

Reinstating Isaac *The Centrality of Abraham's Son in the "Jacob-Esau" Narrative of Gen 27*

I. Introduction

The infamous narrative centered in Genesis 27, in which Jacob ostensibly "steals" the patriarchal blessing from his brother, Esau, presents a number of interpretive difficulties. If it is assumed that Jacob is the central character in view here (as is usually the case) then the reader is faced with the dilemma of a pericope which seems to intimate that it is possible to obtain spiritual blessing through deception. If the blessing in question were concerned only with societal position and material inheritance, this might not prove too great a difficulty. However, this particular blessing is not simply socio-political. Rather, it is the Abrahamic blessing, which is equally concerned with spiritual inheritance and the good favor of Yahweh. Clearly, the efficacy of this sort of blessing must reside in the activity of God. Is it to be assumed, then, that Yahweh was somehow forced into giving spiritual blessing to Jacob as a result of his deception? Does this narrative thereby allow deception as a viable means of coming under the blessing of Yahweh?

There is little within this particular narrative that can be construed as an ethical evaluation of Jacob's actions, unless one argues that the episode in-totem is intended to lend tacit approval to his methodology. However, it is probable that the identity deception perpetrated upon Jacob by Laban in Gen. 29:21-25, closely paralleling the deception here, constitutes divine judgment visited upon Jacob for his duplicity. It is unlikely, then, that the narrative in question here is intended to approve of Jacob's actions. If Jacob's actions are not here approved, then one might naturally expect to find this pericope constructed so as to disapprove of them, yet disapproval is as notably absent as approval. If Jacob and his deception are, in fact, the focal point of this narrative, then the lack of either positive or negative ethical evaluation seems rather odd.

There is also the question of how best to understand the role of Rebekah in this narrative. Commentators are divided on this issue. She cannot be written off as an inconsequential character here since her activity constitutes a substantial portion of the narrative material. More to the point, she is a key player in the development of the deception-issue which is so central here. Given her prominence, the reader naturally asks if Rebekah is to be viewed positively or negatively. But again, as with the question of Jacob's deception, the text is silent. It happened. Little else is said. What, then, is her contribution to the development of the central intent of this narrative?

A similar question of function must be raised in regards to the other two characters as well: Esau and Isaac. A survey of the relevant scholarship reveals a broadly accepted assumption that Esau's role in the development of this narrative is both extremely limited and primarily negative. In part, this assumption is based upon the literary boundaries often assigned to the narrative in question. It will be argued here that Esau is actually an important key to understanding authorial intent in this narrative, especially in terms of determining the proper boundaries of the narrative. Even more important, however, is the question of Isaac's role in this text.

This paper will argue that the questions raised above can be answered, and authorial intent recovered, only when Isaac is recognized as being the central character in what has often been seen as the second of the two "Jacob and Esau" narratives, the other one being the sale of the birthright found in Gen. 25:19-34. The author's intent is not to draw the reader's attention to Jacob's deception and all the implications which obtain therein. Rather, this text is intended as a commentary on Isaac. More specifically, this narrative functions to explicate his failure to do what Yahweh expected of him as the patriarch of his family and the consequences which resulted from that failure.

II. Structure & Interpretation

Proper interpretation of this narrative depends upon recognition of its chiasmic structure. While parallel elements of the narrative have been noted (Fokkelman, 101; Ross, 474), the full extent of the pericope's symmetry seems to have gone largely unnoticed. In part, this oversight is related to a general lack of consensus about the narrative's boundaries. A number of scholars judge the narrative to begin at 27:1 and end at 28:5. There are also scholars who believe that the narrative in question actually begins at 26:34 with Esau's marriage to the Hittite women, Judith and Basemath, and ends at 28:9 with his marriage to the Ishmaelite, Mahalath. However, either because of the trend towards identifying discrete scenes within the material, or the propensity towards seeing Esau's first marriage merely as an indicator of Esau's self-disqualification, the true purpose of vv. 26:34 and 28:9 has been missed. In fact, Esau's marriages serve as the termini of a chiasm:

- A Esau marries [26:34-35]
 - B Isaac calls (ka-rah) for a son (here Esau) and commands him to "go" on a search (here for game) [27:1-4]
 - C Rebekah involves herself, devising a plan to aid Jacob [27:5-17]
 - D Deception enacted [27:18-25]
 - E Blessing [27:26-29]
 - D' Deception discovered [27:30-41]
 - C' Rebekah involves herself, devising a plan to save Jacob [27:42-46]
 - B' Isaac calls (ka-rah) for a son (here Jacob) and commands him to "go" on a search (here for a wife) [28:1-7]
- A' Esau marries [28:8-9]

Following this structure, it becomes clear that 27:26-29, in which Isaac mistakenly conveys a blessing on Jacob, forms the fulcrum of the narrative. There are some interesting questions raised by the particular form of this blessing, not the least of which is as follows: does Isaac intend this to be the Abrahamic birthright blessing, or is it in fact something altogether different? Rackman has suggested that the blessing of vv.26-29 can not be the Abrahamic blessing on the grounds that what is present in 27:26-29 is entirely materialistic (Rackman, 18). This is an interesting question and will be briefly addressed below. Of greater importance in understanding the author's intent, however, is the fact that the structure of this narrative places the blessing at the center of the flow of thought. It is not the blessing, as a thing in and of itself, however, which is most significant here. The blessing does not choose its own object nor does it come to rest upon someone without intention. Rather, the blessing is pronounced, which means that the chiasmic structure draws the reader's attention not primarily to the blessing itself, which is passive, but to the one who does the blessing; i.e. to Isaac. By placing Isaac and this essential patriarchal activity in the center of the structure, the pericope demands that Isaac be given a more prominent role in the interpretive process than has often been afforded him by modern scholarship.

Esau's marriages, which book-end the chiasm, further this demand. If the first marriage in 26:34-35 is considered independent of its parallel in 28:8-9, a case might possibly be made for seeing here a mere introduction to the following narrative, possibly by providing an apology for Esau's disqualification. However, when considered in tandem, the two accounts of Esau's marriages seem to demand more careful attention. After all, the narrative deals only tangentially with marriage and is far more oriented to the subject of patriarchal blessing and the delineation of the next progenitor of Abraham's line. Why then, should Esau's marriage be construed as a meaningful introduction to this text unless, as already mentioned, it is to be taken

as a brief statement of Esau's disqualification? More careful attention to Esau's marriages reveals another interpretive option which is more plausible given the direction in which the narrative is unfolding. When such attention is given, the editorial comment in 26:34 – "when Esau was forty years old" stands out. Noting that Abraham saw it as his patriarchal duty to obtain a suitable wife for Isaac when he was forty years old (cf. Gen 25:20), this editorial comment seems to direct the reader's attention less to Esau's failure to choose a wife of suitable tribal identity than to the fact that Isaac has not fulfilled his own obligation to ensure that his son is provided with an appropriate wife, thus protecting the purity of the family line. The editorial note in 28:8 to the effect that Esau suddenly realized, only after Jacob has been sent to Laban, how much his choice of wives grieved Isaac, reinforces this. The reader is given the impression that Isaac has previously failed to communicate the importance of marrying within the family line to his eldest son. Thus, it is best to see the mention of Esau's marriages not as reasons for his disqualification from being installed as the next progenitor, but rather as a subtle criticism of Isaac, the "acting" patriarch. It is Isaac's passivity which has created the context in which Esau was tempted into inappropriate marriages.

Having thus cast a suspicious light on Isaac, the author turns to the second parallel theme of his chiasm (B + B') by detailing the episode in which Isaac calls for Esau and sends him on a hunt. Since this hunt and the subsequent preparation of a ritual meal, in keeping with Hebrew custom (Steinmetz, 97), was clearly intended to be a prelude to the blessing of Esau, a question is raised: did Isaac know about Yahweh's oracle (25:23) and Esau's sale of the birthright to Jacob (25:29-34)? It seems highly unlikely that he would not have been aware of either one. That Rebekah would have been given an oracle concerning Isaac's sons and not communicated it to him is difficult to imagine. It may also not be pressing the text too far to say that Esau's exclamation in 27:36 "he has supplanted me these two times" implies prior knowledge on Isaac's part of the birthright sale. Surely Isaac knew of at least one of the relevant past episodes and, indeed, it is likely that he was cognizant of both. What the narrative presents then seems to be, at some level, a depiction of Isaac as attempting to thwart the revealed will of God regarding which son would be given the Abrahamic blessing.

As mentioned previously, some scholars have argued that the blessing, which Isaac intended for Esau, but which Jacob "stole," was material, rather than spiritual. Entertaining this option for a moment, there are two interpretive avenues which may be pursued. First, it might be that the blessing intended here is essentially unconnected to the Abrahamic blessing and simply represents Isaac's desire that his firstborn, whom God has chosen not to work through, should not be bereft of all material advantages. Perhaps this desire was related to a dissatisfaction with the manner in which his own half-brother Ishmael was turned out of the camp at Sarah's insistence. However, the linguistic similarity between the initial blessing given to Abraham in 12:2-3 and the blessing given to Jacob in 27:26-29 is unmistakable, making it highly unlikely that 27:26-29 is not, in some significant way, dependent on 12:2-3. A second interpretive option, which is far more likely, is to see the blessing here as an excised portion of the Abrahamic blessing. If that were the case, then Isaac's failure, which is being underscored here, would be tied up in his mistaken belief that the Abrahamic blessing could be separated into material and spiritual components, with the one divorced from the other. The criticism here would then be that Isaac has failed to understand the true nature of the blessing Yahweh has bestowed on Abraham's family. As biblical history continues to develop it becomes axiomatic that the spiritual blessings of the covenant are inextricably tied to physical and material blessings, e.g. the Land. This notion of material vs. spiritual components of the blessing contrasting within the narrative is interesting. However, the evidence for a material/spiritual split here is not fully convincing and, in any case, it is not necessary to see Isaac as attempting to split the blessing in order to make the larger case: that, by attempting to bestow either part or all of the Abrahamic blessing on Esau rather than Jacob, who is God's chosen instrument and progenitor of the line, Isaac has a second time within the narrative failed to do what is expected of him as the patriarch. The various tensions and dysfunctions which follow in the rest of the narrative result from Isaac's failures. Only by understanding the author's negative evaluation of Isaac as

patriarch in this narrative does it become possible to properly understand the place of the other characters in this text.

As the third parallel theme (C + C') is introduced, Rebekah, realizing what her husband is attempting to do, intervenes. In devising a plan by which Jacob should be given the blessing, however, she radically oversteps her cultural boundaries. While it may well be true that women in ancient Hebrew society enjoyed a rather more important role than one might naturally suspect (de Vaux, 24-40; Benjamin, 22-30) there were certainly areas of tribal life in which their role was substantially limited. One such area would seem to have been the allocation of the inheritance. This appears to have been the exclusive domain of the father. For Rebekah to interfere with the process was for her to violate a significant cultural expectation. A second area in which women's roles seem to have been limited was the arrangement of marriages for sons. In her attempt to save Jacob from harm at Esau's hands, however, she overstepped this one as well (cf. Gen 27:46). It may be presumed that the author expected his original audience to assign a slightly negative evaluation of Rebekah on these grounds. However, the flow of the text is done a disservice if too much is made of her actions. The main point is not to criticize Rebekah but simply to show that she was encouraged into overstepping her cultural boundaries because of Isaac's failure to adequately fulfill his roles as the patriarch.

What is true of Rebekah might also be said of Jacob. At this point in the development of the larger story of Genesis, Jacob is still a rather ambiguous figure. It seems premature to discredit his character on the basis of his purchase of the birthright from Esau in 25:29-34. While his actions there betray a certain scheming ambition, the transaction has all the appearances of legality and the narrative seems to be more a statement of Esau's failure to recognize the birthright's value than a criticism of Jacob per-se. Moreover, Jacob is hesitant about enacting Rebekah's proposed. Within the narrative of 26:34-28:9, Jacob is more a pawn than a genuine player and this fact alone argues against any interpretive approach which places him at the pericope's theological center. His boldest act is to make the decision to follow through on his mother's plan when given the opportunity to come clean. Certainly Jacob's deception of his father is responsible for much of the dysfunction which results in this narrative, but the fact remains that Isaac's failure to properly convey the blessing to the son of God's choosing, established both prophetically and legally, is ultimately responsible for creating the circumstances in which so much strife befalls the family.

This is not to say, of course, that only Isaac is to be held responsible for his actions. Quite the opposite. Esau's decision to marry Hittites results not only in a strained relationship with his parents, but eventually means that he is the uneasy husband of three wives. Rebekah's inappropriate interventions eventually lead to her favorite son being sent away and not returning until after her death. Jacob's deception forces him to leave family and friends and, in fact, seems to return to haunt him when his uncle, Laban, visits a very similar deception on him in regards to the woman for whom he paid a dowry of seven years service (29:23-25). Each character is thus held responsible, in various ways, for their individual contributions to the dysfunction of their family.

The central unifying feature of this narrative, however, is Isaac and his failure to do what was expected of him as the patriarch. Had he fulfilled his patriarchal obligation by obtaining an appropriate wife for Esau, following the model of his own father Abraham, Esau would not have been placed in a situation in which the inappropriate marriages seemed a viable option. Furthermore, had Isaac fulfilled his patriarchal obligation by passing the full Abrahamic blessing to Jacob as God intended, Rebekah would not have been pushed to overstep her cultural boundaries and Jacob would not have been encouraged towards the deception which created the rift between he and his brother Esau, a deception for which so many paid so dearly.

One final observation, which again argues for Isaac's centrality in this narrative, can be made. Following the conveyance of the full Abrahamic blessing on Jacob in 28:1-5, Isaac all but disappears as a character in the flow of Biblical history. It is at this point, but not before, that Jacob becomes the focal point of the developing text. It seems best to say, then, that 26:34-28:9 does not itself represent the shift in focus from

Isaac to Jacob, as has often been assumed. Rather, this pericope should be seen as additional material concerning Isaac and his activities as a patriarch. This itself is interesting as it has been remarked upon by a number of scholars that, among the patriarchs, Isaac seems to have gotten short shrift literarily. Abraham and Jacob are both given substantial narrative time, but there is a noticeable paucity of material about Isaac. Apart from the structural concerns, an additional strength of the interpretive approach outlined here is that it recognizes an additional, substantial pericope as being focused on Isaac. It is not that Isaac has not been given an expected amount of “text-time” but that the material focused on him has not been properly recognized. Once the blessing is passed, however, Jacob becomes the patriarch to which the reader’s attention is supposed to be drawn. If the shift in patriarchal focus is attempted too early, that is, prior to 28:9, interpreters are forced to make strained conjectures about the author’s intent and how Jacob and the “theft” of the blessing is to be understood theologically and applied. These hermeneutical contortions are completely unnecessary, however, when Isaac is recognized as playing the central role here, as the author intended.

III. Conclusion

Again, it should be noted that the centrality of Isaac in this narrative does not relieve the other participants of their responsibility. Rather, the author has constructed this narrative in such a way as to show that Isaac’s failures to do what was expected of him as the patriarch created an environment in which unwise and even sinful decisions on the part of his family were encouraged. The principle might be abstracted to contemporary contexts in this manner: when spiritual leaders fail to do what God expects of them, dysfunction will be the result. There are, of course, profound implications of this principle for churches as well as for families.

It might well be noted, in closing, that the artistry of this narrative argues against the position of critical scholars who contend that there are a number of different authors responsible for its construction (i.e. J, P, etc..) (Von Rad, 276; Skinner, 368-375). When the clear chiasmic structure is discerned and the subtlety with which the author weaves the story around its central character, Isaac, is appreciated, it is difficult to imagine that several different and temporally disconnected authors could be responsible for this narrative’s creation. In fact, it is the failure to consider this pericope as a cohesive and intricate whole which has led to the traditional misunderstandings about its function and purpose.

When considered with the proper narrative boundaries, the chiasmic structure of this text emerges and the author’s intent becomes clear. In order to faithfully understand and apply this text, interpreters must restore Isaac to his rightful place in the center of this pericope.

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