

32 Beer-sheba, for there did the two of them swear. And they sealed a
 33 pact in Beer-sheba, and Abimelech arose, and Phicol captain of his
 34 troops with him, and they returned to the land of the Philistines. And
 Abraham planted a tamarisk at Beer-sheba, and he invoked there the
 name of the LORD, everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned in the
 land of the Philistines many days.

31. *the name of that place Beer-sheba.* The Hebrew makes a transparent etymological pun. *Be'er* means "well." *Sheb'a* can be construed as "oath" but it is also the number seven, ritually embodied here in the seven ewes Abraham sets apart. A second etymology may be intimated, not for the place-name Beersheba but for the term *shev'uah*, "oath," which seems to be derived by the writer from the sacred number seven, made part of the oath-taking.

32. *the land of the Philistines.* This is an often-noted anachronism, the incursion of the Philistines from Crete to the coastal area of Canaan postdating the Patriarchal period by more than four centuries. The writer may mean merely to refer casually to this region in geographical terms familiar to his audience; it is not clear that Abimelech with his Semitic name is meant to be thought of as a "Philistine" king.

33. *at Beer-sheba.* The cultic tree is planted at rather than in Beer-sheba because it is evident that the site of the oath is a well in the wilderness, not a built-up town.

And it happened after these things that God tested Abraham. And He
 said to him, "Abraham!" and he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Take,
 pray, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go forth to
 the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the

1. The abrupt beginning and stark, emotion-fraught development of this troubling story have led many critics to celebrate it as one of the peaks of ancient narrative. Among modern commentators, Gerhard von Rad, Claus Westermann, and E. A. Speiser have all offered sensitive observations on the details of the story, and the luminous first chapter of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which compares this passage with one from the Odyssey, remains a landmark of twentieth-century criticism.

2. *your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac.* The Hebrew syntactic chain is exquisitely forged to carry a dramatic burden, and the sundry attempts of English translators from the King James Version to the present to rearrange it are misguided. The classical Midrash, followed by Rashi, beautifully catches the resonance of the order of terms. Rashi's concise version is as follows: "Your son. He said to Him, 'I have two sons.' He said to him, 'Your only one.' He said, 'This one is an only one to his mother and this one is an only one to his mother.' He said to him, 'Whom you love.' He said to him, 'I love both of them.' He said to him, 'Isaac.'" Although the human object of God's terrible imperative does not actually speak in the biblical text, this midrashic dialogue demonstrates a fine responsiveness to how the tense stance of the addressee is intimated through the words of the addresser in a one-sided dialogue.

your only one. Some scholars, bothered by the technical inaccuracy of the term, have followed an ancient reading of *yadid*, "favored one," instead of the Masoretic *yahid*. This seriously misses the point that in regard to Abraham's feelings, Isaac, this sole son by his legitimate wife, is his only one. The phrase

3 mountains which I shall say to you." And Abraham rose early in the
morning and saddled his donkey and took his two lads with him, and
Isaac his son, and he split wood for the offering, and rose and went to
4 the place that God had said to him. On the third day Abraham raised
5 his eyes and saw the place from afar. And Abraham said to his lads,
"Sit you here with the donkey and let me and the lad walk ahead and
6 let us worship and return to you." And Abraham took the wood for the
offering and put it on Isaac his son and he took in his hand the fire

"your son, your only one," will return as a thematic refrain at the end of the story (verses 12, 16).

Moriah. Though traditional exegesis, supported by the reference to the Mount of the LORD at the end of the tale, identifies this with Jerusalem, the actual location remains in doubt. In any case, there is an assonance between "Moriah" and *yir'eh*, "he sees," the thematic key word of the resolution of the story.

3. *and Isaac his son.* The crucial item is left to the very end. The narrator does not miss a chance in the story to refer to Isaac as "his son" and Abraham as "his father," thus sharpening the edge of anguish that runs through the tale.

and he split wood. In a narrative famous for its rigorous economy in reporting physical details, this act of Abraham, wielding an axe and cutting things apart is ominously singled out for attention.

5. *said to his lads . . . let me and the lad.* An identity of terms, an ironic divergence of meanings—the young men who are his servants—in fact, his slaves—and the boy to whom he fondly refers, whom he thinks he is going to kill.

let me. The Hebrew uses a jussive form for the three verbs, a gentler mode of speech than a flat declarative about future actions.

and the cleaver, and the two of them went together. And Isaac said to
Abraham his father, "Father!" and he said, "Here I am, my son." And
he said, "Here is the fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the
offering?" And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for the offer-
ing, my son." And the two of them went together. And they came to
the place that God had said to him, and Abraham built there an altar
and laid out the wood and bound Isaac his son and placed him on the
altar on top of the wood. And Abraham reached out his hand and took

6. *the cleaver.* E. A. Speiser notes, quite rightly, that the Hebrew term here is not the usual biblical term for knife, and makes a good argument that it is a cleaver. Other terms from butchering, rather than sacrifice, are used: to slaughter (verse 10) and to bind (verse 9—a verb occurring only here but used in rabbinic Hebrew for binding the legs of animals).

7. *Father.* The Hebrew is literally "My father," but that noun with the possessive ending is the form of intimate address in biblical Hebrew, like *Abba* in postbiblical Hebrew.

the fire and the wood. A moment earlier, we saw the boy loaded with the firewood, the father carrying the fire and the butcher knife. As Gerhard von Rad aptly remarks, "He himself carries the dangerous objects with which the boy could hurt himself, the torch and the knife." But now, as Isaac questions his father, he passes in silence over the one object that would have seemed scariest to him, however unwitting he may have been of his father's intention—the sharp-edged butcher knife.

8. *God will see to.* Literally, "see for himself." The idiomatic force is "provide," but God's seeing lines up with Abraham's seeing the place from afar, his seeing the ram, and the seeing on the Mount of the LORD. Beyond the tunnel vision of a trajectory toward child slaughter is a promise of true vision.

And the two of them went together. The impassive economy of this refrainlike repeated clause is haunting: two people, father and son, together for what threatens to be the last time, together "in one purpose" (Rashi), the father to sacrifice the son.

9.–10. In contrast to the breathless pace of the narrative as a whole, this sequence inscribes a kind of slow motion: building the altar, laying out the wood, binding the child on top of the wood, reaching out the hand with the butcher knife—until the voice calls out from the heavens.

the cleaver to slaughter his son. And the LORD's messenger called out to him from the heavens and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" and he said, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not reach out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear God and you have not held back your son, your only one, from Me." And Abraham raised his eyes and saw and, look, a ram was caught in the thicket by its horns, and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up as a burnt offering instead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place YHWH-yireh, as is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD there is sight." And the LORD's messenger called out to Abraham

11. *and the LORD's messenger called out to him from the heavens.* This is nearly identical with the calling-out to Hagar in 21:17. In fact, a whole configuration of parallels between the two stories is invoked. Each of Abraham's sons is threatened with death in the wilderness, one in the presence of his mother, the other in the presence (and by the hand) of his father. In each case the angel intervenes at the critical moment, referring to the son fondly as *na'ar*, "lad." At the center of the story, Abraham's hand holds the knife, Hagar is enjoined to "hold her hand" (the literal meaning of the Hebrew) on the lad. In the end, each of the sons is promised to become progenitor of a great people, the threat to Abraham's continuity having been averted.

Here I am. The third time Abraham pronounces this word—*hineni*—of readiness: first to God, then to Isaac, now to the divine messenger.

13. *a ram.* The Masoretic Text reads "a ram behind [*aḥar*]," but scholarship is virtually unanimous in following numerous ancient versions in reading *eḥad*, "one," a very similar grapheme in the Hebrew.

14. *sight.* The place-name means "the LORD sees." The phrase at the end means literally either "he sees" or "he will be seen," depending on how the verb is vocalized, and this translation uses a noun instead to preserve the ambiguity. It is also not clear whether it is God or the person who comes to the Mount who sees / is seen.

once again from the heavens, and He said, "By my own Self I swear, declares the LORD, that because you have done this thing and have not held back your son, your only one, I will greatly bless you and will greatly multiply your seed, as the stars in the heavens and as the sand on the shore of the sea, and your seed shall take hold of its enemies' gate. And all the nations of the earth will be blessed through your seed because you have listened to my voice." And Abraham returned to his lads, and they rose and went together to Beer-sheba, and Abraham dwelled in Beer-sheba.

And it happened after these things that it was told to Abraham, "Look, Milcah, too, has born sons to Nahor your brother. Uz, his firstborn, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram. And Chesed and Hazo and Pildash and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. And Bethuel begot Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she, too, gave birth—to Tebah, and to Gaham, and to Tahash, and to Maacah."

16. *because you have done this thing.* The LORD's invocation of causation thickens the ambiguities of the story. Abraham has already been promised an innumerable posterity (chapters 15, 17). Perhaps now he has proved himself fully worthy of the promise. One might note that here for the first time a future of military triumph is added to the promise.

20.–24. The genealogical list inserted here, which reflects a Mesopotamian confederation of twelve tribes akin to the twelve tribes of Abraham's descendants, is directed toward the introduction of Rebekah (verse 23), soon to join the Patriarchal narrative as a principal figure. The genealogy marks a kind of boundary in the larger narrative. Abraham has accomplished his chief actions; all that is really left to him is to acquire a suitable burial plot for Sarah, which will be his final gesture in laying claim to the land. At that point, even before Abraham's death, the concerns of the next generation will take center stage (chapter 24).

sides, between you and us, and let us seal a pact with you, that you will do no harm to us, just as we have not touched you, and just as we have done toward you only good, sending you away in peace. Be you hence blessed of the LORD!” And he made them a feast and they ate and drank. And they rose early in the morning and swore to each other, and Isaac sent them away, and they went from him in peace. And it happened on that day that Isaac’s servants came and told him of the well they had dug and they said to him, “We have found water.” And he called it Shibah, therefore the name of the town is Beer-sheba to this day.

And Esau was forty years old and he took as wife Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite. And they were a provocation to Isaac and to Rebekah.

mula for parting after the completion of a treaty—in verse 31, “and Isaac sent them away, and they went from him in peace.” (Compare David and Abner in 2 Samuel 3.)

33. *Shibah*. Though the word in this form means “seven,” the etiology of the name intimated by the narrative context obviously relates it to *shevu’ah*, “oath,” whereas the earlier story about Beer-sheba (chapter 22) appears to link the name with both “seven” and “oath.”

34. *And Esau . . . took as wife*. This brief notice about Esau’s exogamous unions obviously is distinct from the preceding stories about Isaac. It is probably placed here to remind us of his unworthiness to be the true heir (thus forming a kind of envelope structure with the spurning of the birthright in the last verse of chapter 25), and in this way serves to offer some sort of justification in advance for Jacob’s stealing the blessing in the next episode. It also lays the ground for the end of the next episode in which Rebekah will invoke the need for Jacob to find a wife from his own kin as an excuse for his hasty departure for Mesopotamia.

35. *provocation*. Some commentators construe the first component of the compound noun *morat-ruah* as a derivative of the root *m-r-r*, “bitter”—hence the term “bitterness” favored by many translations. But the morphology of the word points to a more likely derivation from *m-r-h*, “to rebel” or “to defy,” and thus an equivalent such as “provocation” is more precise.

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, preponderently 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.

And Rebekah said to Jacob her son, “Look, I have heard your father speaking to Esau your brother, saying, ‘Bring me some game and make me a dish that I may eat, and I shall bless you in the LORD’s presence before I die.’ So now, my son, listen to my voice, to what I command you. Go, pray, to the flock, and fetch me from there two choice kids 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.

2 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
3 and the hands are Esau’s hands.” But he did not recognize him for his
4 hands were, like Esau’s hands, hairy, and he blessed him. And he said,
5 “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
6 drank. And Isaac his father said to him, “Come close, pray, and kiss
7 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.

8 May God grant you
from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth.
9 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.” 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!” And he said, “Your brother has come in deceit and has taken your blessing.” And he said,

“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?” 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 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.” 40

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 *tarid* (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.

1 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
2 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.
3 So now, my son, listen to my voice, and rise, flee to my brother Laban
5 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

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, 46
“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. *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?”