

Homiletics Analysis: Genesis 36

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Genesis 36 is a genealogical chapter recording the descendants of Esau — the generations of Edom. The chapter opens with a brief notice that Esau took his wives from among the Canaanites and moved away from Canaan to the hill country of Seir, separating himself from his brother Jacob because the land could not support both of them (vv. 1–8). The bulk of the chapter then catalogs Esau’s sons and grandsons who became the chiefs of Edom (vv. 9–19), followed by the sons of Seir the Horite who previously inhabited the land (vv. 20–30), then a list of eight kings who reigned in Edom before any king reigned in Israel (vv. 31–39), and finally a closing list of the chiefs of Esau according to their clans (vv. 40–43). The chapter is structured entirely by the formula of genealogical record-keeping, with none of the dramatic narrative that characterizes the surrounding chapters.

This Text — Intent:

The placement and content of Genesis 36 accomplish something the narrative surrounding it requires: it closes the account of Esau definitively before the Joseph narrative opens. The genealogy of Esau is not an aside or a bibliographical footnote — it is the God-governed record of what became of the man who was not chosen. God is not silent about Esau. He did not abandon him. The chapter demonstrates that God’s sovereign narrowing of the covenant line to Jacob does not mean the unchosen are forsaken — Esau was blessed with extraordinary fruitfulness, territorial possession, and national emergence. The intent is to display God’s sovereign election as neither arbitrary cruelty nor exclusion from every blessing, while at the same time making clear that the covenant line, the promise line, and the text’s continuing attention belong to Jacob and his seed. God is seeking to produce in the reader a settled confidence in His sovereign governance of all peoples, a clearer understanding of what election does and does not mean, and a proper appreciation of how the LORD closes one chapter of history so that the next may open with clarity.

Subject Sentence: The generations of Esau — God closes the unchosen line with dignity before the covenant story continues.

Primary Claim: God’s sovereign election of Jacob over Esau does not mean Esau is abandoned or cursed — God fruitfully governed Esau’s line too — but the covenant promise, and Scripture’s continuing attention, belong to Jacob alone; readers are called to rest in the justice and wisdom of divine election rather than questioning its terms.

Interpretive Evaluation

The function of the genealogy itself: Some readers treat Genesis 36 as essentially archival filler — interesting to historians of the ancient Near East but homiletically barren. This reading should be qualified rather than fully refuted. It is true that the chapter's genealogical density resists the kind of verse-by-verse application common to narrative passages. However, the Toledoth formula ("these are the generations of Esau") signals that the chapter carries the same structural weight as the other Toledoth units in Genesis — each of which is theologically purposeful. The text is not filler; it is closure. It answers the question that election raises: what happened to the one not chosen? The chapter's answer is theologically significant even if it does not read like a sermon text.

Arminian/Wesleyan readings — election and fairness: Arminian interpreters often use the Esau narrative (drawing on Romans 9 where Paul explicitly cites the Jacob/Esau election) to press the point that divine election must be conditioned on foreseen faith or foreseen qualities, lest God appear arbitrary or unjust. Genesis 36 does not resolve that debate, but it does provide an important piece of data: Esau was not left in destitution. He received extraordinary material blessing — wives, children, chiefs, kings, territory. The Arminian instinct to protect God from the charge of unfairness finds a partial answer here: God did bless Esau, richly and visibly. But the text simultaneously does not suggest that this blessing is equivalent to the covenant. Esau's kings and chiefs are catalogued and then the narrative moves on. Jacob's line continues. The Reformed reading — that election is unconditional and sovereign, and that Esau's fruitfulness demonstrates God's common grace and providential governance rather than covenantal inclusion — best accounts for the whole canonical picture, including Paul's use of this material in Romans 9.

The notice about kings reigning in Edom "before any king reigned over Israel" (v. 31): This phrase has generated significant discussion because it appears to presuppose the monarchy — which would not arrive in Israel until centuries later, suggesting either a later editorial insertion or that Moses wrote with prophetic anticipation of what God had already promised (Genesis 17:6, 16 — "kings shall come from you"). The Reformed and evangelical reading treats this as authorial anticipation consistent with Mosaic composition: the promise of kings from Abraham and Jacob's line was already given, and the contrast highlights that Edom achieved national-political structure first, while Israel's covenant destiny remained unfulfilled until the appointed time. This does not undermine Mosaic authorship; it reflects exactly the kind of providential framing that the Toledoth structure of Genesis employs throughout.

Dispensational readings: Dispensational interpreters sometimes treat the Edomite genealogy as significant primarily for its prophetic relevance — noting that Edom's later history (Obadiah; Isaiah 34; Malachi 1) involves divine judgment, and reading backwards into Genesis 36 a foreboding quality. While it is true that Edom's later story is one of judgment, Genesis 36 itself does not carry that tone. The chapter is genealogical record,

not prophetic anticipation of doom. To read the chapter primarily through the lens of Edom's eventual judgment is to import a later canonical frame in a way that distorts the chapter's own register, which is one of documentation and closure rather than warning.

The Reformed reading — which best accounts for the text on its own terms and in its canonical location — reads Genesis 36 as the providentially governed closing of Esau's account within the Genesis narrative. God is shown to have dealt faithfully and fruitfully with Esau even outside the covenant line. Election is sovereign, purposeful, and not capricious. The unchosen are not forgotten. But the covenant, the promise, and the continuing story belong to Jacob. This is the chapter's contribution to the canon's unfolding argument about election, grace, and the purposes of God.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 9:10–13** — Paul's explicit citation of the Jacob/Esau election ("Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated") grounds the New Testament's theological engagement with this Genesis narrative; Paul uses it to argue for unconditional divine election, the very claim Genesis 36 illustrates by showing the covenant line narrowing to Jacob while Esau's line is documented and then closed.
 - **Malachi 1:2–5** — God's words "I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated" appear at the opening of the prophetic canon's final book, where Edom's desolation is contrasted with Israel's restoration; this canonical bookend to the Esau story shows that Genesis 36's genealogical documentation is not the last word about Edom, but the contrast serves to highlight what covenant belonging means.
 - **Genesis 25:19–34** — The original election notice ("two nations are in your womb... the older shall serve the younger") and Esau's despising of his birthright establish the framework within which Genesis 36 operates; the genealogy is the fulfillment of what was promised to Rebekah about two nations.
 - **Obadiah 1:1–4** — The entire book of Obadiah is an oracle against Edom, the nation descended from Esau; the pride of Edom's territorial establishment (Genesis 36's record of chiefs and kings) is addressed in Obadiah, providing the canonical conclusion to what Genesis 36 records as beginning.
 - **Deuteronomy 2:1–8** — God's instruction to Israel to pass through Edom without provoking conflict, on the grounds that He has given Seir to Esau as a possession, demonstrates that God's governance of Esau's line continued actively into Israel's later history; Esau's territorial possession recorded in Genesis 36 was divinely granted and divinely respected.
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Aim: To demonstrate from Genesis 36 that God’s sovereign election is neither arbitrary nor cruel — He governs and blesses all people under His providence — while equipping readers to rest in the wisdom of a God who narrows covenant blessing purposefully and without injustice.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Toledoth heading: “These are the generations of Esau (that is, Edom)”	The standard Genesis Toledoth formula; signals structural and theological weight
2–5	Esau’s wives and sons born in Canaan: Adah, Oholibamah, Basemath; sons Eliphaz, Reuel, Jeush, Jalam, Korah	Notable: Esau’s wives are named differently here than in Genesis 26; likely reflecting different name traditions or name changes
6–8	Esau moves from Canaan to Seir because the land cannot support both him and Jacob; separation mirrors Abraham and Lot	The separation is amicable and providential; Esau’s departure clears the land for Jacob’s covenant inheritance
9	Second Toledoth heading: “These are the generations of Esau the father of the Edomites in the hill country of Seir”	The chapter divides into two genealogical units; this heads the second
10–14	Esau’s sons and grandsons: Eliphaz’s sons (including Amalek, born of a concubine Timna), Reuel’s sons	Amalek appears here — Israel’s later enemy is Esau’s grandson through a concubine
15–19	The chiefs descended from Esau’s sons	The political structure of Edom traced to its genealogical roots
20–28	Sons of Seir the Horite, the previous inhabitants of the land; including Lotan, Shobal, Zibeon, Anah, Dishon, Ezer, Dishan and their descendants	These are the indigenous Horite people whom Esau’s descendants displaced; Anah is identified as the one who found hot springs in the wilderness
29–30	The chiefs of the Horites	The Horite political

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
31–39	Eight kings who reigned in Edom before any king reigned in Israel; none are father-to-son successions — possibly elective monarchy	structure, now absorbed into or displaced by Edom The phrase “before any king reigned over Israel” is theologically and chronologically significant
40–43	The chiefs of Esau listed by their clans, locations, and names; closing formula: “he is Esau, the father of Edom”	The chapter closes with exactly the formula with which it began — Esau is Edom, and his story is complete

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–8	Esau’s family and departure from Canaan
2	9–19	The genealogy and chiefs of Esau’s sons in Seir
3	20–30	The sons and chiefs of Seir the Horite
4	31–39	The kings of Edom before Israel’s monarchy
5	40–43	The chiefs of Esau by clan and location

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The generations of Esau — God closes the unchosen line with dignity before the covenant story continues.

Primary Claim: God’s sovereign election of Jacob over Esau does not mean Esau is abandoned or cursed — God fruitfully governed Esau’s line too — but the covenant promise, and Scripture’s continuing attention, belong to Jacob alone; readers are called to rest in the justice and wisdom of divine election rather than questioning its terms.

Applications (Five)

1. (*Mind/Belief*) Reject the assumption that election means the non-elect are simply discarded. Genesis 36 documents Esau’s line with care, detail, and dignity. Eight kings. Dozens of chiefs. Named wives. Named territories. God did not forget Esau when He chose Jacob. For the reader who struggles with the doctrine of election because it seems to make

God arbitrary or indifferent to those outside the covenant, this chapter is a corrective: God governs all peoples with providential care. The unchosen are not unwatched. Common grace is real. This should free the believer to hold election without embarrassment — not as divine favoritism that discards the rest, but as sovereign narrowing for specific covenant purposes within a larger frame of providential governance over all.

2. (*Affections/Worship*) Cultivate gratitude for undeserved covenant inclusion rather than treating it as an entitlement. The contrast Genesis 36 draws — Esau receives fruitfulness, territory, kings; Jacob receives the covenant, the promise, the presence, and ultimately the Christ — should produce worship, not entitlement. Every reader standing within the covenant community stands where Jacob stood: not chosen because of merit but chosen by sovereign grace. Esau's extraordinary earthly prosperity alongside his exclusion from covenant blessing should strike the believer with the weight of what grace means. The appropriate response to this chapter is not academic satisfaction that election is fair, but stunned gratitude that one is on the inside at all.

3. (*Will/Behavior*) Stop treating the silence of God in your current season as evidence of His absence or rejection. Esau's separation from Jacob and departure to Seir does not produce a chapter about God speaking to Esau, commissioning Esau, or appearing to Esau. The genealogy proceeds in relative divine silence compared to the theophanic richness of Jacob's story. Yet the record is clear: God blessed Esau. The blessing was real even where direct divine address was absent. For the believer in a season of apparent divine silence — no dramatic revelation, no felt presence, no visible covenant milestone — Genesis 36 provides a category: God can be actively at work in governance and blessing even where He is not speaking in ways the person can hear. Absence of dramatic encounter is not absence of God.

4. (*Mind/Belief*) Recognize that separation and departure are sometimes the God-ordained means by which covenant inheritance is preserved. Esau's departure from Canaan is framed not as punishment but as providential necessity: the land could not support both brothers (v. 7). The same dynamic appears with Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13). The separation that looks like loss is the mechanism by which the covenant is preserved for the one who remains. Readers who are experiencing painful separation — from people, from places, from communities — should be given this category: God sometimes governs the departure of others, or our own departure from others, not as abandonment but as the necessary clearing of the ground for what He intends to do next. The land needs to be unencumbered. The covenant needs room.

5. (*Affections/Worship*) Let the strangeness and density of this chapter cultivate patience with the whole counsel of God. Genesis 36 is not a chapter most readers would choose for personal devotion. Its genealogical density seems remote, its names unpronounceable, its relevance obscure. Yet it is Scripture. It carries the Toledoth formula. It was preserved across millennia. The discipline of engaging it — asking what God is doing here, why this matters, what the Spirit intends — cultivates the kind of patient, whole-Bible attentiveness that is itself a form of worship. Not every text will produce immediate

emotional warmth or obvious personal application. Some texts ask the reader to slow down, submit to the text's own agenda, and trust that God included it for reasons that surpass immediate utility. Genesis 36 trains that posture.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Genesis 36 teaches that God is the sovereign governor of all peoples, not merely of the covenant community. His election is purposeful — narrowing through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for specific redemptive ends — but His providential care extends beyond the covenant line. Esau receives the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of fruitfulness and national emergence even outside the covenant, demonstrating that the promises have two registers: the universal, which Esau shares, and the particular covenantal, which belongs to Jacob alone. The chapter also teaches that God's sovereign choices are not capricious — they are executed with consistency, faithfulness, and dignity toward all parties. Election is not favoritism that humiliates the unchosen; it is purposeful selection for specific redemptive ends within a framework of universal providential governance.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Genesis 36 is the genealogical demonstration of what Reformed theology means by the distinction between God's election of grace and His common grace governance of all peoples. The chapter shows that covenant election does not exhaust God's dealings with humanity — He governs Esau's line as surely as Jacob's, though with different purposes and different promises in view. This directly supports the Reformed doctrines of unconditional election and common grace held in proper tension: election is real and sovereign (Jacob, not Esau, carries the covenant promise), and God's providential care is genuinely extended to all (Esau's fruitfulness is no illusion). Paul's use of this narrative in Romans 9 — where he defends divine election against the charge of injustice — draws on exactly this Genesis material, confirming that the Reformed reading of unconditional election has deep canonical roots. The chapter also serves the Reformed conviction that all of Scripture is profitable: even the most genealogically dense passage carries theological weight and claims the reader's attentive submission.

Main Takeaway

God chose Jacob, not Esau — not because of anything Jacob did, and not because Esau was forgotten or discarded. Esau became a nation. He had kings before Israel did. God governed him too. But the covenant, the promise, the line through which the world would be blessed — that belonged to Jacob by God's sovereign, purposeful, undeserved choice.

If you are in Christ, you stand where Jacob stood: chosen not because of merit but because of mercy. That should not produce arrogance toward those outside, or anxiety about whether you might be the wrong brother — it should produce worship, and patience, and confidence that the God who governed even Esau’s genealogy has not lost track of you for a single moment.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the chapter as homiletically useless and skipping it.** The density of the genealogy tempts preachers to pass over Genesis 36 entirely or treat it with a dismissive summary. This is a failure to submit to the text’s own canonical claim. The Toledoth structure signals that this chapter carries structural weight in Genesis. Skipping it — or prefacing any engagement with “I know this seems boring, but...” — teaches congregants that some Scripture is not really useful, which Paul explicitly denies (2 Timothy 3:16). The chapter should be engaged with theological seriousness, even if the sermon’s texture is necessarily different from a narrative chapter.
- **Failing to address the doctrine of election, which is the chapter’s primary theological context.** Genesis 36 only makes full sense against the backdrop of Genesis 25’s election notice and the Jacob/Esau story that precedes it. A preacher who treats the chapter as purely historical-geographical record without addressing what it shows about divine election has missed the chapter’s load-bearing theological purpose. The question the chapter answers — “what happened to the one not chosen?” — should be made explicit.
- **Using the chapter to preach Arminian or election-softening conclusions.** Because the chapter shows Esau being blessed, some expositors use it to suggest that election is not as absolute or determinative as Reformed theology maintains — “see, Esau turned out fine.” This misreads the evidence. Esau’s fruitfulness is common grace and providential governance, not covenant inclusion. The distinction matters enormously for how the gospel is understood. The chapter should be used to distinguish these categories clearly, not to blur them.
- **Overreading the Amalek connection as the chapter’s primary homiletical point.** The appearance of Amalek in verse 12 — Esau’s grandson through a concubine — is interesting and has later canonical relevance (Amalek becomes Israel’s persistent enemy). But Genesis 36 does not highlight this; Amalek appears in a list alongside many other names without editorial comment. To build a sermon on the Amalek connection is to elevate what the text treats as incidental and bypass what the text treats as central: the governance of Esau’s whole line.
- **Ignoring the “kings before Israel” phrase (v. 31) or resolving it too quickly.** The phrase “before any king reigned over the people of Israel” is one of the chapter’s

most theologically interesting details, and it has generated both critical questions (does it presuppose the monarchy?) and theological observations (Edom achieved national structure before Israel did, despite Israel's covenant advantage). A preacher should address this honestly — acknowledging the authorial anticipation of the monarchy promised in Genesis 17 — rather than skipping past it or treating it as a textual problem to be quickly explained away.

- **Preaching the chapter morally rather than theologically.** The temptation in any genealogical text is to moralize from individual figures — Esau's choices, his intermarriage with Canaanites, his departure. But the chapter itself does not moralize; it documents. The appropriate homiletical register for Genesis 36 is theological and doxological — what does this chapter reveal about God's sovereign governance? — rather than ethical and exemplary. To preach “be like Jacob, not like Esau” from this text is to miss the chapter's own mode of address entirely.