

# Children of the Bible

## Week 1



### Brothers in conflict: Genesis and the Patriarchs

Although treated as history by many, the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures is really a telling of Hebrew myths of origin and explanations about why things are the way they are. In this sense using 'myth' as an anthropological term, not the common definition of it being false.

The stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs and their children established who had the right to the land and how they were favoured by God. The challenge comes when descendants of these original children claim the territory for themselves while excluding any other culture or people. The first sibling relationship, Ismael and Issac, is the spiritual basis for much of the modern difficulty between Muslims and Jews.

The three sets of brother we will look at in this study, Ishmael & Issac, Esau & Jacob, and Joseph & his eleven brothers. Together they set the stage for what would become the Hebrew people, the only ancient people who are still a functioning culture and society today, most notably as the Jewish tradition.

#### ISMAEL

Patriarch of the Arab people, son of Abraham and Hagar

#### ISSAC

Patriarch of the Hebrew people, son of Abraham and Sarah

#### ESAU

Patriarch of the Edomites, son of Issac and Rebecca

#### JACOB

Patriarch of the Hebrew people, son of Issac and Rebecca

#### JOSEPH

Patriarch who led his people into slavery in land of Egypt

# Ishmael

Genesis 16, 17:18, 20, 23-27, 21:9-21

The name “Ishmael” means “God hears”. This name was given to Hagar before Ishmael was born, after she had run away from Sarah’s cruelty and God was sending her back to continue being Sarah’s slave.

Very little is mentioned about Ishmael in the Bible. His mother Hagar, is the one with the majority of the story, and in it she is the second woman to speak with God after Eve. In her conversation with God, God gives the promise that her son will have many descendants and his behaviour will include fighting with everyone around him.

In chapter 17 we read that Ishmael was circumcised at the same time Abraham was circumcised, and was 13 at the time. God gives the same promise to Abraham as to Hagar, that Ismael will grow and have countless descendants, including the “12 princes”, who are named in Islamic tradition. These 12 princes became the forebears of regions in modern day Saudi Arabia, much like the 12 tribes of Jacob defined the regions in Israel.

According to Genesis 21, Ismael was 14 when Issac was born, and due to Sarah’s jealousy wanting her son Issac to inherit all of Abraham’s wealth, she forced



Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. Tradition would have insisted that Ishmael, regardless of who his mother was, would inherit Abraham’s wealth with Issac having only a small share.

After God assures Abraham that Ishmael will live and have a great life, Abraham gives into Sarah, and we have the narrative of Hagar laying a dehydrated Ishmael under a bush then praying for help, which comes in the form of a well.

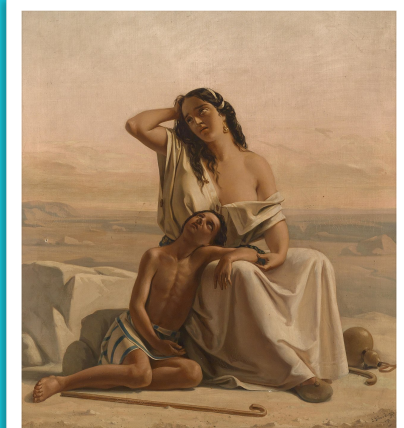
Tradition holds that well was at Zamzam in Mecca, and is still recognized in Islamic tradition today. Islamic tradition further holds that Mohammed had a direct inherited link to Ishmael, which puts Islam completely within the Arab world of the ancient Middle East.

## HAGAR IN ISLAMIC TRADITION

Unlike the tellings of the story of Hagar being the slave as part of the Jewish and Christian narrative, the Qur’an identifies Hagar as Abraham’s second wife, thus on a more equal footing with Sarah.

She is not mentioned by name in the Qur’an, but is described as an Egyptian princess given in marriage when it was believed Abraham and Sarah were cousins.

Rather than cast out, Islamic tradition holds that she was given territory near Mecca, and is honoured during the Hajj.





## Issac

Genesis 17:19, 21,21:1-8, 22:1-19

The name “Issac” means ‘laughter’, since both his mother, Sarah, and his father, Abraham, laughed upon hearing that she was going to have a baby at her advanced age.

Issac has the distinction of being a place holder between the importance of his father and his son, Jacob. He is the only Patriarch who does not have a conversation with God, nor does he have a story where he is the protagonist.

Most of Issac’s story is what is done to him, including the story of how his father, Abraham, was instructed

to sacrifice him on an alter, and was willing to do so. Only a last minute reprieve allowed Issac to be spared.

The story of Issac being sacrificed has been used at length to argue that God is cruel and demands sacrifice from humanity. However, Forensic Archeology has provided a different explanation for this story, an explanation that has been supported by Jewish and Christian historians and theologians.

Throughout the areas of Israel, Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, ancient alters during the Iron Age (c. 1200-500 BCE) have been found that show child sacrifice was, if not common, at least regularly practiced.

Most modern scholars in both Judaism and Christianity agree that the story of Issac’s sacrifice and God providing a ram instead, is really the story of God wanting an end to the sacrificing of children as a form of worship.

Why sacrifice children in the first place? The practice can be found in the Middle East and throughout the world, but it is the Aztecs who give us the lens through which to understand: Carved on their places of worship is the explanation that we give back to God what we most value, and for most societies it was their children.



## SARAH IN ISLAMIC TRADITION

While the Jewish and Christian Bibles hold that Sarah looked down on Hagar, was jealous of her, and eventually forced Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, Islamic tradition is quite different.

While the Qur’an doesn’t mention her by name, she is considered the first wife of Abraham, and on relatively good terms with second wife, Hagar.

The Qur’an does include the story of Sarah’s pregnancy and her laughter when she heard she would have a child.



# Esau

## Genesis 25:24-34, 27:31-41

Like his father, Issac, Esau is not a significant player in the Patriarch tradition found in the Bible. In fact he, like Ishmael, does not receive that distinction of the title “Patriarch” at all. He is recognized as the patriarch of an entirely different group of people outside of the Hebrew tradition.

The name “Esau” means “hairy”, and while he was the first born son and technically should have been the natural inheritor, we read in Genesis 25 that not only did his mother, Rebecca, know he was not going to be the powerful son, but he thought so little of his birthright that he traded it to his younger brother Jacob, simply because he was hungry.

In Hebrew tradition at the time, while all sons (and perhaps daughters) received part of their father’s estate, the oldest son inherited twice as much including the family ‘god(s)’, and became the *de facto* leader of the family.

The only personal information we read about Esau aside from being ‘hairy’, is that he liked the outdoors and was a skilled hunter. The image is of a physically larger boy, who was favoured by his father. Scripture



tells us that Esau regularly took the results of his hunt to his father to eat.

Linguistic tradition holds that the stew he demanded of Jacob was red, thus being connected to the word ‘Edom’ which means ‘red’ in Hebrew, thus his descendants were called “Edomites”.

There is no other reference to Esau as a child in Genesis. His story finishes when he realized Jacob had inherited both the birthright and blessing from their father, and his rage that Jacob ‘tricked’ him, even though Esau made his own decisions and his brother was just there to take advantage of them.

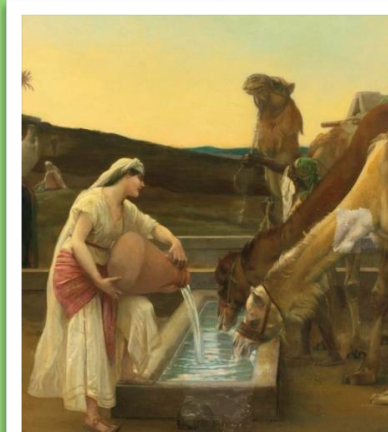
The two brothers don’t reconcile until decades later when they have their own families and their own wealth.

## REBEKAH IN ISLAMIC TRADITION

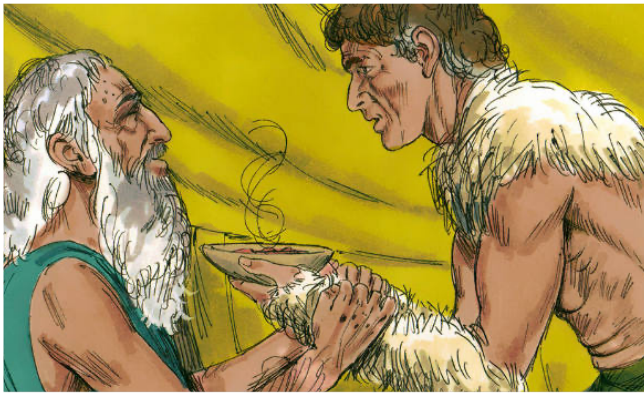
Like Hagar and Sarah, Rebekah (Rebecca in Hebrew) is not mentioned in the Qur’an (in fact the only women mentioned in the Qur’an is Mariam, or Mary the mother of Jesus).

While the tradition does respect the mother of Jacob, who like the other patriarchs was considered a prophet, she is not highlighted as a matriarch the way she is in Jewish tradition.

The only story of Rebekah in Islamic tradition is that she was 3 years old when she was married to Issac, contradicting Jewish and Christian scriptures, and not popular among modern Muslims.







## Jacob

### Genesis 25:24-34, 27:1-30

According to different translations of Hebrew, the name “Jacob” could mean “heel” or “from behind” or “cheater”, all of which fit with the Biblical narrative of Jacob’s birth, childhood and receiving the birthright and blessing that the law of the land dictated belonged to his older brother.

Like so many of the characters in the Bible, their childhood is not as significant as their conception/birth or their actions as adults, so we learn as little about Jacob’s childhood as we do about Esau.

What we know is that unlike his brother, Jacob was favoured by his mother and was the herder of the

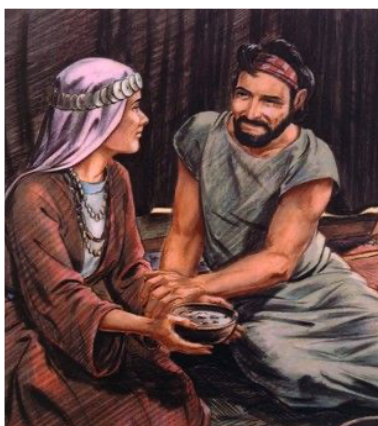
family, staying close to home rather than spending time in the wild as his brother, Esau, preferred.

Jacob also appears to be the wiser of the two brothers, easily outwitting Esau. Biblical scholars have often made the argument that Jacob was the better strategic thinker, looking at the future and how to place himself, while Esau was more occupied with the here and now, and didn’t concern himself with what would come.

Along with his mother, Rebecca, Jacob was able to manipulate his father, Issac, into giving him the family blessing. While the Biblical narrative tells us that Rebecca was the mastermind behind that deception, we also have to keep in mind that she was correcting the local tradition to fall in line with what God had told her would be the relationship between the two brothers going forward, with Jacob as the leader rather than Esau.

Biblical narrative also suggests both brothers were 40 when this occurred, so they were no longer squabbling children. Both had power of choice, and Jacob seized his opportunity.

Jacob’s story continues while Esau’s does not, and eventually Jacob is given the name “Israel”, and it is his 12 sons and grandsons that become the 12 tribes of Israel, matching the sons of Ismael.



## REBECCA THROUGH A NEGATIVE LENS

Christian tradition holds that Rebecca, like Eve, was a trickster who couldn’t be trusted by the men around her.

The difficulty with this interpretation is the story we read in Genesis 25:22-23, where Rebecca is told by God that her younger son would be the one who would have power over her older son. That knowledge influenced her decision to help Jacob receive the birthright that Esau had already traded to Jacob for a bowl of stew.

# Joseph

Genesis 30:22-25, 37:1-36

The name “Joseph” means “God shall add”. He has the distinction of being one of the few children in the Hebrew Bible who has his childhood acknowledged. Joseph is the last of the Patriarchs, and while the 11th son of Jacob, he is the 1st child of Rachel, Jacob’s favourite wife, and thus was the favoured child of his father.

As with every favoured son throughout the generations of the Patriarchs, the other sons were angry and jealous, destroying the relationship between brothers. For Joseph it was compounded by the fact he had ten brothers with different mothers, and only shared his mother, Rachel, with his brother Benjamin, who was the next favoured after Joseph.

When Joseph was 17, his father gifted him with a special coat that was worth more money than anything his brothers had received, marking him as the favoured child in a very public way. His brothers, minus Benjamin, were finally finished with the favouritism. It did not help that Joseph was prone to having dreams that he freely shared with his father, brothers, and anyone else who would listen. Some of those dreams included his brothers bowing down to him like subjects or servants. Joseph’s brothers had had enough.



The story of the planned murder and eventual selling of Joseph into slavery, marks a turning point in the early stories of the origin of the Hebrew tradition. Up to this point they had been nomadic, travelling from modern day Iraq to Syria to Israel and down to Saudi Arabia. With the capture and the rise in prestige and power of Joseph, they now become a nation with substantial influence in their adopted land of Egypt. They become so significant, according to scripture, that the rulers of Egypt worried the Hebrews would take over. In efforts to keep that from happening, the entire nation of Israel was made slaves.

The story of Joseph would eventually become the story of Moses, including the concept of the Promised Land, and how the Hebrews were the Chosen People.

## RACHEL IN ISLAMIC TRADITION

Like the other Matriarchs, Rachel and her sister Leah, the wives of Jacob, are not mentioned in the Qur’an. They are simply recognized as the honourable wives of the prophet Jacob.

Traditionally Muslims recognize Rachel’s tomb, found in Bethlehem, as a special place of Muslim prayer.

Muslims and Jews have been arguing ownership of the site and its accompanying grave yard since the mid-1800’s. Currently Bethlehem is in Gaza with limited access for Christians and Jews.

