

Genesis 26:34-27:29
Deception and Blessing, part 1

Before time began, God had a plan. That plan was revealed in obscure references in the pre-diluvian world, to men such as Adam and Noah. But beginning with Abraham, God's plan of salvation began to be more clear, although certainly not as clear as it became later and as it is today. The unfolding of that plan began with God's promise to Abraham of land, seed and blessing. Furthermore, God promised, in a now very familiar passage, that through Abraham, "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

That precious promise was passed on to Isaac, and the decision to do so was God's alone. Though Abraham had many children, his firstborn Ishmael was not selected as the child of the promise. But Ishmael was not passed over altogether. He, too, enjoyed his own blessings from God. He became a father of nations. But he was not of the chosen line. Just as God had chosen the line of Seth before that of Cain, and the line of Shem before that of Japheth and Ham, so now God had chosen Isaac before Ishmael.

But now Isaac, himself, was growing old. The promises of land, seed, and blessing had to be renewed in the next generation. And like his father, Isaac had more than one potential heir. His firstborn, Esau, and his younger brother, Jacob, were not on the best of terms. Jacob had already compelled the foolish and impulsive Esau to barter away his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew. But there remained the blessing of the father to be received. And this blessing carried with it the implied promises of God for land, seed, and blessing. And as with Isaac and Ishmael, God had already chosen whom He wanted to be the inheritor of His promise. So God worked through the actions of men to achieve His sovereign purpose.

Prelude - Esau's Wives

Once again, we see the family of Abraham having issues related to marriage. Abraham and Sarah had struggled with the issues of infertility and integrity in their marriage. Isaac and Rebekah had done the same. But now the family problems stemmed not from decisions made after a couple were married, but rather in the choice of a marital partner in the first place. ³⁴When Esau was forty years old he married Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite; ³⁵and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah" (v. 34-35).

We can first see that Esau had little regard for his family's religious heritage. Esau was willing to compromise on the exclusivity of being a family that worshipped Yahweh alone. He would bring pagan worshippers into the family circle. Furthermore, this decision not only brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah for religious reasons, but no doubt angered them as well since Esau had no doubt been expected to find a wife from the family of his mother in Paddan-Aram. So on both a religious and personal level, Esau had ignored the wishes of his parents. His decision would have significant consequences and eventually prohibitions against marrying Canaanite women would be prescribed by law in Hebrew culture (Deuteronomy 7:3-4; 1 Kings 11:2; Ezra 9:12).

That Esau took two wives, while not ideal, was not unusual. Lamech is the first polygamist recorded in Scripture, and he also was from the rejected line (Cain). Even the great patriarch Abraham had possessed concubines (Genesis 25:6). And it may be that Esau had a good reason for taking a second wife. Judith, the first wife to be listed, and therefore likely the first wife Esau took, is mentioned only here in Scripture. None of Esau's descendants are recorded as having been born by her. Therefore she may have been barren, and this was what prompted Esau to take a second wife. We should not excuse the behavior too much, however, as once Esau began the practice, he took several other wives as well (see his genealogy in Genesis 36).

That no specific grievance is named in Scripture indicates that the grief brought to Isaac and Rebekah had to do with the choice of the women, and not necessarily the women themselves. Since Isaac, and Abraham for that matter, had entered into alliances with the King of Gerar, clearly contact with those outside the faith was permitted. Surely the patriarchs had traded with and had other kinds of interactions with the people among whom they sojourned. But marriage was of a different nature. That Esau had chosen to marry outside the family was the problem. Esau had dismissed his mother's relatives as potential brides as easily as he had previously dismissed his birthright. Some commentators suggest that this act of Esau's was what disqualified him to be Isaac's heir and thus justified the actions of Rebekah and Jacob that followed. That is going too far, I think, but we can nevertheless see that God used Esau's foolish actions to achieve his purposes of making Jacob the heir of the promise.

The Plan Conceived

Time had passed. Isaac had grown old. He thought his end was near, and he wanted to make certain he had his affairs in order. ¹“Now it came about, when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called his older son Esau and said to him, ‘my son.’ And he said to him, ‘here I am.’ ²Isaac said, ‘behold now, I am old and I do not know the day of my death. ³Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me; ⁴and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die” (v. 1-4).

This was to be the third time Scripture recorded a conflict between Esau and Jacob. The first was in the womb, and the second had been over the birthright. Now the issue was Isaac's blessing. As we discussed at the time when we looked at the narrative in which Esau sold his birthright, the birthright and the blessing were not the same thing. It seems that birthright related more to the family's possessions. Distribution of the family's goods was the prerogative of the father, who generally, but not always practiced primogeniture in this culture. We have examples of shared inheritance between sons became law under Moses (Deuteronomy 21:15-17) and even daughters (Job 42:15). The blessing to the prophetic announcement of the father which, as we will see in a future passage, apparently could not be withdrawn even if procured under duress or by deception (Genesis 27:33).

So, Isaac's motivation was clear. He wanted to ensure the succession to the rightful family line. That he had grown blind in his old age was not uncommon. Jacob, Eli and Ahijah all are described as losing their vision in their old age. We do not know how old Isaac was at the time of this encounter, but he died at one hundred and eighty years of age (Genesis 35:28). Since one consequence of the events described in

this passage was the hasty relocation of Jacob to Paddan-Aram, where he stayed for twenty years (Genesis 31:41), Isaac could have been no older than one hundred and sixty, so he may have been near that age.

Isaac gave his son Esau a simple task for one described in Scripture as a skillful hunter. He was to go and hunt some game that Isaac might enjoy a last meal. Though Isaac's eyesight and health might be failing, it seems his appetite was not. That Isaac preferred Esau, Scripture has made plain. Perhaps he did so because his eldest son's hunting ability provided Isaac with his favorite dishes. In this culture, as in many others of Mesopotamia, a meal often accompanied the passing of the birthright or the giving of the father's blessing. We have many Ugaritic texts that demonstrate this to be true. So Isaac wanted one last meal with his son to provide the setting in which he would pass along the coveted blessing.

That Esau obeyed was understandable. He no doubt loved his father and wanted to please him if he could. We are left to speculate if Esau (or Jacob for that matter) ever told their parents about the transfer of the birthright. That Esau expected to receive the blessing showed that he did not consider having lost the birthright to be of much significance. Isaac, too, assumed the birthright was to be given to Esau, though surely Rebekah must have told him about the curious answer to prayer she had received regarding the two boys that "the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). Interestingly, Scripture makes no mention of Abraham passing the birthright on to Isaac. This may be because Ishmael, and Abraham's other sons as well, had moved away and only Isaac was left at home. In any case, Isaac was prepared to pass along this important authority to Esau.

But others were privy to this conversation between Isaac and Esau. "Rebekah was listening while Isaac spoke to his son Esau" (v. 5). Like Sarah before her, Rebekah had overheard (Genesis 18:10). While it might be argued that she accidentally heard the two men talking, the context makes it clear that she was intentional in her actions. And she was thinking as she listened. So, very quickly she developed a plan. "When Esau went to the field to hunt for game to bring home, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, 'behold, I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, saying, 'bring me some game and prepare a savory dish for me, that I may eat, and bless you in the presence of the Lord before my death.' Now therefore, my son, listen to me as I command you. Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats from there, that I may prepare them as a savory dish for your father, such as he loves. Then you shall bring it to your father, that he may eat, so that he may bless you before his death'" (v. 5-10).

Esau's departure to hunt game for his father gave Rebekah a small window of opportunity in which to act. The blessing was about to be given, and there was no time to hesitate. She summoned her favorite son, Jacob, and outlined her scheme to steal the blessing. Her choice of words indicated her strained relationships. Isaac was not "my husband" but "your father" and Esau was not "my son" but "your brother" (v. 6). Even the narrator acknowledged that Jacob was "her son" (v. 6). And her accounting of the conversation between Isaac and Esau was not given accurately either. Perhaps to spur Jacob on, she added that Isaac wanted to bless Esau "in the presence of the Lord" (v. 7). One might think, though, that if Jacob had any fear of God, such a statement would only make him more reluctant to interfere. To interfere with God's sovereign plan while God was present was not an undertaking for the faint of heart.

We must note that this was entirely Rebekah's plan. She said "listen to me" (v. 8). Jacob was a willing accomplice, to be sure, but the idea and the strategy were his mother's. A generous interpretation would argue that Rebekah was merely trying to fulfill the divine oracle she had been given when she asked God why her pregnancy was so turbulent (Genesis 25:23). The text, however, offers no support to that conclusion. Nowhere in the narrative are Rebekah's motives mentioned as her simply trying to accomplish the work of the Lord. Rather, Scripture says quite plainly that Rebekah simply preferred Jacob.

But Jacob appreciated the risk involved in trying to steal the blessing. ¹¹Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, 'behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man. ¹²Perhaps my father will feel me, then I will be as a deceiver in his sight, and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing'" (v. 11-12). He understood that not to receive a father's blessing was one thing, but to receive a father's curse was something far worse indeed. To be caught in such a deceit would forfeit any claim to any blessing, even a small one given to a second son.

No doubt Jacob knew the story of Ham, who shamed his father bringing about a curse upon his son, Canaan (Genesis 9:20-25). Though not yet under the Law, that Law reflected the values of the culture to which it was given, and that culture demanded the honoring of parents. The Law demanded the most extreme punishments for those who dishonor their parents, and Jacob was certainly aware of this (Exodus 21:15, 17; Deuteronomy 21:18-19).

Rebekah was not to be dissuaded, however. She had an answer ready for her reluctant son. "His mother said to him, 'your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, get them for me'" (v. 13). This was a great risk on Rebekah's part indeed. And it must have been enough to convince Jacob to go ahead with the plan. If all the danger was his mother's, perhaps he assumed he had nothing to lose. ¹⁴"So he went and got them, and brought them to his mother; and his mother made savory food such as his father loved. ¹⁵Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her elder son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. ¹⁶And she put the skins of the young goats on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. ¹⁷She also gave the savory food and the bread, which she had made, to her son Jacob" (v. 14-17).

Jacob and Esau must have been fraternal, not identical twins. Esau was hairy, and Jacob was smooth. Perhaps with an underlying sense of humor, Scripture used a word for smooth, *ḥālāq*, that means both 'smooth' but also "lying lips" (Psalm 12:3-4; Proverbs 5:3). Also, that Rebekah had access to Esau's clothes was an indication that Esau had been living with his parents as part of the extended family. No doubt this nearness only increased the dissatisfaction Rebekah and Isaac had with Esau's Canaanite wives. Another point we should note is that by putting the skins of the goats on Jacob's arms and neck, Rebekah was assuming physical contact between her son and Isaac. Her mind had worked quickly. She had thought through her plan in detail. Finally, this was also an indication of how unwell Isaac was, for Rebekah was counting on his inability to distinguish between goatskin and human hair.

The Plan Executed

Jacob's costume in place, the plan was put into effect. ¹⁸Then he came to his father and said, 'my father.' And he said, 'here I am. Who are you, my son?' ¹⁹Jacob said to his father, 'I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me'" (v. 18-19). That Isaac responded with a question to Jacob's announcement that he had returned was an indication that Isaac was uncertain. He had just sent Esau away, though the time must have at least an hour or two for Rebekah and Jacob to have a goat butchered and cooked. Still, to the mind of Isaac, his son had returned surprisingly quickly.

Isaac seemed caught off guard at the quick return of his son. And Jacob answered with a lie, even reminding Isaac of the fact that he was the firstborn, no doubt in the hope of drawing his father's attention back to the fact that he was to give his blessing. That Jacob added "I have done as you told me" only amplified his deception, as he represented himself as the obedient, rather than the treacherous son. He wanted to remind his father that he was there for a purpose, and had not just come by with some food to chat.

But Isaac was unconvinced. "Isaac said to his son, 'how is it that you have it so quickly, my son?' And he said, 'because the Lord your God caused it to happen to me'" (v. 20). Old as he was, Isaac still retained enough sense to know that hunting was not an activity so quickly done, even by a hunter with the reputation of being as gifted as Esau. And Jacob's answer was especially sinful, since he invoked the name of God as a support for his deceit. Jacob had to be aware that time was of the essence. Soon, perhaps very soon, Esau would return with his kill, have it prepared, and enter the room with the meal for his father. Jacob had to be gone by then. The irony here, of course, is that while Jacob is trying to claim God was working on his behalf so that he might receive the blessing, God, in fact, *was* bringing all this about to fulfill His own sovereign plans. In a very real sense, God *was* causing this all to happen to Jacob.

But Isaac must be certain. The father's blessing could not be invalidated once it had been given. So, "Isaac said to Jacob, 'please come close, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not'" (v. 21). Isaac was not convinced by his son's appeal to his God. Isaac's eyesight was failing, but his sense of smell and touch were still strong. Perhaps they had grown stronger as they increased to compensate for his declining visual acuity. Still, Jacob must have moved confidently forward to his father's bed, smiling to himself as he trusted in his mother's handiwork.

²²So Jacob came close to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, 'the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.' ²³He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands" (v. 22-23). Jacob must have shuddered with fear. Suddenly he realized that their hurriedly constructed plan had not accounted for the difference in speech between the two men. Jacob grew silent. It is interesting to note that from now on in their conversation, Jacob answered only with the briefest of expressions and offered no additional commentary on the questions his father asked.

Now Isaac was even more confused than before. He knew the voice of his sons. They lived together for at least forty years, maybe as long as sixty years. Perhaps, as twins, their voices were quite similar, but

clearly Isaac could distinguish between them. So, one last time Isaac asked for the truth. “He said, ‘are you really my son Esau?’” (v. 24). Whether with bold confidence or trepidation (sadly, Scripture does not say) Jacob answered, “I am” (v. 24). Jacob was no mere negotiator. He was an outright liar. The question was straightforward, and so was the depravity of the answer.

Isaac was blind, both literally and figuratively. He could not see his sons, and he could not see that he was being deceived. So, perhaps though he was still not entirely convinced, Isaac asked for his meal. “He said, ‘bring it to me, and I will eat of my son’s game, that I may bless you.’ And he brought it to him, and he ate; he also brought him wine and he drank” (v. 25). Let us hope he enjoyed his meal. I imagine it was eaten in silence, for Jacob did not want to talk much. Perhaps he just grunted and muttered in response to his father’s conversation, all the while looking over his shoulder lest Esau came into the room.

The meal over, “his father Isaac said to him, ‘please come close and kiss me, my son.’” (v. 26). A kiss often accompanied the paternal blessing in Hebrew culture (Genesis 31:55; 48:10). This was Jacob’s moment of truth. He was as close to his father as possible. If ever there was a chance for Isaac to recognize the swindle being played upon him, it was now. This part of the narrative cannot be read without harkening to another kiss in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:48-49). Perhaps this was not a kiss to betray the Son of Man, but it was certainly a kiss to deceive a father.

Isaac did not recognize Jacob. His sense of smell overpowered his sense of hearing.

²⁷So he came close and kissed him; and when he smelled the smell of his garments, he blessed him and said,

‘See, the smell of my son
Is like the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed;
²⁸Now may God give you of the dew of heaven,
And of the fatness of the earth,
And an abundance of grain and new wine;
²⁹May peoples serve you,
And nations bow down to you;
Be master of your brothers,
And may your mother’s sons bow down to you.
Cursed be those who curse you,
And blessed be those who bless you” (v. 26-29).

The deed was done. Jacob had received the blessing. The blessing Isaac passed on had three main parts. The first was about the recipient of the blessing, himself. The second regarded what he would receive. And the third concerned his relationship with others. We can also see that the blessing emphasized the other two of the three main themes of Genesis, land and seed. And all of this repeated the Abrahamic promises which began in Abraham’s first encounter with God in Genesis 12.

The first part of the blessing is a remark by Isaac of the smell of his son. Isaac loved Esau, and that love was, at least in part, based on Esau’s own love of the outdoors. Here Scripture graphically described the

nearly-blind Isaac as he took in a deep breath as Jacob (in Esau's clothes) approached. He inhaled the odor, we dare not call it fragrance, of a man of the field.

The experience of this sensation was continued as Isaac blessed his son. "May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and an abundance of grain and new wine" (v. 28). The eloquent language was a shorthand for the promised land of Canaan, that had now been passed on to Jacob. Heaven and earth was simply another way of stating all of creation. The fertility promised here was not only the fertility of the field, but also of marital intimacy. The expectation was that Jacob would become a great nation. The blessing was that of nationhood, and it could only be realized through progeny, and thus it involved the blessing of seed.

The final element of the blessing Isaac gave was that of authority. The phrase "bow down" was used twice to impress upon the reader, as it must have impressed itself upon Jacob, that his people were to rule. This passage also involved the curse/bless formula we have seen before. God was called upon to do to others what they did to the promised son. This also hearkened back to God's original promise given to Abraham, where He asserted that "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3).

Once Isaac had finished blessing him, Jacob probably left quickly. There was no need to linger. Esau's return was immanent. Rebekah's plan for her favorite son had come to pass. But at such a cost. This ruse would fracture the family for the next two decades.

Takeaways

Again we see God's commitment to His sovereign plan for the line of Abraham despite the moral lapses of the human actors in the drama. Isaac is weak and easily taken advantage of. Rebekah is malicious and selfish. Jacob is spineless and corrupt. Yet God's plan moved forward. We can take both encouragement and warning from that.