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WHO IS ESAU (GENESIS 27.32)?
MATTHIAS STOM'S ISAAC BLESSING JACOB,
IN THE BARBER INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS

Martin O'Kane

In the reception history of the Bible, the story of Jacob and Esau is particularly prominent. Studiously interpreted in Jewish and Christian tradition and imaginatively reincarnated in literature, music and art, the identity of the twin brothers has been a subject of heated debate among theologians and a source of inspiration for artists through the centuries. Invariably, however, attention is focussed on the identity of Jacob, the chosen son who inherits the birthright, becomes a prototype for Christ and later represents both Church and Synagogue. But what about Esau? Who is he and what does he stand for? Why has he become such a thoroughly maligned figure in the history of tradition and why has he been given a reputation totally unjustified, based on the few details we know about him from the Bible itself? A painting depicting a key episode in the biblical narrative of Jacob and Esau, and now occupying a commanding position in one of the galleries of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, invites the viewer to reflect again on Esau and his identity and to reassess the undeserved reputation he has acquired. Beginning with the Barber Institute painting and using it as a point of departure, this chapter explores some of the issues surrounding Esau's identity that emerge from this painting and in other significant works of art.

In 1991, a painting entitled *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (fig. 1), by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist, Matthias Stom, was acquired, amid much excitement, by the Barber Institute. Shortly afterwards, to celebrate its acquisition, an exhibition of other works by the little-known artist Stom was set up to contextualize the painting. In this exhibition and in the accompanying catalogue, *Isaac Blessing Jacob* was interpreted primarily in the context of two other biblical paintings, between which, the then

curator Richard Verdi believed, *Isaac Blessing Jacob* had originally hung, namely *Tobias Healing his Father's Blindness* and *Christ Disputing with the Doctors in the Temple*.¹ Thus the interpretation focussed on how all three paintings expressed a common theme, namely father-son relationships, and on the importance of seeing in the Old Testament figures of Jacob and Tobias 'types' of Christ. By placing the morally questionable episode of Jacob's deception of Isaac between two such 'unproblematic' biblical scenes, one could argue that, in the eyes of the viewer, the juxtaposition served to rehabilitate Jacob's deceitful character and justify his morally dubious actions within a mysterious and providential plan of God.

But, quite apart from this interesting interpretation that the position of *Isaac Blessing Jacob* within the triptych facilitates, its composition, on its own, has always fascinated me for quite different reasons: composed in such a way as to convey deliberately the importance of the five senses, the painting parallels precisely the literary structure of the corresponding biblical narrative in Genesis 27, a narrative which, as Robert Alter brings out very clearly, is also constructed around the five senses.² In a previous publication, I tried to show how the dynamic at work in the painting parallels the dynamic of the text and how, through an emphasis on the five senses, it effectively insinuates both viewer and reader into the murky world of treachery and deceit.³ Stom's painting, like the narrative, asks a number of disturbing questions of its characters, of the author who created the narrative and even of God himself, the controlling hand sanctioning the deceit for his own ends. Rembrandt considered the treatment of the weak and aged Isaac so disrespectful that he never actually painted the scene, preferring instead to represent the distinguished old age of biblical patriarchs in a more dignified way, for example as in his painting *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*, which depicts an incident from the end of Jacob's life, taken from Genesis 48.⁴

Stom's *Isaac Blessing Jacob* comes from an important period in the history of the iconography of Genesis 27. Although the story was depicted in art from early Christian times, it became particularly popular in seventeenth-century Holland, after which it appears only very sporadically.

1. Richard Verdi, *Matthias Stom: Isaac Blessing Jacob* (The University of Birmingham: The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 1999).

2. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 139.

3. See my chapter, 'The Deception of Isaac (Genesis 27): Matthias Stom's *Isaac Blessing Jacob*', in Martin O'Kane, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), pp. 107-27.

4. Verdi, *Matthias Stom*, p. 60.

Stom's version, therefore, represents one of the most significant and yet one of the final stages in the rich iconography of this biblical story. Its popularity in seventeenth-century Holland has been attributed to the intense interest in the subject by Rembrandt and his followers who were attracted to the psychological complexity and striking emotional contrasts of the subject.⁵ So, although Rembrandt did not actually paint the scene, and indeed made only two drawings of it, it appears that he did use it frequently as a kind of master-class study for his pupils.⁶ By the mid-seventeenth century the followers of Rembrandt had produced more than two dozen paintings and drawings of it (almost half of the depictions of the subject known from this period). But the manner in which artists interpreted and depicted the story during this period changed radically. Not only did they tend to concentrate on the very specific episode of the blessing of Jacob (Gen. 27.27), rather than convey the several individual narrative episodes within the chapter as had previously been the convention, but, more often than artists of any other age, they were inclined to interpret the story generally on purely human terms, as one of sibling rivalry, guile and deception, rather than as an overtly religious theme. Seventeenth-century artists also devised a radically new way of portraying the theme from their predecessors and adopted a more immediate and concentrated approach. All three characters (Rebekah, Isaac and Jacob) are shown at close range filling the picture field and in direct proximity to the viewer. The space is usually shallow and barely defined; still-life elements (for example, the meal) are reduced to a minimum. All this serves to focus the attention of the viewer on the psychological undercurrents of the action but particularly on the character and motives of Rebekah. To achieve this effect, the episode of Esau returning from the hunt and presenting game to his father, a traditional element in earlier depictions of the scene, is usually eliminated.⁷

The proliferation of Dutch paintings and drawings from this period and their accessibility to us today has meant that when we see depictions of this biblical scene, we generally do so through the perspective of seventeenth-century painters, and we focus on the particular characters and aspects of the scene they wish to accentuate. As a result, one of the casualties is Esau because, although well represented in earlier expressive depictions of Genesis 27, he is generally eliminated from Dutch paintings due to the desire to focus on the very moment of Isaac's blessing of Jacob, when Esau is out hunting and so absent from the scene. Nevertheless,

5. See Verdi, *Matthias Stom*, pp. 23-24.

6. Verdi, *Matthias Stom*, p. 60.

7. See Verdi, *Matthias Stom*, p. 26.

even though Esau is absent, the secretive and manipulative actions of the other characters draw our attention to him, reminding the viewer of the injustice perpetrated against him; indeed, if we do not call to mind the absent and wronged Esau as we engage with paintings of the scene, the episode loses entirely its psychological intensity.

Since Esau is not depicted explicitly we have to insinuate him, as did Stom, into the scene. In his painting, not only does the hunting dog symbolize Esau's presence, but Rebekah raises her finger to the viewer urging us not to divulge anything to Esau: Jacob wears Esau's clothes and, as far as the blind and duped Isaac is concerned, Jacob really is Esau. Such postures and techniques ensure that the absent Esau remains a central character in the plot. His haunting presence in the painting mirrors the text of Genesis 27 where the different episodes of the story appear punctuated by either Esau's presence or absence. He is present at the very beginning of the chapter when Isaac sends him out to hunt (vv. 1-4) and at the end when he reappears before his father and secures a lesser blessing (vv. 30-40), but in the central section of the chapter which describes how Jacob wins Isaac's blessing by deceitful means, he is absent (vv. 6-29). Yet, even in this absence, Esau seems to haunt the entire scene, primarily through the repetition of his name. Throughout Genesis 27, his name occurs twenty-one times while Jacob's and Isaac's occur only thirteen times and Rebekah's just five. In the crucial episode where Isaac bestows his blessing on Jacob (vv. 5-30), depicted by Stom, the name of Esau occurs ten times even though he is away hunting and absent from the scene. Yet, when Jacob departs and Esau re-enters Isaac's presence, in the ensuing conversation Jacob's name is never mentioned by Isaac and just once by Esau, and this only in a very derogatory manner in v. 36 ('Isn't he rightly named "Jacob"? He has deceived me these two times'). There are other ways, besides the constant repetition of his name, in which the presence of the absent Esau insinuates itself into the scene of Jacob's blessing, namely through the all-important question of identity. Jacob pretends to be Esau, he dresses like him and makes his skin feel like Esau's so that not only does Jacob now appear in Esau's clothes but also in his very skin. Jacob says to Isaac, 'I am Esau' (v. 19) and, for the blind Isaac, he really is Esau.⁸ Again, later in v. 24, when asked by Isaac, if he is his son Esau, Jacob answers 'I am'. The effect of this skilfully constructed narrative is that the memory of Esau is never allowed to be forgotten but

8. Robert Alter comments on v. 18, 'Isaac's stark question in v. 18, "Who are you, my son?", 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' (Alter, *Genesis*, p. 139).

is always kept before the reader of the text and the viewer of the painting; the haunting and lingering memory of the deceived and wronged Esau powerfully elicits our sympathy for him in both the biblical text and in Stom's painting.

The interpretation of this painting within the triptych, referred to above, focusses on the choice and role of Jacob as a type of Christ and so, in that context, Esau's own story and identity are discarded and simply fade away. However, around the same time as *Isaac Blessing Jacob*, Stom painted another scene from the Jacob–Esau story (Gen. 25.29–34), in which Esau features very prominently, *Esau Sells his Birthright to Jacob* (fig. 2), now in the Hermitage, St Petersburg, which bears a remarkable likeness both in theme and composition to the Barber Institute painting. If we look at these two paintings side by side, they provide a sharper focus on the character of Esau than does the triptych.

Taken together, the two paintings convey Jacob's shrewd and manipulative manoeuvrings in respect of both his brother Esau and his father Isaac. The composition, focussed on a group of three figures, is similar in both paintings. Occupying the left side of the canvasses are Jacob and Rebekah: in one scene they scheme to rob Esau of his birthright and in the other, they scheme to deceive Isaac into bestowing his blessing on Jacob. Occupying the entire right side in the first painting is Esau with a hare slung across his shoulder while in the second painting Esau fills the entire right side of the canvas. The composition of the two paintings thus makes a clear and unambiguous parallel between Isaac and his son Esau, a bond made stronger through the depiction of the hare that Esau carries, a reminder to the viewer of Isaac's special love for him: 'Isaac loved Esau because he loved game' (Gen. 25.28).

Thus Stom's *Isaac Blessing Jacob* can be interpreted within two contexts: seen within the context of the triptych, it evokes the theme of father–son relationships in respect of Jacob, Tobit and the young Christ. However, when we look at this painting in the light of Stom's *Esau Sells his Birthright to Jacob*, it is clearly the relationship between Isaac and his son Esau—and not Jacob—that is highlighted. We have little or no background information and documentation either to these paintings or indeed to the life of Stom himself, but it is already clear that Stom was prepared to depict Esau more sympathetically than had been the case in biblical and theological commentary. Stom's two paintings raise the question as to whether Esau's character is viewed more positively in visual interpretation generally, compared to how he has been presented in textual traditions. It is this question I want to address in the following section.

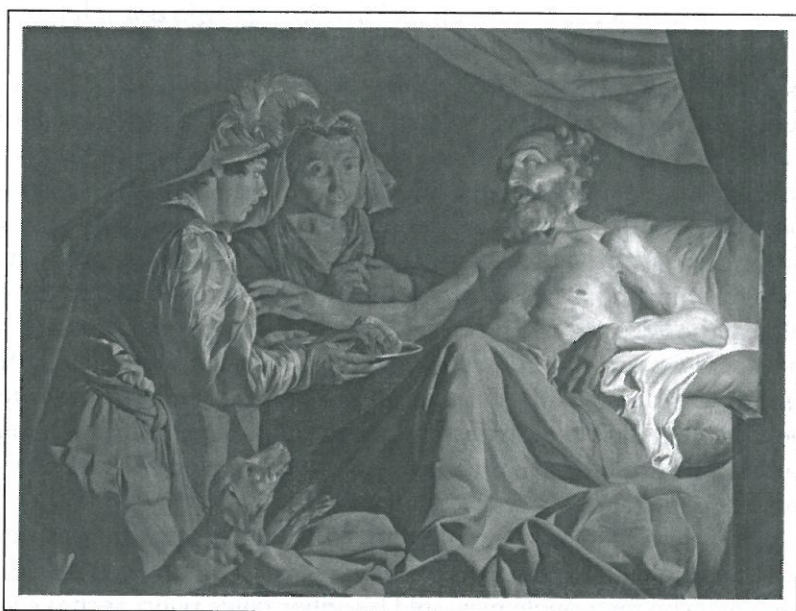


Figure 1. Matthias Stom, *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (c.1633-40),
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, The University of Birmingham



Figure 2. Matthias Stom, *Esau Sells his Birthright to Jacob* (1640s),
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

1. *Esau in Tradition and in Christian Art*

Esau, most unfairly, has been vilified in both Jewish and Christian theological reflection and completely ignored in, and omitted from, the Koran. Such abject vilification is unjustified, based on what we know of him from scattered episodes in Genesis: he receives a minor blessing from Isaac (27.39-40); he willingly becomes reconciled with his brother (33.4); with Jacob, he takes care of the burial of his father Isaac (35.29); God gives him and his descendants the territory of Seir and makes him father of the Edomites (36.8). One remarkable aspect of the post-biblical traditions associated with Esau is that they focus almost entirely on his identity, an aspect partly reflected in the biblical tradition itself: the question that Isaac repeatedly asks throughout Genesis 27, 'Who are you?', is the same question that has been asked ever since: Who is Esau?, whom does he represent and what does he stand for?

In the New Testament he is identified with all that is ungodly and with sexual immorality: 'See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son' (Heb. 12.16). In early rabbinic midrash, Esau is frequently an eponym for pagan Rome while Jacob is identified as Israel, but later, Esau, or Edom his descendant, is most often read as the Christian Church. The midrashic equation of Esau with Christianity is rich but very problematic because it implies that Christianity is the elder religion (Esau) and Judaism the younger (Jacob). The Rabbis resolved the problem by thinking of Esau as an elderly Rome become lately Christian.⁹ Interest in Esau is continued in the Talmud where there is extensive folklore surrounding him: he is a hunter of people as well as of beasts and the murderer of Nimrod (*Yashar Toledot* 51b-52a); he had unusually long teeth (*Ber.* 54b) and an insatiable sexual appetite; his descendants live by the sword (*Tg. Yer. Gen.* 30.8) and are said to be nomadic peoples who refuse the Torah; the Gentiles, especially the Christians are held to be descendants of Esau (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam* 36d).¹⁰

On the other hand, early Christian writers, such as Tertullian and Irenaeus, identify 'the Jews' as the elder son Esau, and the dominant younger son Jacob, as 'the Christians'. Commentators point out that, since, at the time of Tertullian, Christians were younger and more

9. Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 5-6.

10. See Michael Fixler, 'Esau', in David Lyle Jeffrey (ed.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 239-40.

powerful it was obvious to Tertullian that only the Christians could be read as Jacob.¹¹ For Augustine, Esau is a symbol of the proud and carnal man and his descendants are said to be bent on 'the lust of the flesh'. In his interpretation of Rom. 9.13, 'Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated', Augustine identifies Esau as the *populus Synagogae* while Jacob represents the *populus Ecclesiae*. For Augustine, Esau is primarily a representative of all those who do not believe, while other Christian writers, for example Hippolytus, go so far as to identify Esau with the devil himself.

So, at an early stage, both Jews and Christians firmly rejected Esau (and Edom his descendant), preferring instead to associate themselves with Jacob. From the Middle Ages onwards, the rivalry between Esau and Jacob came to symbolize more overtly that between Christians and Jews. At the Reformation, both Luther and Calvin regarded the biblical story as a classic example of the doctrine of predestination, citing Gen. 25.23 in support of this interpretation. Calvin argued that the choice of Jacob over Esau had nothing to do with merit; God simply and freely chose to elect Jacob for no evident cause that reason might deduce. Luther identified Esau with Rome and all that was corrupt in the Catholic Church and Jacob with the Reforming Protestant Churches of Northern Europe. Thus, the entire reception history of Esau is preoccupied with his identity. Who is he? What are his characteristics? And most importantly, with whom is he to be identified now? Interpreters through the ages seemed to vie with one another to find hyperboles to express his evil nature and intent.

In art, Esau is given distinctive characteristics. Gen. 25.2 describes him as 'a skilful hunter, a man of the field,' and this is generally the way he is presented in iconography. Dressed as a hunter, he often carries a bow and is identifiable by his hairy appearance. His specific iconographical features include a hunting hat, a bow and arrow and his game, normally a deer, a rabbit or hare. Of the five episodes in his life that are most represented (his birth; the selling of his birthright; his marriages to Judith and Basemath; Isaac's request for game; his ultimate reunion with Jacob), the two most recurrent themes in art are the selling of his birthright and his appearances in the narrative of Isaac blessing Jacob in Genesis 27, the two instances where Esau has been outmanoeuvred by Jacob (both painted by Stom).

11. Fixler, 'Esau', p. 240.

Esau occurs in Christian art from an early period. He appears as a hunter returning to Isaac with his game in the early fourth-century Via Latina catacomb while in illustrated manuscripts from as early as the sixth century he features prominently: for example, in the Vienna Genesis he is depicted in the profile of a hunter selling his birthright while in the Ashburnham Pentateuch he is depicted returning to Isaac with game, in this instance a deer. In none of these early images is he given a particularly negative connotation and often simply appears as part of hunting scenes. In an eleventh-century illuminated manuscript in the British Library (fig. 3), an illustration accompanying Genesis 27 effectively sums up the entire narrative. Esau, in an attitude of filial obedience goes off to hunt to the left of the picture and returns to his father Isaac to seek his blessing. The four figures in the main panel are divided into two distinct groups: on the left, Isaac and Esau dialogue with one another while on the right and behind Isaac's back, Rebekah and Jacob whisper and plot together.

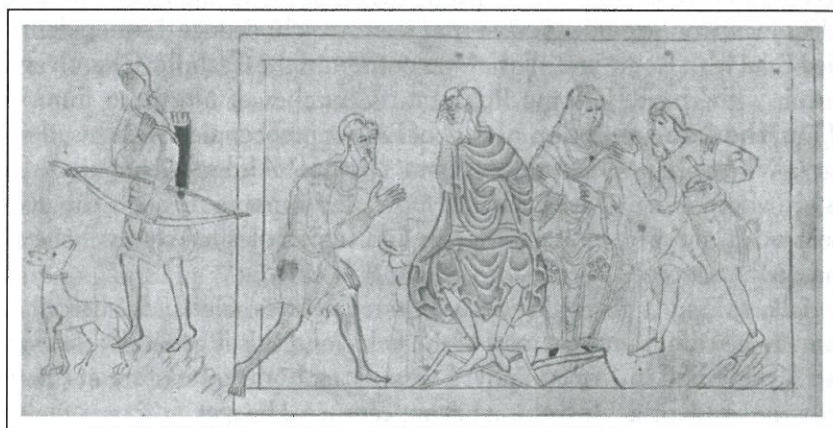


Figure 3. Cott. Claudius B. IV (Aelfric), *The Blessing of Jacob*,
The British Library

In the detailed and extensive twelfth-century mosaics of the Cathedral of Monreale in Sicily, Esau's character is given careful consideration and is represented several times in ways that highlight his filial devotion to Isaac. One image shows Esau obeying his father's command to go hunting, a second shows him returning with game and a third depicts an intimate scene between Isaac and Esau. The number and variety of images of Esau contained in the Princeton Index of Christian Art illustrate not only the popularity of the image of Esau, but also indicate that

he was not, as in textual traditions, always portrayed negatively. Many mediaeval images ensured that Esau's return to Isaac is highlighted, thus offering a parallel scene to Jacob's offering of food to Isaac, and suggesting that Esau, because of his filial devotion, should be held in the same high esteem as Jacob. For example, in a twelfth-century illuminated manuscript from Zurich the story of Genesis 27 is depicted (fig. 4) in two narrative tableaux: while the first focusses on Rebekah's maternal manipulation of Jacob, the lower panel conveys Esau's filial devotion—his return from hunting game for his father.

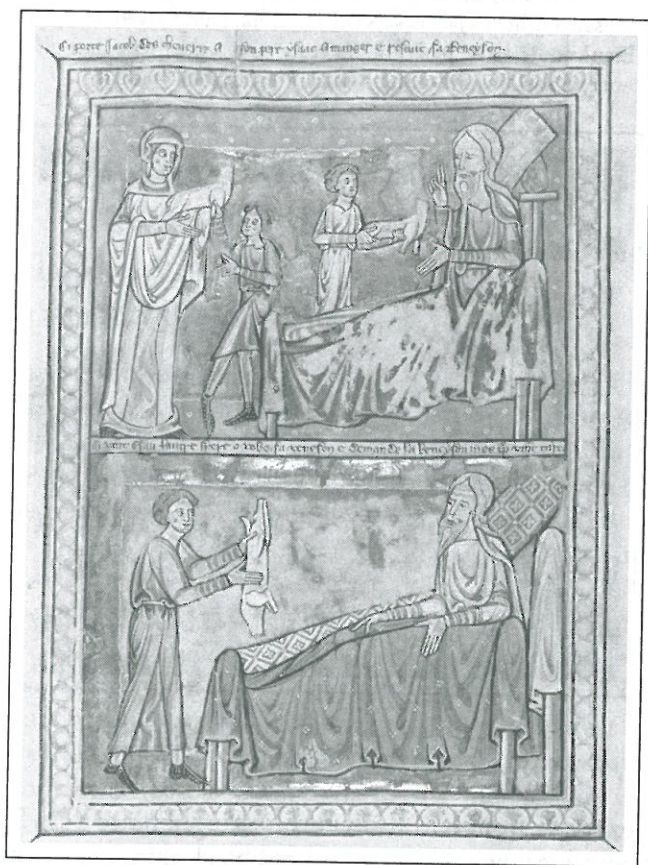


Figure 4. *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (twelfth century),
The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

It is not until the mediaeval period that we find an increasing tendency to depict Esau negatively in art. In several instances, for example in illuminated manuscripts, the image merely reflects the negative tone

of the biblical text it illustrates. This is especially the case at the beginning of the Book of Malachi where Esau and Jacob are depicted within the capital O that begins the superscription in the Latin Vulgate:

Onus verbi Domini ad Israël in manu Malachiae

The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel by the hand of Malachias

The negative image of Esau reinforces the authoritative choice of Jacob over Esau and anticipates the first two verses of the book:

I have loved you, says the Lord: and you have said: How have you loved us? Was not Esau brother to Jacob, says the Lord, and I have loved Jacob but have hated Esau? and I have made his mountains a wilderness, and given his inheritance to the dragons of the desert (Vulgate, Mal. 1.2-3).



Figure 5. Isaac Blessing Jacob (twelfth century),
The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

In an example from late thirteenth-century France (fig. 5), Esau is pictured with his bow and arrow and has black skin, suggesting his evil and diabolic nature.

In an earlier twelfth-century French illuminated manuscript, the opening illustration of the Book of Malachi (fig. 6) depicts Jacob sitting on Christ's knee while Esau, raising his forefinger in protest, is rejected and pushed aside.

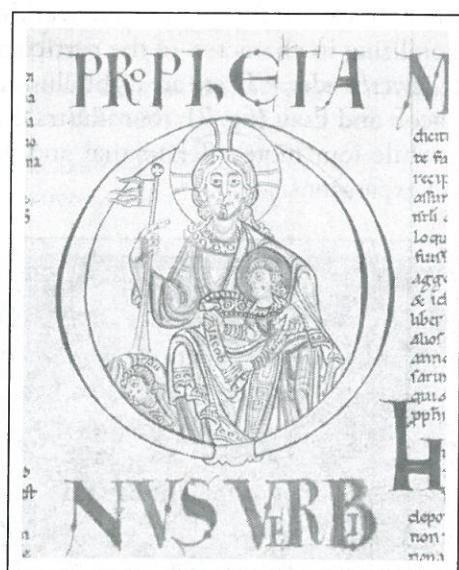


Figure 6. *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (twelfth century),
The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

In many examples from the *Biblia pauperum*, the Bible of the Poor, images of Esau's selling of his birthright are frequently juxtaposed between images of Adam and Eve, after they have succumbed to temptation by eating the forbidden fruit, and images of the temptation of Christ by the devil. The episode of the selling of the birthright was thus interpreted as a temptation for Esau, similar to that experienced by Adam and Eve and by Christ, and a temptation which he did not resist.

But the most negative assessment comes in the *Bible moralisée* (early thirteenth century, Paris), one of a unique group of Bibles containing extensive cycles of biblical illustrations, juxtaposed with theological texts and allegorical, interpretative images.¹² It includes over a thousand exquisitely illuminated medallions accompanied by textual extracts and commentaries that acted as captions to the illustrations in order to reveal, by word and image, the relevance of the Bible to contemporary life. The images were arranged in such a way that the *Bible moralisée* was to be 'read' by viewing/reading first the biblical image with its caption and then by viewing/reading the corresponding commentary image and

12. *Codex Vindobonensis 2554* is now in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. All the medallions, along with translation of the captions and commentary, have been published in Gerald B. Guest, *Bible moralisée* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1995). I have taken the translations of the captions from this volume.

its caption; the commentary was designed to uncover the contemporary meaning, often moralizing in character, of the particular biblical event for the mediaeval viewer/reader.¹³ There are eight illustrations that interpret the story of Jacob and Esau (fig. 7): four illustrate scenes from the biblical narrative while four more offer textual and visual allegorical interpretations and expansions.



Figure 7. *Codex Vindobonensis 2554*,
Early thirteenth century, Paris,
Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

13. Guest, *Bible moralisée*, p. 1.

Left (top image):

Biblical text:

Here Rebekah has two children: Esau and Jacob. The one was good and the other was bad (Gen. 25.24-25).

Left (second from top):

Commentary caption:

That Rebekah has two children, one good and one bad, signifies that the Holy Church gave birth to two types of people, good Christians and miscreants.

Right (top image):

Biblical text:

Here Esau goes into the forest to hunt for animals and leaves his home and his mother all day, and Jacob stays with his mother and does her wil. (Gen. 25.27-28).

Right (second from top):

Commentary caption:

That Esau leaves his mother signifies usurers and miscreants and wicked people who leave their mother, who is the Holy Church. That Jacob remains with his mother signifies the good Christians and the mild who stay willingly in the Holy Church and do her will.

Left (second from bottom):

Biblical text:

Here Jacob comes at the command of his mother and comes before Isaac and he gives him his blessing and he returns to his mother (Gen. 27.5-29).

Left (bottom image):

That Isaac gave Jacob, his son, his blessing signifies Jesus Christ who gave to his disciples his blessing when he spoke to them on the Mount of Olives.

Right (second from bottom):

Biblical text:

Here Esau comes from hunting and comes before his father Isaac and asks him for his blessing and Isaac tells him that he is too late that Jacob has taken it (Gen. 27.30-35).

Right (bottom image):

Commentary caption:

That Esau came afterward to ask for his blessing and his father told him that Jacob had taken it signifies the Jews and the miscreants who will come on Judgment Day before Jesus Christ for his blessing and he will say to them: You are too late, the Christians have taken it.

Thus, according to the influential *Bible moralisée*, Esau is inherently evil from birth, he signifies usurers and miscreants and evil people who leave the Church. He also signifies the Jews and all those who will be refused a blessing by Christ on Judgement Day. The emphasis of the *Bible moralisée* on making its message relevant to contemporary life resulted in a commentary that presented a negative assessment of Esau, identifying Esau as the 'other', with all those groups marginalized or excluded in mediaeval society. Esau represents everyone, and everything, according to the *Bible moralisée*, that must be avoided and shunned.

One of the most distinctive—and most negative—depictions of Esau is to be found on a fresco painted between 1288 and 1295 in the basilica of St Francis in Assisi, the spiritual home of the Franciscan Order.¹⁴ It was painted by the so-called 'Isaac Master' but many art historians argue that this unidentified artist can be no less a person than Giotto himself. The early Franciscans, whose official name was *The Order of Lesser or Minor Friars*, emphasized that Francis's companions were to be brothers of equal worth; none was to be esteemed as superior to the other, and all were to live a humble life that was minor or lesser. To underpin their ideology with biblical authority, they pointed to those instances in the Bible where God had clearly chosen the lesser or minor brother over the elder and, not surprisingly, the story of Jacob and Esau provided one of the best examples to support their case.

Jacob was presented as one of the most fundamental prototypes for Francis, indeed prefiguring the saint himself, and the typological founder of the Franciscan order. Joseph and Benjamin, lesser brothers also, served as exemplars of a Franciscan ideology of mission. In Franciscan writings, much was made of Jacob, being the *frater minor*, the lesser brother to Esau, allowing many inventive and often fanciful interpretations. John of Wales summed up Franciscan thinking: 'If you search through Scriptures you will find that minor brothers are preferred to major brothers in sanctity and goodness'.¹⁵ At the canonization of St Francis in 1226, he was heralded by the Pope as a 'new Jacob', in virtue of his contempt for the world, and in embracing both Leah and Rachel, symbols of the two religious paths, the active and the contemplative. For these reasons, the visualization of the story of Jacob in the Franciscan order assumed great importance and significance.

14. For a comprehensive discussion of the frescoes at Assisi, see Amy Neff, 'Lesser Brothers: Franciscan Mission and Identity at Assisi', *Art Bulletin* 88 (2006), pp. 676-706. I rely here on her painstaking and insightful interpretation of these frescoes.

15. Quoted in Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 683.

Among the hundreds of frescoes to be painted in the basilica in Assisi, it was decided that only sixteen Old Testament scenes should be included, and so the choice and selection of subjects had to be made very carefully. When choosing which Old Testament scenes to depict, the question of Franciscan identity was particularly important: it was decided that it would be appropriate to include all lesser or minor brothers such as Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Benjamin to support the Franciscan ideology:

The Isaac Master's frescoes demonstrate the scriptural origins and significance of minority, sanctioned and bound by a Franciscan rule whose essential and most crowning virtue is minority itself—namely being the lowest, the humblest of all.¹⁶

Of the sixteen Old Testament narrative scenes at Assisi, the story of Isaac blessing Jacob and his rejection of Esau are the subject of two of the largest frescoes (figs. 8 and 9). The warm red backgrounds and forceful perspectives make these scenes stand out from all others in the basilica.¹⁷ They appear as a diptych with clear compositional repetition of pose and setting, the purpose being to ensure that the two biblical scenes would be seen as mutually related, that the two brothers would be contrasted and that, most importantly, the viewer would identify with Jacob and not Esau.

The most immediately striking aspect of these two frescoes is the colour red that predominates. Esau's distinctive colour was red; according to Gen. 25.25 he was born red and so his skin is imagined as ruddy and his hair reddish. He sold his birthright for a dish of red pottage (Gen. 25.30) and so he and his descendants were called Edom, meaning red. In addition, mediaeval exegetes often called Esau bloody and carnal because he was a hunter, stained red by the blood of his innocent victims. However, it is remarkable that in these frescoes Jacob appears to take on all of Esau's redness; while Jacob's garments are dark red and his complexion red and hair ruddy, Esau's garments are yellow and his complexion pale and hair fair. It is clear that Esau's essential characteristics have been transferred to Jacob in these frescoes. Neff emphasizes how, in mediaeval tradition, the clothes of Esau had immense symbolic value: the firstborn in the Old Testament had a special garment reserved for use when offering sacrifice but, since Esau sold his birthright, he relinquished his right to these clothes which Rebekah (the Church) then gave to Jacob. Esau's fine clothes were also interpreted as the Hebrew Scriptures. Both

16. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 701.

17. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', pp. 676-79, for a detailed discussion. In particular, she brings out very clearly in her article the significance of the colour red.

traditions imply a transfer of choice and preference from Jews (Esau) to Christians (Jacob). In the frescoes, the choice of Jacob and rejection of Esau are portrayed by transferring Esau's redness on to Jacob.¹⁸



Figure 8. Isaac Master, *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (c. 1288–95), S. Francesco, Assisi

The red tones that predominate in these frescoes are important for another reason since the colour red was associated not only with Esau but also with Christ. In many mediaeval paintings (and also in Assisi) Christ wears wine-red garments in Passion scenes, the colour symbolizing both passion and redemption: these dual meanings associated with Christ's red robe were justified in mediaeval exegesis of Old Testament verses that lead back directly to Jacob and Esau.¹⁹ For example the 'man from Bozrah'

18. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 683.

19. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', pp. 683–84, and her discussion of the original Franciscan sources.

in Isa. 63.1 ('Who is this man that comes from Edom, in crimson-dyed garments from Bozrah?') was interpreted in several mediaeval texts as Christ on the way to Calvary. Thus, in this fresco, Jacob, like Christ, takes and redeems Esau—Edom's sinfulness. The motif of dark red, so noticeable in the fresco of Jacob, is continued in the other frescoes depicting Christ and St Francis—thus providing a visual link between all three figures throughout the basilica.

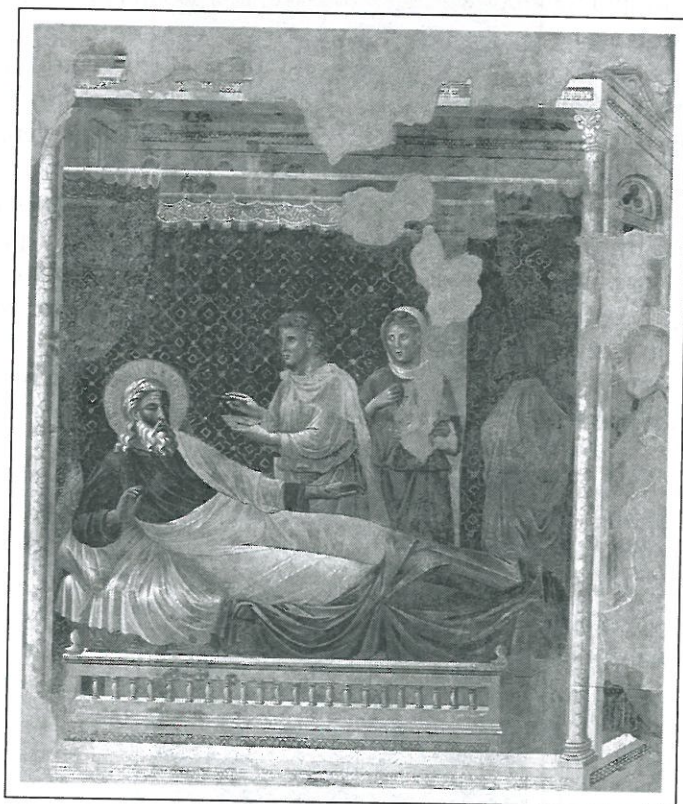


Figure 9. Isaac Master, *Isaac Rejecting Esau* (c. 1288–95), S. Francesco, Assisi

In the second fresco, depicting Isaac's rejection of Esau, it is most unusual that Esau does not carry weapons or other usual attributes of hunting, something that contrasts with numerous mediaeval frescoes elsewhere that emphasize his carnality through clear references to the hunt. Esau's face appears handsome and trusting, suggesting that the Assisi frescoes are not judgmental of him. But, on the contrary, Esau cannot be taken as a neutral or benign figure here. Unlike Isaac and

Jacob, he is not haloed and a small detail confirms his semi-bestial nature: this is in the form of a centaur carved on the relief on the footboard of Isaac's bed, his arm flexed as if hurling a weapon. John of Wales says: 'Esau was a hunter because he was a sinner and, throughout scripture, we do not find any hunters among the saints'.²⁰ Esau wandering in the fields pursuing carnal passions, it was felt, was not a suitable symbol for the Friars Minor. Even though he is a hunter, it is noteworthy that the insipid liquid he serves up to Isaac on a spoon falls short of the game that Isaac had requested.

Thus, while Esau may at first appear open and trustworthy in this fresco (fig. 10), on closer inspection this is not the case and indeed his appearance is linked to the devil, an association made by several exegetes, for example, John of Wales who states: 'We understand in Esau that first angel puffed up with pride, full of envy towards God and perverted by greed for glory, he rightly lost the delights of paradise prepared for him and was cast down into hell'.²¹ Directly below the image of Esau, there is another fresco which graphically depicts a vision of thrones in heaven with one very glorious throne (Lucifer's) conspicuously empty. Thus, rather than indicating Esau's innocence, his bright and handsome countenance likens him to the proud rebel angel Lucifer.



Figure 10. Isaac Master, *Esau*, detail (c. 1288–95),
S. Francesco, Assisi

20. Quoted in Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 686.

21. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 687.



Figure 11. Isac Master, *Jacob*, detail (c. 1288–95),
S. Francesco, Assisi

If, in these frescoes, Jacob (fig. 11) is clearly presented as a type of Francis and as a model for the followers of Francis, then who exactly does Esau represent for the viewer? Some suggest that he may represent overbearing leadership: John of Wales likens the overzealous and oppressive superiors of the Franciscan order to Esau, warning his readers not to emulate 'prelates who have the smooth and mild voice of Jacob but lacking mercy and moderation, confirm the hairy and harsh hand of Esau, hirsute and bloody who esteeming himself the superior and older always acted with brotherly hatred.'²² Others (Bonaventura) identify Esau who sold his birthright with those 'who sell eternal blessings'. Yet others link Esau with the Dominican Order, rivals to the Franciscans. In Franciscan literature, Jer.16.16, 'Behold I will send man fishers...and after this I will send man hunters', is interpreted thus: the hunters are the Dominicans because they are prefigured by Esau 'who was a hunter and took as wives the daughters of Heth, that is secular learning'.²³

As Neff concludes, it is likely that more research in Franciscan literature would yield many more 'Esaus' among the enemies and reprobates and rivals of the order. In this fresco however, Esau is primarily the antithesis of humble minority. Although individual viewers might have

22. Quoted in Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 700.

23. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 701.

projected a range of identities on Esau's image, his role here is to show all the Friars Minor ideally are not. He demonstrates what they must work to redeem: offences against loving brotherhood and sins of pride, heresy and violence against God.



Figure 12. Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Jacob and Esau*, detail from Baptistery Doors, Florence (1404–24).

In Renaissance art, neither Esau nor Jacob was particularly popular subjects: but two outstanding examples of major artistic significance do exist from this period. The first appears on the doors of the baptistery in Florence by Ghiberti (1404–24) (fig. 12), and the second is on the loggia of the Vatican by Raphael (1518–20). The Jacob and Esau panel is regarded as the most accomplished panel on the door of the baptistery in Florence and includes the significant episodes in the Esau–Jacob narrative. At the very centre of the panel on the ground lies Esau's hunting spear. Esau and his hunting dogs occupy the entire centre front of the panel as Esau listens obediently to the request of Isaac to hunt game. Significantly this episode of filial obedience effectively conceals the episode of the selling of the birthright that is just about visible in the far background. The narrative continues on the far right as Esau departs to hunt. In creating this masterpiece, Ghiberti clearly gave considerable thought to the role and character of Esau: he is not given any negative associations, he is not eliminated from the story and he is given as much prominence, if not more, than Jacob.

2. Esau in Jewish Art

In Christian iconography the clothes of Esau may have been an important symbol, but in Jewish iconography, on the other hand, it was the quarry that Esau carries over his shoulder that received most attention. The iconography of Jacob and Esau in Jewish art has been much neglected and, as far as I know, has only been considered by one scholar, Marc Epstein,²⁴ but with very interesting results, and, therefore, in the following section I present the main thrust of his findings since they illumine yet further the various identities foisted on Esau over the centuries.

In Christian literature from the mediaeval period, generic illustrations of Esau the huntsman or depictions of Isaac sending him out to hunt are common but in these images it is extremely rare that Esau's quarry is depicted as a hare. Usually the quarry is a deer as in the *Bible moralisée* and in early Christian illustrated literature; there is only one unambiguous example of Esau returning with a hare on his spear (in the late fifth-century Vienna Bible). In the extensive and elaborate cycle of the Jacob–Esau stories in Monreale Cathedral, Esau is depicted hunting birds but he returns with a hare. Here Isaac's surprise appears to be directed at Esau's quarry rather than at Esau himself. Apart from these specific isolated instances, the hare is not at all a continuous or consistent feature in images of Esau in Christian illuminated literature.

On the other hand, in contrast to this almost complete dearth of hares in Christian iconography and tradition, there is a multiplicity of hares in almost all Jewish depictions of Esau's hunt from the same period and is well represented in all illustrated haggadahs in Germany, as well as Spain and Portugal. In the beautifully illustrated *Golden Haggadah* from thirteenth-century Spain, now in the British Museum, Esau is armed with a bow and arrow and bears a hare upon a club he has slung over his shoulder (fig. 13).²⁵

In the early fourteenth-century Schocken Bible, a roundel depicting Esau at the beginning of the book of Genesis shows him bearing a hare tied to a spear; In the *Sarajevo Haggadah*, two full miniatures are devoted to Esau's hunt and return. Although he goes out and hunts birds with his bow, he is depicted returning with a hare slung over his shoulder. The

24. Marc Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1997).

25. Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 23.

frequent occurrence of the hare cannot be explained simply as a marriage between Jewish and Christian iconographical traditions since Christian sources are not interested in it as a symbol. So, Epstein concludes, it must be considered as an example of a distinctively Jewish mediaeval motif.²⁶

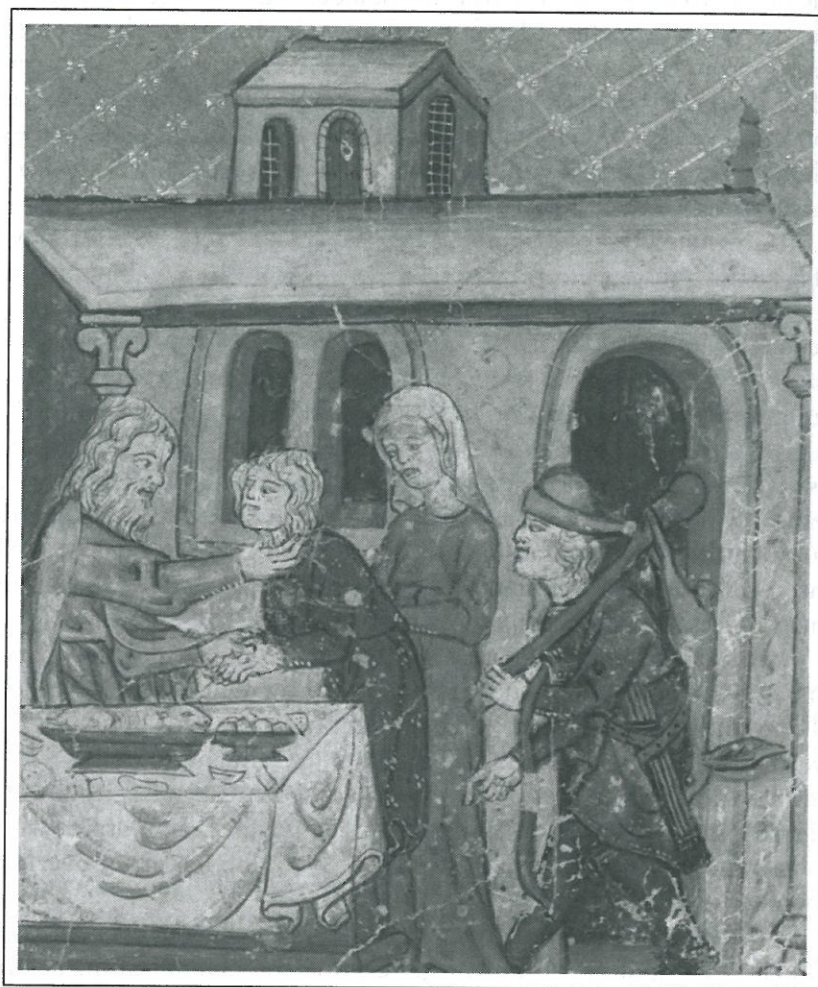


Figure 13. Esau with Hare,
Detail from *The Golden Haggadah* (Castile, c. 1320),
British Library

26. Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 23.

This may seem somewhat peculiar since the hare (in Hebrew, *arnevet*) is mentioned only twice in the Pentateuch in the list of forbidden animals: Lev. 11.6 and 14.7. In addition, hunting by Jews was unequivocally condemned throughout ancient and mediaeval rabbinic literature and was viewed as a distinctively non-Jewish activity, one of the classical excesses of the gentiles. Yet, in Jewish iconography, the image of the hare hunt seems to have had a profound and pervasive allegorical significance for Jews in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when they appear to have identified themselves as the victim, the quarry.

Epstein argues that rabbinic literature makes it clear that Esau's quarry and target for killing is Jacob and his descendants, the Jews, and so Esau's hunt serves as a typology for the oppression of the Jews by the nations of the world. In biblical and rabbinic literature, particularly in the Psalms, the enemy is frequently envisaged as deploying 'the snares of the hunter'. When hunting appears in mediaeval Jewish literature and art (where there are very many images of hunting scenes) it is often used allegorically as a figure for the persecution of the Jews. The allegorical significance of hunts and hunting in mediaeval Hebrew texts and iconography explain the frequency of their appearance, despite the prohibition of hunting in Jewish law.

But why should an animal that has been hunted in a ritually unacceptable manner be offered as a meal to a venerable patriarch such as Isaac and why should such an animal be identified with the Jewish people? The hare is not mentioned at all in rabbinical exegetical traditions. In fact, the midrashim took great pains to show that Esau's catch should be ritually slaughtered for Isaac and that it should not be an unclean beast nor one that had died by itself nor had been bitten by a carnivorous beast nor even stolen from its rightful owner. The same midrashim also state that the only single virtue of the villainous Esau was his unwavering filial piety.²⁷ So it does not follow automatically that the depiction of the hare simply symbolizes Esau's disrespect for his father in bringing him food that he cannot eat.

27. Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 130 n. 32, refers to *Bereshit Rabbah* 65.16 where R. Simeon b. Gamaliel compares Esau's filial piety to his own and finds Esau's devotion to his father 'a hundred times greater'. Epstein notes that Esau's response to Isaac's summons, 'Here I am!', in Gen. 27.1 parallels exactly Abraham's response in Gen. 22.1, the ultimate model of acquiescence to paternal will, in this case the will of God. Thus, Esau holds his father in an esteem similar to that in which Abraham held God. According to rabbinic sources, Esau's reward for his filial piety is that his children will have dominion over the entire world.

The idea that Isaac would have eaten non-kosher game is notably at odds with rabbinic imaginings of the scene. Classical midrashic works from the sixth-century *Bereshit Rabbah* to the fifteenth-century *Sefer haYashar* completely take for granted the kosher nature of Esau's hunt.²⁸ Those that actually describe the details of his hunt all note that it was done entirely in accordance with rabbinic law. Thus the rabbinic sources stand in stark contrast to the iconography. Ironically, Christian iconography appears to support rabbinic texts, through its representation of Esau's quarry as generally kosher, while Jewish iconography seems to ignore rabbinic views. Esau's hare in Jewish iconography might thus be regarded as an 'orphaned image', argues Epstein, in that it cannot trace its ancestry from the venerable tradition of rabbinic textual exegesis.²⁹ Thus, Epstein concludes, the hare (including Esau's hare) was a conscious iconographic contribution to the construction of mediaeval Jewish identity. Further, he argues, interest in creating a sort of 'iconographic exegesis' linking Esau's hunt with contemporary historical circumstances at that time was so strong that Jewish iconography did so in spite of the fact that no rabbinic text features the hare in describing Esau's quarry brought to Isaac.

The hare had a negative meaning for mediaeval Christians, sometimes being a symbol for homosexuals and by extension, Jews.³⁰ Thus Christians, the majority, had defined their quarry, the Jews, the minority, as hares. But Jews re-appropriated the image of the hare and set about transforming it from an emblem of infamy and oppression to a metaphor of Jewish self-definition. The character of the hare, Epstein argues, as adept at surviving, and fleet of foot, together with its reputation as a trickster, suited the Jews; traits that the majority regarded negatively were now viewed as advantages by the minority. Furthermore, not only could it be a symbol for Jews but also it was a particularly appropriate symbol for Jacob. Jacob, like the hare, had the reputation of being clever and cunning. Thus the hare could be an appropriate attribute for the ambiguous moral character of Jacob:

The symbolism of the hare is manifestly consonant with Jacob's character and fortunes, and emblematic of the chain of concealment and revelation, of switched identities, of honesty and prevarication that constitutes his life's history.³¹

28. Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 23.

29. Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 26.

30. Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 26.

31. Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 132 n. 47, draws attention to how the theme of Jacob's 'switched identity' is conveyed in the language of the narrative. Jacob deceives

By choosing the hare as a symbol and linking the trickster hare with Jacob, they acknowledge that their contemporary state of subjection to Edom is in some measure one of the continuing repercussions of Jacob's deception of Isaac. By placing the hare in Esau's hand, artists bring evidence against Esau on two scores: first, he dares to bring to Isaac food that was not kosher, thus spurning filial piety by pursuing game that was specifically in contradiction to the desires of his father. Second, the hare, Esau's quarry, symbolizes the diverse qualities of Jacob and by extension the Jewish people. Therefore Esau has spurned not only his father but also his brother Jacob and his descendants against whom he harbours a murderous intent, symbolized by the dead quarry he carries over his shoulder.

3. Conclusion

The starting point for this exploration of how Esau is presented in art was Stom's *Isaac Blessing Jacob* at the Barber Institute. Stom's composition subtly draws attention to how Esau, even in his absence, still haunts this scene of deception and, seen alongside the artist's other depiction of Esau, *Esau Sells his Birthright to Jacob*, suggests that Stom was inclined to treat him more sympathetically than is evident elsewhere in the history of his reception. As in Stom's paintings, Esau's filial devotion is frequently alluded to in other visual representations; unlike the deceitful Jacob, he is shown as an obedient and dutiful son. But he is not always portrayed positively in art: he was appropriated by the Franciscans to symbolize everything that is evil, haughty and proud, and in the *Bible moralisée*, he is depicted as being inherently evil from birth and becomes a symbol for usurers, miscreants and those evil people who reject the Church. In the *Biblia pauperum*, his image is juxtaposed with that of Adam and Eve, thus making his sin equal to theirs. In Jewish art, Epstein has shown how the game that Esau hunts, the hare, symbolizes all that is evil in Esau: by placing the unclean hare in Esau's hand, Jewish artists—but not rabbinic sources—bring evidence against him that he dared to bring to Isaac food that was not kosher, thus spurning filial piety.

The artworks discussed in this chapter offer interpretations—and not simply illustrations—of the biblical Esau; some present him positively and others negatively, but through their imaginative interpretations, they

his brother in both Gen. 25.29-34 and 27.5-30. In the latter, Esau exclaims, 'First, he has taken away my birthright (*bekhorah*) and now, he has taken away my blessing (*berakhah*)!'.

draw the viewer powerfully into a biblical world full of deceit and deception and invite the viewer to reassess the roles given to Esau, Jacob and Rebekah. Each depiction of Esau and Jacob can bring out a new aspect of this troublesome narrative, raising questions we have not thought of before. The philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer makes a useful distinction between the *broad* subject matter of a work and the very *particular* way a painting interprets it. The subject matter an artwork brings to mind, he argues, is larger than what is shown and, at the same time, reveals the individuality of a work, its particular way of contributing towards its expression.³² Thus, when an artwork brings its subject matter to mind, it will bring to mind more than what is initially seen. We are led out of the immediacy of our own horizon and brought to consider other ways of seeing and thinking; re-acquainting ourselves with previous interpretations of a subject frees us from being compelled to think and feel solely in terms of our present horizon.³³ The subject matter that a painting expresses, in this case Esau, can never be exhausted by its particular exemplifications; it always remains more than any individual expression of it and is always susceptible to extension by further interpretation, so that no artwork can ever do full justice to the visualization of the subject:

The particular artwork allows us to gain sight of that which, without art's mediation, we could never come to see. Though aesthetics and aesthetic revelation must focus on the particular instance, the value of aesthetic experience resides in its ability to illuminate, re-interpret and develop previous experience.³⁴

Stom's *Isaac Blessing Jacob* at the Barber Institute constitutes, in Gadamer's terms, a very distinctive visual expression of the biblical story of Genesis 27 and offers a unique interpretation of the story that conveys a sympathetic understanding of the absent Esau. In suggesting with great subtlety how Esau has been wronged, the painting invites us to re-examine and reassess the negative reputation that Esau has acquired, so unwarranted and undeserved, in the reception history of the Bible.

32. See Nicholas Davey's discussion of Gadamer in his 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', in *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual* (ed. Ian Heywood and Barry Sandwell; London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 3-29 (14-17).

33. Davey, 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', p. 3.

34. Gadamer, quoted in Davey, 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', p. 24.