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CHAPTER 27

And it happened when Isaac was old, that his eyes grew too bleary to see, and he called to Esau his elder son and said to him, "My son!" and he said, "Here I am." And he said, "Look, I have grown old; I know not how soon I shall die. So now, take up, pray, your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt me some game, and make me a dish of the kind that I love and bring it to me that I may eat, so that I may solemnly bless you before I die." And Rebekah

1. *his eyes grew too bleary to see.* Isaac the man of taste (25:28) and of touch (26:8), is deprived of sight in his infirm old age. In the central episode of this story, he will rely in sequence on taste, touch, and smell, ignoring the evidence of sound, to identify his supposed firstborn.

4. *I may solemnly bless you.* The Hebrew says literally, "my life-breath [*nafshi*] may bless you." *Nafshi* here is an intensive synonym for "I," and hence something like "solemnly bless" or "absolutely bless" is suggested.

5. *And Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to Esau.* According to the convention of biblical narrative, there can be only two interlocutors in a dialogue (as in Aeschylean tragedy), though one of them may be a collective presence—e.g., a person addressing a crowd and receiving its collective response. Within the limits of this convention, the writer has woven an artful chain. The story, preponderantly in dialogue, is made up of seven interlocking scenes: Isaac-Esau, Rebekah-Jacob, Jacob-Isaac, Isaac-Esau, Rebekah-Jacob, Rebekah-Isaac, Isaac-Jacob. (The last of these occupies the first four verses of chapter 28). The first two pairs set out the father and his favorite son, then the mother and her favorite son, in opposing tracks. Husband and wife are kept apart until the penultimate scene; there is no dialogue at all between the two brothers—sundered by the formal mechanics of the narrative—or between Rebekah and Esau. Although one must always guard against the excesses of

was listening as Isaac spoke to Esau his son, and Esau went off to the field to hunt game to bring.

- 6 And Rebekah said to Jacob her son, "Look, I have heard your father
7 speaking to Esau your brother, saying, 'Bring me some game and make
8 me a dish that I may eat, and I shall bless you in the LORD's presence
9 before I die.' So now, my son, listen to my voice, to what I command
10 you. Go, pray, to the flock, and fetch me from there two choice kids
11 that I may make them into a dish for your father of the kind he loves.
And you shall bring it to your father and he shall eat, so that he may
bless you before he dies." And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother,

numerological exegesis, it is surely not accidental that there are just seven scenes, and that the key word "blessing" (*berakhah*) is repeated seven times.

to bring. The Septuagint reads instead "for his father," which is phonetically akin to the word in the Masoretic Text (either variant is a single word in the Hebrew). The Septuagint reading has a slight advantage of syntactic completeness, but subsequent exchanges in the story insist repeatedly on the verb "to bring" as an essential element in the paternal instructions.

7. and I shall bless you in the LORD's presence. Rebekah substitutes this for "that I may solemnly bless you" in the actual speech on which she eavesdropped, thus heightening the sense of the sacred and irrevocable character of the blessing she wants Jacob to steal.

8. So now. There is a pointed verbal symmetry in Rebekah's use of the same introductory term, *we'atah*, that Isaac used to preface his instructions to Esau.

9. two choice kids. Kids will again be an instrument of deception, turned on Jacob, when his sons bring him Joseph's tunic soaked in kid's blood. And in the immediately following episode (chapter 38), Judah, the engineer of the deception, will promise to send kids as payment to the woman he imagines is a roadside whore, and who is actually his daughter-in-law Tamar, using deception to obtain what is rightfully hers.

- "Look, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth-skinned man. What if my father feels me and I seem a cheat to him and bring
on myself a curse and not a blessing?" And his mother said, "Upon me
your curse, my son. Just listen to my voice and go, fetch them for me."
And he went and he fetched and he brought to his mother, and his
mother made a dish of the kind his father loved. And Rebekah took
the garments of Esau her elder son, the finery that was with her in the
house, and put them on Jacob her younger son, and the skins of the
kids she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. And
she placed the dish, and the bread she had made, in the hand of Jacob
her son. And he came to his father and said, "Father!" And he said,
"Here I am. Who are you, my son?" And Jacob said to his father, "I
am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you have spoken to me. Rise,
pray, sit up, and eat of my game so that you may solemnly bless me."
And Isaac said to his son, "How is it you found it this soon, my son?"
And he said, "Because the LORD your God gave me good luck." And
Isaac said to Jacob, "Come close, pray, that I may feel you, my son,

11. Look, Esau my brother is a hairy man. It is surely noteworthy that Jacob expresses no compunction, only fear of getting caught.

15.-16. the garments of Esau . . . the skins of the kids. Both elements point forward to the use of a garment to deceive first Jacob, then Judah, with the tunic soaked in kid's blood combining the garment-motif and the kid-motif.

18. Who are you, my son? The inclination of several modern translations to sort out the logic of these words by rendering them as "Which of my sons are you?" can only be deplored. Isaac's stark question, as Tyndale and the King James version rightly sensed, touches the exposed nerve of identity and moral fitness that gives this ambiguous tale its profundity.

19. I am Esau your firstborn. He reserves the crucial term "firstborn" for the end of his brief response. As Nahum Sarna notes, the narrator carefully avoids identifying Esau as firstborn, using instead "elder son." The loaded term is introduced by Jacob to cinch his false claim, and it will again be used by Esau (verse 32) when he returns from the hunt.

Rise, pray, sit up. It is only now that we learn the full extent of Isaac's infirmity: he is not only blind but also bedridden.

22 whether you are my son Esau or not." And Jacob came close to Isaac
his father and he felt him and he said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob
23 and the hands are Esau's hands." But he did not recognize him for his
24 hands were, like Esau's hands, hairy, and he blessed him. And he said,
25 "Are you my son Esau?" And he said, "I am." And he said, "Serve me,
that I may eat of the game of my son, so that I may solemnly bless
you." And he served him and he ate, and he brought him wine and he
26 drank. And Isaac his father said to him, "Come close, pray, and kiss
27 me, my son." And he came close and kissed him, and he smelled his
garments and he blessed him and he said, "See, the smell of my son
is like the smell of the field that the LORD has blessed.

28 May God grant you
from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth.
29 May peoples serve you,
and nations bow before you.
Be overlord to your brothers,
may your mother's sons bow before you.
Those who curse you be cursed,
and those who bless you, blessed."

23. *he did not recognize him.* This crucial verb of recognition will return to haunt Jacob when he is deceived by his sons and then will play through the story of Judah and Tamar and of Joseph and his brothers.

24. *Are you my son Esau?* Doubt still lingers in Isaac's mind because of the voice he hears, and so he is driven to ask this question again. His doubt may seem assuaged when he asks his son to kiss him just before the blessing, but that, as Gerhard von Rad observes, is evidently one last effort to test the son's identity, through the sense of smell. The extent of Rebekah's cunning is thus fully revealed: one might have wondered why Jacob needed his brother's garments to appear before a father incapable of seeing them—now we realize she has anticipated the possibility that Isaac would try to smell Jacob: it is Esau's smell that he detects in Esau's clothing.

And it happened as soon as Isaac finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob 30
barely had left the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother
came back from the hunt. And he, too, made a dish and brought it to 31
his father and he said to his father, "Let my father rise and eat of the
game of his son so that you may solemnly bless me." And his father 32
Isaac said, "Who are you?" And he said, "I am your son, your firstborn,
Esau." And Isaac was seized with a very great trembling and he said, 33

30. *as soon as Isaac finished.* This entire sentence makes us aware of the breakneck speed at which events are unfolding. Rebekah and Jacob have managed to carry out her scheme just in the nick of time, and the physical "bind" between this scene and the preceding one is deliberately exposed, just as the bind between the first and second scene was highlighted by Rebekah's presence as eavesdropper.

31. *Let my father rise and eat of the game of his son . . . bless me.* Jacob's more nervous and urgent words for his father to arise from his bed were cast in the imperative (with the particle of entreaty, *n'a*, "pray"). Esau, confident that he has brought the requisites for the ritual of blessing, addresses his father more ceremonially, beginning with the deferential third person. (The movement from third person to second person at the end of the sentence is perfectly idiomatic in biblical Hebrew when addressing a figure of authority.)

32. *Who are you?* This is the very question Isaac put to Jacob, but, significantly, "my son" is deleted: Isaac is unwilling to imagine that a second "Esau" stands before him, and so at first he questions the interlocutor as though he were a stranger.

I am your son, your firstborn, Esau. The small but crucial divergences from Jacob's response (verse 18) could scarcely be more eloquent. Esau begins by identifying himself as Isaac's son—the very term his father had omitted from his question, and which Jacob did not need to invoke because it was part of the question. Then he announces himself as firstborn—a condition to which he has in fact sold off the legal rights—and, finally, he pronounces his own name. Jacob, on his part, first got out the lie, "Esau," and then declared himself "firstborn."

"Who is it, then, who caught game and brought it to me and I ate everything before you came and blessed him? Now blessed he stays."
34 When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with a great and very bitter outcry and he said to his father, "Bless me, too, Father!"
35 And he said, "Your brother has come in deceit and has taken your blessing." And he said,
36

"Was his name called Jacob
that he should trip me now twice by the heels?
My birthright he took,
and look, now, he's taken my blessing."

And he said, "Have you not kept back a blessing for me?"
37 And Isaac answered and said to Esau, "Look, I made him overlord to you, and all his brothers I gave him as slaves, and with grain and wine I endowed him. For you, then, what can I do, my son?" And
38 Esau said to his father, "Do you have but one blessing, my father?"

33. *Who is it, then, who caught game.* As a final move in the game of false and mistaken identities, Isaac pretends not to know who it is that has deceived him, finding it easier to let Esau name the culprit himself. Isaac must of course realize at once who it is that has taken the blessing because he already had his doubts when he heard the son speaking with the voice of Jacob.

34. *he cried out . . . "Bless me, too, Father."* Esau, whose first speech in the narrative was a half-articulate grunt of impatient hunger, had achieved a certain stylistic poise when he addressed his father after returning from the hunt, imagining he was about to receive the blessing. Now, however, faced with irreversible defeat, his composure breaks: first he cries out (the Hebrew meaning is close to "scream" or "shout"), then he asks in the pathetic voice of a small child, "Bless me, too, Father." Esau strikes a similar note at the end of verse 36 and in verse 38.

36. *Was his name called Jacob / that he should trip me now twice by the heels?* At birth, Jacob's name, *Ya'aqob*, was etymologized as "heel-grabber" (playing on *'aqeb*, "heel"). Now Esau adds another layer of etymology by making the name into a verb from *'aqob*, "crooked," with the obvious sense of devious or deceitful dealing.

Bless me, too, Father." And Esau raised his voice and he wept. And 39
Isaac his father answered and said to him,

"Look, from the fat of the earth be your dwelling
and from the dew of the heavens above.
By your sword shall you live
and your brother you'll serve.
And when you rebel
you shall break off his yoke from your neck."

39. *from the fat of the earth . . . from the dew of the heavens.* The notion put forth by some commentators that these words mean something quite different from what they mean in the blessing to Jacob is forced. Isaac, having recapitulated the terms of the blessing in his immediately preceding words to Esau (verse 37), now reiterates them at the beginning of his blessing to Esau: the bounty of heaven and earth, after all, can be enjoyed by more than one son, though overlordship, as he has just made clear to Esau, cannot be shared. (The reversal of order of heaven and earth is a formal variation, a kind of chiasm, and it would be imprudent to read into it any symbolic significance.)

40. *By your sword shall you live.* Yet Esau's blessing, like Ishmael's, is an ambiguous one. Deprived by paternal pronouncement of political mastery, he must make his way through violent struggle.

And when you rebel. The Hebrew verb is obscure and may reflect a defective text. The present rendering steps up the conventional proposal, "grow restive," lightly glancing in the direction of an emendation others have suggested, *timrod*, "you shall rebel," instead of *tariḏ* (meaning uncertain). This whole verse, however obscurely, alludes to the later political fortunes of Edom, the trans-Jordanian nation of which Esau is said to be the progenitor. One of the miracles of the story, and of the story of Joseph and his brothers that follows, is that the elements that adumbrate future political configurations in no way diminish the complexity of these figures as individual characters. To the extent that there is a kind of political allegory in all these tales, it remains a secondary feature, however important it might have been for audiences in the First Commonwealth period.

41 And Esau seethed with resentment against Jacob over the blessing his father had blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, "As soon as the time for mourning my father comes round, I will kill Jacob my brother." And Rebekah was told the words of Esau her elder son, and she sent and summoned Jacob her younger son and said to him, "Look, Esau your brother is consoling himself with the idea he will kill you. So now, my son, listen to my voice, and rise, flee to my brother Laban in Haran, and you may stay with him a while until your brother's wrath subsides, until your brother's rage against you subsides and he forgets what you did to him, and I shall send and fetch you from there. Why

44,45

42. *And Rebekah was told the words of Esau.* This is a shrewd ploy of oblique characterization of Esau. He had "spoken" these words only to himself, in what is presented as interior monologue. But one must infer that Esau was unable to restrain himself and keep counsel with his own heart but instead blurted out his murderous intention to people in the household.

43. *So now, my son, listen to my voice.* Introducing her counsel of flight, Rebekah uses exactly the same words she spoke at the beginning of her instructions to Jacob about the stratagem of deception to get the blessing.

45. *Why should I be bereft of you both on one day?* The verb *shakhal* is used for a parent's bereavement of a child and so "you both" must refer to Jacob and Esau: although a physical struggle between the two would scarcely be a battle between equals, in her maternal fear she imagines the worst-case scenario, the twins killing each other, and in the subsequent narrative, the sedentary Jacob does demonstrate a capacity of unusual physical strength.

should I be bereft of you both on one day? And Rebekah said to Isaac, "I loathe my life because of the Hittite women! If Jacob takes a wife from Hittite women like these, from the native girls, what good to me is life?" 46

46. *I loathe my life because of the Hittite women!* Rebekah shows the same alacrity in this verbal manipulation that she evinced in preparing the kidskin disguise and the mock-venison dish, and, earlier, in her epic watering of the camels. Instead of simply registering that Jacob ought not to take a wife from the daughters of the Canaanite (compare 24:3 and 28:1), she brandishes a sense of utter revulsion, claiming that her life is scarcely worth living because of the native daughters-in-law Esau has inflicted on her. This tactic not only provides a persuasive pretext for Jacob's departure but also allows her—obliquely, for she does not pronounce his name—to discredit Esau.

what good to me is life? The phrase she uses, *lamah li hayim*, contains an echo of her question during her troubled pregnancy, *lamah zeh 'anokhi*, "why then me?"