the Lord had visited Rebekah and Isaac under the Oaks at Mamre—as he had visited Abraham and Sarah—*Rebekah* is the one who would have been running around arranging hospitality for the strangers while her husband lingered in his tent. That's MY theory, anyway. And Rebekah wouldn't have laughed, either. If the Lord or an angel of the Lord had told Rebekah that she, 20 years barren, would have



children, she would have moved heaven and earth to get pregnant. Invented *in vitro* 4,000 years ago, whatever was needed!

And this new covenant generational surely would have learned from the first generation's mistakes. Both the Bible and the Koran tell of a warm, continuing relationship between the half-brothers Ishmael and Isaac. But Ish had been banished and was the patriarch of another people. Rebekah would not have wanted Isaac to have fathered a son by someone else to compete with the child the Lord had promised to give Isaac. If we know anything at all about Rebekah, surely we can safely guess THAT!

But did you notice that both Rebekah and Isaac had a relationship with God? Isaac prayed to the Lord and Rebekah "inquired of the Lord." And God responded. Gave Rebekah everything Isaac had asked for, everything SHE had asked for, and then some. Not just one child, but twins.

And then God tested Rebekah with a statement of future fact: One will be strong. But the other will have power. And God's favor would be with the younger.

You KNOW this story: Rebekah had twins. The older was red and hairy. They named him Esau, meaning "rough and hairy." The younger, Jacob's name means "heel holder" because he apparently tried to climb over Esau to get out first. But because of God's prophecy to Rebekah, this is one time when being born second was actually better than having been born first.

And sure enough, the seconds-older Esau turned out to be the more powerful of the two, a man's man, the son Dad loved best. But Jake was more of a Momma's boy. And in this way Rebekah and Isaac failed THEIR children, as surely as the first generation of the covenant had failed theirs before them.

Now I know you will ask, "Didn't GOD himself favor one of Isaac's sons over the other?" I'll bet some of you could even point to verses throughout the Bible where God declared that he HATED Esau.

We don't like the idea that God has favorites. In the opening verses of the book of Malachi for instance, when the Lord said, "I have loved you," the prophet dared to question God by pointing out that Esau was Jacob's brother. In other words, "If you REALLY love us, God, why didn't you love Esau as much as you loved Jacob?" God's answer was something like, "I choose whom I choose."

We would like to find a logical reason, though, to explain God's preference, God's choice. That's when we notice that the people, the nation, that Esau became the father of was called Edom, a small nation neighboring Israel to the south whose name means "red" and also "still," as in "not singing the praises of the Lord." And we notice that Esau married two Hittite women and nowhere is reported as "praying to the Lord."

All of that came later, though. In today's lesson we just get the beginning of the story. We see that Jacob is sneaky and in our human way of thinking we wonder why God has chosen him—before he was even born—to be the one through whom God's promise to us would descend. Jacob's fixation on the prize: the birthright (and later the blessing) tell us that Jacob knew what was really valuable in a way that his brother Esau did not. What Jacob had to learn at this point was to seek the giver of the prize, not just the prize itself.

As for Esau, we have our evaluation backwards, really. God knew before Esau was even born what he would choose in his life, that he would live for the moment. Esau chose neither what was of true value, a relationship with the prize-giver, the author of life itself.

What about us? Apparently WE know what's truly valuable in life, but will the next new generation? God keeps overturning the expected order of things. He works through those who are barren. He gives the birthright to surprising people who don't deserve God's favor and reminds us when we object that God isn't bound by our sense of logic and fairness.