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labour here is a metaphor for his actions throughout this chapter. He simply ploughs the same furrow as Abraham, hardly deviating to left or right.

There are, of course, one or two points of difference. For example, the implied etymological derivation of Beer-sheba is different in the two passages (21.30-31; 26.32-33). But more tellingly, the motivations for making the covenant in each passage are quite different. In ch. 21 Abraham protests that Abimelech's servants have done him harm (21.25). Abimelech protests his ignorance and we have no reason to disbelieve him (21.26). The two then make a covenant that recognizes Abraham's rights over the well (21.27-32). In ch. 26, however, the initiative is reversed. Abimelech fears that Isaac will harm him (because Yahweh is on Isaac's side?, 26.28-29). Thus they form a mutual non-aggression treaty (26.29-31). Whether Abimelech's fears are justified or not, the fact that in this passage the roles are reversed and a foreign king approaches a patriarch with fears that necessitate a covenant makes one thing clear. This nation's perception of the patriarchal family has not stood still with Isaac, it has worsened. How Abraham's descendants will be a blessing to the nations remains a mystery.

26.34-35

The bulk of ch. 26 explored the tense relations between Isaac and the inhabitants of the land. Since Hittites are included in the generic term 'Canaanite' (see 23.2-3; 27.46-28.1), Esau's Hittite wives reveal his remarkably open-minded spirit when compared to his grandfather and father. While Abraham was not above buying land from Canaanites/Hittites (23.16), he was implacably opposed to intermarriage with them (24.3). Isaac resurrects the old animosities with foreigners at Gerar. Esau is far more accommodating. Yet his foreign liaisons 'made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah' (26.35), just as life in Gerar had produced contention and enmity (26.20-21). It is one thing for Isaac to offer his wife to foreigners, quite another for Esau to take his wives from foreigners. If sharing wells with Philistines had caused so much strife, one can only imagine the bitterness of the domestic scene with Canaanites as permanent fixtures in Esau's tents. That the name of one of Esau's fathers-in-law, Beer, apparently means 'my well', is ominous.

Genesis 27.1-40

27.1-17

In the Jacob story, ch. 27 proves to be as crucial for the transmission of the promises to the next generation as ch. 22 was in the Abraham story.

While in ch. 22 the question was 'Will the chosen son survive?', here the reader asks, 'Will the chosen son gain the blessing?' Note the following points of contact between the two chapters.

Each episode presents a father and son alone in which one party is at best economical with the truth (cf. 22.8). Yet in both incidents, whether as son or father, Isaac is the victim. The terms 'my son' (*b^enî*) and 'here I am' (*binnennî*) occur several times in Genesis (e.g. 21.10; 6.17), but the only uses of these terms in the same verse in Genesis are confined to 22.7; 27.1, 18. '[Isaac] said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am" (27.1; cf. 27.18). During the ascent of Moriah Abraham's reply to his son's inquiry was, 'Here I am, my son' (22.7). The similar dialogue in both episodes highlights the central role of sonship which is threatened in both passages, though in different ways. In addition, just as Abraham 'went (*blk*) and took (*lqh*) the ram' (22.13), so Jacob 'went (*blk*) and got (*lqh*) [the kids]' (27.14). While not an uncommon word pair, it occurs four times in ch. 22 (22.2, 3, 6, 13), and three times in this chapter (27.9, 13-14). The going, taking and killing of these animals provides in each story the means to evade the seemingly inevitable—the death of Isaac and the blessing of Esau.

This episode is clearly one concerning the respective fates of elder and younger sons, but it also reveals much about the parents. The implied tension between Rebekah and Isaac noted already surfaces again in their direct address to the twins. Isaac calls Esau 'my son' (27.1, 21, 24, 37); Rebekah calls Jacob 'my son' (27.8, 13, 43). Isaac does call Jacob 'my son' (27.18, 20-21, 25-27), but only when Jacob masquerades as Esau. Rebekah never calls Esau 'my son'. Indeed, nowhere does she ever speak to him. It is left to the narrator to remind us that the brothers are 'her elder son Esau' and 'her younger son Jacob' (27.15). Nowhere is either child called 'their son', even when it would be appropriate to do so (e.g. 27.5). The narrator's choice of words largely reflects the perception of the characters themselves: Esau is '*his* son' (27.5), Jacob is '*her* son' (27.6, 17). Taken as a whole, the narrative expounds parental division and favouritism.

The oracle of 25.23 casts its shadow over the entire chapter. The future for the two sons outlined there is threatened by Isaac's dying wish to bless Esau (cf. Jacob's similar blessing in chs. 48-49, especially 49.29). Jacob has already received the birthright, but his ambitions require its formal ratification through the blessing. The significance of achieving both is highlighted by the wordplay between *b^erākā* (blessing) and *b^ekōrā* (birthright).

Esau's wives might be irritants to Isaac but they do not prevent his giving Esau the blessing. The narrative does not divulge whether

Rebekah told Isaac of the oracle of 25.23, or whether he is aware of the transfer of birthright from Esau to Jacob in 25.29-34. (After all, the reversal of primogeniture should not be a novel idea to *him*.) If he does know, then his action here is similar to Abraham's when he remonstrated 'O that Ishmael might live in your sight!' (17.18). Like Abraham he protests that the firstborn should retain his pre-eminence. And he does seem to break with the usual protocol of deathbed blessings by calling only one son before him (cf. chs 48-49; 50.24-25; Deut. 31-34; Josh. 23-24; 1 Kgs. 2.1-9). On the other hand, he might be totally unaware of the developments in the story so far. Certainly it would take little imagination to see Rebekah orchestrating events for the benefit of her younger son, not worrying her husband with details he would be better off not knowing. Jacob's silence would also be understandable, while Esau would not wish to advertise what a fool he had made of himself. This latter scenario, which seems more likely to me, would present the old patriarch as a pathetic figure, a duped, senile, passive character, unaware of what is taking place outside his tent, and as we shall soon see, confused about what takes place within it (27.18-33).

Rebekah forms a stark contrast to her blind, uncomprehending and vulnerable husband. Her hoodwinking of Isaac sits uncomfortably with the previous observation that Isaac loved Rebekah (24.67), though his treatment of her at Gerar indicates that this should not be romanticized. And if Isaac can lie about *her* identity to Abimelech, why can't her son Jacob give Isaac a taste of his own medicine? She is aware, scheming and in control. Isaac is the dormant character for whom things must be done—Esau must hunt his game, prepare his food, and so on. Rebekah is the active character who initiates proceedings—persuades Jacob, instructs him, prepares the food, and so on. While the ancestral line is traditionally presented as Abraham-Isaac-Jacob, one begins to wonder in this story whether this should be revised to Abraham-Rebekah-Jacob. She certainly outperforms both her husband and mother-in-law. Sarah too had overheard plans for the firstborn, but her response had been simply to laugh (18.10-12). By contrast, when Rebekah overhears Isaac's plan she strikes immediately with a cunning strategy (27.5-13). Her instruction to Jacob, 'obey my word as I command you' (27.8), expresses authority more at home on the lips of the dominant male in these patriarchal texts, than of a wife. Isaac had passed her off for a while as his sister, but she passes off kid disguised as game and Jacob disguised as Esau with aplomb. She is not only confident, but quite ruthless, as her reassurance to Jacob reveals: 'Let your curse be on me, my son' (27.13). Win or lose, she is committed to her course of action (see 35.8). The fact that she concedes the possibility of receiving a divine curse suggests

that she is motivated more by her personal bias for Jacob (25.28) than by a desire to facilitate God's will decreed in 25.23.

27.18-29

This crucial paragraph is introduced by a precise verbal echo from ch. 22. Verse 18 repeats a sequence of 5 Hebrew words from 22.7, but with a telling twist at the end. Previously we read, '... his father and he said 'My father', and he said, 'Here I am *my son*'. Now we read, '... his father and he said 'My father', and he said 'Here I am, *who are you my son?*' The parallel with ch. 22 underlines yet again that this passage like the former is pivotal for the ongoing patriarchal promises. But the shift from declarative (22.7) to interrogative (27.18) in the father's answer subtly emphasizes that deception and intrigue is much more at the heart of this story than of the former.

The tension built up by the dialogue between Isaac and Jacob is almost a match for that raised by the conversation between Abraham and Isaac on Moriah. But whereas Isaac's question shows him to be only dimly comprehending of his fate in 22.7, suspense builds immediately in ch. 27 as he shows that his suspicions have been aroused. Just one syllable of Hebrew from Jacob is enough to make Isaac suspicious. Having been addressed as 'My father' the force of Isaac's question must be '*Which* son are you?' (27.18). Jacob tells a quick lie, 'I am Esau *your firstborn*' (27.19). Characters and readers alike already know Esau's status, but in the drama being played out we must be reminded of what is at stake, just as Abraham was when commanded, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love' (22.2). However, Jacob's attempt to hurry on to the blessing ceremony is thwarted. For the first time in his life Isaac puts up resistance. He questions the speed of 'Esau's' return (27.20a). Jacob must now steel himself to lie more convincingly. But even his pious reply (27.20b), does not deflect Isaac's suspicions. The danger to Jacob is increased as Isaac moves his investigation from sight (which we know is impaired), and hearing, to touch and smell (which his love for savoury food suggests is quite well preserved). The old man must decide between the conflicting messages that his senses are communicating to him. His hearing tells him it is Jacob; his touch that it is Esau. Isaac's indecision, indicated in 27.23, is obscured by traditional translations. 'So he blessed him' (NRSV), presents Isaac as completing the blessing, then resuming his interrogation (27.24), when it is obviously too late to change anything. The clause should in fact be translated 'as he was about to bless him' (Speiser 1964: 209; cf. JPSV; TEV. Though cf. Ska 1992: 520). That is to say, the tension is not resolved but heightened as Isaac moves towards blessing Jacob but then backs away to con-

tinue questioning. Jacob's mettle as a liar is tested further; he comes through with flying colours. But even after affirming his identity as Esau, Jacob must wait. He must now serve up the food to his father which might once again arouse the old man's suspicions. What Jacob's response would have been to the obvious question, 'Is this really game, my son?', we are left to ponder, for the cravings of Isaac's stomach silence any lingering doubts. Only after he has been wine and dined by his son do we come to the climax of the scene. Jacob's treachery is sealed with a kiss (27.27). An act between intimates, showing kinship and trust, becomes the consummate deception when Isaac inhales with Jacob's breath the smell of Esau's clothes (27.27).

Isaac might be fooled, but for the reader most of Jacob's statements are transparent lies: 'I am Esau your firstborn'; 'I have done as you told me'; 'now sit up and eat of my game'; 'I am [your son Esau]'. But one more statement encapsulates the moral ambiguity of this tale. Jacob tells his father that he caught the game so quickly 'Because the Lord your God granted me success' (27.20). Is this just one more untruth, or could Jacob be saying more than he realized? I can not help but feel that Jacob's words here, which reproduce the same idiom as that expressed by Abraham's servant in 24.12, should be pondered more deeply on this occasion. For the Lord had indeed predicted pre-eminence for Jacob over Esau. Is Jacob taking God's name in vain or not? And just how involved is God himself in this scene? (See, e.g., 27.30-40; 28.10-22.)

Chapter 25 divulged that Esau was a hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. True to form, while Esau is out in the field, Jacob is in his father's tent. In fact, ch. 25 anticipated a large number of events in ch. 27. Jacob prepared stew and gave it to his brother (25.29a); Rebekah prepares kid and Jacob serves to his father (27.14, 19). Esau came in from the field (25.29b); Esau is sent out to the field and returns from the field (27.3, 30). Esau made a request to eat (25.30); Isaac requests a meal (27.4, 25). The birthright's sale was sealed with stew (25.31); the blessing is sealed with savoury food (27.25). Esau ate (*'kl*) and drank (*šth*, 25.34); Isaac eats (*'kl*) and drinks (*šth*, 27.25). Important plot developments revolve around food. It is Jacob and Rebekah who do the preparing and Esau and Isaac who (until 27.31), do the eating. The preparing serves the needs of the schemers and the eating satisfies the victims.

Finally, after surviving a welter of questions, physical examination, tasting of food and smelling, Jacob receives the blessing he craves. It supplements the programmatic divine oracle received by Rebekah in 25.23 and has three main elements. The motif of service introduced then is repeated, this time predicting universal lordship over both 'peoples'

and 'brothers'—that is those within and outside the patriarchal family (27.29a). To these are now added the blessings of fertility and prosperity (27.28), and reciprocal blessings and curses (27.29b). And still Isaac does not realize that from his perspective he has blessed the *wrong son*.

27.30-40

In a movingly poignant scene, Esau enters with the meal his father had ordered. But he is too late. This point is emphasized by the dialogue which reproduces almost exactly key elements from the previous scene:

Jacob: Now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me (v. 19).

Esau: Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game, so that you may bless me (v. 31).

Isaac: Who are you, my son? (v. 18)
Who are you? (v. 32)

Jacob: I am Esau your firstborn (v. 19)

Esau: I am your firstborn son, Esau (v. 32)

Note the inversion of sentence structure in the last example, where the name of Esau is delayed until the end in order to heighten the dramatic effect and produce Isaac's extreme physical reaction (27.33).

Isaac does not as before engage in a detailed interrogation to discover who his visitor is. One question is sufficient. It takes longer, however, for Isaac's befuddled mind to realize who his previous visitor was (27.35).

While Esau's wild and plaintive reaction to Jacob's deception (27.34, 36, 38), is in keeping with his characterization so far, Isaac takes the reader by surprise. He is consumed by fear and shakes violently (the Hebrew of 27.33 is even more extreme than NRSV indicates). This is the most animated Isaac has been anywhere in Genesis. One might have expected him to act like this on top of Moriah, but the narrator chose not to present any of his angst as he faced death. Here, once again, he is still the victim. But he is not the only victim, as his 'blessing' on Esau shows.

In essence the blessing Isaac pronounces on Esau is the mirror image of the one given to Jacob. The fertility and prosperity received by Jacob is denied to Esau (27.39 cf. 27.28; though see comments below), and his lot will be servitude to Jacob rather than lordship over him (27.40b cf. 27.29b). In addition, the motif of conflict introduced in several ways earlier will characterize Esau's existence, 'by your sword you shall live' (27.40a). The one ray of hope is that Esau will one day break free from his subservience to his brother (27.40c).

The second blessing's reversal of the first is highlighted by the inversion of the opening images of fertility:

- | | | |
|---------|---|----|
| 27.28a: | May God give you of the dew of <i>heaven</i> | A |
| | and of the fatness of the <i>earth</i> | B |
| 27.39b: | Away from the fatness of the <i>earth</i> ... | B' |
| | and away from the dew of <i>heaven</i> | A' |

Yet there is more than a suspicion of Delphic ambiguity in the second. The Hebrew preposition *min* is used in both blessings and is capable of being translated in two ways. While the context might seem to be against it, it is possible to translate 27.39b positively as 'of the fatness of the earth' (as is done for example, by KJV, NKJV, ASV). Have the two brothers been blessed equally or not? This ambiguity will engage the reader's interest as the plot unfolds (see 33.1-20; ch. 36).

Three passages set out the destinies of Jacob and Esau (i.e. 25.23; 27.27b-29, 39-40). They have taken up so much narrative space that the reader cannot miss their importance for the plot. Three main elements emerge from the three passages: the elder will serve the younger; division and conflict will characterize their relationship; the elder will be deprived of the fertility and prosperity granted to the younger (though stated ambiguously).

The oracle and blessings project beyond the story line of chs. 25-36, and envisage international relationships. Such issues lie beyond the scope of this commentary. I will, therefore, confine my interest to developments within the lives of Jacob and Esau as presented in the narrative, recognizing that more could be said.

As an actor, God seems to be absent from this episode; but how involved is he? Rebekah just happens to overhear Isaac's words to Esau (27.5). Jacob's deception works, but he comes within a whisker of being detected by both his father (27.18-24) and brother, for Esau returns 'when Jacob had scarcely gone out' (27.30). Are these simply fortuitous happenings, or does their compound effect force one to look for a divine director in the background (as in the book of Esther)? Jacob's haunting words, 'Because the Lord your God granted me success' (27.20), once again appear to be more than an evasive ploy by Jacob. (See further on, e.g., 28.10-22; 32.1-21.)

Genesis 27.41-28.22

27.41-28.9

The divisions that have characterized family relationships so far now intensify. Initially, Jacob had feared only the possibility of a curse if Isaac