

In Genesis, there are significant moments that foreshadow the emergence of the Israelites as a favored people. The blessing narrative in Genesis 27 recounts one of those moments because it gives some explanation as to why the ancient Israelites believed themselves to be chosen of God and set at a distinct advantage to their neighboring Canaanites. In this essay, I will discuss the content and structure of the first twenty nine verses of Genesis 27, and how this passage attempts to setup this theme of divine favor that will be continued throughout the entire Bible.

This first half of Genesis 27 describes Rebekah and Jacob's deception of Isaac and Esau; it stands as a whole story within the larger framework of the chapter and book. The passage begins by informing the audience that Isaac is "old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see."<sup>1</sup> Isaac calls Esau into his presence and gives Esau instructions by which Isaac can bless him. Up to this point in the history of this family, Esau has traded the birthright to which he is entitled to his younger brother, Jacob- an act that Isaac, their father, is unaware of. So, Isaac is calling his eldest son, Esau, to give him the blessing to which Isaac believes Esau is entitled. These twenty nine verses, then, open by informing the audience of Isaac's disability, which sets the stage for the type of trickery to be exercised, and also outlines the terms by which the blessing will be issued. After several verses of Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, plotting their deceit, and the actual deception of Isaac into believing that Jacob is in fact Esau, Isaac issues the blessing to Jacob. These two events serve well to bookend the story because it begins with the

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 27:1

promise of a blessing and ends with the blessing having been issued.

Beginning in verse 5, the audience learns of Rebekah's role in securing the blessing for Jacob. The audience already knows that Rebekah is the mother of both Esau and Jacob by the story of their birth, as recorded in Genesis 25. This chapter also says, "Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob."<sup>2</sup> So, an ancient Israelite hearing this story might have heard this family history from an oral account, plus the story of Jacob taking advantage of Esau in order to buy his birthright.<sup>3</sup> In verse 5, the audience learns that Rebekah has been listening to Isaac's instructions to Esau, and she passes on these instructions to her favored son, Jacob, in private. Rebekah instructs Jacob to go to his flock, reminding the audience of the fact that Jacob is a shepherd, and to take "two choice kids, so that [she] may prepare from them savory food for [Isaac], such as he likes."<sup>4</sup> Immediately, though, Jacob is concerned about her plan because he realizes that Esau is a "hairy man" and he is not.<sup>5</sup> At this point, Rebekah takes a crucial step in securing her plan and satisfies Jacob's concerns by telling him that she will absorb any curse that might come to him, as long as he obeys her commands. Once Jacob agrees, Rebekah prepares the meal to be served at the blessing ceremony and creates a costume for Jacob out of Esau's clothing and the skins of the kids.

The scene that brings this story to a climax has Jacob before a supremely suspicious Isaac, pretending to be Esau. From the onset of this passage, the audience is aware of the coming deception. When Jacob enters his father's chambers, he calls to Isaac, who responds, "Here I am; who are

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 25:28

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 25:29-34

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 27:9

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 27:11

you, my son?”<sup>6</sup> “Here I am” is the exact phrase with which Esau responds to his father’s initial call in verse 1. Immediately, the audience realizes that just as Esau is being taken advantage of by Jacob and Rebekah, so to will Isaac be. Through the course of the nine verses that precede the pronouncement of the blessing, Isaac uses every faculty available to him to test the authenticity of this person claiming to be Esau. Twice, though, Jacob lies to his father and tells him that he is Esau. The food prepared by Rebekah tastes authentic and because of the costume, Jacob, in fact, feels and smells like Esau. In the end, in verses 27-29, Isaac pronounces the blessing over Jacob, in honor of his own requirements for the blessing.

Walter Brueggemann, in *Genesis*, draws out four important components of the blessing in Genesis 27. First, the blessing is intergenerational, in that it acknowledges the fact that “parents and children have a deep stake in each other’s destinies.”<sup>7</sup> Second, the act of blessing, as a ritual act, “is a decisive moment in which something has happened irrevocably.”<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, the blessing narrative “assumes and affirms that *spoken words shape human life*.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the words of Isaac’s blessing are an actual force that will determine the type of success that Jacob will experience in his life. Lastly, as Brueggemann demonstrates, the blessing narrative “understands that power, the capacity to shape the future, lies not in weapons and arms, but in the use of language, gesture, and symbol.”<sup>10</sup>

A modern reader of the blessing narrative in Genesis 27 might struggle to reconcile the fact that a blessing could come to Jacob by means of

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 27:18

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*(Atlanta:John Know Press,1982) p.228.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*(Atlanta:John Know Press,1982) p.228.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*(Atlanta:John Know Press,1982) p.228.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*(Atlanta:John Know Press,1982) p.228.

deception. Still, as Brueggemann urges, it serves the reader well to understand the story in the way it is presented, that is, by understanding, “settlement of property and inheritance is seldom achieved without coveting and calculation.”<sup>11</sup> With this understanding, the audience is then free to understand Jacob and Rebekah’s plot as a scheme devised to take what was in no other way available to them. If this blessing truly was a guiding force in the life of the recipient, as it is presented, then Jacob can be understood to have used every means available to secure for himself a prosperous future.

Ultimately, the audience understands that Jacob represents Israel in this story. It would be Jacob who would struggle with God and bear twelve sons who become the twelve tribes of Israel. Esau represents the Canaanites in this story. For an ancient Israelite hearing this story, the depiction of Esau as a sort of brutish hunter/gatherer who is easily deceived and taken advantage of is an invitation into the symbolic world where Jacob, the weaker shepherd uses every means available to toil his way to the top of this patriarchal system, even conquering his brother.

Indeed, the whole story is a symbolic depiction of the assent of the Israelites, told to inspire an ancient audience, and nothing is more inspiring than the words of the actual blessing. Isaac begins the blessing in verse 28 by saying, “may God give you the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine.” This blessing deals firstly with prosperity on earth. With this pronouncement, Jacob is given a symbolic inheritance of rain, as represented by the “dew of heaven”, that will, in turn, water his vast inheritance of land and produce a richness of “grain and wine”- promising him “the good life.” Isaac then turns to a political blessing and assures

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*(Atlanta:John Know Press,1982) p.229.

Jacob power over nations, not just a local area. Indeed, Isaac appoints Jacob to be the head of the household in verse 29 when he says, “be Lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you.” Isaac sums up this two-part blessing with a blessing for everyone who blesses Jacob and a curse for everyone who curses him. Understanding that Esau is the brother who has been beaten to the blessing, the implied meaning of verse 29 is that Jacob is now in authority over Esau, and thereby God will give Israel power over the peoples who were spawned from Esau, the Canaanites.

With an understanding of the implications of Jacob’s blessing, the audience ought to remember the true mastermind of this scheme. Rebekah is the mother of two sons who both hold the potential for great futures because of the richness of their father’s blessing. Again, a modern reader might be troubled by the idea of a mother choosing one son for greatness at the expense of the other. In fact, Rebekah did not only choose Jacob to receive the blessing, she worked towards the goal that ultimately brought about Esau’s demise. Still, as we have already noted, the modern reader does well to understand that the narrative does not apologize for these apparent character flaws, rather the story, like the characters, uses every element available to work towards the ultimate blessing of a man and a nation. Rebekah’s blessing comes through the blessing of Jacob, whom she favored from birth. It is significant to note that Rebekah first appears outside Isaac’s chambers, eavesdropping on his conversation with Esau about the blessing. Rebekah understands that Isaac is old and that this act of passing on his blessing would mark the transition of power within their family. Rebekah is already in a close relationship with Jacob, and she understands that if Jacob is blessed, and becomes the head of the household, then she ultimately

would receive his favor and live out the rest of her life with the benefits of his blessing. In this blessing narrative, Rebekah is another character who begins the story in a position to be outside of the blessing, if Esau receives it, and works to win the blessing for herself, through Jacob. Rebekah, just as Jacob, is a symbol of the sort of “never say die” spirit that the author of this story intends to inspire in the ancient audience.

The blessing narrative in Genesis 27:1-29 is a relatively direct story about the transfer of Isaac’s blessing to his son, Jacob. Still, there are rich undertones regarding the relationships within this early family and the significance of the blessing. The author does not apologize for the moral ambiguities or character flaws exhibited in the story, rather they serve the greater goal of creating a realistic scene in which a blessing is given to an unexpected, but deserving recipient. Ultimately, the narrative foreshadows the emergence of the Israelite people, and symbolically ordains them as the recipients of the divine blessing and favor.