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“WHO ARE YOU?”
READING AND JUDGING CHARACTER IN GENESIS 26:34–28:9

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“Who Are You?” Reading and Judging Character in Genesis 26:34–28:9

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INTRODUCTION

In Genesis 27,¹ Isaac plans to bless Esau, the firstborn. But Isaac’s wife Rebekah puts a counterplan in motion whereby Jacob, the second-born, disguises himself as Esau and acquires the blessing instead. When Esau attempts to receive his blessing, he learns that it has already been given to Jacob. He cries out bitterly, and Isaac gives him a secondary blessing, but Esau plots to kill Jacob once their father dies. Rebekah sets another plan in motion to keep Jacob (and by extension, Esau) safe, telling him to flee to her brother in Paddan-Aram. Isaac sends Jacob off with another blessing and commands him to marry within the extended family. In the end, the deceiver gets the blessing while the obedient son loses it, and the deceiver is not punished but blessed further.

In view of the moral problems presented by this story, there is remarkably very little space devoted to the judgment of these characters and their actions. Only Isaac and Esau seem to express negative views of Jacob’s ruse (27:35–36), but even though Isaac says Jacob came “in deceit,” he never chastises him. In fact, not only does Isaac stand by the blessing he gave to Jacob (27:33, 37), but he also blesses him a second time (28:1–4). Isaac’s judgment of Jacob’s actions, then, seems to be only for the benefit of Esau in the moment of Esau’s pained realization. But besides this brief interchange between Isaac and Esau, no other characters pass judgment on the actions of the others. Moreover, the narrator does not explicitly commend or condemn the characters either. Yet readers tend to offer their own judgments of the characters, sometimes scathing, sometimes sympathetic.

The difference between the text’s judgment of the characters (which is almost non-existent) and the reader’s judgment of the characters is where this paper focuses. Because there is no explicit judgment of character in this narrative, the interpreter is invited to participate in the task of evaluation. The reader becomes a “co-producer of meaning,”² combining clues in the text with her theological and ethical commitments to create her own judgment of these characters. The details of the text, which may implicitly cast judgment on the characters, do not point in one direction only, however, but can be used to support competing interpretations. My thesis is that there is a spectrum of plausible interpretations of the characters in Genesis 27, ranging from positive (sympathetic to characters, affirming their actions, viewing them as moral exemplars) to

¹ I use the designation “Genesis 27” as shorthand for the full episode, which is 26:34–28:9. See p. 6 below for further explanation.

² Charles H. Cosgrove, “Toward a Postmodern *Hermeneutica Sacra*: Guiding Considerations in Choosing Between Competing Plausible Interpretations of Scripture,” in *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations* (ed. Charles H. Cosgrove; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 43.

negative (unsympathetic to characters, condemning their actions, viewing their plotline as a cautionary tale). Sometimes the positive and negative interpretations are incompatible (e.g., Rebekah is either working with or working against God’s providence), but they need not be (e.g., Esau may not deserve the blessing, but we can still sympathize with his plight).³

Interpretation(s)

When two or more reasonable interpretations do not complement each other, but rather compete, the situation is called “indeterminate.”⁴ Indeterminacy is inevitable, especially in the world of biblical interpretation. This means that not all biblical texts have “one correct, original meaning,” by which all other interpretations are judged. Rather, there are often multiple plausible interpretations produced by the same textual elements⁵ and even the same exegetical methods. When faced with differing options, readers must choose between them based on “extra-exegetical” criteria.⁶ That is, the criteria are outside the text and the exegetical method used. Charles Cosgrove insists that interpreters should acknowledge their own extra-exegetical criteria so that “we take responsibility for our interpretations” and their ethical implications.⁷ This means that when considering the choice between different judgments of character, the reader should also consider the ethical *effect* this interpretation may have. Many commentators have judged Rebekah negatively, which may be appropriate given her use of deception, but unfortunately their interpretations have reflected and perpetuated a misogynistic worldview.⁸

³ Baruch Hochman, *Character in Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 124, writes that complex characters have “traits [that] implicitly form a dynamic system of stresses that suggest greater complexity—that is, a high degree of inner tension and self-contradiction.” It is my thesis that the characters in this text are given combinations of traits—positive and negative—that allow for multiple interpretations. Cf. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Interpretation: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985), 55.

⁴ Charles H. Cosgrove, “Introduction,” in *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations* (ed. Charles H. Cosgrove; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 5.

⁵ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 228.

⁶ Cosgrove, “Toward a Postmodern *Hermeneutica Sacra*,” 44–61, names four criteria by which interpretations can be judged: theological, moral, correlational (relevance to readers), and ecumenical (see below). Cf. Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987), 12–15, whose criteria are plausibility (readers share assumptions), adequacy (interpretation is true to the text), and relevance.

⁷ Cosgrove, “Toward a Postmodern *Hermeneutica Sacra*,” 40–43.

⁸ John Skinner calls Rebekah’s plan a “clever but heartless stratagem” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930], 368). E. A. Speiser

Cosgrove believes that if readers make clear their criteria for choosing between interpretations, an ecumenical spirit may more readily arise.⁹ Since we all interpret from our own cultural perspective, to have an “ecumenical spirit” means to recognize the validity of reasonable interpretations from other cultural perspectives as well. Cosgrove takes this a step further and suggests that an ecumenical commitment should manifest itself in collaboration and synthesis between interpreters of different backgrounds (recognizing, of course, that not all interpretations *can* be synthesized). Sometimes a particular interpretation is only appropriate for a specific context, but that does not necessarily make it a less valid reading. Interpreter A can disagree with Interpreter B while still recognizing the validity of Interpretation B for Context B.

My purpose in this thesis is to sketch a range of valid interpretive possibilities that can potentially support an ecumenical understanding of the text. That is, I hope to show that multiple readings are possible by presenting positive and negative (complementary or competing) interpretations of each character. A reader may choose to judge Esau negatively (based on a certain reading of textual data), which may be an appropriate reading in that reader’s context. But he should also acknowledge the possibility of interpreting Esau positively, which can have beneficial ethical effects. At the end of this paper, I will also briefly consider some of the ethical implications of the character judgments.

In order to illustrate different experiences of the ecumenical aspect of interpretation, I have created an allegory using the four characters of Genesis 27 as models.

First is Isaac. Isaac has two sons, each representing an interpretation. He must decide which interpretation to bless. Initially, Isaac chooses Jacob’s interpretation, and when confronted with Esau’s interpretation, cannot acknowledge the validity of this second one. But after interacting with the second interpretation, Isaac is able to accommodate it, to synthesize it with the first. Jacob’s interpretation is primary, but Esau’s also has a place within it.

comments that Jacob was “under pressure from his strong-willed mother” (*Genesis* [AB 1; 3d ed.; Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1964], 211). Walter Brueggemann suggests that Rebekah does not “evoke any positive feeling from the listener,” and that “[t]here are no hints in the entire narrative that she knows what she is doing” (*Genesis* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1992], 234–235). Victor P. Hamilton titles one of his commentary sections, “Rebekah Incites Jacob to Deceive Isaac,” and claims that Rebekah “imposes on Jacob” (*The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 214, 216). For more discussion of the negative history of interpretation of Rebekah in the last two centuries, see Christine Garside Allen, “Who Was Rebekah? ‘On Me Be the Curse, My Son,’” in *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion* (ed. Rita M. Gross; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 192–196.

⁹ Cosgrove, “Toward a Postmodern *Hermeneutica Sacra*,” 47, 57–61.

Second is Rebekah. Rebekah is the interpreter who must grapple with the ethical implications of her reading. She presents an interpretation to Jacob, who agrees with the methodology (the deception), but not with the implications (“What if my father feels me?”). Rebekah adjusts her interpretation to respond to the objections. Later, when Esau plots to kill Jacob, Rebekah must once again revise in light of the practical implications of her interpretation.

Third is Esau. Esau is a reader with unexamined assumptions. He assumes his interpretation (My father gave me a commission, I will do it and be blessed) is the only possible one. He is shocked to find out that another interpretation is not only possible, but equally valid. At first he hates this other interpretation (Jacob) and plots to destroy it. Given time, however, he ends up reconciling with the other interpretation (cf. Gen 33), although he recognizes that they are appropriate only in their respective contexts (cf. Gen 36: Esau in Seir, Jacob in Canaan).

Fourth is Jacob. Jacob is the synthesizer. He attempts to accommodate all other interpretations into his own. He listens to the voice of his mother, he presents himself as Esau, and he answers all his father’s questions and doubts. After his interpretation is accepted, he must again accommodate three more interpretations: his brother’s anger, his mother’s instructions, and his father’s command. Jacob, though the active beneficiary in this episode, can only succeed by synthesizing his interpretive claims with those of others.

In this allegorical reading, Isaac represents the interpreter who must choose between readings, and in the end privileges one over the other, but still synthesizes them. Rebekah is the interpreter who continually wrestles with the ethical implications of her interpretation. Esau represents the reader who grows to be more hospitable to other interpretations, but acknowledges that they may be more appropriate in different contexts. Jacob is the super-synthesizer who tries to accommodate all interpretations into his own. It should be emphasized that no model given here is better than another. These are simply four possible experiences a reader may have when encountering competing interpretations. Indeed, when readers come to the end of this paper, they will have to decide how to synthesize or choose between the various readings of the characters.

Narratology: Characterization and Gaps

I employ the tools of narratological analysis, particularly focusing on characterization. There are many ways a character can be presented in literature:¹⁰ description of the character (physical appearance, internal disposition, mannerisms, dress); speech of the character (personal thoughts or spoken words); actions of the character (recurring or one-

¹⁰ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (2d ed.; New York: Routledge, 2002), 59–67; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 33–42.

time deeds). These may be conveyed by the narrator, they may be articulated by the character him- or herself, or they may be expressed by another character (including God in biblical texts), who may or may not give a sympathetic account of the character being described. Furthermore, the one giving an account may or may not be reliable; that is, their account may not be trustworthy or accurate. The disapproval of Jacob’s actions is not spoken by the narrator but by the wronged party—do we trust Isaac and Esau’s judgment in this situation?

Another phenomenon in literature that narratology examines is the presence of “gaps.” Gaps are informational omissions in the text.¹¹ They are spaces where a reader might expect certain data—because of convention or curiosity—but such data are absent. Gaps are inevitable in literature because no text can exhaustively supply all the information that might be communicated—this would make writing and reading extremely tedious. Instead, the writing process is selective, and texts communicate a limited amount of information. When presented with a gap, the reader attempts to fill it in. We engage in this process of “gap-filling” naturally.

If I say to my wife, “I drove to the store and got some milk,” she probably assumes that I drove in a car, not a horse-drawn buggy or a spaceship. She automatically fills in the missing information with a plausible hypothesis. Additionally, she likely assumes that I purchased the milk and did not steal it. These gaps are filled by what she expects; this is the conventional plot of grocery shopping. But perhaps her curiosity is piqued by whether I went through the checker’s line or the self-checkout station. This gap may be important to her understanding of my story, but her inquiry is prompted by curiosity, not convention. However, it could be argued that my checkout procedure is unimportant to the narrative. In this case, the insignificant or irrelevant gap is called a “blank.”¹² An extreme example of a blank might be how many times I inhaled while carrying the milk. Readers may disagree as to which gaps are significant and which are merely blanks. A single reader may even change her mind as to which gaps are relevant to interpretation, either by re-reading or by later clues in the text itself. The process of gap-filling is not necessarily complete after the first satisfactory answer is given—sometimes it needs to be revised. Using the grocery shopping example, if police suddenly showed up to the house and arrested me for shoplifting, my wife would have to revise her hypothesis that I had purchased the milk. This is an example of when the text itself fills in a gap later in the narrative. Sometimes the text is not so explicit, though, and the reader must revise his hypothesis by incorporating newly encountered textual clues.

A very significant gap in Genesis 27—and the focus of this study—is the judgment of character. As noted above, the narrator gives no explicit judgment of any of the characters. Only Isaac and Esau appear to comment negatively on Jacob’s actions. Thus the reader is invited to fill in the gaps, to participate in the task of judgment, by

¹¹ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 235–237; Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 128–130.

¹² Cf. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 236.

using textual data to formulate a hypothesis.¹³ My thesis will involve a different sort of gap-filling, however. Instead of developing a single hypothesis and revising it as new clues are incorporated, I will develop multiple, even competing hypotheses, explaining how certain textual elements may be interpreted in one way or another. I do not advocate for one interpretation over another, but rather wish to show the spectrum of possible judgments of character, given the text and its gaps. I should note, moreover, that the conclusions I reach do not necessarily exhaust the range of possibilities for this text and these characters. There are other potential interpretations, but I only focus on the broad categories of positive and negative.

The Text: Genesis 26:34–28:9

For the sake of efficiency, I have been designating the text at hand as “Genesis 27.” However, the more precise delineation of the narrative is Genesis 26:34–28:9. I will refer to the narrative as the “blessing episode,” “the story of the blessing,” or “Genesis 27.” I do not call it “the Story of the *Stolen* Blessing” or “Jacob *Steals* the Blessing,” because this automatically assigns interpretive judgment.¹⁴

Genesis 27:1–28:5 is made up of six scenes, each of which features two primary characters:¹⁵

Scene	Text	Characters
Scene One	27:1–5	Isaac and Esau
Scene Two	27:6–17	Rebekah and Jacob
Scene Three	27:18–29	Isaac and Jacob
Scene Four	27:30–40	Isaac and Esau
Scene Five	27:41–46	Rebekah and Jacob
Scene Six	28:1–5	Isaac and Jacob

¹³ J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (trans. Ineke Smit; Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 1999), 148–149.

¹⁴ As I argue later (p. 44), the Hebrew verb that is used to describe Jacob’s acquisition of the blessing (לקח, “take”) has multiple semantic possibilities, including “take away” or “purchase.” Given the ambiguity, I refrain from casting the episode only in the image of theft.

¹⁵ Gordon Wenham sees only five scenes, by combining scenes five and six, which together illustrate Rebekah’s plan to save Jacob from Esau (*Genesis 16–50* [WBC 2; Dallas: Word, 1994], 202–203), while Nahum M. Sarna and Robert Alter identify seven, isolating 27:46 as its own scene because Rebekah and Isaac are the primary characters (Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* [New York: JPS, 1989], 189; Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* [New York: Norton, 1996], 137). J. Gerald Janzen breaks up scene five even more, giving Esau (v. 41) his own scene, so that there are eight scenes total (*Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12–50* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 103). My reasons for delineating scene five are given below, p. 7.

If one follows the pattern of characters, the scenes form an ABCABC structure. On either side of these scenes are the announcements of Esau’s marriages (26:34–35; 28:6–9). These framing texts are included in my analysis because they disclose important characterizations of Esau.

It is common to attribute 27:1–45 to JE and 26:34–35 and 27:46–28:9 to P.¹⁶ Thus, goes the theory, the Isaac that blesses Jacob in P (28:1–5) is unaware of the deception in J.¹⁷ But read synchronically, the second blessing of Isaac to Jacob is an important illustration of character judgment—Isaac seems to forgive or ignore Jacob’s earlier deception. Commentators usually include 27:46 with the following verses (28:1–5) rather than with 27:41–45. The argument is that Rebekah has two different reasons for sending Jacob away, one in vv. 41–45 and one in v. 46. Verse 46, following on the heels (in P) of 26:35, draws attention to (in)appropriate marriages, a concern of P.¹⁸ However, for the purposes of character analysis, I keep v. 46 with vv. 41–45 because they all demonstrate Rebekah’s ingenuity in creating and carrying out a plan by which to protect both of her sons. 28:1 begins a new scene because two new characters are primary (Isaac and Jacob).

There are seams at the edges of some of the scenes in which a third character is present. In 27:5, Rebekah is suddenly and surprisingly present in the scene. She interrupts the continuity between Isaac’s instructions and Esau’s obedience, thus foreshadowing the action that will take place in the rest of the episode. In v 30, Jacob leaves his father’s presence just as Esau is coming in from hunting—indicating not only the suspenseful proximity of the brothers, but also the fact that Jacob got to the prize first. In Scene Five (vv. 41–46), Rebekah and Jacob are the two main characters, but Esau appears at the front seam (v. 41) and Isaac at the end seam (v. 46). In fact, this scene could more properly be called “Rebekah and All the Other Characters,” because she is the primary speaker and actor.

Background Texts

Genesis 27 is not a standalone episode, but is the climax of the Jacob-Esau conflict which began in Rebekah’s womb (25:22). When the twins struggled within her, Rebekah “inquired of YHWH,” who told her: “Two nations are in your womb, and from your belly, two peoples will be divided. One people will be stronger than the other people, and

¹⁶ See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 203–204, for a detailed summary of the source critical argument.

¹⁷ David Marcus, “Traditional Jewish Responses to the Question of Deceit in Genesis 27,” in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (eds. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; Atlanta: SBL, 2000) 299–340. Cf. Speiser, *Genesis*, 215–216; Wenham, *Genesis*, 204.

¹⁸ See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 447.

the greater will serve the younger” (25:23).¹⁹ This oracle of YHWH not only interprets the conflict within the womb, but predicts the conflict that will occur later.²⁰

Esau is born red (אדמוני, *’admoni*) and hairy (שער, *śe’ar*) (25:25; hence his later associations with Edom and Seir), and grows up to be “a man knowing hunting,²¹ a man of the field” (25:27). Isaac loves Esau “because game was in his mouth” (27:28).²² Jacob, on the other hand, is born “grasping the heel (עקב, *’aqeb*) of Esau” (25:26), hence his name Jacob (יעקב, *ya’aqob*). He grows up to be “a *tām* man, dwelling in tents” (25:27). The translation of *tām* is difficult. It usually means “complete,” “whole,” or “perfect.” In the case of Job, it means something like “blameless” or “having integrity” (Job 1:1). These do not describe the trickster Jacob. But other translations which contrast *tām* with Esau’s apparently robust and loud personality—“quiet,” “sedentary”—are also unsatisfactory. J. P. Fokkelman suggests that for Jacob, *tām* should be understood under the heading of integrity, as “bent on one purpose.” That is, “Jacob ... works at one purpose for all he is worth, to become the blessed one who takes the first place. ... This singleness of purpose constitutes Jacob’s ‘integrity.’”²³ This understanding of *tām* seems to comport with the way Jacob is characterized by his actions: he seeks to take the birthright and the blessing from Esau so that he can have the benefits of the firstborn. After the narrator’s description of Jacob, we are told that “Rebekah loved Jacob” (25:28). Unlike Isaac’s love for Esau, the description of Rebekah’s love is unqualified. The reason for her love of Jacob is a narrative gap. Could this be unconditional love? Perhaps Rebekah’s love is inspired by YHWH’s oracle; Jacob the younger will have authority over Esau the elder. Or maybe Rebekah loves Jacob because he, like his mother, dwells among the tents and leads a more domestic life. While the text does not give a reason, readers who attempt to fill in the gap can come to different conclusions.

The next pertinent scene leading up to Genesis 27 is 25:29–34. In this episode, Esau comes in from his hunting and is famished. Jacob has cooked a stew and Esau wants

¹⁹ All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

²⁰ Cf. Terence E. Fretheim, “Which Blessing Does Isaac Give Jacob?” in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (eds. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 284–285, who suggests that God’s oracle has actually “generated certain levels of the conflict” as well.

²¹ Or “a skillful hunter,” but I have opted to keep the translation more literal.

²² In Hebrew, the referent for “his mouth” is ambiguous. Presumably it is the mouth of Isaac, who loves to eat the game that Esau brings him. But if it is Esau’s mouth, then Esau could be pictured as a sort of dog or other predator which carries its prey in its mouth (cf. 1 Sam 17:35; Amos 3:12; Alter, *Genesis*, 128). This could be a detail by which the narrator subtly demeans Esau. But if the phrase refers to Isaac’s mouth, then Isaac’s appetite is emphasized, a detail which factors into his characterization in ch. 27.

²³ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (2nd ed.; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 91. Cf. Ellen F. Davis, “Job and Jacob: The Integrity of Faith,” in *Reading Between Texts* (ed. Danna Nolan Fewell; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 203–224.

to eat from it. Jacob names the price of the stew: the birthright. Esau agrees, and Jacob gives him the stew. There is no theft in this episode; rather, it is an exchange, though a lopsided one. The last thing the narrator tells us is that Esau “despised the birthright” (29:34).

Isaac and Rebekah have much more textual prehistory than Jacob and Esau. Isaac could be understood as a more passive character, when compared to his father Abraham and son Jacob. Other characters act on Isaac or on his behalf more than he himself acts. He was the child promised to Abraham and Sarah. After his birth (Gen 21), he was nearly sacrificed (Gen 22), only spared at the last moment. Isaac did not find a wife for himself, but Abraham sent a servant to find a wife for him. Abraham’s servant found Rebekah (Gen 24), a relative through Abraham’s brother Nahor. Rebekah is hospitable and decisive in her interactions with the servant and with her own family. She goes to Canaan with the servant (leaving the land of her birth, like Abraham), and is joined to Isaac. We are told that Isaac loves Rebekah (24:67), and later, because she is barren, Isaac prays for her (25:21). Once the twins grow up, Isaac loves Esau and Rebekah loves Jacob (25:28). Genesis 26 narrates the family’s stay in Gerar during a famine, but it is told from the perspective of Isaac. The twins are not mentioned, and Rebekah has only a brief appearance. Isaac tells the locals that Rebekah is his sister, because he fears they will kill him if he says Rebekah is his wife (26:7). This is the third wife-sister episode in Genesis, the first two performed by Abraham and Sarah (chs. 12 and 20). In Isaac’s rendition, he is found out not through divine intervention (as in the two Abraham versions), but because Abimelech, the Philistine king, happens to look out a window to see Isaac “Isaacing”²⁴ his wife (26:8). Right before the blessing episode, the narrator informs us that Esau has married Hittite wives, who are a “bitterness of spirit” for Isaac and Rebekah (26:34–35, cf. 27:46; 28:8).

The characterization of Jacob and Esau which leads up to the Blessing Episode is relatively straightforward. The brothers are contrasted by the narrator, and YHWH gives expression to the conflict between them that will continue to grow. Isaac and Rebekah’s relationship is more difficult to decipher, and thus we are faced with a situation of indeterminacy before we even get to the blessing episode. While Isaac loves Rebekah (24:67), the narrator leaves a gap concerning Rebekah’s feelings toward Isaac. Presumably, Isaac’s love (24:67) and care (25:21) for Rebekah could be reciprocated.²⁵

²⁴ In Hebrew this verb is the Piel form of Isaac’s name, and has sexual connotations (NRSV has “fondling”). It is interesting that here Isaac “Isaacs” his wife, and in Genesis 27:36, Esau claims that Jacob has “Jacobed” him twice. Thus these two patriarchs live out the verbs associated with their names and get caught, following, as will be outlined in a later section, the plotline of the trickster.

²⁵ Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 60.

However, Rebekah might be resentful for the way she was treated by Isaac in Gerar.²⁶ But what if she played along with the ruse in order to protect her husband there?²⁷ Finally, the notice of parental love in 25:28 could indicate a division of the family. Could the favoritism described there represent a larger family conflict? Or might it be a more benign description, only implying preference?

With these questions and textual clues, one may posit these broad potential options for the spousal relationship:

1. Isaac and Rebekah love each other.
 - a. They are not in conflict in chapter 27, but each wants their favorite son to receive the blessing.
 - b. They work together to help Jacob secure the blessing.²⁸
2. Isaac and Rebekah are in conflict.
 - a. The Blessing Episode is an outworking of the favoritism they exhibited in 25:28. Isaac’s plan to bless Esau struggles against Rebekah’s plan to have Jacob blessed.
 - b. Rebekah’s plan is prompted by the way she was treated in Gerar. Trickery pays back trickery.²⁹

Where the text of Genesis 27 provides evidence to support one or more of these options, I will return to the question of Rebekah and Isaac’s relationship.

The Birthright, the Blessing, and the Oracle

Three concepts that factor into my analysis—and thus require some explanation—are the birthright (25:29–34; 27:36), the blessing, and the oracle of YHWH (25:23). The birthright was the right of the firstborn to inherit the father’s property and position upon the father’s death.³⁰ Later Israelite law dictated that the firstborn should receive a larger

²⁶ Imtraud Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled with God* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005), 61; Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar’s Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 64.

²⁷ Christine Garside Allen, ““On Me Be the Curse My Son!”” in *Encounter With the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Martin J. Buss; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 169; Adrien Janis Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster, Heel, and Hairy-Man: Rereading Genesis 27 as a Trickster Tale Told by a Woman,” in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (ed. Athalya Brenner; First Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 287.

²⁸ David J. Zucker, “The Deceiver Deceived: Rereading Genesis 27,” *JBQ* 39, no. 1 (2011): 49.

²⁹ So Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled*, 61; Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 64.

³⁰ Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis* (ed. and trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob; New York: Ktav, 1974), 188; Sarna, *Genesis*, 180–181.

portion than the other sons (Deut 21:15–17).³¹ That Esau would sell this right to Jacob for a bowl of stew indicates his disregard for it (25:34: “and Esau *despised* the birthright”).³² Esau gives up his larger share of the inheritance, and thus his future prominence within the family.³³ For Jacob, having the right of the firstborn is practically to *be* the firstborn, but only Jacob and Esau know of the trade (there is no suggestion that either of the parents are told), and so Isaac still plans to bless Esau. It is noteworthy that the narrator never calls Jacob or Esau the “firstborn” (בכר)—only the sons claim this title for themselves (27:19, 32)³⁴—an indication that its rights and position are in dispute.

The blessing which Isaac plans to give to Esau is a deathbed blessing.³⁵ The blessing did not need to be given only to the firstborn³⁶ (cf. Jacob blessing his grandsons [Gen 48:14–20] and each of his twelve sons [49:1–28]), and might also be accompanied by instructions (28:1–5; 49:29–33; cf. 1 Kgs 2:1–10). While the birthright was concerned with inheriting property, the blessing was concerned with prosperity and fertility.³⁷ In the blessing which Isaac gives to Jacob-as-Esau, however, prosperity is followed by a blessing of authority over brothers and nations.³⁸ While the connection between the

³¹ The firstborn receives either a double portion (while the other sons receive single portions) or two-thirds of the father’s estate (with the remaining one-third divided among the others), depending on how one translates the passage. Cf. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 58.

³² It is unclear whether this sort of transaction would be binding. Deuteronomy 21:15–17 protects the firstborn from losing his extra inheritance because of the father’s favoritism for another son, but does not address whether a son could trade his own birthright to another. There appears to be evidence that this sort of transaction was a possibility in the ancient Near East (see Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* [New York: Melton Research Center, 1966], 186–187 for more detail). However, its historical probability does not affect the fact that Esau sells the birthright to Jacob. For further discussion of the birthright law, especially in the context of Jacob and Esau, see Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 55–68.

³³ It appears that Esau later regrets this trade (see 27:36), especially after he loses the blessing as well.

³⁴ Sarna, *Genesis*, 190; Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 106–107.

³⁵ Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 436–437.

³⁶ Wenham argues that because Isaac summons only Esau—and not also Jacob—to receive the blessing, the “whole procedure is flawed from the start.” Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 203, 205.

³⁷ Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (trans. Keith Crim; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 18, 54; James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 226–233.

³⁸ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 110–111; McKeown, *Genesis*, 230. Familial authority is a key aspect when Jacob blesses his own sons as well (Gen 49): he gives greater priority to Judah the fourth-born and Joseph the tenth-born than Reuben, Simeon and Levi, his three eldest sons (cf. 1 Chron 5:1).

blessing (ברכה) and the birthright (בכרה) is not made explicit by the text (except perhaps in 27:36), both set up power relations within the family. The birthright insures that the firstborn son becomes the head of the family upon his father’s death. The blessing which Isaac gives to Jacob-as-Esau establishes the primacy of one brother over the other. That Jacob receives Isaac’s blessing only confirms and establishes what Jacob is entitled to by the birthright. The blessing and the birthright both concern the future of the family, passing on the ancestral heritage from one generation to the next. However, there is a key ancestral legacy which is conspicuously absent from Isaac’s blessing to Jacob-as-Esau: the Abrahamic promise and covenant. Isaac was not planning to pass on the Abrahamic blessing to Esau. Perhaps this is because it was not his to bestow; rather, only God can choose who will receive this blessing in the next generation.³⁹

But God also seems to have a stake in the power relations between the brothers. In the oracle to the pregnant Rebekah (25:23), YHWH foretold that “the greater [or elder] shall serve the younger.” This oracle is unwittingly fulfilled by Isaac when he blesses Jacob, “Be lord to your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you” (27:29), and when Isaac blesses Esau, “Your brother you shall serve” (27:40). The oracle of YHWH, like the birthright and the blessing, is concerned with which son of Isaac and Rebekah has authority over the other, and similarly omits the distinct features of the promise to Abraham (of land and descendants).

It is often asked how Jacob’s ascendancy over Esau actually plays out in their lives. Esau never serves Jacob, nor even bows to him; in fact, it is Jacob himself who bows down to Esau seven times (33:3)!⁴⁰ As commentators note, however, the oracle of YHWH and Isaac’s blessings for his sons also point to the relations between the nations descended from Jacob and Esau: Israel and Edom. Edom was a vassal state of Israel for a time (2 Sam 8:14), thus fulfilling the younger’s dominance over the elder.⁴¹ But Edom eventually revolted (2 Kgs 8:20–22), thus fulfilling Isaac’s blessing of Esau that “you will break his yoke from off your neck” (Gen 27:40). Though the international history of Israel and Edom can be discerned in YHWH’s oracle and Isaac’s blessings, this should not detract from interpreting the impact the oracle and blessings have on the lives of

³⁹ Fretheim, “Which Blessing?”, 279, 290. While it appears that Isaac passes on the Abrahamic blessing in 28:3–4, Fretheim argues that Isaac can only “commend” Jacob to God as a worthy candidate, and that only God can grant the blessing. This will be discussed further in scene six (p. 55).

⁴⁰ Cf. Frank Anthony Spina, “The ‘Face of God’: Esau in Canonical Context,” in *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders* (eds. Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon; Leiden: Brill, 1997): 15.

⁴¹ Israel was also a younger nation than Edom. When the Israelites were headed to the land of Canaan, Edom was already an established country with a king (cf. Num 20:14–21).

Jacob and Esau.⁴² Jacob’s primacy over Esau may never have been actualized, but that does not make it any less real. The fact that Esau is utterly distraught (27:34) at having lost his birthright and blessing (27:36) and plans to murder Jacob because of it (27:41) indicates its real claim on the lives of Jacob and Esau. While the subservience of Esau may not have found practical effect, its proclamation was enough to change the course of the brothers’ relationship. The reason for Jacob’s departure and the subsequent reconciliation between brothers (Gen 33) is caused by the struggle for firstborn status, a struggle in which Jacob emerged victorious (cf. 32:28).

Power Relations

One final section is important for this introduction. It concerns the structures of power in the blessing episode. Understanding the relative power statuses of each character has a dramatic impact on how one might judge their actions. The narrative of the blessing takes place in a patriarchal culture, where the eldest male has the most social power. This means that Isaac is the most powerful person in the narrative. However, as noted above (p. 9), he is portrayed as a passive character. His blindness and old age (27:1) show that he is also physically weak. Thus the narrator has set up Isaac to have conflicting levels of power: he is politically powerful but physically weak and literarily passive.

Esau is the next most powerful person. As the firstborn male, he is positioned to take over Isaac’s role. We are told just prior to the blessing episode that Esau is forty years old and married (26:34–35). He is a grown male and presumably the head of his own household (though not yet his father’s household). In addition, Esau is a manly man, one who hunts and enjoys the outdoors, and who has plenty of body hair, a sign of masculinity.⁴³ But it appears to be Esau’s very strength—perhaps an overconfidence in his power—that leads to his downfall. Twice while he is hunting—that very activity which displays his manliness—he loses a significant piece of his status to Jacob: first the birthright (25:29–34), then the blessing (27:5–30). Thus for Esau, his power is his very undoing, his trajectory is one of tragedy.

Jacob, as the second born son, has fewer rights and privileges than his elder brother. He has lower social power. In contrast to Esau, Jacob is a “smooth” man (27:11) who dwells among the tents (25:27). While being a tent-dweller can mean being a shepherd (cf. 4:20; 13:2–5), it also has connotations of femininity (cf. 18:9; 24:67), as the home was considered the domain of the woman.⁴⁴ Coupled with the lack of hair, it is

⁴² Cf. Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Recovering the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 52.

⁴³ Susan Niditch, “My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man”: *Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 116.

⁴⁴ Cf. Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 105.

possible to consider Jacob a more “effeminate son.”⁴⁵ Jacob’s more feminine characterization may point to his relative powerlessness compared to Esau, which only further accentuates his victory over his brother.⁴⁶ Jacob is also portrayed as clever and stubborn, one who does not “let go” until he receives a benefit (cf. 25:31–34; 32:26). This allows him to persevere and overcome obstacles, including unfair power structures. Jacob is an underdog and a trickster, literary types that will be examined later in this paper.

Rebekah, as a woman, is the least socially powerful among the characters, and is “as underprivileged as her son Jacob.”⁴⁷ However, just as Isaac was given uneven modes of power, so the narrator compensates Rebekah’s inferior social status with a high literary power. That is, Rebekah has the most control over the course of the plot. Her plans overcome the plans of Isaac (27:1–5) and Esau (27:41), and in the end, she accomplishes her goal to have Jacob blessed. While it may be an overstatement to say that Rebekah moves “the men around her like chess pieces,”⁴⁸ the inversion of power in this narrative cannot be ignored. The socially powerless Rebekah is also a trickster whose literary strength as a character enables her to achieve victory for Jacob.

⁴⁵ Niditch, ‘*My Brother Esau*’, 115–116.

⁴⁶ See Niditch, ‘*My Brother Esau*’, 117: “What we can say with certainty is that the writers of the Hebrew Bible, in various ways, love to portray the success of the disempowered who are aided by their ever-present divine ally, the all-powerful Yhwh. God loves the weak because their success is testimony to the realization that all power comes from him. No one is weaker than women in the views of androcentric writers, and so Israel becomes the female in a relationship with her protector God.”

⁴⁷ Esther Fuchs, “Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Adela Yarbro Collins; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 138.

⁴⁸ Susan Niditch, “Genesis,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary: Revised and Updated* (eds. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 36.

**SCENE ONE (GEN 27:1–5)
ISAAC’S COMMISSION TO ESAU**

Translation

1 And it was that Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see. And he called Esau his big son. And he said to him, “My son.” And he said to him, “Behold me.”
 2 And he said, “Behold (please), I am old. I do not know the day of my death.
 3 So now, lift up (please) your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt for me wild game.
 4 And make for me delicacies, just as I love, and bring to me so I may eat, so that my *nefesh* may bless you before I die.”
 5 (And Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son!) And Esau went to the field to hunt wild game to bring.

Translation Notes

Verse 1. “His big son”: traditionally “his older/elder son.” I have chosen to retain the simple translation of “big,” in contrast to Jacob’s description as the “small” son (27:15).⁴⁹

Verse 2. “Behold (please)”: I have translated the usually untranslated particle **נָה**, which in the case of imperatives, can soften the force of the command.

Verse 3. The words for “hunt” and “wild game” come from the same root (**ציד**).

Verse 4. “Delicacies”: This rare word only occurs eight times in the Hebrew Bible: six times in Genesis 27, and twice in Proverbs 23. The root **טעם** means “to taste.” “My *nefesh*”: **נַפְשִׁי**, “my soul.” This is usually translated as an emphatic “I,” but I leave “my *nefesh*” transliterated for two reasons. First, it sets up a contrast between Isaac’s speech here and what Rebekah reports to Jacob (discussed in scene two, p. 21). Second, *nefesh*, traditionally rendered “soul,” can also mean “appetite,” which produces some interesting connotations, considering that Isaac has just asked for food (see p. 17). Some translators render *nefesh* as an adverb or adjective, thus: “solemnly bless” (Alter); “my innermost blessing” (Sarna, Plaut).

Verse 5. I have put the information about Rebekah in parentheses to emphasize her intrusion here: in between Isaac’s command and Esau’s obedience. In Hebrew, Rebekah’s presence is even more striking because she is named before the verb, reversing normal word order.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 65.11 (ed. and trans. H. Freedman; vol. 2; 3d ed.; New York: Soncino, 1983), which also plays with the meaning of **גדל** as “great.”

Analysis of the Scene

The blessing episode begins with the notice that Isaac is old and practically blind. These two details of Isaac’s condition seem at first to be ordinary facts. When one is old, eyesight tends to diminish (cf. Gen 48:10; Deut 34:7; 1 Sam 3:2). But these are crucial details for the development of the plot.⁵⁰ Each detail corresponds to one of Isaac’s sons. Isaac’s old age, and therefore imminent death, prompt him to bless his eldest son Esau, which sets up the whole episode. The detail about his failed eyesight is the condition which allows Jacob to approach his father in the guise of Esau without being discovered.⁵¹

The conversation between Isaac and Esau starts with a characteristic “commissioning exchange.” Isaac first says, “My son,” to which Esau responds, “Behold me” (traditionally rendered “Here I am”).⁵² Isaac then launches into his speech, commenting on his imminent death before giving a lengthy, five-verb command to Esau, followed by a promised reward: “so that my *nefesh* may bless you before I die.”⁵³

As the scene progresses, it seems that this will be a straightforward tale of command and obedience: Isaac commands, Esau obeys. But right before Esau leaves, we learn an intriguing fact: Rebekah has been listening the whole time! Why is this information revealed now? Why not earlier or later? If it was stated at the beginning of the scene, one might think she was present with Isaac and Esau, as if both parents were commissioning their oldest son. If given later, it would feel redundant, because Rebekah immediately tells Jacob that she was listening in on the conversation. Its current placement is a strategic move by the narrator because it separates Isaac from Esau, command from obedience. Rebekah disrupts the connection between father and oldest son in order that the younger son can receive the blessing. Indeed, this sentence is a miniature representation of the next two scenes, in which Rebekah and Jacob plan and act, with the result that Jacob receives the blessing. Esau’s obedience to his father’s commission is presented in vv. 5 and 30–31. If Rebekah and Jacob did not intervene, the narrative would flow smoothly from command to obedience to blessing for Esau. But as it is written, Rebekah’s interruption between Isaac and Esau in v. 5 foreshadows the way in which Rebekah and Jacob come between Isaac and Esau in scenes two and three (vv. 6–29) so that Jacob receives the blessing instead.

⁵⁰ Cf. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 71.

⁵¹ *Genesis Rabbah* 65.8. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 205.

⁵² For other “commissionings” that begin this way, see Gen 22:1, 11; 31:11; 37:13; 46:2; Exod 3:4; 1 Sam 3:4–16; Isa 6:8. Cf. Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 51–53.

⁵³ This opening is somewhat parallel to Genesis 22. Both begin with the commissioning exchange, and both are concerned with Isaac’s death. In chapter 27, Isaac’s death frames the command and the promise of a blessing which he gives to Esau. In chapter 22, however, Isaac’s death is the command, and blessing is not mentioned until the act is nearly carried out. In both cases, Isaac’s death necessitates blessing.

Analysis of the Characters

Isaac and Rebekah

The power structures of this tale are no more apparent than here. Isaac wishes to bless Esau according to the traditional, patriarchal convention. The two most powerful characters are poised to transfer the patriarchal power from father to son. Rebekah, though socially powerless, is clever and resourceful. She overhears the commission and sees an opportunity to advance the cause of her younger son, Jacob. Though the first-time reader does not know how the story ends, victory seems to be adumbrated by the report of Rebekah’s listening which intrudes between Isaac and Esau. Two different plotlines begin here, one initiated by Isaac and one by Rebekah. While conventional, patriarchal power may insist that Isaac’s plan and Esau’s obedience should prevail, the biblical writers tend to favor the weak over the strong. This is a reflection of God’s preference for the powerless over the powerful, a preference which is particularly relevant given YHWH’s oracle (25:23).

Isaac and Esau

When Isaac commissions Esau, it may seem like he is giving his son a unique task to match the unique occasion. But the task is not unique; in fact, it actually seems to be a regular occurrence.⁵⁴ “Isaac loved Esau because wild game was in his mouth” (25:28). Esau is the son whom Isaac loves, yet here Isaac declares his love not for Esau, but for the “delicacies” which Esau is to make (27:4). Indeed, while Esau, Jacob, and Rebekah are all shown to be cooks, Isaac is not. Isaac loves to be fed. This characterization of Isaac is compounded by his use of the word *nefesh*, which I left untranslated. It is traditionally rendered “soul,” but means something more like “life” or “inner being” (see translation notes above). But there is another possible meaning of *nefesh*, and that is “appetite.”⁵⁵ Notice that the blessing which Isaac promises comes only after he has eaten.⁵⁶ “Make for me delicacies—just as I love—and bring to me so I may eat, so that my [satisfied] appetite may bless you before I die.”

If Isaac is perceived as a man of appetite, he is then very much like Esau. In 25:29–34, Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a pot of lentil stew, which he hastily gulps down in his hunger. He also claims, like Isaac, to be dying: “I am walking toward death,”

⁵⁴ Devora Steinmetz also notes this: *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict, and Continuity in Genesis* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 39–40. Rimmon-Kenan (*Narrative Fiction*, 61) notes that “habitual actions tend to reveal the character’s unchanging or static aspect, often having a comic or ironic effect.” As I will show, Esau loses his blessing precisely as he is performing this habitual action at which he excels.

⁵⁵ Yair Zakovitch, *Jacob: Unexpected Patriarch* (trans. Valerie Zakovitch; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 29.

⁵⁶ But see Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 440, who perceives it as a cultic meal by which the one who blesses receives strength. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 190.

he says (25:32). Like son, like father.⁵⁷ The prospect of death prompts a request for food, and in exchange for food, a firstborn right is given. In each case, it is Jacob who ends up with the reward: the birthright (בכורה) first and then the blessing (ברכה). Jacob benefits from the appetites of Esau and Isaac.

When Isaac sends Esau to the field, Esau enters the space where he thrives (cf. 25:27–28). But the field also becomes the space for Esau’s defeat. It is while Esau is in the field or coming in from the field that he loses birthright and blessing.

The reader can already feel the odds stacking against Esau. The oracle foretold his subservience to Jacob. Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, with the explicit comment that he “despised the birthright” (25:34). Just before the blessing episode, we are told Esau has married Hittite women who become burdensome for his parents (26:34–35). All of these prior events in Esau’s life hint that he is unqualified to receive the blessing.

Yet Esau is obedient and honors his father in this episode. The rabbis had this to say: “R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said: All my lifetime I attended upon my father, yet I did not do for him a hundredth part of the service which Esau did for his father.”⁵⁸ But his obedience here is tempered by his past shortcomings. Or perhaps it is the other way around, that his shortcomings are tempered by his obedience, lest we demonize Esau unfairly. Thus the reader can be sympathetic toward Esau in this episode without overlooking the ways in which he has disqualified himself.

⁵⁷ Cf. Niditch, *My Brother Esau*, 115.

⁵⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* 65.16; cf. *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1.15: “R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said: No son has ever honoured his parents as much as I have done, and yet I find that Esau honoured his father even more than I” (ed. and trans. J. Rabbinowitz; vol. 7; 3d ed.; New York: Soncino, 1983).

**SCENE TWO (GEN 27:6–17)
REBEKAH’S PLAN**

Translation

6 And Rebekah said to Jacob her son, saying, “Behold, I heard your father speaking to Esau your brother, saying,
7 ‘Bring to me wild game and make for me delicacies so I may eat and I will bless you before YHWH before my death.’
8 So now, my son, listen to my voice, to what I am commanding you:
9 Go (please) to the flock and take for me from there two good goat-kids, and I will make them delicacies for your father just as he loves.
10 Then you will bring to your father and he will eat, on account of which he will bless you before his death.”
11 And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man.
12 If perhaps my father feels me, then I will be in his eyes like a mocker, and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing.”
13 And to him his mother said, “Upon me be your curse, my son. Only, listen to my voice and go, take for me.”
14 And he went and he took and he brought to his mother, and his mother made delicacies just as his father loved.
15 And Rebekah took the garments of Esau her big son—the precious-ones which were with her in the house—and she clothed Jacob her small son.
16 And with the skins of the goat kids she clothed upon his hands and upon the smoothness of his neck.
17 And she gave the delicacies and the bread which she had made into the hand of Jacob her son.

Translation Notes

Verse 6. As in verse 5, Rebekah appears before the verb—reversing normal Hebrew word order—which emphasizes Rebekah’s role in the narrative.

Verse 10. “on account of which.” The construction is בעבר אשר, *ba ‘ăbur ašer*. As far as I can tell, it is a unique construction in MT. *Ba ‘ăbûr* (בעבור, *plene* spelling) is used by Isaac (v. 4), Jacob (v. 19), and Esau (v. 31) as a conjunction, “so that” or “in order that,” preceding the subject of blessing, “my/your *nefesh* (נפשך/נפשי)”: “so that your *nefesh* may bless me.” Rebekah, using deficient spelling (not meaningful in itself) and the relative particle אשר, seems to use it in a prepositional sense: “on account of which” or “for the sake of which.” BDB takes אשר as an optional addition for the word “that.” This would translate the clause “so that he will bless you,” and thus has no essential difference from the other uses in Gen 27. However, seeing אשר as a relative pronoun, the phrase opens up a

new interpretive possibility—and thus establishes the difference between Rebekah’s and the men’s use of the same word. “And you will bring to your father and he will eat, on account of which he will bless you.” Isaac will bless Jacob *on account of*, that is, *because of*, his eating. This will be discussed further below (pp. 24–25).

Verse 15. “And Rebekah took the garments of Esau her big son—the precious-ones...” Most translations treat “the garments” (בגדי) and “the precious ones” (החמדת) as a hendiadys (i.e., “the precious garments”) despite the fact that they are different genders (*garments* is masculine plural, *precious-ones* is feminine plural) and are separated by the three words denoting Esau’s ownership of them. My translation follows the Hebrew more closely, and demonstrates a narrative specification: Rebekah took Esau’s garments; not just any of his garments, but the precious-ones which were with her in the house.

Analysis of the Scene

Though Rebekah and Jacob appear together in this scene, Rebekah is clearly in control. It is her initiation, resourcefulness, and preparation that allows Jacob to obtain the blessing from Isaac. Rebekah’s authority is reflected in the Hebrew syntax: both verses 5 and 6 begin with Rebekah’s name, coming before the verb. As mentioned in the translation notes, this construction emphasizes Rebekah’s prominence in the episode. After she hears Isaac’s plan, she then speaks to Jacob, putting another plan in motion. Not only does her plan succeed, but when Esau plots to kill Jacob, she implements another plan which keeps the family safe.

In scene one, Isaac spoke to his son Esau (v. 5), whereas in scene two, Rebekah speaks to her son Jacob,⁵⁹ reporting to him Isaac’s commission to Esau. As is clear from

⁵⁹ Some commentators (e.g., Hamilton, Jeansonne, Wenham) find the genitive pronouns in Gen 27 to be evidence of a divided family. In vv. 5 and 6, Isaac speaks to *his* son, while Rebekah in turn speaks to *her* son. According to the argument, this indicates that the family is split in two: Rebekah and Jacob versus Isaac and Esau. Other pronoun uses apparently also point to the distance between characters. Some observations are in order, however. First, Esau is also called *her* (Rebekah’s) son in this episode (27:15, 42; 28:5). Though some (e.g., Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 66) claim that Esau is only called Rebekah’s son by the narrator, it should be noted that Jacob is also only called “*her* son” by the narrator (27:5, 15, 17, 42); it is true that Rebekah calls Jacob “my son,” but what else would she call him? Second, it is sometimes argued that Rebekah deliberately distances herself from Isaac and Esau when she talks to Jacob by calling them “your father” (instead of “my husband”) and “your brother” (instead of “my son”) (see, e.g., Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled*, 60). But this is a normal conversational construction. How awkward it would be for Rebekah to say to Jacob, “I heard my husband speaking to my other son,” as if Jacob was not himself related to them. Far from emphasizing division, Rebekah’s pronouns describe Isaac and Esau in relation to Jacob, to whom she

even a surface reading, Rebekah’s report of Isaac’s speech is different than Isaac’s actual speech. For one, it is much briefer. Whereas Isaac tells Esau about his imminent death and gives him a detailed, multi-verb command, Rebekah only reports what is necessary for Jacob to hear. “Bring to me wild game.” This lets Jacob know that Esau is out hunting—he will be away from the camp for a while, because hunting does not usually happen quickly (cf. v. 20). “Make for me delicacies.” Isaac wants a particular meal cooked from this wild game. “So I may eat and I will bless you . . . before I die.” Isaac is prepared to give his patriarchal blessing. This is Jacob’s chance to receive it.

The efficiency of Rebekah’s report is not limited to subject matter, but is also reflected in grammatical construction. Where Isaac uses the emphatic clause, “so that my *nefesh* may bless you” (three words in Hebrew), Rebekah drops the indirect language and simply uses the first person singular conjugation of the verb: “and I will bless you” (one word in Hebrew). Isaac also says בטרם while Rebekah uses the more common לפני for “before” (Rebekah uses “before” in both its spatial and temporal senses).

Given Rebekah’s tendency to efficiency, her added phrase, “before YHWH,” is all the more striking. Why does she invoke God’s name in her report when Isaac did not say it in the first place? There are a few possibilities, none of which are conclusive. First, while Isaac has sent Esau off to perform a habitual deed (hunting and cooking) by which Isaac will grant him a deathbed blessing, Rebekah wants to “impress upon Jacob the importance and solemnity of the occasion.”⁶⁰ Alternatively, Isaac’s words may be patterned after a social convention, one which neglects to refer to God. Rebekah invokes God’s name to persuade Jacob that the blessing Isaac gives will be divinely supported. Because the blessing is before the deity, it signifies a sacred and irrevocable act.

Another interpretive option suggests that Rebekah self-consciously refers to the oracle she received from YHWH (25:23). Rebekah thinks she will fulfill the oracle by ensuring that Jacob gets the blessing. Of course, as was discussed in the introduction (p. 12), this is exactly what happens. Isaac blesses Jacob, proclaiming that he will be “lord to [his] brothers” (27:29), which is confirmed in Esau’s blessing: “Your brother you shall serve” (27:40) This proclamation of Jacob’s ascendancy over Esau fulfills YHWH’s oracle that “the greater shall serve the younger.” Without Rebekah’s planning and action, Jacob would not have received the blessing and the oracle would not have been fulfilled. Esau would have had authority over Jacob. If one accepts this line of interpretation—that Rebekah seeks to fulfill the oracle—a difficult question arises: What is the role of human agency in fulfilling God’s will? While it is beyond the scope of this paper, the way one answers that question will affect how one judges Rebekah’s actions. Are they appropriate, inappropriate, or unnecessary?

speaks. Cf. Ronald T. Hyman, “Comment on ‘The God of Abraham, Rebekah, and Jacob,’” *JBQ* 33, no. 1 (2005): 62.

⁶⁰ Sarna, *Genesis*, 190.

A third interpretation is that Rebekah justifies her actions by invoking YHWH. She tries to give the deception a “spiritual dimension”⁶¹ in order to get Jacob on board. Alternatively, she could also be justifying her attempt to fulfill YHWH’s oracle. In fact, the three interpretive possibilities given in the prior paragraphs are not mutually exclusive, but can be synthesized in various combinations. However, the text is quite reticent when it comes to the motives of the characters, particularly Rebekah in this scene, as will be discussed below (pp. 26–28). Any theories we generate for her motivation will be tentative and incomplete.

After her report of Isaac’s commission, Rebekah begins to command Jacob. She transitions to the command with “So now” (וְעַתָּה; v. 8), exactly the same way Isaac had begun his commission of Esau (v. 3), demonstrating that contradictory plans are now in motion. Her command is comprised of two verbs: go and take.⁶² At this point, we are only aware of one point of deception: instead of wild game, two goat kids will be cooked into the delicacies which Isaac loves. Rebekah insinuates that Jacob will pretend to be Esau, but does not state it outright. Jacob jumps to this conclusion and raises a problem.

“Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man.”⁶³ If perhaps my father feels me, then I will be in his eyes like a mocker, and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing” (vv. 11–12). If Jacob is to act as Esau, then he must feel like his hirsute twin. Many commentators point out that Jacob is not protesting his mother’s plan out of moral compunction, but out of the fear of being caught.⁶⁴ Jacob is willing to go along with the plan, but he wants to make sure he is protected first: protected against detection and protected against a curse. Rebekah responds to both of these concerns, first by taking any curse he might receive upon herself, and later by covering the smoothness of his skin with the skins of the goats.

After Rebekah reassures Jacob, she reiterates her command, “Go and take for me.” Jacob obeys Rebekah, just as Esau obeyed Isaac. Two obedient sons fulfill the plans laid out by their parents, but these plans cannot both succeed. One will prevail over the other. Rebekah takes the clothes of her “big son” Esau and puts them on her “small son” Jacob. As mentioned in the translation note on 27:1 (p. 15), גִּדְלִי and קָטָן can be translated “elder” and “younger” (as is traditionally done in this episode). But Esau, being a hunter

⁶¹ McKeown, *Genesis*, 134.

⁶² Interestingly, these two verbs comprise the test of Abraham in Gen 22 as well (22:2–3, 13). See Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 51–57.

⁶³ Being “smooth” has the connotation—in Hebrew as in English—of being clever or untrustworthy (cf. Ps 12:3–5 [Eng 12:2–4]; Pr 2:16; 5:3; 7:5). Spina, “The ‘Face of God’,” 10, suggests that Jacob’s admission of being smooth is an “instance of self-incrimination” and therefore provides an implicit character judgment. Cf. Zakovitch, *Jacob*, 30.

⁶⁴ E.g., Alter, *Genesis*, 139; McKeown, *Genesis*, 134; Sarna, *Genesis*, 191.

and an outdoorsman, could also be physically bigger than Jacob.⁶⁵ That קטן is used rather than צעיר (“younger,” used in YHWH’s oracle in 25:23) seems to play with this idea. Perhaps Jacob is wearing clothes that are too big for him! The purpose of the clothes, however, is not for looks (Isaac cannot see if they fit or not), but for the smell⁶⁶—the evidence which finally prompts Isaac to bless Jacob-as-Esau (27:27). After putting the goatskins in place, Rebekah gives Jacob the food she has made so he can take it to his father.

Even with all the disguise, however, is the plan really all that foolproof? Will Isaac be convinced that Jacob is Esau? Would Isaac really not be able to tell the difference between the hair of goats and Esau’s arm hair? Could he not discern between wild game and domestic goat meat, and ultimately between the wild Esau and the domestic Jacob? The reader waits with anticipation as Jacob stands at the edge of the crucial scene.

Analysis of the Characters

Isaac and Food

It becomes clear that Isaac continues to be associated with food. In Rebekah’s report of Isaac’s commission, the only phrases she quotes verbatim are “make for me delicacies” and “so I may eat” (v. 7, cf. v. 4). Everything else is paraphrase. Part of the plan hinges on how these delicacies are to be made. Isaac asks Esau to “make me delicacies *just as I love*” (v. 4). But it is clear from the remaining narrative that Esau cannot do this; only Rebekah can make this dish. Rebekah reports Isaac’s speech as “make for me delicacies,” without the “just as I love” ingredient which Isaac had mentioned. Why not? At first, her omission seems due to the efficiency of her report. But perhaps she doubts Esau’s ability to make this meal in just the right way. When she tells Jacob what she will make, she says, “delicacies just as he loves” (v. 9). Rebekah insinuates that she can make the dish, but Esau cannot. As it turns out, the narrator agrees with her. Rebekah’s meal is described as “delicacies just as he loved” (v. 14). When Esau makes his own meal for Isaac, it is described by the narrator as simply “delicacies” (v. 31). The narrator corroborates Rebekah’s judgment of Esau’s cooking ability. Only Rebekah can cook the perfect meal for Isaac, the one he asks for, the one he loves, the one that leads to the blessing.

Isaac sets up an “eating-to-blessing paradigm” in this episode.⁶⁷ This is echoed by every other character in the story as well. Isaac first says it in his commission: “make for me delicacies, just as I love, so I may eat, so that (בעבור) my *nefesh* may bless you before I die” (v. 4). Jacob and Esau both say it when they come to their father as well:

Jacob: “Eat from my wild game so that (בעבור) your *nefesh* may bless me” (v. 19).

⁶⁵ This is not to say Jacob is not strong. See 29:1–10 (specifically vv. 2–3, 10) for an example of Jacob’s strength.

⁶⁶ Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 140.

⁶⁷ Cf. a similar observation by Garside Allen, “Who Was Rebekah?”, 205.

Esau: “Let my father ... eat from the wild game of his son so that (בעבור) your *nefesh* may bless me” (v. 31).

Isaac says it again to Jacob-as-Esau right before the eating and blessing take place: “Bring to me so I may eat from the wild game of my son so that (למען) my *nefesh* may bless you” (v. 25). Isaac also refers to this order of operations when he breaks the unfortunate news to Esau: “Who then was he who hunted wild game and brought to me so that I ate from it all before you came, and I blessed him? Indeed, blessed shall he be!” (v. 33). Rebekah also speaks of this process twice, once when “quoting” Isaac’s commission, and once when giving her own commission to Jacob:

Report of Isaac’s speech: “Bring to me game and make for me delicacies so I may eat and I will bless you before YHWH before my death” (v. 7).

Rebekah’s commission to Jacob: “And you will bring to your father and he will eat, on account of which (בעבר אשר) he will bless you before his death” (v. 10).

This many occurrences of the eating-to-blessing paradigm provides overwhelming evidence that food is essential to the blessing in this episode. What effect does this data have?

First, the characterization of Isaac as a man of appetite comes into more focus. What was introduced in scene one is here in scene two reinforced; the image is virtually solidified by the end of Genesis 27. Second, the paradigm indicates the inseparable connection between food and blessing, and suggests that the blessing could only be transferred once Isaac had eaten.⁶⁸ Third, it implies that Esau was the intended recipient of the blessing. Since “Isaac loved Esau because game was in his mouth” (25:28), the paradigm plays to Esau’s strengths. This is Esau’s domain, and the meal will grant him access to the blessing.

But Jacob is also familiar with the eating-to-blessing paradigm. He purchased the birthright from Esau with a bowl of lentil stew (25:29–34). Perhaps he thinks he can purchase the blessing with food as well. After all, if the delicacies which Isaac loves lead to the blessing, is this not an exchange? There is a clue to this connection in Rebekah’s commission to Jacob. Notice how in vv. 4, 19, and 31 the word בעבור links the eating with the blessing (see top of this page). When Rebekah commands Jacob, however, she links the eating with the blessing by בעבר אשר. First, the spelling of בעבר is deficient (which is not necessarily significant in itself); she does not include the ך that the men use. Second, she adds the relative particle אשר, “that/which.” BDB treats אשר as an optional addition to בעבור (still to be translated “so that,” “in order that”), but 27:10 is the only occurrence of this construction in MT. If אשר is read not as a superfluous “that” but as a relative pronoun, and hence the “object” of the preposition בעבר, it would be read as “on

⁶⁸ “The meal is described ... as a constituent part of the blessing ritual” (Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 439, 440). Westermann is more interested in the ritual aspect of eating a meal, but comes to a similar conclusion regarding the necessity of food to the transference of blessing.

account of which” or “because of which,” the “which” referring back to the action of eating. “*On account of eating* (the meal), Isaac will bless you.” In Amos 2:6 and 8:6, בעבור is used in an economic sense: “for the price of.” “They sell ... the needy *for* (בעבור) a pair of sandals” (2:6; 8:6 NRSV). In a way, בעבור acts as the term denoting the exchange rate. Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes applies this sense of the term to Genesis 12:13, where Abram tells Sarai to “say now my sister art thou that it might go well with me *for the price of you* [בעבורך] and myself might live on account of you” (van Dijk-Hemmes’s translation, italics mine).⁶⁹ She writes, “Sarai’s beauty, which would cost Abram his life in his capacity as her husband, can, and indeed will, yield him a profit in his capacity as her brother. To Sarai’s ears the preposition used by Abram may sound like ‘at the cost of you.’”⁷⁰ This economic sense of the term could also fit Genesis 27:10. Rebekah’s command would be translated thus: “... and he will eat, *for the price of which* he will bless you.” In other words, the “cost” to receive the blessing is food. Food goes in, a blessing comes out! Jacob has already purchased the birthright with food, and this episode provides Jacob the chance to purchase the blessing with food as well. This is Jacob’s domain, and the meal will grant him access to the blessing.

Esau and Jacob

Esau and Jacob are contrasted from day one (25:25–28), and these contrasts play an important role in the blessing narrative, particularly this scene. Esau is hairy while Jacob is smooth. Esau is a hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob stays among the tents. Esau is a manly man, but Jacob is more effeminate. Yet Esau’s strengths, the very attributes that equip him for obedience to Isaac’s commission, tragically enable his downfall. While he is out hunting in the field, Jacob is among the tents (cf. 25:27) securing the blessing.

Another contrast between the brothers is their obedience. Esau obeys without question, a trait that was celebrated in his grandfather Abraham (22:16–18; 26:5). Jacob, on the other hand, “wrestles” (cf. 32:28) with his mother’s plan, only obeying once he is assured protection. This is a characteristic of Jacob, who demands assurance or evidence before he acquiesces to others. He requires Esau to swear to the birthright deal before giving him the stew (25:33). He only accepts YHWH as his God once he has seen evidence of this deity’s protection and presence (28:20–21; cf. 35:1–3). He refuses to let his nocturnal sparring partner go until he has received a blessing (32:26). So here, when Rebekah commands him, he needs assurance before he can obey. His hesitation pays off: not only does Rebekah protect him from any curse, but she cleverly disguises his arms so that he can succeed.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, “Sarai’s Exile: A Gender-Motivated Reading of Genesis 12.10–13.2,” in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (ed. Athalya Brenner; First Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 227.

⁷⁰ van Dijk-Hemmes, “Sarai’s Exile,” 229.

⁷¹ Cf. Allen, “On Me Be the Curse,” 169.

Rebekah

Even with Jacob’s hesitation, Rebekah is clearly in control of this scene, and indeed, the entire episode. There are three main questions which contribute to the interpretation of Rebekah’s character, all concerning motives.

1. Why does Rebekah invoke the name of YHWH?
2. Why does Rebekah want Jacob to receive the blessing?
3. Why does Rebekah use deception to accomplish her goal?

The first question was addressed above, with three potential—yet tentative—answers given. The second question has received various answers, which I will divide into two broad categories: Favoritism and Fulfillment. As with the first question, the answers to the second question are not all mutually exclusive, and be combined in different ways. But there are broad contours to their content, hence my division.

The Favoritism idea argues that Rebekah’s preference for Jacob (25:28) drives her to desire that he receive the blessing from Isaac. As noted in the introduction (p. 10), 25:28 could signal a rift in the family, whereby Rebekah and Jacob are pitted against Isaac and Esau. Rebekah’s plan trumps Isaac’s commission, and thus Isaac and Esau are the losers. Rebekah’s love for Jacob could be because of YHWH’s oracle; however, Jacob’s feminine characteristics, such as staying among the tents, may prompt her love instead—Jacob is similar to Rebekah.⁷² Rebekah wants Jacob to receive the blessing so that he can prosper. And Jacob’s economic security ensures her security as well.⁷³ Westermann claims that Rebekah wants to resist the unjust system of primogeniture so that the younger son can thrive.⁷⁴ To sum up the Favoritism theory: Rebekah seeks to enhance the power of her favorite son Jacob.

The Fulfillment idea argues that Rebekah tries to fulfill the oracle of YHWH, which foretold that “the greater shall serve the younger” (25:23). Rebekah’s love for Jacob is more likely prompted by the oracle, and she wants to make sure that Isaac blesses the “right” son. Rebekah takes it upon herself to carry out God’s plan to elevate the younger son. Once again, we face the problem of deciding whether Rebekah should or even could fulfill YHWH’s oracle. Regardless of how we might answer that question, it appears that Rebekah thinks it can and should be done. The text does not say whether Isaac knows of the oracle. Did Rebekah tell him about it or not? If Isaac was told, then presumably he has forgotten about it now; he plans to bless the older son. If Isaac is ignorant, then Rebekah must act so that the “right” son is blessed. Esau has been disqualified from the blessing by his Hittite marriages, which also cause bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah. It is not simply that Jacob is the right son, but Esau is the wrong son!

⁷² Niditch, *My Brother Esau*, suggests that Rebekah and Jacob “secretly plan clever tricks together,” because they both are tricksters (116).

⁷³ Naomi Steinberg, “Gender Roles in the Rebekah Cycle,” *USQR* 39, no. 3 (1984): 180–181.

⁷⁴ Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 438, 442.

That Esau is unfit to receive the blessing only confirms the oracle’s preference for the younger son. Rebekah is acting in accord with what she has heard from YHWH.

The clues in the text can be used to support different ideas that address the question of Rebekah’s preference for Jacob, but to answer the third question—concerning deception—requires some extra-textual resources. Why does Rebekah use deception to accomplish her goal? Put another way: Was deception necessary? It may seem easy on a first read to condemn Rebekah’s use of deception. Couldn’t Rebekah have simply told Isaac that Jacob was the more appropriate son? Perhaps not. Fuchs argues that women’s lack of social power means they cannot directly confront the (male) sources of power, but must resort to indirect action, that is, deception, to bring about their plans. “Had Rebekah been socially and legally equal to her husband, deception would have been unnecessary.”⁷⁵ So to answer the question: yes, deception was necessary because Rebekah is socially powerless. However, as Fuchs points out, women’s extenuating motivations for using deception—lack of power, fear—are rarely offered by the biblical text, and therefore deception appears as if it is one of women’s defining characteristics.⁷⁶ The narrator does not tell us that Rebekah uses deception because of her lack of social power. The deception simply stands without comment.

However, women are not condemned—and are sometimes even praised—when their deception “enhance[s] male power.”⁷⁷ Rebekah’s support of Jacob falls under that description. The text itself refrains from judgment,⁷⁸ thus insinuating that the deception is not chastised but viewed positively by the narrator, because of its enhancement of Jacob’s status. But “the ascription of deceptiveness even to the most exalted female role models tarnishes their luminousness.”⁷⁹ Despite the positive effect the deception had in helping Jacob, the very fact of deception leaves a bitter taste in the mouth of the reader. Therefore, readers are open to condone or condemn the deception.

One interpreter who openly praises Rebekah’s actions and views her as a spiritual role model is Christine Garside Allen. The title of her essay, “On Me Be The Curse My Son,” quotes the most self-sacrificial line in the blessing episode.⁸⁰ Allen argues that “the decision to deceive Isaac was a courageous and holy act.”⁸¹ In order to fulfill the divine will that Jacob would have priority over Esau, Rebekah “was willing to sacrifice her life.”⁸² “In this way,” says Allen, “the divine call cooperated with a human response.”⁸³

⁷⁵ Fuchs, “Who is Hiding the Truth?”, 138.

⁷⁶ Fuchs, “Who is Hiding the Truth?”, 140. In contrast, when men deceive men, their extenuating motives are given (e.g., Gen 12:13; 26:7).

⁷⁷ Fuchs, “Who is Hiding the Truth?”, 142.

⁷⁸ Cf. Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 53, 65.

⁷⁹ Fuchs, “Who is Hiding the Truth?”, 142.

⁸⁰ Allen, “Who Was Rebekah?”; “On Me Be the Curse.” The second essay is a revised version of the first.

⁸¹ Allen, “On Me Be the Curse,” 170.

⁸² Allen, “On Me Be the Curse,” 171.

Rebekah’s motive behind the deception is to fulfill YHWH’s oracle. She offers herself as “a victim if the plan should fail.”⁸⁴ The “sanctity” which Rebekah models is that she trusts God enough to offer her life in order to fulfill God’s will. This, of course, is not the only available interpretation of Rebekah, but it is a unique, positive reading which helps to counteract the usual, negative readings (for which, see introduction, pp. 2–3, n8).

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

**SCENE THREE (GEN 27:18–29)
ISAAC BLESSES JACOB-AS-ESAU**

Translation

18 And he came to his father and he said, “My father.” And he said, “Behold me. Who are you, my son?”

19 And Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau your firstborn. I did just as you spoke to me. Rise (please), sit and eat from my wild game so that your *nefesh* may bless me.”

20 And Isaac said to his son, “How now did you find so quickly, my son?” And he said, “Because YHWH your God made it happen before me.”

21 And Isaac said to Jacob, “Draw near (please) so I may feel you, my son. Are you really my son Esau or not?”

22 And Jacob drew near to Isaac his father and he felt him. And he said, “The voice is the voice of Jacob but the hands are the hands of Esau.”

23 And he did not recognize him because his hands were like the hands of Esau his brother: hairy. And he blessed him.

24 And he said, “Are you really my son Esau?” And he said, “I am.”

25 And he said, “Bring near to me so I may eat from the wild game of my son so that my *nefesh* may bless you.” And he brought near to him and he ate, and he brought wine to him and he drank.

26 And Isaac his father said to him, “Draw near (please) and kiss me, my son.”

27 And he drew near and he kissed him and he smelled the smell of his garments and he blessed him. And he said,

“See, the smell of my son
is like the smell of a field which YHWH has blessed.

28 And may God give to you from the dew of the heavens
and from the fat of the earth
and an abundance of grain
and new wine.

29 May the peoples serve you
and nations bow down to you.

Be lord to your brothers
and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.

Those who curse you be cursed
and those who bless you be blessed.”

Translation Notes

Verse 20. “YHWH your God *made it happen* before me.” Traditionally rendered, “YHWH your God *granted me success*,” the verb קרה means to “happen, befall, meet.” In general, the verb designates unplanned or unexpected things that happen (i.e., without pre-arrangement). However, it occurs three times in the Hiphil in

MT (Gen 24:12; 27:20; Num 35:11). Because the Hiphil stem usually implies causation, YHWH is invoked (in the Genesis occurrences) by the speaker as the one who “causes to occur.” Here, Jacob may mean that God has ordained the unexpected to happen (i.e., an animal to cross his path early), which is why Jacob-as-Esau has had a successful hunt.

Verse 25. “Bring near to me... And he brought near to him.” In Hebrew, there is no object of this verb. Presumably, it implies the food. The root נָגַג , here in the Hiphil form, is the same used by Isaac when he tells Jacob to “draw near to me” (vv. 21, 26; cf. vv. 22, 27).

Analysis of the Scene

This scene is the climax of the blessing episode. Jacob must now carry out the plan of Rebekah, perform as Esau, and receive the blessing from Isaac.

A noticeable feature of this scene is the repetition of certain details: Isaac twice asks his son’s identity, and Jacob responds that he is Esau; Isaac blesses Jacob twice; and twice Jacob is told to “draw near to me” so that his father can test his identity. There have been numerous proposals to account for these repetitions: two different sources (JE) have been combined;⁸⁵ an initial scene of identification (vv. 18–23a) is followed by a “precultic” blessing ritual (vv. 23b–29);⁸⁶ the clause in 27:23b is to be translated, “as he was about to bless him ...,” thus demonstrating Isaac’s hesitation rather than repetition;⁸⁷ the narrative artistry of the author(s) heightens the suspense of the scene.⁸⁸ As will become clear, I lean toward the final option, although suspense is only one effect of the repetitions in this scene.

Another important theme is the presence and activity of the five senses (sight, touch, sound, taste, and smell). Isaac’s dim eyes were mentioned in v. 1 and, while not explicitly included here, clearly (pun intended) inhibit his ability to recognize Jacob (v. 23). Isaac’s hearing is the only sense that suspects Jacob (v. 22), but its objections are overruled by the more visceral, intimate senses of touch (vv. 22–23, 26), taste (v. 25), and smell (v. 27).⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Skinner, *Genesis*, 368–369.

⁸⁶ Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 436, 439.

⁸⁷ Speiser, *Genesis*, 206, 209; Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 218.

⁸⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 272–273; cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 230.

⁸⁹ Skinner, *Genesis*, 368, (following earlier scholars) wants to divide Jacob wearing Esau’s garments and Jacob wearing goat-skins into two different sources, as if “originally” Jacob could have only worn one disguise to deceive Isaac. But when the senses are taken into consideration, it becomes clear that each disguise serves a different purpose, the goat-hair for touch, the garments for smell.

Of course, what gives this scene so much weight is the juxtaposition—indeed, causation—of deception and blessing.⁹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the ethics of deception per se; rather my focus is on how one might interpret a character who uses deception. Of course, what one thinks about deception will determine how they interpret a deceptive character, but I leave that extra-exegetical criterion up to individual readers. Instead, I ask—the act of deception being a given—how might a reader judge Jacob’s deception positively or negatively?

We follow Jacob across the seam from one scene to the next, from his mother to his father. He enters his father’s presence and addresses him, “My father.” Isaac appropriately assumes one of his sons stands before him, because he asks, “Who are you, *my son*?” Some interpreters understand Isaac to be asking, “*Which* of my sons are you?”⁹¹ If this is the case, Isaac does not know whether Jacob or Esau is before him. The reader knows that Jacob has entered to receive the blessing, but Isaac does not. It is possible that Isaac, upon hearing the voice, thinks Jacob is there for some unrelated reason (after all, he identifies Jacob’s voice in v. 22).

Jacob answers, “I am Esau your firstborn.” As if to emphasize the deception, the narrator includes Jacob’s name in the sentence rather than using the more expedient “he said.” *Jacob* said, “I am *Esau*.” Then Jacob-as-Esau continues, citing his obedience to Isaac’s commission, and invites his father to sit up and eat from the game “so that your *nefesh* may bless me.” Jacob’s purpose is made clear: he is there to receive the blessing. If Isaac had originally thought Jacob stood before him, he must now be confused. If this person is indeed Jacob, how could he know about Esau’s commission? Jacob shouldn’t know of it, so it must be Esau.⁹² But then, if it is Esau, how could he have returned so quickly?

This is the question Isaac asks, and it can be understood as the first test Jacob must pass. The word “quickly,” מֵהֵר, has already been used to describe the hospitable actions of other patriarchs and matriarchs in Genesis. Abraham and Sarah (18:6–7) and Rebekah (24:18, 20, 46) are described as “hastening” to feed or give drink to their guests. Could Isaac be commenting on the prompt hospitality of his son? Jacob-as-Esau is thus implicitly grouped with his grandparents and mother, who also displayed such conduct.

Jacob replies that divine providence has aided his quest. He, too, invokes a phrase related to his mother: “YHWH your God *made it happen* (קרה) before me.” These same words are found in 24:12, in the prayer of Abraham’s servant before he meets Rebekah. It proves fruitful to compare the two speeches:

⁹⁰ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 230–231. Cf. Marcus, “Traditional Jewish Responses,” 293–305.

⁹¹ So Speiser, *Genesis*, 209; Sarna, *Genesis*, 191; W. Gunthur Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 186; but contra Alter, *Genesis*, 139.

⁹² Cf. Benjamin Goodnick, “Rebekah’s Deceit or Isaac’s Great Test,” *JBQ* 23, no. 4 (1995): 226.

27:20 הקרה יהוה אלהיך לפני

“YHWH your God made it happen before me.”

24:12 יהוה אלהי אדני אברהם הקרה־נא לפני היום

“YHWH, God of my master Abraham, (please) make it happen before me today.”

As noted in the translation section, the key word in this phrase is קרה, a verb which indicates a chance (unplanned) meeting or encounter. But the Hiphil stem seems to imply causation. What better subject of this verb than YHWH, who is able to cause the unexpected to happen?⁹³ In a situation of uncertainty and potential indecision (as in the quest of Abraham’s servant to find the right wife for Isaac) or of chance opportunity (as in hunting), YHWH transforms unplanned encounters into evidence of divine providence, granting success to those who seek.⁹⁴ But one cannot ignore that the two uses of קרה in Hiphil in Genesis are placed in the mouths of human characters. The servant prays an imperative קרה to God which appears to be answered immediately (24:15—“before he had finished speaking” NRSV). Jacob, on the other hand, uses the perfect קרה to describe YHWH’s past providence, a providence *which did not actually happen*. This may be something YHWH is expected to do—but it does not actually describe Jacob-as-Esau’s hunting expedition.⁹⁵ It may be that the phrase reminds Isaac of the success his father’s servant had in finding Rebekah so quickly.⁹⁶ Just as God had chosen Rebekah,⁹⁷ so God must have chosen the son that stands before Isaac. Of course, Isaac thinks it is Esau, but the reader knows it is Jacob.

The first test was verbal, but the second test is tactile. “Draw near,” says Isaac. This is the first of six times this verb (נגש) appears in the scene, three times a command of Isaac and three times the narrated account of Jacob’s obedience. The verb is in Qal form 4 times (vv. 21–22, 26–27) and in Hiphil form (“bring near”) twice (v. 25). Each time נגש is used, it initiates a non-verbal test: touch (v. 21), taste (v. 25), and smell (v. 26). Because Isaac cannot see Jacob, he must employ these other, more intimate senses to determine the identity of the son before him.

“Draw near (please) so I may feel you, my son. Are you really my son Esau or not?” This test is exactly what Jacob feared would happen (vv. 11–12). Fortunately for him, because of Rebekah’s ingenuity, his arms have been disguised as Esau’s. Isaac even

⁹³ Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 218. My discussion ignores the use of the Hiphil of קרה in Num 35:11, the subject of which is the congregation of Israel.

⁹⁴ Hence BDB’s suggested translation of קרה in Hiphil as “grant(ed) success.”

⁹⁵ Janzen, *Abraham*, 106–107, sees not a similarity but a contrast between Abraham’s servant and Jacob. Whereas God’s granting success is “imaged in the servant’s own integrity ... Jacob obscures God’s character by his shameless attempt to implicate God in his deceit.”

⁹⁶ It is entirely likely that Isaac would recognize the verb because his father’s servant told him the whole story of the quest (Gen 24:66).

⁹⁷ See Allen, “Who Was Rebekah?”, 197.

verifies their credibility: “The hands are the hands of Esau.” Though Isaac hears the voice of Jacob, the feel of Esau seems more convincing. The narrator says that Isaac “did not recognize him” because of the “handy” disguise.

Following this is a curious note that Isaac blessed Jacob. Some commentators, not allowing that Isaac could bless Jacob twice, have proposed alternative translations.⁹⁸ Hamilton’s is the most creative: “Accordingly, he was on the verge of blessing him.”⁹⁹ This implies that Isaac, about to bless Jacob-as-Esau, suddenly retracts his intention in order to perform more identity tests. Westermann argues against this reading and says that the phrase “and he blessed him” is the introduction to the blessing ritual proper, which “consists of action and word.” That is, “and he blessed him” is the heading of all the ritual acts which proceed thereafter, culminating in the actual words of the blessing in vv. 27–29.¹⁰⁰ But there is a simpler reason for this initial blessing. Jacob had said to his mother, “If perhaps my father feels me, then . . . I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing” (v. 12). Isaac does indeed feel Jacob, but the feared curse does not come; instead, Isaac blesses Jacob. This is a direct answer to Jacob’s objection. As we saw in scene two, Rebekah answered Jacob’s objection by taking any curse upon herself and by covering his arms with goat skin. Here in scene three Isaac has (unknowingly) answered Jacob’s objection by blessing and not cursing him. Now both Isaac and Jacob are satisfied. Isaac is satisfied that Esau is before him and Jacob is satisfied that his mother’s costume is successful.

For the third test, Isaac asks Jacob’s identity again, using almost the exact same words as in the previous test:

v. 21 האתה זה בני עשו אם-לא

“Are you really my son Esau or not?” (with ה interrogative particle)

v. 24 אתה זה בני עשו

“Are you really my son Esau?” (without ה interrogative particle¹⁰¹)

Why such near-verbatim repetition? Westermann sees the second inquiry (v. 24) as the first part of the blessing rite, when identification is confirmed.¹⁰² Others view this as the narrator’s tool of suspense-building, causing the reader to sweat with Jacob. If the voice

⁹⁸ E.g., Speiser, *Genesis*, 209. Jacob suggests that the “blessing” here should be understood as a gesture of welcoming or thanking (*The First Book*, 181). Cf. also Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 209.

⁹⁹ Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 218. See also Speiser, *Genesis*, 206, 209.

¹⁰⁰ Therefore the tests performed prior to v. 23b are Isaac’s personal attempts to determine the identity of his son. The tests performed afterward are the constituent acts of the blessing ritual. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 439, cf. 435.

¹⁰¹ The question here could be understood as a statement (“You really are my son Esau”), requiring only a brief affirmation. Jacob, *The First Book*, 181. Cf. Marcus, “Traditional Jewish Responses,” 301.

¹⁰² Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 440.

of Jacob may give him away, then he must speak as little as possible.¹⁰³ Isaac asks, “Are you really my son Esau?” “I am,” he answers, אָנִי (‘*ani*). He gives the briefest reply, and this is the last he speaks for the entire episode. Jacob does not utter another word until 28:16.¹⁰⁴ It is as if Isaac wants to give his ears one last chance to rebut his sense of touch, but only getting the smallest reply, he moves on to let the other senses weigh in on the question of identity.

Isaac calls for the food, and Jacob presents it to him along with wine. While Isaac asks for “the wild game of my son,” the reader knows that Jacob gives him domestic goat meat. The fourth test—the taste test—seems to go smoothly.

The fifth and final test is the olfactory exam. “Draw near (please) and kiss me, my son.” As Jacob leans in to kiss, the smell of the garments—Esau’s precious garments—give Isaac the final confirmation of his son’s identity. He launches into the blessing by extolling the smell of the field which wafts out from the clothes. “See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which YHWH has blessed,” he begins. It is interesting that the garments Jacob was wearing were actually “in the house” with Rebekah (v. 15), not on Esau as he was in the field. Once again, one of Isaac’s senses has been fooled. Here is a chart of how the different senses are deceived in this episode:

Sense	What it expects/declares	What is actually there
Sight (dim)	---	---
Hearing	Esau ... but is it Jacob?	Jacob
Touch	Esau’s hairy hands	The hair of goat skins
Taste	Wild game	Domestic goat meat
Smell	The smell of the field	Garments from in the house

Isaac expects Esau, who goes out to the field and secures wild game. Instead, he gets Jacob, who at every point presents a domestic version of Esau’s wildness. In the end, Isaac deems this tame version worthy to be blessed.

As noted in the introduction of this paper (p. 12), the blessing itself does not refer to the Abrahamic promises, but rather to material prosperity and supremacy over brothers and nations. It has a tripartite structure:

1. Blessings of prosperity (vv. 27b–28)
2. Blessings of social-political superiority (v. 29a)
3. Blessing of protection (v. 29b)

¹⁰³ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 208.

¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, his first words convey surprise about God’s presence: “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” (28:16 NRSV). His previous speech (27:24) was meant to conceal his own presence before his father. Perhaps Isaac could have said, “Surely Jacob was in this place—and I did not know it!”

This is the moment that Isaac unwittingly fulfills YHWH’s oracle by making Jacob lord of all his brothers.¹⁰⁵ In addition, Isaac grants Jacob protection from enemies: “Those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.” Not only did Rebekah take responsibility for any curse that could potentially come upon Jacob, but now Isaac grants Jacob protection from any curse that comes his way.¹⁰⁶ Scene three ends with the word “blessed” (ברוך), as if to emphasize what Jacob now is. Isaac later confirms Jacob’s new status by using this same word in 27:33: “Indeed, blessed (ברוך) shall he be!” Jacob has succeeded, but the next scenes will reveal the consequences of the deception.

Analysis of the Characters

What Does Isaac Know?

The above analysis operated under the assumption that Isaac was fooled by Jacob, and that he had no idea of the fraud until the true Esau came to him. This seems to be the most straightforward reading of the narrative. But is it possible—that is, does the text allow—that Isaac knows he is blessing Jacob? At first, this seems impossible. There are verbal cues which make it obvious that Isaac does not know. Verse 23 says plainly, “And he did not recognize him.” If Isaac knew he had blessed Jacob, why then does he “tremble a great trembling exceedingly” (v. 33) when Esau stands before him? And why does he ask, “Who then was he who hunted wild game...” as if he is still figuring out the identity of the blessed one? Any interpretation claiming Isaac’s awareness of Jacob’s presence must address these textual data.

Here are some broad possibilities for Isaac’s knowledge:

1. Ignorance: Isaac does not know he blesses Jacob—he discovers the deception only afterward.
2. Ambiguity: Isaac is not sure whom he blesses, but proceeds with the blessing anyway.
3. Knowledge: Isaac knows that he blesses Jacob; he discovers this as Jacob is before him.¹⁰⁷
4. Planning: Isaac knows that he blesses Jacob; because he (or he and Rebekah) have set up the situation in order to “test” Jacob.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Though Jacob and Esau only have one brother in each other, the plural which Isaac uses is poetic. It should be understood as “relatives.” Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 193.

¹⁰⁶ Sarna, *Genesis*, 192; Wenham, *Genesis 12–50*, 210; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 232; Zakovitch, *Jacob*, 34. Cf. McKeown, *Genesis*, 136, 231–232. The pronouncement is similar to what God promised Abraham in 12:3. The three main differences are: (1) the “bless” clause comes before the “curse” clause in 12:3, but “curse” comes before “bless” in 27:29; (2) in 12:3, YHWH says “*I will* bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you *I will* curse,” while in 27:29 God is not invoked as the benefactor; (3) in 12:3, “the one who curses you” implies that it will be a rare occurrence, but in 27:29, the plural participle indicates that Jacob/Jacob’s family will have more enemies.

¹⁰⁷ Goodnick, “Rebekah’s Deceit,” 226; Sidney Breitbart, “The Problem of Deception in Genesis 27,” *JBQ* 29, no. 1 (2001): 46.

How someone reads Isaac’s knowledge level will have an effect on how she judges his character. In the first instance—Ignorance—Isaac can be viewed as a victim of the deception (perhaps a deserving victim: has his appetite clouded his judgment?). In the second option—Ambiguity—Isaac’s character is indeterminate, just like the choice he must make. Is he too hasty in his move to bless, risking error for the sake of efficiency? Should he have given more tests to figure out his son’s identity? Should he have simply waited for both his sons to be present to distinguish them? Or perhaps he should be viewed as sincere, simply making the best choice he could given the evidence. With the third possibility—Knowledge—one may dislike Isaac’s conscious decision to change the recipient of the blessing. Is Isaac going back on his word to Esau? On the other hand, perhaps a reader might approve of Isaac’s decision to bless the younger brother. After all, wouldn’t this reflect Isaac’s discernment in recognizing that Jacob is more worthy than Esau? The fourth interpretation—Planning—gives the impression that Isaac and Rebekah both favor Jacob over Esau, despite Isaac’s love for wild game. Due to Esau’s Hittite wives and birthright selling, he has been disqualified from receiving the firstborn blessing. Isaac and Rebekah believe this and plan to have Jacob receive the blessing instead.¹⁰⁹ Should a reader approve of Isaac’s choice then, or disapprove because of the way it treats Esau?

However, before we can make judgments on Isaac’s character, it is first necessary to determine whether the text allows for any reading besides Isaac’s ignorance. It is my argument that there is a gap in the narrative concerning Isaac’s knowledge that allows for the other interpretive possibilities.

The first batch of evidence is practical.¹¹⁰ In the chart of sense-deception (p. 34), I pointed out that every “wild” characteristic of Esau is replaced by a more “domestic” aspect of Jacob. The plausibility of these disguises is suspect. Could Isaac really not tell the difference between goat’s hair and Esau’s arm hair? Or the difference between wild game and goat from the flock? Could he actually think that the voice he heard must have been Esau after all?¹¹¹ Practically speaking, it seems unlikely that Isaac would have been fooled by so many discrepancies between the real Esau and the fake Esau, unless one also concedes the foolishness of Isaac himself.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Zucker, “The Deceiver Deceived,” 48. Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster, Heel, and Hairy-Man,” 287.

¹⁰⁹ This is Zucker’s interpretation. Bledstein views Isaac as the sole planner of the situation.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Marcus, “Traditional Jewish Responses,” 298–299.

¹¹¹ Jacob (*The First Book*, 181), commenting on Jewish interpreters, suggests that Jacob’s voice may have sounded like Esau’s. It was not the sound of the voice per se, but the manner of speaking (e.g., saying “YHWH your God”), which gave Jacob away.

¹¹² Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 208, claims that Isaac’s failure to recognize Jacob is evidence of “the decline in Isaac’s powers,” an explanation complementary to dull-wittedness.

The next piece of evidence involves the phrase that Isaac “did not recognize” Jacob. This seems irrefutable. But the verb in Hebrew (נָכַר), like English, can also carry the sense of “acknowledge.”¹¹³ Therefore the translation could be: “And he did not acknowledge him because his hands were like the hands of Esau his brother—hairy.” That is, Isaac knew that Jacob was disguised as Esau, but he did not call Jacob out—he did not acknowledge him—so that Jacob could continue the ruse. If this is the case, it may reveal some of Isaac’s inner motivation. Whether or not Isaac planned to have Jacob before him (the Knowledge or Planning interpretations), Isaac may view the situation as a test of Jacob’s character. How well does he perform under pressure?¹¹⁴ Jacob’s desire to receive the blessing at any cost, including deception, may have impressed Isaac. After all, clever trickery runs in the family, but this is a trait that Esau seems to lack (further discussion of this is on pp. 55–56). Perhaps Isaac thought of other contrasts between his two sons and came to the conclusion that Jacob was more worthy than Esau to receive the blessing. Jacob’s dogged persistence for the blessing surely contrasts with Esau’s despising of the birthright (25:34).¹¹⁵ In the end, Isaac blesses Jacob—knowingly or unknowingly—and must face the consequences of this act when Esau comes in to see him.

Jacob and the Deception

Like Rebekah, Jacob is typically judged negatively because of the deception he uses to obtain the blessing.¹¹⁶ The text itself does not judge Jacob one way or the other. Some commentators, however, point out that the narrator presents certain details which may exonerate Jacob’s behavior.¹¹⁷ First, Rebekah has initiated the plan and commanded Jacob to obey. Could Jacob’s obedience to his mother’s plan mitigate his culpability? Second, Esau’s Hittite marriages, which directly precede the events of Genesis 27, demonstrate Esau’s unworthiness for the blessing. Third, that Esau despised the birthright and sold it to Jacob is further evidence that he is unfit for the blessing. Finally, YHWH’s oracle seems to give divine approval for Jacob’s ascendancy over Esau. God is reversing

¹¹³ Think of someone receiving an award: “We would like to *recognize* so-and-so for their outstanding achievement.” It is not that the award-givers suddenly realize who the recipient is, but rather that the recipient is being acknowledged for their work.

¹¹⁴ Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster, Heel, and Hairy-Man,” 289; Zucker, “The Deceiver Deceived,” 53–54.

¹¹⁵ The text up to this point is silent about Isaac’s awareness that Esau has sold the birthright. If Isaac does not know now, he will know by 27:36, when Esau tells him.

¹¹⁶ E.g., Brueggemann’s comment (given earlier, pp. 2–3, n8): “Neither Jacob nor Rebekah evokes any positive feeling from the listener. ... If we feel toward them at all, the feeling is probably contempt” (*Genesis*, 234).

¹¹⁷ E.g., Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 438.

the power structure,¹¹⁸ at least between brothers (and the people-groups who descend from Jacob and Esau). It is important to keep in mind, however, that though God may have initiated a new world order (albeit on a small scale), Jacob and Esau still live in their traditional, conventional world where Esau has the power. Therefore the means by which Jacob acquires the birthright and blessing may seem unacceptable to traditional, conventional morality. In this way Jacob can be understood through the literary figure of the trickster.

The trickster is a type of underdog, a marginalized figure who attempts to raise his or her status by indirect (that is, clever or deceptive) means. Whereas the typical underdog succeeds in achieving a higher status, the trickster’s deception is eventually found out, causing the trickster to flee and thus return to a marginalized status.¹¹⁹ In the Blessing Episode, Jacob follows this pattern:

1. Jacob is a marginalized character: the second-born son, lacking the rights and power of the firstborn.
2. Jacob—with the aid of “co-trickster” Rebekah¹²⁰—is disguised to seem like the elder son.
3. Jacob receives the blessing intended for Esau—thus raising his status.
4. The deception is uncovered by Esau and Isaac.
5. Jacob must flee to Paddan-Aram, sent by his mother (27:41–45) and father (28:1–5).¹²¹

Trickster tales are engaged with power structures, such as those at play in the blessing narrative. The socially powerless figure of the trickster uses cleverness or deception to overcome those aligned with the establishment; that is, the dominant power group. Thus the trickster has an “anti-establishment quality at the very source of its being.”¹²² Trickster tales are found in cultures all over the world because their content is appealing and entertaining.

Niditch suggests, however, that these tales would be especially meaningful for marginalized groups who could identify with the trickster. “In identifying with the trickster one is enabled better to accept one’s fortunes as a given and to be assured that if one does not succeed one at least survives.”¹²³ A marginalized community might be an

¹¹⁸ Brueggemann emphasizes this reversal in his commentary (*Genesis*, 209–210, 229–235).

¹¹⁹ Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 44–45. Though the trickster must flee, he or she survives, and thus can “be involved in another plot, in sense of both narrative and deception” (45).

¹²⁰ Niditch, *Prelude*, 100.

¹²¹ This analysis of the specific elements of the trickster motif is modified from Niditch, *Prelude*, 100.

¹²² Niditch, *Prelude*, 49.

¹²³ Niditch, *Prelude*, 48.

appropriate context for a positive reading of Jacob and Rebekah’s actions.¹²⁴ However, Niditch cautions: “There is little ethical value judgment in the tale. It is not entirely permissible to deceive, for the hero is found out and demoted. On the other hand, he leaves with his deceitfully acquired goods intact.”¹²⁵ The trickster Jacob must flee, bearing the consequences of his deception. If a reader approves of Jacob’s deception, one which subverts the dominant power structures and elevates the lowly, then he must also note the consequences for Jacob’s actions—not just the immediate flight, but also the subtle repercussions that haunt Jacob the rest of his life.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ See Miguel De La Torre, *Genesis* (Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 2011), 252–257; Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible With the Damned* (Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 2005), 76–89.

¹²⁵ Niditch, *Prelude*, 49. This applies to the wife-sister tale in Gen 12:10–20, but is equally applicable in Gen 27.

¹²⁶ There are several moments which echo the structures, themes, or text of Gen 27: e.g., Laban giving Leah to Jacob in place of Rachel (Gen 29:21–30); Laban searching for his household gods which Rachel had stolen (31:30–35); Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok and the problem of names and blessing (32:22–32); Jacob’s sons deceiving him about the fate of Joseph (37:31–35).

**SCENE FOUR (GEN 27:30–40)
ISAAC AND ESAU: THE AFTERMATH**

Translation

30 And when Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and when Jacob had only just gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, then Esau his brother came in from his hunting.

31 And he made—he, too—delicacies, and he brought to his father. And he said to his father, “Let my father arise and eat from the wild game of his son so that your *nefesh* may bless me.”

32 And Isaac his father said to him, “Who are you?” And he said, “I am your son, your firstborn Esau.”

33 And Isaac trembled an exceedingly great trembling, and he said, “Who then was he who hunted wild game and brought to me so that I ate from it all before you came, and I blessed him? Indeed, blessed shall he be!”

34 When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and he said to his father, “Bless me—me, too, my father.”

35 And he said, “Your brother came in deceit and he took your blessing.”

36 And he said, “Is it because his name is Jacob that he has supplanted me these two times? He took my birthright, and behold, now he has taken my blessing.” And he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

37 And Isaac answered, and he said to Esau, “Behold, as a lord I have set him over you, and all his brothers I have given to him as servants, and with grain and new wine I have sustained him. So for you, then, what can I do, my son?”

38 And Esau said to his father, “Is one blessing it for you, my father? Bless me—me, too, my father.” And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.

39 And Isaac his father answered, and he said to him,
 “Behold, from the fat of the earth will your dwelling be,
 and from the dew of the heavens above.

40 By your sword you will live
 and your brother you shall serve.
 But when you roam free,
 then you will break his yoke from off your neck.”

Translation Notes

Verse 36. “he has *supplanted* me”: In Hebrew, ויעקבני, a pun on the name Jacob (יעקב).

Verse 39. “from...”: The preposition מן (*min*) can have different nuances. Its basic meaning is “from” or “of.” It can have a partitive meaning (“from”) or a privative meaning (“away from”). The use of מן is identical to that in Isaac’s blessing of Jacob (v. 28): “May God give to you *from the dew of the heavens and from the fat of the earth,*” but the way מן is translated here can drastically change the meaning of Esau’s blessing. More discussion of מן and its connotations is on pp. 45–47.

Analysis of the Scene

While it is tempting to rejoice at Jacob’s success in the previous scene, the reader is quickly confronted with the devastating aftermath. Esau’s grief at his lost blessing and his desperate pleas to his father invoke the reader’s sympathy. Isaac’s inability to retract the blessing and help or comfort his favorite son is heartbreaking. Speiser comments that this scene “could hardly be surpassed for pathos.”¹²⁷

The fourth scene begins with another seam: Jacob is just leaving as Esau arrives home from the hunt. The depiction of Jacob leaving Isaac’s presence not only heightens the tension—Jacob succeeds just in time—but it also serves as the final intrusion into the Isaac-Esau plotline. Esau’s obedience began just after Rebekah overheard Isaac’s commission (v. 5), and it ends just after Jacob has received the blessing (v. 30). Rebekah and Jacob’s plan fits neatly into the inclusio of Esau’s obedience. If vv. 5a, 6–30a had been removed, Esau would have completed his task and received the blessing with no problems. But vv. 5 and 30 remind us that Rebekah and Jacob got to Isaac first.¹²⁸ Jacob has already received the blessing, and so we watch Esau complete his futile cooking. The narrator even emphasizes that he is second by the phrase גַּם־הוּא, “he, too.” This phrase is completely unnecessary to the grammar of the sentence, but adds to the tragedy of the scene. Esau is a diligent, obedient son who has no idea that he has been wronged, and has no clue that his work will be for naught.

Esau’s encounter with Isaac can be compared to Jacob’s encounter with Isaac in order to contrast the characterization of the brothers.¹²⁹ First, Esau’s invitation to his father to eat is much more indirect, and therefore polite, than Jacob’s invitation:¹³⁰

Jacob (v. 19): Rise (please), sit and eat from my wild game
so that your *nefesh* may bless me.

Esau (v. 31): Let my father arise and eat from the wild game of his son
so that your *nefesh* may bless me.

Whereas Jacob commands his father (albeit with the particle וְ) to sit up and eat, Esau uses the third-person jussive, not addressing his father directly.¹³¹ Jacob calls the food “my wild game,” while Esau calls it, “the game of his son,” still speaking of his father and himself in the third person. Esau speaks humbly of the wild game he actually caught,

¹²⁷ Speiser, *Genesis*, 213.

¹²⁸ Finally, Jacob has succeeded in being first while Esau is second (reversing the birth order).

¹²⁹ “When two characters are presented in similar circumstances, the similarity or contrast between their behaviour emphasizes traits characteristic of both” (Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 70).

¹³⁰ Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 372; contra Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 210–211.

¹³¹ This is how someone with lesser power addresses someone greater, calling them “my master” (instead of “you”) and referring to themselves as “your servant” (instead of “me”), even though they are talking face to face (e.g., Gen 44:16).

while Jacob speaks presumptuously of the game he did not catch, and which is actually not game at all, but goat meat. Interestingly, Esau’s invitation is remarkably similar to Isaac’s earlier request to Jacob (v. 25): “Bring near to me *so I may eat from the wild game of my son* so that my *nefesh* may bless you.” It seems that Isaac and Esau have an insider language when it comes to giving and receiving food, while Jacob’s words are a bit more direct. Perhaps this indicates all the more that Isaac may have known Jacob was before him. Jacob did not use the correct speech patterns when addressing his father.

Isaac responds to Esau with a question of identity. Unlike with Jacob, Isaac does not assume a son stands before him, despite Esau’s use of “my father.” Isaac asks a more general, “Who are you?” to which Esau, perhaps not sensing anything wrong, replies, “I am your son.” Esau supplies the missing “son” from Isaac’s question. He then goes on, “Your firstborn, Esau.” Like Gen 22:2, the syntax builds to the revealed identity, starting with “son,” then becoming more particular, “firstborn,” until finally the name is said: “Esau.”¹³² Esau’s first word to Isaac’s question of identity is the last word Jacob speaks to Isaac’s question of identity: אָנִי. “Are you really my son Esau?” Isaac had asked Jacob. “I am,” he said (v. 24). “Who are you?” Isaac asks Esau. “I am,” he says, “your son, your firstborn, Esau” (v. 32). One אָנִי must be false! Surely it was the first one; he couldn’t have finished hunting that quickly. If Isaac was earlier unaware that he had blessed Jacob, now is the moment of his revelation.

Isaac has a violent physical reaction to this realization. In Hebrew the emphatic language is stunning: “And Isaac trembled a great tremble unto excess.” Not only is the root *חרד* (tremble) doubled (verb + noun), but the tremble is “great” (*גדולה*) and it is great “unto excess” (*עד-מאד*, “exceedingly”). The root *חרד* is always used to describe the shaking of terror, fear or anxiety.¹³³ Why would Isaac be fearful, even terrified? Perhaps the realization that he has blessed Jacob confirms his fear that he would bless the wrong son. This would comport with the reading that Isaac was unsure whether Jacob or Esau was before him as he went ahead with the blessing anyway. Knowing that he cannot retract the blessing, Isaac now must face the reality that he has made a mistake. But what if Isaac knew he was blessing Jacob? It is possible that Isaac fears Esau’s reaction to the news (anger and violence, cf. vv. 40–45).¹³⁴ If Esau thought that Isaac had blessed Jacob on purpose, would Esau try to harm his father? In this case, Isaac must proceed carefully¹³⁵ in order to allay any suspicion Esau could possibly have.

¹³² Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 141.

¹³³ Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 211.

¹³⁴ Cf. Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster, Heel, and Hairy-Man,” 289: “Trickster [Isaac] trembles violently with fear, now that he must cope directly with Hairy-man’s [Esau’s] grief.”

¹³⁵ “To be anxiously careful” is another possible translation of *חרד* given by BDB. It probably shouldn’t be forced here, but its connotation thickens the interpretive possibilities.

Isaac’s first question to Esau is, “Who are you?” His second question is, “Who then was he who...?” This could be a rhetorical question on Isaac’s part—if Esau is before him, who else could the other person be but Jacob? Whether or not Isaac knew he had already blessed Jacob, the question has an obvious answer.¹³⁶ However, if Isaac did already know, then the question has the added effect of feigning ignorance to Esau. It seems to work, because Esau does not appear to realize Jacob has taken his blessing until Isaac says so (vv. 35–36). Isaac’s question narrates in painful detail all the steps of the hunt-bring-eat-bless enterprise, emphasizing that it all happened “before you came.” Not only did the imposter beat Esau to the task, but he also succeeded in his mission to get the blessing. “Indeed, blessed shall he be!” declares Isaac. This declaration finalizes the authority and irrevocability of the blessing. Isaac confirms the validity of Jacob’s reception of the blessing.

Esau reacts in a manner similarly extravagant to his father’s trembling. A more literal translation would be: “He cried a great and bitter cry unto excess.” He seems to be overwhelmed by grief that someone else has done exactly as he did, only moments earlier. The result—that someone else was blessed (and shall remain blessed)—drives Esau to implore his father, “Bless me—me too!” Esau’s use of אֲנִי recalls the narrator’s in v. 31 (“And he made—he too”). Isn’t the food-to-blessing paradigm repeatable? Could not the same preparation produce the same result: blessing? But Esau learns the harsh lesson that in this case, simply providing food does not ipso facto lead to a blessing. Rather, it is the *first* food which receives the blessing. Esau has performed the necessary actions but is too late. In English—but not in Hebrew—we could make a pun on אֲנִי , saying that “he too,” or “me too” is unfortunately “he *two*” and “me *two*.” Esau has arrived second, and thus is out of luck.

Isaac then reveals that Jacob came “in deceit and he took” Esau’s blessing. Isaac appears to judge Jacob’s actions negatively by saying he came *in deceit*. Alternatively, however, Isaac might be protecting himself from Esau by describing the extenuating circumstances by which he blessed Jacob. Isaac could not simply tell Esau that Jacob came and took the blessing. Esau would wonder why Isaac did not recognize Jacob. Instead, Isaac uses the fact of deception (because, after all, Jacob did come in deceit) as an alibi. Isaac needs Esau to believe that he only gave away the blessing because he was duped (whether or not he truly was duped).¹³⁷ Esau cannot blame his elderly and blind father for the misplaced blessing; he must turn his anger toward Jacob.

That is precisely what Esau does. Now that he knows for sure the perpetrator’s identity, Esau proclaims his own judgment of Jacob. “Is it because his name is Jacob (יעקב) that he has supplanted me (ויעקבני) these two times?” There is a pun on Jacob’s name here. Perhaps, in modern English slang, it could read: “Is it because his name is Jacob that he has jacked my stuff twice? First my birthright, and now my blessing!” But

¹³⁶ Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 142.

¹³⁷ Cf. Marcus, “Traditional Jewish Responses,” 299.

the translation of עָקַב is tricky. “Jacked my stuff” gets at the pun, but implies theft. “Overreached” (BDB’s proposal) or “supplanted” suggests that Jacob has taken what was rightfully Esau’s, namely the benefits of the firstborn, and thus the title. Esau names the sins Jacob has committed against him. But his declaration also acts as a confession. Esau admits that Jacob has taken his birthright. Rashi comments on this:

Why did Isaac tremble? He thought: Perhaps I have sinned in blessing the younger before the elder, thus changing the order of relationship *between them*. But when Esau began to cry out, “for he hath supplanted me these two times”, his father asked him, “What did he do to you?” He replied, “He took away my birthright”. Isaac thereupon said, “It was on account of this that I was grieved and trembled: perhaps I had overstepped the line of strict justice. Now, however, I have really blessed the first-born—‘And he shall indeed be blessed’”.¹³⁸

According to Rashi, because Esau had sold his birthright (בכרה) to Jacob, he no longer had the right to the blessing (ברכה) either. Isaac *has* blessed the correct son, the one to whom the birthright belonged. Esau’s shortsightedness when he sold the birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew has now come back to haunt him.¹³⁹ It should be noted that the verb “to take” (לקח), has the connotation “to purchase” as well as a more sinister “take away.”¹⁴⁰ That Isaac (v. 35) and Esau (v. 36) both use this verb instead of גָּנַב (“to steal”)¹⁴¹, allows for ambiguity in their assessment of Jacob’s actions. It could be that Jacob has bought both the birthright and the blessing, not stolen them, further evidence that Jacob and Rebekah may have viewed the deception in economic terms (see p. 25).

Despite the fact that Jacob has taken Esau’s blessing, Esau still persists to his father, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?” That is, “Have you given Jacob all your blessing or is there a little leftover for me?”¹⁴² Has Isaac held back some of the blessing to Jacob so that now Esau can receive it? No. Isaac tells Esau: “Behold, as a lord I have set him over you, and all his brothers I have given to him as servants, and with grain and new wine I have sustained him.” Just as Isaac had earlier detailed the acts of the imposter leading to the blessing, he now outlines the blessing itself. How painful for Esau to hear the blessing which he did not receive! Esau has been made subservient to Jacob. “So for you, then, what can I do, my son?” Any blessing Isaac gives Esau would only solidify Esau’s subordination to Jacob. Is that what Esau wants?

¹³⁸ *Chumash With Rashi: Bereshith* (ed. and trans. A. M. Silbermann; vol. 1; Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1934), 127, italics original.

¹³⁹ Cf. Breitbart, “The Problem of Deception in Genesis 27,” 47, who suggests that Esau’s failure to tell his father earlier about the sale of the birthright constitutes an act of deception.

¹⁴⁰ Sarna, *Genesis*, 194.

¹⁴¹ This verb is used in the story of Rachel “stealing” her father Laban’s household gods (Gen 31:19–42, esp. vv. 19, 30, 32), an episode that echoes Genesis 27.

¹⁴² Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 442.

Esau presses Isaac again. “Is one blessing it for you, my father?” Esau is desperate for a blessing. Surely, he thinks, even if Isaac has given all the firstborn blessing to Jacob, there could be some other blessing for him. He repeats, “Bless me—me too, my father,” the בָּרַךְ once more reinforcing his secondary status. He then “lifts up his voice and weeps.” While Esau first lifted up his weapons in obedience (cf. v. 3), he now lifts up his voice in grief. His obedience has led to his grief, because while he was out obediently hunting, he lost his blessing to Jacob.

In contrast to Jacob, Isaac does not “bless” Esau, but “answers” him. This is the second time Isaac answers (עָנָה) Esau (vv. 37, 39).¹⁴³ The first “answer” outlines the blessing that Jacob received, and the second “answer” gives Esau his blessing, which is subordinate to Jacob’s. Commentators give Isaac’s answer to Esau various names: blessing, antiblessing, curse.¹⁴⁴ The title one gives seems to depend on two factors: (1) how much one wants to contrast the proclamation Isaac gives Jacob with the one he gives Esau; (2) how one translates מִן (*min*) in both Jacob’s blessing and Esau’s blessing. I refer to both as blessing because they have similar structure and content, and because the language of curse is not used.¹⁴⁵ However, Esau’s blessing is clearly secondary to Jacob’s: “your brother you will serve.”

The translation of the preposition מִן is ambiguous. It typically means “of” or “from,” having a partitive meaning (as in Isaac’s blessing to Jacob, v. 28: “May God give to you *from* the dew...”). But it can also have a privative meaning: “away from.” The question is whether Isaac’s blessing to Esau insinuates a partitive or privative connotation. That is, does Esau also receive “from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth” or is his dwelling “away from” such prosperity?

In support of the partitive¹⁴⁶ is the fact that Isaac’s words to Jacob and Esau are identical. Why translate them two different ways? Both Jacob and Esau are blessed with the phrases “from the dew of the heavens,” “from the fat of the earth.” Granted, Jacob is given these things by God, but that does not mean Esau cannot access them. Jacob may have double the prosperity (dew, fat, grain and new wine), but Esau still receives some,

¹⁴³ Just as Isaac blesses (בָּרַךְ , vv. 23, 27) Jacob twice.

¹⁴⁴ Fretheim (“Which Blessing?” 289) calls it a *blessing*, and Spina (“The ‘Face of God’,” 11) calls it a *secondary blessing*. Fokkelman (*Narrative Art*, 104) and George W. Coats (*Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature* [FOTL 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 203–204) both give it the name *antiblessing*, while Skinner (*Genesis*, 373–374) and Hamilton (*Genesis 18–50*, 228) go as far as to designate it a *curse*.

¹⁴⁵ Nor is “bless(ing)” used, as I’ve just said, but if the pronouncement over Esau is to be understood as curse, in contrast to Jacob’s blessing, the text could have been more explicit. Thus, I believe the contrast to be one of subordination (Esau is subordinate to Jacob) not opposition (blessing and curse). Cf. Heb 11:20.

¹⁴⁶ Jacob, *The First Book*, 184; Plaut, *The Torah*, 187; Janzen, *Abraham*, 106; Alter, *Genesis*, 143; Spina, “The ‘Face of God’,” 11–12.

too.¹⁴⁷ It is also apparent that in the future, Esau is materially blessed just as Jacob is (cf. 36:6–8).¹⁴⁸ Surely Esau would understand the מ in a positive way, a way that benefits him. Would Esau, as modern linguists do, finagle the preposition to have an opposite meaning in order to heighten the contrast between blessings? Probably not. Thus it seems that the plain reading, where מ means the same thing (“from”) in both blessings, is more appropriate.

In support of the privative¹⁴⁹ is the fact that Isaac’s “identical” words to Jacob and Esau are framed in slightly different contexts. To Jacob he says, “May God give to you *from* the dew of the heavens and *from* the fat of the earth.” But to Esau he says, “Behold, *from* the fat of the earth will your dwelling be, and *from* the dew of the heavens.” In Jacob’s blessing, the מ supports the verb. God will give “from the sources of” dew and fat. In Esau’s blessing, the מ seems more locative. What does it mean that “your dwelling will be *from*” dew and fat? Does it not make more sense that the dwelling—a location—would be related to dew and fat by a preposition of location, and thus “away from” or “apart from”?¹⁵⁰ As for the future, could we really use the blessings as adumbrations of the sons’ prosperity? Doesn’t Jacob’s promise of primacy over his brother never come to practical fruition? So the fact of Esau’s future wealth could be despite his father’s blessing rather than because of it. And even if Esau heard the מ as partitive, perhaps Isaac could have meant it as privative, and thus Esau was tricked into thinking he had received a blessing.¹⁵¹ Besides all this, the contrast with Jacob’s blessing is significant enough to warrant a different translation of the preposition.

In the end, I believe, the preposition is deliberately ambiguous.¹⁵² It could be read either way, both producing a compelling and legitimate reading. And no matter how one reads the מ, Esau’s blessing is clearly secondary to Jacob’s, a fact which leads Esau to plan his brother’s murder (v. 41). Esau is to live by his sword—insinuating violence—but he is also to serve his brother. The latter pronouncement recalls again the oracle of YHWH (25:23), which Isaac has now doubly established (27:29, 40). However, despite this unfortunate reality for Esau, there is hope for a future release. One day Esau will break Jacob’s yoke off of his neck¹⁵³—but how? At present, it appears to be through

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Jacob, *The First Book*, 184; Alter, *Genesis*, 143.

¹⁴⁸ Spina, “The ‘Face of God’,” 19–20.

¹⁴⁹ Skinner, *Genesis*, 373; von Rad, *Genesis*, 274; Speiser, *Genesis*, 210; Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 111; Zakovitch, *Jacob*, 36–37; Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 46.

¹⁵⁰ A possible reading could be: To Jacob: “May God give you *a part from* the dew and the fat.” To Esau: “Your dwelling will be *apart from* the dew and the fat.”

¹⁵¹ Zakovitch, *Jacob*, 37.

¹⁵² Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 194; Fretheim, “Which Blessing?” 289. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 212, notes the ambiguity as well, but leans toward the privative sense.

¹⁵³ Rebekah put “Esau” (that is, goat skins) on Jacob’s neck so he could secure the blessing. Now Isaac puts Jacob’s yoke on Esau, thus reinforcing Jacob’s blessing. But

fraternal violence. But in the end, forgiveness is the means of yoke-breaking (Gen 33). The fourth scene ends with this proclamation of hope, but it is quite dim amidst the darkness that Esau feels, as the next scene will reveal.

Analysis of the Characters

Esau

Esau has done everything right; he has been obedient to the letter. Yet he does not receive the blessing he was promised but finds out that his brother has cheated him. He wears his emotions on his sleeve, and his bitter cries cannot but promote pity in the reader. We know that things are stacked against Esau—the oracle foretold his subordination to his brother, he sold his birthright to Jacob, and he married Hittite wives. At the same time, however, Esau is loved by Isaac, and is obedient to his father. Does he not deserve to be blessed?

It is in this scene that we most see the depth of Esau’s wound. While fratricide (v. 41) is an inappropriate response (cf. Cain, Gen 4), we are made to feel Esau’s outrage at Jacob’s deceit. The trajectory of Esau’s life, however, does not end here. Perhaps the narrator gives such a moving portrayal of Esau’s devastation so that when Esau and Jacob reunite (Gen 33), Esau’s forgiveness is that much more profound. For now, however, the reader sits with Esau in his pain.

Esau is a tragic figure in this episode. His birth is a mixed blessing: he is the firstborn, but YHWH’s oracle foretells his subservience. He grows up a strong hunter, and he is loved by his father. When Isaac asks him to perform a task playing to his strengths, Esau is eager to obey. It appears that Esau will, after all, overcome the oracle spoken about him. Despite having sold the birthright, perhaps Esau will still get the blessing. But it is not to be. The very moment of Esau’s triumph is his tragic fall, as he is robbed of his blessing and left with nothing. He can only beg a secondary blessing out of a reluctant father.

Isaac

In this scene, Isaac can be interpreted in three broad ways, depending on how one views his knowledge level.

1. Duped co-victim (corresponding to the Ignorance and Ambiguity readings)
2. Protector
3. Knowing accomplice (corresponding to the Knowledge and Planning readings)

The first is the most common reading.¹⁵⁴ Isaac, like Esau, has only now discovered that he has blessed Jacob. He and Esau are united in their pain, most emphatically shown by the exaggerated language of vv. 33–34. He wants to bless Esau, but cannot give him

neither the skins nor the yoke are permanent: Jacob’s deception was eventually revealed, and Esau’s servitude will eventually end. Cf. Janzen, *Abraham*, 106.

¹⁵⁴ E.g., Janzen, *Abraham*, 105.

anything more than a blessing subordinate to Jacob’s. He ends Esau’s blessing with a glimmer of hope because Isaac wants Esau to be free from Jacob’s yoke.

Isaac as protector is not truly its own reading, but can be synthesized with the other two. In this interpretation, Isaac is not helpless to bless his son Esau, but rather tries to protect Esau from receiving a blessing that would only be subsumed under Jacob’s. After Isaac realizes Esau is before him, he admits that the blessing of the imposter cannot be revoked (v. 33). Isaac cannot transfer the blessing once given! When Esau first utters, “Bless me—me too, my father” (v. 34), Isaac replies that Jacob has taken his blessing (v. 35). Esau asks if there is any blessing left (v. 36), but Isaac outlines all that he has given Jacob, insinuating that the firstborn blessing has been exhausted (v. 37). “So for you then, what can I do, my son?” he asks, because any blessing he gives Esau will only doubly confirm what he has given to Jacob. But Esau persists (v. 38), and Isaac gives him an answer, a blessing which may promise prosperity (depending on the translation of מן), but also acknowledges the reality of Jacob’s supremacy. It gives Esau a hope for future freedom, but it is unclear when or how that might come about. So Isaac’s reluctance to give Esau a blessing is not because there is absolutely only one blessing which can be given.¹⁵⁵ Rather, it is because he wants to protect Esau from the subordinate blessing. If Isaac had only blessed Jacob, then perhaps his brotherly primacy could more generically refer to relatives and descendants. But if Esau receives a blessing, it specifies his service to Jacob (“Your brother you will serve”). Is this really what Esau wants? In the end, Isaac gives in to Esau’s weeping, and Esau receives this subordinate blessing.

The third way to understand Isaac is what I have termed “knowing accomplice.” This assumes that Isaac was aware that he blessed Jacob, and that once Esau arrives, he tries to cover up his knowing involvement from his elder son. His extreme trembling—a word associated with fear—signals his anxiety about Esau’s potentially violent reaction to losing the blessing. If Esau thinks Isaac knowingly blessed Jacob, might he try to harm his father? So Isaac plays dumb: “Who then was he who...?” Once Isaac sees that Esau is more distraught than angry, he reveals that Jacob has taken the blessing. He adds “in deceit” so that Esau will believe Isaac has been tricked. Only after Esau’s bitterness is directed toward Jacob (v. 36) does Isaac venture to tell Esau how he blessed Jacob. His question, “So for you then, what can I do, my son?” is Isaac’s final attempt to dissuade Esau from seeking the secondary blessing which will only anger him further (cf. v. 41). But because Esau begs and weeps, Isaac feels confident that he can give Esau such a

¹⁵⁵ Jacob gives a blessing to each of his sons as well as his grandsons, fourteen recipients in all. Westermann believes the bestowal of only one blessing indicates an “earlier understanding of blessing” (*Blessing*, 54). However, Isaac himself never claims there is only one blessing (Esau merely asks about this, v. 38), but speaks in such a way so as to dissuade Esau from insisting on a secondary blessing. There is only one blessing for primacy over brothers, but the blessing of prosperity is available for each son.

blessing that subordinates him to his brother. Isaac can safely confirm Jacob’s superiority over Esau because Esau will not harm the father who uttered these blessings.

No matter how one reads Isaac, it appears that he is testing both of his sons.¹⁵⁶ He tests Jacob with the question of identity: “Are you really my son Esau?” Jacob passes the test, either because his disguise convinces Isaac, or because his persistence impresses Isaac. Isaac then gives Jacob what he wants: the firstborn blessing. Isaac tests Esau with the question of desire: “So for you then, what can I do, my son?” After Esau insists on receiving a secondary blessing, Isaac gives him what he wants.¹⁵⁷ Thus the two sons are differentiated for Isaac. Jacob, with a more long-term vision of the blessing, goes to great lengths to obtain it. Esau, on the other hand, once again displays his short-term vision.¹⁵⁸ Suddenly aware that his blessing has been taken, Esau’s desire for any blessing he can get reveals his present-oriented mindset. He hopes it will ease his pain, but it only aggravates it, as it verifies his subordinate status. So Isaac, having seen the dispositions of his two sons, perhaps realizes that Jacob is the more appropriate and responsible choice for the blessing.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster, Heel, and Hairy-Man,” 283, 287.

¹⁵⁷ Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster, Heel, and Hairy-Man,” 289–290, suggests that Esau (Hairy-Man) could have asked Isaac for land and descendants (the Abrahamic promise), which Isaac (Trickster) would have granted, but Esau “does not know” what to ask for. Therefore, Isaac reserves the Abrahamic blessing for Jacob (Heel).

¹⁵⁸ Recall in 25:19–34 how Esau’s appetite was satisfied in the moment at the cost of the future benefits of the birthright. Cf. Janzen’s comment: “[Esau] lacks the patience for delayed satisfactions that is to be a quality of spirit characteristic of the new people that Yahweh is in process of fashioning” (*Abraham*, 96).

**SCENE FIVE (GEN 27:41–46)
REBEKAH’S SOLUTION**

Translation

41 And Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing which his father had blessed him. And Esau said in his heart, “The days of mourning my father approach—then I will kill Jacob my brother.”

42 And the words of Esau her big son were told to Rebekah, and she sent and called for Jacob her small son, and she said to him, “Behold, Esau your brother is consoling himself to kill you.

43 So now, my son, listen to my voice, and rise, flee to Laban my brother in Haran,

44 and dwell with him a few days, until the rage of your brother turns away,

45 until the anger of your brother turns away from you and he forgets what you did to him. Then I will send and take you from there. Why should I be bereaved of both of you in one day?”

46 And Rebekah said to Isaac, “I abhor my life because of the daughters of Heth. If Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth like these, from the daughters of the land, why do I have life?”

Translation Notes

Verse 42. “Consoling himself to kill you.” In Hebrew, the phrase literally reads: “consoling himself to you, to kill you.” Other translations attempt to smooth out or fill in the syntax (NRSV: “consoling himself *by planning* to kill you”), but this loses the precision.

Verse 46. “Why do I have life?” Literally in Hebrew: “Why to me is life?” This is a similar statement to Rebekah’s cry during her pregnancy (25:22), although there the Hebrew is more cryptic (cf. also Esau’s rhetorical question about the birthright, 25:32).

Analysis of the Scene

While formally, this scene involves two main characters—Rebekah and Jacob—Esau makes an appearance at the front, and Isaac at the end. Rebekah, however, is the character in control. Just as she initiated the plan that helped Jacob receive the blessing instead of Esau, here she orchestrates a plan that protects the family from self-destruction.

Esau begrudges Jacob because of the blessing. The text is ambiguous as to whose blessing causes Esau to be angry, but both blessings are implied. Esau plans to kill Jacob in retaliation, but his plan is quite vague compared to the intricate ruse Rebekah and

Jacob pulled off. Once the “days of mourning my father” are over,¹⁵⁹ Esau will carry out his vengeance. If Esau killed Jacob before Isaac died, he might be disowned by his father,¹⁶⁰ or killed himself (cf. v. 45). But if Isaac was dead, and then Esau killed Jacob, perhaps Esau would be able to inherit the position of power within the family.¹⁶¹ Isaac had said his death was imminent (27:2), and thus Esau’s plan might soon come to fruition. However, Esau cannot keep the plan to himself. Somehow Rebekah is “told” about it, but the messenger and the means are part of the narrative’s gaps.

Rebekah once again gives a short paraphrase to Jacob: “Esau is consoling himself to kill you.” According to Rebekah, Esau—who desperately grieved the loss of his blessing—is now assuaging his grief with the thought of Jacob’s murder. Esau is following the path of Cain, and Rebekah must act quickly to protect both of her sons. After the brief explanation of Esau’s plan, Rebekah launches into a plan of her own. Once again, she begins, “So now, my son, listen to my voice” (cf. v. 8).¹⁶² Jacob does not verbally respond to his mother as he did the first time (vv. 11–12), perhaps because he, after seeing the success of her earlier plan, trusts her judgment.¹⁶³ Rebekah’s new plan involves Jacob fleeing to her brother Laban. Jacob must go into exile in order to escape the threat of his brother.¹⁶⁴

Rebekah assures Jacob that he will only be away “a few days” until Esau’s wrath and anger subside and he “forgets” what Jacob did. However, the “few days” Rebekah promises turn into twenty years (cf. Gen 31:38), and mother and son never meet again. Some read this as punishment for Rebekah’s deceit.¹⁶⁵ The narrator does not explicitly judge Rebekah, but the lack of reunion between mother and son appears to be an implicit judgment. There is another way to interpret the situation, though. The real punishment for the deception is that Esau will kill Jacob. That is the direct consequence of Rebekah and

¹⁵⁹ Once Isaac died, there would be a period (probably seven days, cf. Gen 50:10) of mourning, after which time Esau would kill his brother. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 443.

¹⁶⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 212.

¹⁶¹ Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 102.

¹⁶² In 27:8, Rebekah also says, “to what I am commanding you.” But the command (צוה) at this end of the narrative is given by Isaac in 28:1 (cf. 28:6).

¹⁶³ As noted in scene two (p. 25), one of Jacob’s characteristics is that he requires evidence or assurance before committing himself to an agreement, a plan, or a god. Since Jacob saw his mother’s earlier plan succeed, he is more trusting of her new plan.

¹⁶⁴ Exile-as-protection occurs elsewhere in the OT. See Moses (Exod 2:11–15), David (1 Sam 21:10), Jeroboam (1 Kgs 11:40). In the New Testament, Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with Jesus to escape Herod’s massacre of the children (Matt 2:13–15). Cf. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 65–66, who sees Jacob’s exile as a “symbolic death.” See also Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 116: “When the inevitable fraternal conflict arises, then, only two possibilities remain: the son will be lost to his family either through death or through exile.”

¹⁶⁵ E.g., Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 216; Zakovitch, *Jacob*, 38.

Jacob’s actions. Rebekah averts the punishment—Esau’s anger which would result in fratricide—by sending Jacob away. The twenty years that Jacob is in Paddan-Aram is not a result of Esau’s wrath. Rather, the time extension is due to Laban’s control over Jacob and Jacob’s family.¹⁶⁶ Thus the fact that Jacob works for Laban twenty years is unrelated to Rebekah’s notion that Esau will forget what Jacob did to him after “a few days.”

Why does Rebekah ask the rhetorical question about losing both sons in one day? If Esau kills Jacob, one son is gone. But Esau would presumably be subject to a blood-avenger for the murder (although who would carry it out?), and thus also be either exiled or put to death.¹⁶⁷ Rebekah cares for both of her sons, even if she favors Jacob.¹⁶⁸ More importantly, with her plan she protects the family as a whole. If both Jacob and Esau were killed, there would be no one to continue the ancestral line, and thus the promise to Abraham would come to nothing.

After Rebekah’s comments to Jacob, she immediately speaks to Isaac. She does not tell him about Esau’s anger,¹⁶⁹ but instead brings up the issue of marriage as a reason to send Jacob away. Because of the discrepancy between what Rebekah tells Jacob and what she tells Isaac, source critics separate v. 46 from the preceding narrative and assign it to the P section that follows in 28:1–9.¹⁷⁰ While v. 46 may well be a contribution of P, the narrative flows quite well without resorting to source division. But this does not mean that the reader must judge Rebekah to be deceptive.¹⁷¹ She has two legitimate reasons to send Jacob to Laban, both prompted by Esau. Esau’s words (vv. 41–42) are a threat to Jacob, and Esau’s wives (36:34–35) are a bitter reality for Isaac and Rebekah. Rebekah speaks to Jacob and Isaac the words which will most provoke them to action. Jacob may not have a thought for endogamous marriages, but he does fear Esau’s violence.¹⁷² Isaac may not respond well to the potential fraternal conflict, but he does understand the importance of avoiding Canaanite marriages (cf. 24:2–9).¹⁷³ As the next scene will demonstrate, Isaac acts on Rebekah’s words and sends Jacob off with the command to marry Laban’s daughter(s), an enterprise concomitant with the Abrahamic blessing.

¹⁶⁶ Contra von Rad, *Genesis*, 274.

¹⁶⁷ Speiser, *Genesis*, 210. Alter suggests that the brothers may kill each other (*Genesis*, 144).

¹⁶⁸ Jacob, *The First Book*, 185.

¹⁶⁹ Perhaps, as discussed in scene four (pp. 42–43, 48–49), Isaac already knows about and fears Esau’s potential for violence.

¹⁷⁰ E.g., Speiser, *Genesis*, 215–216; Coats, *Genesis*, 196. Others assign it to a Redactor (R) (see Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 447, for discussion of this).

¹⁷¹ Cf. Michael A. Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979), 49, 50.

¹⁷² Though it is not stated in this scene, Jacob’s fear of Esau is a factor when he returns to Canaan (32:6–8, 11).

¹⁷³ Cf. Jacob, *The First Book*, 185.

Analysis of the Characters

Rebekah and the Men

All four characters make an appearance in this scene, but Rebekah is clearly in control. The way in which she responds to or interacts with the three men reveals clues about the characterization of each.

Esau. Again living in the moment, Esau fosters a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing. He cannot see past his anger and thus plots fratricide. Though the reader can sympathize with Esau’s pain (as evidenced last scene), murder is an extreme reaction to a stolen blessing. Perhaps he thinks that by killing Jacob, he can regain his firstborn status. But killing his brother will make things worse for Esau, not better. Besides, he also received a blessing, albeit subordinate to Jacob’s. Esau’s emotions, however, get the best of him. Assuming his father’s death to be imminent, he plans his brother’s death to follow swiftly after. Esau lays out a short-term solution that he thinks will comfort his present pain. But Rebekah knows differently. After “a few days,” Esau’s anger will “turn away,” and he will forget what Jacob has done to him. That is, Esau will eventually move on with his life and no longer dwell in his grief and anger. Esau can only envision a future without Jacob via murder. But Rebekah gives Esau a future without Jacob via exile. By sending Jacob away, Rebekah plans a long-term solution to Esau’s pain, providing the space for him to heal. Thus Rebekah not only knows that Esau can move past his anger,¹⁷⁴ she also creates the conditions in which he can do so.

Jacob and Isaac. Jacob is silent in this scene, and as mentioned above, it could be because he trusts his mother’s plans now that he has seen how well they work. She tells him what he needs to hear¹⁷⁵—Esau is plotting your death—so that he takes seriously the call to flee. Rebekah also tells Isaac what will prompt him to action: endogamous marriage. He heeds her words, evidenced by his command to Jacob in 28:1–4. It is almost as if Rebekah reminds Isaac of the responsibilities of the covenant family: with blessing comes obligation. Now that Jacob has received the firstborn rights and blessing, he should marry the appropriate woman.¹⁷⁶ Though the land of Canaan has been promised to Abraham’s descendants (through Isaac, and soon Jacob), the women of the land are off-limits to the patriarchs.¹⁷⁷ It is important that Jacob marry the right wife, and Rebekah’s complaint to Isaac calls this to the father’s attention.

¹⁷⁴ Jacob, *The First Book*, 185. Cf. a similar observation by Johanna Stiebert, “The Malignant Patriarch: Prophetic Ideology and the ‘Bad Press’ of Esau,” in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll* (eds. Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 36.

¹⁷⁵ In scene two, when she gave Jacob a report of Isaac’s commission, she also told him only what he needed to hear.

¹⁷⁶ Jacob, *The First Book*, 188; Coats, *Genesis*, 200; Steinberg, “Gender Roles,” 181.

¹⁷⁷ Although in the next generation, this taboo is apparently less enforced (e.g., Judah’s wife, Tamar, and Asenath).

In the end, Rebekah not only protects the family from the violent after-effects of the deception, but she also creates the space for her sons to thrive. By sending Jacob away, Esau has the space to cool down and heal from his wound. This turns out to be precisely what he needed, as he eventually forgives Jacob (Gen 33). But the exile also allows Jacob the opportunity to marry, have children, and become independently wealthy.¹⁷⁸ Rebekah seems to understand the men in this narrative better than they understand themselves. She anticipates Esau’s eventual forgiveness, Jacob’s potential future in Paddan Aram, and Isaac’s concern for appropriate marriage. She not only ensures that the family survives, but also that both Jacob and Esau thrive.

¹⁷⁸ Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 52.

**SCENE SIX (GEN 28:1–5)
ISAAC SENDS JACOB OFF**

Translation

1 And Isaac called to Jacob and he blessed him, and he commanded him and he said, “You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.

2 Rise, go to Paddan Aram, to the house of Bethuel, the father of your mother, and take for yourself from there a wife from the daughters of Laban, the brother of your mother.

3 And may El Shaddai bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you so that you become an assembly of peoples.

4 And may he give to you the blessing of Abraham—to you and your seed with you—so that you may take possession of the land of your sojourning which God gave to Abraham.”

5 And Isaac sent Jacob and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban, the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau.

Analysis of the Scene

In this scene, Isaac gives Jacob another blessing in addition to the one he has already received. The blessings are very different. The earlier blessing concerned prosperity, authority, and protection. This blessing, on the other hand, recalls the promises made to Abraham, which were passed on to Isaac and now are to be inherited by Jacob: the promises of land, descendants, and divine blessing. The blessing is partnered with the command that Jacob must not marry a Canaanite woman, but a daughter of Laban.

Fretheim argues that Isaac does not actually give Jacob the Abrahamic blessing; it is not his to bestow. Rather, he “commends Jacob to God regarding ‘the blessing of Abraham’ (28:4), which God proceeds to grant (28:13–15; 35:10–12).”¹⁷⁹ God is the one who gives the covenant blessing to the next generation, not the father. Therefore Isaac commends Jacob to God as the appropriate son for the Abrahamic blessing. This has significant implications for an understanding of character in this narrative. Isaac does not condemn Jacob’s act of deception, but rather commends him to God. Why? Perhaps Isaac is impressed by the lengths to which Jacob has gone in order to secure the blessing, a feat that indicates Jacob’s cleverness, persistence, and commitment to the blessing. These are important attributes of patriarchs and matriarchs in Genesis, who are often in situations which require patience¹⁸⁰ or cleverness.¹⁸¹ Esau does not appear to possess these

¹⁷⁹ Fretheim, “Which Blessing?”, 279, 290. Cf. Westermann’s comment: “The blessing is no longer the effective word of the father ...; God is the one who blesses, and the blessing is reworked to a wish or prayer” (*Genesis 12–36*, 447–448).

¹⁸⁰ For example, enduring years of barrenness (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel). Another is sojourning in the promised land of Canaan, knowing that it will not be given to them but to their descendants a few generations later. Cf. Jacob, *The First Book*, 84.

qualities. He is short-sighted (evidenced by the birthright trade) and is even said to “despise” his birthright (as opposed to being utterly committed to it). He is straightforward—which could demonstrate sincerity or honesty—but he does not seem to have the aptitude for cleverness. He is easily swayed by his appetite (selling the birthright) and emotions (wanting to kill Jacob as soon as possible), and thus lacks the foresight and patience that a patriarch of the covenant requires.¹⁸² Though Jacob has deceived his father and taken what was intended for his brother, he is given a commendation to be the son through whom the Abrahamic covenant and promises continue. God confirms this choice (Gen 28:13–15), and thus neither God nor Isaac condemn the deception at all.¹⁸³ So Jacob is sent away to Paddan Aram, and though his journey may be understood as an exile (to escape his brother’s wrath), it could also be seen as the start of a journey or quest.¹⁸⁴

Analysis of the Characters

Isaac and Rebekah

As Rebekah was the primary actor in the previous scene, so Isaac is the primary actor in this scene. Jacob silently assents to his father’s summons, commission, and send-off. Though the reader remembers that Isaac acts only after being prompted by Rebekah (27:46), Isaac is presented as a strong character here. He is not manipulated or deceived, but freely blesses and commands Jacob (28:1). His command to Jacob is similar to that of Abraham to his servant (24:2–4). His commendation of Jacob to God (28:3–4) indicates his active decision not to condemn Jacob’s deception, but to bless him for the future. In a way, though Rebekah has controlled the entire episode of the blessing through her intervening plans, Isaac has the final say about Jacob’s future, and his verdict is to bless Jacob again.

Isaac agrees with Rebekah at several points, however. Her complaint about the Canaanite women is matched by his command to Jacob to avoid a Canaanite marriage. Rebekah’s command to Jacob to flee to Laban is echoed in Isaac’s command to marry a daughter of Laban. And the very fact that Isaac blesses Jacob again indicates that Isaac agrees with Rebekah: Jacob is the more appropriate son to carry on the covenant family.

¹⁸¹ See the wife-sister tales of Gen 12, 20, and 26, or the tale of Tamar’s righteousness in Gen 38. Cf. Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster, Heel, and Hairy-Man,” 288; Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 51.

¹⁸² Though it should not be forgotten that Esau is the ancestor of Edom, and thus is a patriarch of his own people. My point is that Esau does not possess what appears to be valuable among Israelite patriarchs and matriarchs.

¹⁸³ The question should be raised whether the deception and blessing of ch. 27 have any effect on God’s election of Jacob. If election is God’s free choice, then would the actions and attributes of Jacob or Esau sway God’s judgment? To answer this question is beyond the scope of this essay, but see Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 46–53.

¹⁸⁴ Steinberg, “Gender Roles,” 182; Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 60.

**FRAMING SCENES (GEN 26:34–35; 28:6–9)
ESAU’S MARRIAGES**

Translation

26:34 When Esau was forty years old he took as a wife Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite.

35 And they were a bitterness of spirit for Isaac and for Rebekah.

28:6 And Esau saw that Isaac blessed Jacob and sent him to Paddan Aram to take for himself a wife from there, when he blessed him and commanded him, saying, “You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan,”

7 and that Jacob listened to his father and to his mother and went to Paddan Aram.

8 And Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan were evil in the eyes of Isaac his father.

9 So Esau went to Ishmael, and he took Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael (the son of Abraham), sister of Nebaioth—in addition to his other wives—as a wife.

Analysis of the Scene and Esau’s Character

Esau’s marriages frame the story of the blessing and thicken the depiction of Esau’s character in the episode. Scholars have determined this frame to be from the P source (along with 27:46–28:5) because of its concern with appropriate (non-Canaanite) marriages.¹⁸⁵ Why might this type of concern surround a story of deception and blessing?

First, Esau’s marriages disqualify him from being heir to the Abrahamic promises.¹⁸⁶ Abraham had prohibited Canaanite wives for Isaac (24:2–4) and Isaac in turn prohibits them for Jacob (28:1–2). That Esau later recognizes his marriages as unacceptable, at least to his father (28:8), seems to justify his disqualification.¹⁸⁷ In an attempt to remedy the situation, Esau marries within the family as well,¹⁸⁸ but it is too late and still beyond the appropriate boundaries of marriage.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ von Rad, *Genesis*, 277; Skinner, *Genesis*, 375; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 236–237; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 448; cf. Speiser, *Genesis*, 215–216; Coats, *Genesis*, 196; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 202, 205.

¹⁸⁶ Many commentators note this. E.g., Alter, *Genesis*, 136; Jacob, *The First Book*, 179; Skinner, *Genesis*, 374; Sarna, *Genesis*, 189; Steinberg, “Gender Roles,” 181; Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 100.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Steinberg, “Gender Roles,” 181.

¹⁸⁸ While Jacob goes to his mother’s brother Laban, Esau goes to his father’s brother Ishmael.

¹⁸⁹ Esau marries someone within the lineage of Abraham, but it is from an Abrahamic branch already outside the covenant (Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 101). In addition, Ishmael is half Egyptian and his wife is full Egyptian (cf. 21:21), making Mahalath three-quarters Egyptian. Egypt is the brother of Canaan (10:6), and thus Esau still marries inappropriately (cf. Jacob, *The First Book*, 187).

Second, Esau’s initial marriages (26:34–35) were a “bitterness of spirit” to Isaac and Rebekah. Surely this tipped the scales against Esau as well. If Esau married women that made life miserable for his parents, would they be inclined to bless him? It is interesting that Esau’s wives are described as a “bitterness” to his parents, but later, Esau lets out a bitter cry at having lost the blessing (27:34). Perhaps there is a subtle connection being made between Esau’s inappropriate marriages and his loss of the blessing.

Third, Esau’s marriages contrast with Jacob’s singleness. Esau marries at forty, like his father Isaac (cf. 25:20). Unlike his father, however, he marries Canaanite women.¹⁹⁰ Jacob, on the other hand, does not marry. That Esau marries at the same age his father did may indicate Esau’s impatience to be married.¹⁹¹ When Jacob goes to Laban, it turns out his uncle has two daughters. Could it be that Isaac’s two sons were destined for Laban’s two daughters?¹⁹² It does not matter, because Esau has already married Hittite women, those who were close by.

So to ask the question again, why might Esau’s marriages frame the episode of the blessing? If we did not have these framing scenes, we would have a one-sidedly positive (but tragic) image of Esau. Esau has been the model obedient son for the entire episode. He gets no reward even though he has done everything right. He is the victim of the deception. The frames, therefore, provide important context to balance the portrait of Esau. Amid all the pity the reader might feel for Esau, his marriages temper the positive portrayal of his character. One can empathize with a pained Esau in his tragic moment of loss, but one must remember that he has chosen incorrectly when it comes to marriage. This framing context speaks negatively of his character; namely, his discernment and his patience. Thus Esau has been implicitly ruled out as a candidate for the blessing.

Esau’s character is thus complex—he is not a stock hero or villain—comprised of elements that portray him positively (obedience) and elements which portray him negatively (exogamous marriages, appetite, impatience, murderous thoughts). His character can be interpreted through a positive or negative lens, or through both. If one interpretation is chosen to support a thesis or larger reading, however, the interpreter should recognize the potential for other possible readings of Esau’s character.

¹⁹⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 205, suggests that Isaac may have slacked in his responsibility to arrange an appropriate marriage for Esau (as his father Abraham had done for him, Gen 24). He argues that the text is ambiguous as to whether Esau or Isaac is more to blame for the Hittite wives. The evidence seems to lean more toward a negative portrayal of Esau than of Isaac, however, because Isaac later shows great concern for Jacob to marry endogamously.

¹⁹¹ Allen, “Who Was Rebekah?”, 204, suggests that Esau’s “decision to marry two women who were close by instead of travelling the necessary distance to find a wife from those chosen to be God’s children is another indication of his love of the immediate.”

¹⁹² The rabbis suggest this as well, *Genesis Rabbah* 70.16; but see 71.2.

Esau’s complexity in the marriage scenes continues to grow, however. In chapter 28, Esau recognizes the problem of his marriages. The verb “to see” (which inadvertently creates a great pun in English, “Esau saw”) occurs twice, demonstrating that Esau notices the difference between himself and Jacob. Jacob has been sent off to marry a non-Canaanite family-relation. Esau’s wives have made life bitter for Isaac,¹⁹³ and Esau now sees that they are “evil in the eyes of Isaac his father.” These two observations prompt Esau to marry a woman from his father’s kin. Esau tries to change for the sake of his father, a hint that he has begun to forgive Jacob. When Esau planned fratricide, he expected Isaac’s imminent death, which meant Jacob’s could follow soon after (27:41; cf. 27:2). But now Esau aims to please his father by marrying a kinswoman. If Esau had expected Isaac to die soon, why would he start a new marriage, a lifelong enterprise? It appears that Esau, by marrying Ishmael’s daughter, hopes to gain his father’s favor. This could be Esau’s first narrated moment of long-term planning. Esau’s new marriage is evidence that he expects his father to live for a while, thus also indicating that his anger has—at least slightly—turned away from Jacob. So while the initial frame scene (26:34–35) may prime the reader for Esau’s disqualification, the final frame shows a change in Esau’s character.¹⁹⁴ Unfortunately, we do not get to see Esau’s further transformation as it happens, but we do encounter the fruit of it when, in the reunion between the brothers (Gen 33), Esau demonstrates his profound forgiveness of Jacob.

¹⁹³ And Rebekah, according to 26:35, but Esau here only notices the pain it causes his father.

¹⁹⁴ Contra Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 100.

CHARACTER SUMMARIES

Esau

It is helpful to start these summaries with Esau, because his characterization is the most straightforward. I began this paper by claiming that all the characters can be interpreted positively or negatively. As noted in the framing scenes (p. 58), Esau is a complex combination of both positive and negative attributes. Positively, he honors his father Isaac by obediently performing the commission. Also, there is a possibility that Esau demonstrates a change of character at the very end of the episode (28:6–9). Negatively, Esau’s Hittite marriages and sale of the birthright seem to disqualify him from receiving the blessing. His appetite and his murderous anger show that he prefers instant gratification to long-term planning.

The complexity of Esau’s character is most pronounced when one asks whether he deserved the blessing. His honor and obedience seem to indicate yes, but the negative textual data urge no. The reader’s sympathy is with Esau after he discovers the blessing is lost, but at the same time one can understand why Esau is not the ideal candidate.

Later biblical interpretations of Esau focus primarily on his negative qualities (Heb 12:16–17) or condemn the nation of Edom by using the name of its eponymous ancestor (Obad, Mal 1:1–3). A negative reading of Esau is not necessarily inappropriate, especially because some of his actions and thoughts (such as giving up something important for momentary satisfaction, or planning vengeance) should not be imitated.

But a positive reading is also available, one which focuses on Esau’s obedience to his father, and his later forgiveness of Jacob (Gen 33). Esau obeyed his father, yet his obedience was rewarded with deceit. He suffered a horrible wrong, but he was able to accept the new situation and move on with his life (cf. 28:6–9), eventually forgiving Jacob.

Jacob

The complicating factor in judging Jacob’s character is the deception. On the one hand, it reflects negatively on Jacob. He tells bold lies to his father (27:19, 20, 24) in order to take what was rightfully Esau’s. But the text also offers extenuating circumstances for Jacob’s deception. The oracle of YHWH destined Jacob to have primacy over Esau. Therefore Jacob’s ascendancy fulfills the divine will. Esau’s negative qualities (appetite, Hittite marriages) make Jacob look better by contrast. Esau is not the ideal candidate for the blessing, but Jacob is. Jacob is also an obedient son, following the plan which his mother Rebekah initiated. He contributes little to the plan, but does as he is told. These qualifying data can be used to soften the effect of Jacob’s involvement. In the end, however, one cannot escape Jacob’s use of deception, and must come to terms with it.

While a negative appraisal of the deception is easiest, another interpretation is available, that of the trickster. Jacob is a marginalized figure in the power structures of his culture and family. In order to overcome the unjust patriarchal system of

primogeniture, Jacob uses indirect means—deception—to raise his status and thus fulfill the oracle of YHWH, which said the elder would serve the younger. If God wishes to invert the power structure, then the trickster Jacob accomplishes God’s will. But before rejoicing in Jacob’s success, one must remember that the trickster figure is always discovered and returned to a position of marginality. Jacob is found out and must flee his brother’s wrath. He does not get to experience the oracle’s promise—nor the blessing’s proclamation—that Esau would serve him. Jacob survives, but he must live with the consequences of his actions.

Positively, a reader can appreciate Jacob’s qualities of patience, cleverness, and persistence. He is able to raise his status through an act of trickery, thus fulfilling the divine will. He is obedient to his mother, and later, he obeys both his mother and father by going to Paddan-Aram. Neither Isaac nor God condemns Jacob for the deception, but both bless Jacob further (28:1–5, 13–15). Even in exile, which involves hard labor for his uncle Laban, Jacob is blessed with wealth and family.¹⁹⁵

Negatively, a reader can judge Jacob’s deception by its effects. Esau his brother is devastated.¹⁹⁶ Jacob must flee and live in exile. Later events in Jacob’s life have eerie similarities to the deception of Isaac, as if this was the defining episode of his life.¹⁹⁷ How one determines the ethics of deception—that is, if deception is ever appropriate—is an extra-exegetical issue (though not an extra-biblical one; the Bible has plenty to say about deception¹⁹⁸). The narrator of Genesis 27 does not explicitly judge the deception, however, inviting the reader to participate in judgment.

Rebekah

The biblical text does not condemn Rebekah’s involvement in the deception either. In fact, as Esther Fuchs has shown (see scene two, p. 27), Rebekah’s plan is implicitly praised by the narrator because it supports a relatively powerless male (Jacob). But Rebekah has two plans, one which raises Jacob’s status, and one which protects the family from tragedy. She is in control of the episode from start to finish. Because of her resourcefulness and cleverness, Jacob receives the blessing—thus fulfilling YHWH’s oracle—and her two sons are separated so that they can each thrive in their own space (see scene five, pp. 53–54).

¹⁹⁵ Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 52.

¹⁹⁶ Although if YHWH’s oracle was to be fulfilled, and Esau would be subservient to Jacob, there is probably no alternative that Esau would have accepted gladly. See Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 50.

¹⁹⁷ For a list of these, see the end of scene three (p. 39, n126). Some understand these to be punishments or implicit judgments, but I prefer to think of them as “echoes” or “hauntings.” Because of Jacob’s earlier act, we (and perhaps he) see the later events of his life through the lens of that defining deception.

¹⁹⁸ E.g., Tamar and Judah (Gen 28); Shiprah and Puah (Exod 1); Michal and David (1 Sam 19).

But because Rebekah used deception, she is often judged negatively.¹⁹⁹ Jeansonne comments, “The interpretation of the Rebekah cycle stories by biblical scholars has not been as favorable to her as the text itself.”²⁰⁰ Unfortunately, much of the negative criticism is engendered. Thus, Rebekah does not appropriately fulfill her role as wife or mother. Her initiative is seen as manipulation, her love for Jacob, jealousy. Bellis compares Sarah’s treatment of Hagar with Rebekah’s deception of Isaac and concludes, “Sarah’s behavior toward Hagar was cruel and far worse than Rebekah’s deception of Isaac. Nevertheless, in the eyes of many, Sarah is the more ethical character. Abusing a woman servant is acceptable; deceiving a man, even to achieve God’s mission, is not.”²⁰¹ The task for an interpreter who judges Rebekah’s actions negatively is to avoid sexist conclusions. One should also take into consideration Rebekah’s status as a woman in a patriarchal society. A reader may suggest that Rebekah’s deception was inappropriate, but he should also acknowledge that she may have had no other options.

On the positive side, one can follow Garside Allen’s interpretation that Rebekah is a spiritual role model of self-sacrifice (see scene two, pp. 27–28). One could also highlight the effectiveness of Rebekah’s plans: she fulfilled YHWH’s oracle by successfully ensuring Jacob received the promise, and she successfully averted the danger to the family posed by Esau’s anger. Rebekah also cares for both her sons, as evidenced in scene five. She provides the space for Esau to heal and keeps Jacob safe by sending him to her brother Laban. Rebekah makes sure that the Abrahamic promise can be passed on to the next generation.

Isaac

Isaac’s characterization is the most complicated. While a first read may give the impression that Isaac is passive and helpless, deceived and manipulated, further inquiry allows for alternative readings. To come to any conclusions about Isaac, one must first answer a series of ambiguities. The complicating factor is that even these answers may be judged positively or negatively. These are all part of the gap-filling process, with some gaps perhaps better left as blanks.

First, is Isaac able to discern who is the better candidate for the blessing? He could either fail to see Jacob as the better candidate and thus wish to bless Esau, or he could at some point in the episode decide that Jacob is better for the blessing. Further, is it right for Isaac to want to bless Esau? Is this evidence that Isaac is deciding with his stomach (cf. 25:28) rather than by the fitness of his two sons? One the other hand, is it fair for Isaac to switch the blessing to Jacob after he has promised it to Esau?

¹⁹⁹ See introduction for examples (pp. 2–3, n8). Cf. especially Allen, “Who Was Rebekah?”, 192–196.

²⁰⁰ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 53.

²⁰¹ Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 1994), 83.

Second, is Isaac aware that he is blessing Jacob? If so, is his choice to bless Jacob fair to Esau? If Isaac is unaware, do we approve of his later confirmation of Jacob’s blessing? Third, why doesn’t Isaac condemn Jacob’s deception? Is this evidence that he acknowledges God’s choice of Jacob?

There are a multitude of questions which one can answer, each giving a slightly different nuance to the characterization of Isaac. From a negative perspective, Isaac appears to be a man of appetite (see pp. 17–18, 23–25). Perhaps this clouds his judgment, as he wishes to bless the son who satisfies his stomach. In a way, Isaac could be seen as working against God’s will by attempting to bless Esau instead of Jacob. Isaac also seems powerless to prevent fraternal conflict in his family. It is Rebekah who must ensure that Esau is pacified and Jacob is safe; Isaac only participates once Rebekah initiates.

Positively, Isaac could be seen as a man of discernment. This mutually excludes the negative interpretation of his (clouded) judgment, and thus the two readings are indeterminate. They are both valid, but cannot be true at the same time. In the midst of Jacob’s deception, Isaac is able to determine that his younger son is more appropriate for the blessing. Isaac may even be able to see God’s will in the situation. But Isaac also blesses Esau, an indication of his care for both his sons. Isaac wants only to bless and not to curse or condemn. Isaac forgives Jacob’s deception and blesses him further. Perhaps it is Isaac’s forgiveness of Jacob’s deception that inspires Esau to eventually forgive Jacob as well. Isaac allows for other voices to influence his decisions. He hears Jacob’s voice in scene three, and blesses Jacob. He hears Esau’s bitter cries in scene four and blesses Esau. He heeds Rebekah’s concern in scene five for Jacob to marry endogamously. Isaac makes sure that everyone in the family is heard.

CONCLUSION

The characters in Genesis 27 are complex, embodying both positive and negative aspects. Their actions and reactions can compel a reader to sympathize with them or to criticize them. Extra-exegetical criteria for evaluation can sway a reader’s disposition (e.g., is it ethical to deceive, even to fulfill God’s will?). Information not given in the text can influence how one interprets the characters: social structures (patriarchy) and literary types (tricksters). Gaps in the text invite the reader to fill in missing information, which also has an effect on interpretation. Of course, the most significant gap in Genesis 27 is that no explicit judgment is offered for any of the characters. This gap is a deliberate device of the biblical narrator, who wishes to draw the reader into the episode to make judgments of her own. In this way, the blessing episode resembles real life. We often encounter situations in which moral judgment is difficult. There are extenuating circumstances, combinations of positive and negative factors, and prior events in one’s life that complicate the issue.

What I have done in this thesis is to demonstrate that the characters in the narrative of Genesis 27 can be interpreted in positive and negative ways. The textual data can sometimes be used to support opposite readings (e.g., does Isaac know he blesses Jacob or not?), but other times it fits only one reading (e.g., Esau’s fratricidal thoughts are inappropriate). My goal has been to facilitate a more ecumenical reading of each character. While an individual reader (or reading community) may choose to interpret a character one particular way, it is important that they acknowledge the other possible interpretations as well, taking into account the whole presentation of the character. By sketching out positive and negative interpretive possibilities for Esau, Jacob, Rebekah, and Isaac, I hope to provide resources for those who wish to participate in a fuller reading of biblical characters.

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