

Parashat Tol'dot (תולדות)

Genesis 25:19 – 28:9

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A. Zangwill

Lightning Summary

Rebekah bears twins—Esau and then Jacob. Isaac favors Esau; Rebekah favors Jacob. Esau sells his birthright to Jacob. Rebekah dresses Jacob like Esau to deceive Isaac and gain his first-born blessing for Jacob. Jacob flees to avoid Esau's wrath.



Jacob and Esau (2014)

Andrei Mironov

The rabbis reserve the epithet *ha-rasha* (evil one) for a few select bad guys:

- Pharaoh – Ruler of Egypt who enslaved the Israelites.
- Balaam – Non-Israelite prophet hired by the King of Moab to curse the Israelites.
- Nebuchadnezzar – King of Babylonia who destroyed the First Temple.
- Haman – Persian minister who plotted the extermination of the Jews.
- Titus – Roman general who destroyed the Second Temple.
- Esau – Older brother of Jacob.

Which of these is not like the others?

*When Rebekah's time to give birth was at hand, **there were twins in her womb.** The first one emerged red and hairy [sha'ir] all over; so they named him Esau. Then his brother emerged, holding on to Esau's heel [a'kev]; they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.*

***When the boys grew up,** Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob became a mild man, raising livestock. Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob.*

*Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the open, famished. And Esau said to Jacob, "**Give me that red** [a'dom] **stuff** for I am famished"—which is why he was named Edom.*

*Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." And Esau said, "I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?" But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. **Thus did Esau spurn the birthright.***

ESAU

Commentary on Genesis

Rashi

There were twins in her womb. One was righteous and the other wicked.

When the boys grew up. When they were young, they could not be distinguished by their deeds, but when they reached the age of thirteen, Jacob went to houses of study and Esau went to shrines of idolatry.

Give me that red stuff. Lentils for mourning. On that very day, Abraham died so he would not see his grandson Esau take the path of evil. Because of Esau, the life of Abraham was cut short by five years—for Isaac lived 180 years and Abraham only 175 years.

Thus did Esau spurn the birthright. Scripture attests to Esau's wickedness; he despised bringing offerings to the Holy One.

In Praise of Esau (2023)

Lisa Fredman

Why does Rashi (1040 – 1105 CE) consistently portray Esau in the worst possible light?

The moral character of the Jewish people was a sensitive issue to medieval rabbis who were often put on the defensive by Christian polemicists. Thus, a Dominican friar giving testimony against a Jew claimed

Your father Jacob was a thief; there has been no consumer of usury to equal him, for he purchased his birthright, which was worth a thousand coins for a single pot of lentils worth half a coin.

Under such circumstances, Rashi was highly motivated to defend the patriarch against charges of falsehood and trickery. An unbiased reading of the text makes this a difficult task. Therefore, Rashi chose to highlight the wickedness of Esau and minimize his redeeming qualities. The greater Esau's depravity, the less problematic Jacob's behavior was. Vilifying Esau deflected attention and criticism from Jacob.

But the vilification of Esau did not start with Rashi

Bava Batra 16b

Rabbi Yoḥanan says: That wicked Esau committed five transgressions on the day that Abraham died: He engaged in sexual intercourse with a betrothed maiden, he killed a person, he denied the principle of God's existence, he denied resurrection of the dead, and he despised the birthright. The Gemara cites proof for each of these charges

Genesis Rabbah 100:8

Bury me with my ancestors. Jacob died and his sons took him to the cave of Machpelah to lie with his ancestors. But Esau appeared and sought to prevent Jacob's burial; he wanted the remaining space in the cave for himself. Hushim, son of Dan, happened to be standing nearby. He seized a club and struck Esau on the head so hard that his eyes fell out of their sockets and dropped at Jacob's feet. At that, Jacob opened his eyes and smiled. Hence scripture's assurance that "the righteous man will rejoice when he seeks revenge; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked."

But the vilification of Esau did not end with Rashi

Chassidic Siddur (18th century)

Remember him, the man Esau who caused Abraham the patriarch to expire before his time.

Remember him, who condemned his brother's favor, scorning him when he was paying last respects to his grandfather.

Remember him, as one who violated a betrothed girl in the field, who shed blood on returning from the field, and who deceived his father Isaac.

Remember him, who turned a deaf ear to exhortation, who despised his birthright for the sake of a cup of indignation, who cast off God's yoke and effaced the sin of the covenant.

Remember him, the man who by his insolence and crookedness darkened the light of his father with the smoke of idolatrous sacrifice and cruelly harbored revenge against his brother.

Remember him, who prostituted himself like a woman; whose pride of heart provoked him to such depravity.

Remember him, the seed of evildoers, loathsome and tainted, who set out to destroy Jacob with a shout of exaltation, arrogantly hiding a net to snare and destroy his brother.

Commentary on Tol'dot (2025)

Aish.com

Rabbi Ari D. Kahn

The description of Esau at birth, all red, probably covered with blood, seems to foreshadow the subsequent scene when Esau comes in covered in blood from the field ravenous after a day of hunting. The scene has premonitions of death. Indeed, Abraham's premature death on that day unleashed within Esau a murderous rage, a desire to worship pagan gods and a preoccupation with death. He came away from that experience a mean-spirited misanthrope dedicated to spreading his disease to all who crossed his path.

Commentary on Tol'dot (2025)

Chabad.org

Rabbi Yossi Ives

When he was forty, Esau married two Hittite women. Later, he learned that his choice of non-Israelite women displeased his father. This led him to take one of Abraham's granddaughters as his third wife. Was this a sincere effort to put things right? No. Rashi points out that Esau spent the entire forty years before his first marriages kidnapping wives from their husbands and violating them. He had successfully hidden this fact from his parents and his new marriage was a ruse to keep them thinking he was a good person. In modern parlance, we would call this a "deep fake."

EDOM

Genesis 36: 6-8

The possessions of Esau and Jacob were too many for them to dwell together . . . the land could not support both of their livestock. . . So Esau went to another land and settled in the hill country of Seir—Esau being Edom.



Esau and Amalek in second temple apocalyptic literature (2022)

Adam T. Strater

Edom was a weak nation just southeast of the southern kingdom of Judah. During First Temple times, it was often controlled by its neighbors and only achieved lasting independence after Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. An Israelite narrative soon developed that Edom had betrayed its northern neighbors for profit.

That negative opinion only deepened when Babylonia replaced Assyria as the dominant power in the region, conquered Judah, and destroyed Solomon's Temple. The Edomites took advantage of the situation by occupying land formerly held by Judah, but they do not seem to have played any direct role in the sack of Jerusalem or the burning of Solomon's Temple.

Be that as it may, the Hebrew bible consistently depicts Edom as duplicitous and violent. It paints Esau with the same brush when it characterizes all Edomites as "descendants of Esau" and identifies Amalek as Esau's grandson through his son's mistress. In Exodus, Amalek becomes Israel's merciless and implacable enemy.

By associating Esau with Edom and Amalek, Second Temple writers made Esau more wicked retroactively. Despite the fact that Genesis itself makes no value judgments about either Esau or Jacob, later interpreters could not think of Esau without attributing to him the cruelty and baseness of the Amalekites.

Psalm 137:7

Remember the cry of the Edomites on the day Jerusalem fell, how they said “Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundation!”

Obadiah 1:18

The house of Jacob shall be a fire and the house of Joseph shall be a flame. They shall burn and consume the house of Esau, and there shall be no survivors, for the LORD has spoken.

Malachi 1:2

The LORD says, “I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.” If Edom says, “We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins,” the LORD says, “I will tear it down.”

Sha’arei Orah (Kaballah *ca.* 1280 CE)

The LORD gave Mount Seir in Edom to Esau as an inheritance because it was impure. It was impure because goat demons (*seirim*) stray there and call out to their fellows “Esau is a hairy (*sha’ir*) man.” The goat-demons are Esau’s portion and inheritance because they are the lowest of creatures and Esau is the lowest of men.

ROME

Rome and the rabbis (2015)

Joshua Blachorsky

Rome entered Jewish history when the declining Hasmonean Dynasty (141 – 37 BCE) became a Roman client state with Herod as its vassal king. There was relative peace for 100 years until a revolt in 66 CE led the Romans to raze Jerusalem and destroy the Second Temple. The subsequent Bar-Kokhba revolt (132-136 CE) was put down similarly and the Emperor Hadrian banned most Jewish religious practice. Rabbi Akiva famously defied this order and was executed for doing so.

Genesis Rabbah 65:21

The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau. Rabbi Judah Illai said, my teacher Rabbi Akiva said, “the voice of Jacob cries out at what the hands of Esau did to him.” Rabbi Yohana said: Jacob cried out because the emperor Hadrian killed eight hundred million people in Beitar.

The rabbinic reaction to Roman rule in 3rd century Palestine (1992)

Louis H. Feldman

Hadrian’s edicts were reversed by his successors. As a result, later rabbinic comments about Rome are notable for their ambivalence, ranging from the fiercest condemnation to the most lavish praise. Thus, Rabbi Eleazar ben Yose explained the unfathomable wickedness of Rome by deriving the word *senator* from the first letters of the Hebrew words *sone* (one who hates) and *noter* (one who bears ill-will). By contrast, the Talmud quotes Rabbi Yehuda: “How admirable are the deeds of Rome. They have built markets, bridges, and bath houses.”

Life of Brian (1979)

Monty Python

“What have the Romans ever done for us?”

“The aqueduct?”

“Oh yeah, they did give us that.”

“And sanitation. Do you remember how awful that used to be?”

“OK. I’ll grant you that the aqueduct and sanitation are two things the Romans have done for us.”

“How about the roads?”

“Well obviously, the roads go without saying.”

“Irrigation? Medicine? Education?”

“OK. Fair enough.”

“And the wine. And the public baths. And the fact that it’s safe to walk the streets at night.”

“Alright. Apart from the aqueduct, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, and public safety, what have the Romans done for us?”

“Brought peace?”

“Oh shut up!”

CHRISTIANITY

The Legends of the Jews (1925)

Louis Ginzberg

The authors of late 1st and 2nd century CE midrashim were cautious and very often substituted the names Edom, Seir, and Esau for Rome. This practice is very old and was probably began during the reign of Herod, who ruled at the pleasure of the Romans. When Rome adopted Christianity, the same appellations were transferred to the Christians and Christianity.

Esau as a Symbol in Early Medieval Thought (1967)

Gerson D. Cohen

The Jew entered the medieval world with a fully developed view of Rome that had been crystallized over the five centuries when the Roman Empire dominated the Mediterranean world. The official establishment of the Christian Church as the religion of the Empire in 380 CE made no discernible impression on the Jews because by that time, the chasm between Judaism and Christianity had grown so deep and wide that the realignment of the machinery of state with the Church was of no greater import than the succession of one emperor by another. To the Jew, it was a shift from one idolatry to another, one more aggressive and openly hostile, but not a change in kind. Thus, it required no effort on the part of the rabbis to extend their dislike of Rome to the Church. Esau might exchange his Roman eagle for the Christian cross, but he was Esau nonetheless, thereby lengthening the equivalence chain from Rome = Edom = Esau to

Church = Rome = Edom = Esau

Rashi (2012)

Avraham Grossman

Jewish-Christian polemic reached one of its critical points at the end of the 11th century. Rashi was a witness to the First Crusade (1096-1099 CE) where Christian soldiers, charged with religious fervor, rampaged through Jewish communities on their way to Jerusalem. In France and Germany, there were frequent public “disputations” where Christian scholars offered anti-Jewish interpretations of scripture. Jewish sages felt compelled to participate and refute them to stymie their aim to convert Jews to Christianity. These events profoundly affected Rashi.



woodcut of Rashi (1590)

A pervasive feature of Rashi’s *Commentary on the Torah* is its unrelenting hostility to Esau. This hostility is best understood as an expression of Rashi’s hostility to the Church and Esau became the pre-eminent symbol of Christianity to Jews of that time. From the wealth of sources available to him, Rashi consistently selected material that accused Esau of acts the Jewish tradition regarded as cardinal sins, including idolatry, illicit sexual relations, and bloodshed. Indeed, he seeks out negative elements in Esau’s character and actions even when there is no linguistic or contextual basis for them. Rashi’s attitude about Esau became normative for rabbis and persists to this day.