

THE PROBLEM OF DECEPTION IN GENESIS 27

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Much has been written about the narrative in Genesis 27 in which Jacob acquires Isaac's blessing and the supposed "deceit" involved in this transaction. In view of the attention that this narrative has received and the immorality (deception) attributed to Jacob, a new analysis is suggested. It would necessitate entirely too much discussion of the extant literature to treat of the errors in the prevailing interpretations. In place of such a treatment, the reading that follows offers a new starting point from which the biblical text may be understood, and its commentaries considered. The biblical narrative in question consists of three linking parts.

1. The Lord's answer to Rebekah's inquiry about her pregnancy:

*Two nations are in your womb,
Two separate people shall issue from your body;
One people shall be mightier than the other,
And the older shall serve the younger (Gen. 25:23).*

2. Esau's sale of his birthright, at Jacob's demand, in exchange for food to assuage his hunger:

*Jacob said, 'First sell me your birthright.'
And Esau said, 'I am at the point of death, so of what use is my
birthright to me?'
... Thus did Esau spurn his birthright (25:31-34).*

3. The "deception":

*When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they were a **source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah** (26:34-35).*

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This last statement is subject to interpretation. By saying "they" (the wives) were a source of bitterness could be understood as their being very objectionable in their behavior toward Isaac and Rebekah. Or, more likely, that each one of the wives was objectionable because of her not being suitable to carry on the traditions of Abraham and Isaac.

These three texts read sequentially set the stage for the narrative that follows in Genesis 27: God's ordination that, contrary to custom, *'The older shall serve the younger,'*; Esau's spurning of ancestral custom through the sale of his birthright; the unsuitability of Esau's wives to preserve inherited tradition.

The aged Isaac, his eyes too dim to see, called his older son, Esau, to go out and hunt for venison so food could be prepared and a blessing conferred. Isaac was unaware of Esau's prior abdication of his birthright and, thus, of the deception in Esau's silence. But what of Jacob's silence? Why is neither Rebekah nor Isaac informed of Esau's actions? The answer, I suggest, may be found in Isaac's silence.

When Jacob, in Esau's clothing, comes to Isaac with the food which was cooked for him, Isaac asks, *'Yes, which one of my sons are you?'* He was aware that something was amiss. He knew that the voice was not Esau's. He queries, *'How did you succeed so quickly, my son?'* Jacob answers, *'Because the Lord your God granted me good fortune.'* The use of the word "Lord" makes Isaac more aware that it is not Esau, but Jacob. Isaac asks him to come near to him so that he may touch his hand. He wonders, *'The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.'* With this difference in his mind, he confers the blessing.

After eating, Isaac says, *'Come close and kiss me, my son.'* Isaac smells his clothes, but does not touch them, not wanting to face the possibility that it is Esau before him. He says, *'Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the Lord had blessed'* This statement shows that Isaac knows it is Jacob; it could not apply to Esau for he was a hunter, while it was Jacob who tended the fields. He then gave the supposed "Esau" (Jacob) his innermost blessing.

There is no deception in this narrative. Jacob did not deceive anybody because the birthright rightfully belonged to him through Esau's sale. Rebekah was not guilty because of God's revelation to her during her pregnancy. Also,

she knew that Isaac would recognize the voice as Jacob's, and left his choice of blessing to him. Isaac did not deceive, for Esau's marriages were a source of bitterness to him, and Esau did not display the intention of carrying on his father's tradition. However, since Esau was his favorite son, Isaac did not wish to hurt his feelings by saying this outright. He took the opportunity which was presented to him and blessed Jacob instead. If anyone used deception it was Esau, who did not inform his father of the sale of his birthright when his father mentioned that he would bestow on him his innermost blessing.

The narrative in Genesis 27 involves a very complex situation in which four characters play out their thoughts and desires. In understanding them, however, we must attend above all else to the character of the Torah's narration. The Torah is not a book in the modern sense. Its multiple or sedimented layers of meaning are intended for a lifetime of study. It proceeds often by hints, as in this case. Although Esau, the hunter, fits the ancient heroic mold, and in that form serves his father's needs, he cannot stand in the line of patriarchal succession whose horizon is spirit, not nature. The physical infirmity of Isaac's eyes does not blind him to this spiritual truth. He knows all along for whom the blessing is intended, and who at the moment of bestowal is its recipient.

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