

## Four Sets of Brothers

### Cain and Abel

Four sets of brothers fought in Genesis:

Cain & Abel (Genesis 4:1-12)

Isaac and Ishmael (Genesis 21:5-13)

Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25:21-28, 27-34, 38-43)

Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37:2-11)

### Cain & Abel



<sup>1</sup>[Genesis 4:1-12 HCSB](#) Adam knew his wife Eve intimately, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain. She said, "I have had a male child with the LORD's help." (2) Then she also gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel became a shepherd of a flock, but Cain cultivated the land. (3) In the course of time Cain presented some of the land's produce as an offering to the LORD. (4) And Abel also presented *an offering*--some of the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions. The LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, (5) but He did not have regard for Cain and his offering. Cain was furious, and he was downcast. (6) Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you furious? And why are you downcast? (7) If you do right, won't you be accepted? But if you do not do right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must master it." (8) Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. (9) Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's guardian?" (10) Then He said, "What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground! (11) So now you are cursed *with alienation* from the ground that opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood you have shed. (12) If you work the land, it will never again give you its yield. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

### Isaac & Ishmael



<sup>2</sup>[Genesis 21:5-13 HCSB](#) Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him. (6) Sarah said, "God has made me laugh, and everyone who hears will laugh with me." (7) She also said, "Who would have told Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (8) The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned. (9) But Sarah saw the son mocking--the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham. (10) So she said to Abraham, "Drive out this slave with her son, for the son of this slave will not be a co-heir with my son Isaac!" (11) Now this was a very difficult thing for Abraham because of his son. (12) But God said to Abraham, "Do not be concerned about the boy and your slave. Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her, because your offspring will be traced through Isaac. (13) But I will also make a nation of the slave's son because he is your offspring."

<sup>1</sup> *Cain Slaying Abel* by Peter Paul Rubens

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bestpriceart.com/vault/wgart\\_-art-g-guercino-2-abraham.jpg](http://www.bestpriceart.com/vault/wgart_-art-g-guercino-2-abraham.jpg)

## Jacob & Esau



<sup>3</sup>Genesis 25:21-28 HCSB Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife because she was barren. The LORD heard his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. (22) But the children inside her struggled with each other, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. (23) And the LORD said to her: Two nations are in your womb; two people will *come* from you and be separated. One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger. (24) When her time came to give birth, there were indeed twins in her womb. (25) The first one came out reddish, covered with hair like a fur coat, and they named him Esau. (26) After this, his brother came out grasping Esau's heel with his hand. So he was named Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when they were born. (27) When the boys grew up, Esau became an expert hunter, an outdoorsman, but Jacob was a quiet man who stayed at home. (28) Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for wild game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.



<sup>4</sup>Genesis 25:27-34 HCSB When the boys grew up, Esau became an expert hunter, an outdoorsman, but Jacob was a quiet man who stayed at home. (28) Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for wild game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. (29) Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, exhausted. (30) He said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, because I'm exhausted." That is why he was *also* named Edom. (31) Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." (32) "Look," said Esau, "I'm about to die, so what good is a birthright to me?" (33) Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to Jacob and sold his birthright to him. (34) Then Jacob gave bread and lentil stew to Esau; he ate, drank, got up, and went away. So Esau despised his birthright.



<sup>5</sup>Genesis 27:38-43 HCSB Esau said to his father, "Do you only have one blessing, my father? Bless me--me too, my father!" And Esau wept loudly. (39) Then his father Isaac answered him: Look, your dwelling place will be away from the richness of the land, away from the dew of the sky above. (40) You will live by your sword, and you will serve your brother. But when you rebel, you will break his yoke from your neck. (41) Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. And Esau determined in his heart: "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob." (42) When the words of her older son Esau were reported to Rebekah, she summoned her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Listen, your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. (43) So now, my son, listen to me. Flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran,

<sup>3</sup> *The Birth of Esau and Jacob* by the Master of Jean de Mandeville; ca. 1360-1370

<sup>4</sup> *Esau Sells His Birthright* by Rembrandt van Rijn

<sup>5</sup> *Isaac Blessing Jacob* by Gerbrandt van den Eeckhout; 1642

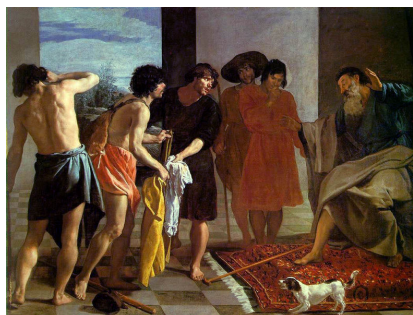
## Joseph & ten of his brothers



<sup>6</sup>Genesis 37:2-11 HCSB These are the family records of Jacob. At 17 years of age, Joseph tended sheep with his brothers. The young man *was working* with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought a bad report about them to their father. (3) Now Israel loved Joseph more than his other sons because Joseph was a son *born to him* in his old age, and he made a robe of many colors for him. (4) When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not bring themselves to speak peaceably to him. (5) Then Joseph had a dream. When he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. (6) He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: (7) There we were, binding sheaves of grain in the field. Suddenly my sheaf stood up, and your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." (8) "Are you really going to reign over us?" his brothers asked him. "Are you really going to rule us?" So they hated him even more because of his dream and what he had said. (9) Then he had another dream and told it to his brothers. "Look," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun, moon, and 11 stars were bowing down to me." (10) He told his father and brothers, but his father rebuked him. "What kind of dream is this that you have had?" he said. "Are your mother and brothers and I going to bow down to the ground before you?" (11) His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter *in mind*.



<sup>7</sup>His brothers were initially going to kill him but decided instead to "mercifully" sell him into slavery.



<sup>8</sup> They lied to Jacob, leading him to believe that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

There is a definite progression in the "end of the story" of each succeeding account.

Cain and Abel → murder  
Ishmael and Isaac → enemies  
Jacob and Esau → estranged  
Joseph and brothers → forgiveness

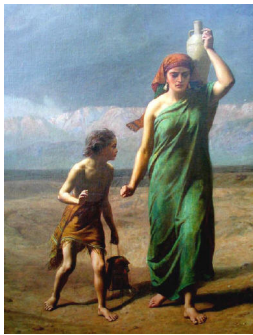
<sup>6</sup> Image source: <http://vridar.files.wordpress.com/2008/06/josephs-dream.jpg>

<sup>7</sup> *Children of Jacob Sell Joseph* by Flavitsky (1855)

<sup>8</sup> *Joseph's Bloody Coat* by Diego Velazquez (1630)



<sup>9</sup>Cain was not able to resolve his jealousy. A root of bitterness grew in him, transformed into rage and he murdered his brother Abel.



<sup>10</sup>Ishmael and Isaac didn't kill each other but Abraham ended up having to expel his son Ishmael from his house. Why?

- [Genesis 21:8-9 HCSB](#) The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned. (9) But Sarah saw the son mocking--the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham.

The Septuagint reads here "fooling around with her son Isaac" which can connote either playing with Isaac or mocking him. The word is "tsach'ak" which (besides being nearly impossible to pronounce!) means to make sport, to toy with, or to make a toy of. So, the Scriptures seem to imply

that Ishmael was sent away so that he would not exert a negative influence on his younger brother Isaac.

The only time the brothers met after that was to bury their father.

- [Genesis 25:8-9 HCSB](#) He took his last breath and died at a ripe old age, old and contented, and he was gathered to his people. (9) His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite.



<sup>11</sup>Initially, after he discovered that he'd lost not only the birthright but also the blessing, Esau wanted to murder Jacob. Time, if allowed to, can sometimes heal such wounds. Twenty years later, when they met again, they made peace and buried the hatchet. Apparently, they kept an eye on the hatchet; however, because just as Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau only met again in order to bury their father.

- [Genesis 35:29 HCSB](#) He took his last breath and died, and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. His sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.bible-topten.com/murder2.gif>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.goodallartists.ca/Hagar%20&%20Ishmael%20d.jpg>

<sup>11</sup> *The Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau* by Sir Peter Paul Rubens



<sup>12</sup> Only in the last set did complete reconciliation take place. Only with Joseph do we come to the fateful room where he revealed himself as their brother and told them “you meant it for harm but God made it turn out right – I forgive you.”

There is definitely a common thread in the cause of these conflicts:  
Cain and Abel → jealousy over God’s acceptance  
Ishmael and Isaac → jealousy over Abraham’s acceptance

Jacob and Esau → jealousy over Isaac’s inheritance and blessing

Joseph and brothers → jealousy over Jacob’s preferential treatment

- **James 3:13-16 HCSB** Who is wise and understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom’s gentleness. (14) But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don’t brag and lie in defiance of the truth. (15) Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. (16) For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil.
- **James 4:1-3 HCSB** What is the source of the wars and the fights among you? Don’t they come from the cravings that are at war within you? (2) You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. You do not have because you do not ask. (3) You ask and don’t receive because you ask wrongly, so that you may spend it on your desires for pleasure.

What do we learn from these four sets of brothers?

1. From Cain and Abel we learn:
  - a. Don’t let your pride get in the way of doing what’s right.
  - b. Don’t let a root of bitterness grow into hatred.
2. From Ishmael and Isaac we learn:
  - a. Don’t allow a mocking spirit to ruin your family.
  - b. When sin has caused a split in your family, turn to Yahweh Rohi, the God who sees for comfort and guidance and make your way in the world the best you can.
3. From Jacob and Esau we learn:
  - a. Do good God’s way. Jacob wanted God’s blessing – good. He was willing to connive cheat and steal to get it – bad.
  - b. Don’t underestimate the destructive power of favoritism.
  - c. Don’t allow short term pleasures to overcome your good sense.
  - d. When you have wronged somebody, be sure God will end up teaching you an appropriate lesson.
  - e. When you have wronged someone, don’t just say I’m sorry – show them you mean it. Do your best to make restitution.
  - f. Just because someone says sorry and someone else says “I forgive you” doesn’t necessarily mean you’re going to be best friends.
  - g. There are some mistakes you simply don’t bounce back from. Some damage is permanent.
4. From Jacob’s family we learn:
  - a. Don’t underestimate the destructive power of favoritism!
  - b. To everything there is a season. Just because you think you know something doesn’t mean you HAVE to say it!

<sup>12</sup> *The Recognition of Joseph by His Brothers* by Peter von Cornelius (1816-1817)

- c. No matter your circumstances, work hard and do the right thing. Sooner or later cream always rises to the top.
- d. In order to overcome injustice done to you, you must take the long view.
- e. Learn to be able to see God's hand in your life.
- f. Don't just forgive someone, show them you mean it.
- g. Don't be overcome with evil. Instead overcome evil with good.