

THE BLESSINGS AND EXILE GIVEN TO JACOB

I. In chapter 27 and the beginning of chapter 28, the text describes the conferral of two blessings to Isaac, one regarding power and prosperity and the other involving the covenant.

A. The account of Jacob's reception of Isaac's blessings of great prosperity and power and then of the covenant is surrounded by accounts of marriage by Esau and Jacob. The marriages, of Esau to those outside of the covenant and of Jacob to relatives blessed by God, reflects the centrality of marriage to the covenant.

1. As a prelude to the episode regarding the blessings, the text recounts that Esau marries, at the age of 40, a Hivite and a Hittite, members of pagan tribes, which the Chosen People would later conquer when returning to the Promised Land after the Exodus. Even at that age, he still does not seem to understand the importance of handing on the covenant to those raised in the family.

- Later on, marrying within the faith would be very important to Jews. One could marry a foreigner, as Joseph does with his Egyptian wife and Boaz, King David's grandfather does with Ruth, but the woman must become Jewish, lest the faith be compromised. See Gen. 48:5-6; Ruth 4:17.

2. After Isaac gives blessings to Jacob and sends him away to get a wife from among his grandfather's people, Esau somewhat understands the problem. But even then he marries a daughter of Ishmael, who has begun to form a separate people.

3. By contrast, the episode ends with Rebekah and Isaac, the latter having forgiven Jacob and appointed him as the heir to the covenant, send him to the people of Laban, Rebekah's brother, to marry one of Laban's daughters. Jacob obeys them and goes to marry a wife from the family blessed by God.

B. The scene begins with Isaac, somewhere over 100 years old, sensing that he might die soon and, therefore, wanting to confer the a special blessing of prosperity and power upon Esau, despite the fact that the latter has displeased him by marrying foreign wives.

1. It turns out that Isaac will live to be 180, but he does not know that. For he is blind and his senses of touch, feel and smell are defective as well.

2. It is odd that he wants to confer this blessing in secret, without witnesses. It is not surprising that he does not want Jacob or Rebekah there, given the fact that he will contradict their wishes that Jacob receive the blessing. But he has no one else present either, thus leading to a situation where he can be deceived. It is likely that Isaac's servants also wanted him to confer the blessing of prosperity and power on Jacob, so he decided not to have them around either until after it was done and they could not stop him.

C. Behind all of the action is the central importance of the blessing, which cannot be revoked. Despite all of his failings, Isaac still speaks with the power of God and his words thus have great supernatural effect.

1. In the text, the word for "blessing" berakhah occurs seven times, and the related verb for giving a blessing, twenty-one times, three times seven. That notion dominates the scene.

2. Isaac gives blessings to both Jacob and Esau, although the latter is very mixed. It is noteworthy that the first two blessings, given to Jacob and Esau, although of supernatural origin, are not particularly spiritual. In the first blessings, Isaac does not seem to confer the blessing of the covenant, but simply a benefit of prosperity and influence.

3. The third blessing, which Isaac very deliberately gives to Jacob, confers the blessings given to Abraham in the covenant. It is not clear whether Isaac initially intended to give this blessing to Esau, but he ends up doing so with full knowledge of what he is doing.

4. At the end of his life, Jacob will once again give a blessing to each of his twelve children and his grandchildren through Joseph, welcoming them into God's people. See Gen. 48-49. Those blessings as well were to have great effect.

II. The conferral of the blessings upon Jacob and Esau occurs in seven interpersonal scenes, most of them centering around Isaac in one way or another, and two more scenes of planning, both involving Rebekah.

A. In the first scene, Isaac sends Esau out to hunt game and prepare him a meal. He only mentions the blessing at the end, for Esau does not appreciate its importance.

1. The repeated idea of the beloved son and Esau's response, "Here I am," creates an ironic parallel to the account of the offered sacrifice of Isaac.
2. Isaac offers "the blessing of my soul" which is a poignant description, but one that neglects to mention God. Isaac presumably understands that the power comes from God, but he has failed to emphasize the point to Esau.
3. Isaac tells Esau to hunt among the Canaanite fields, which are presumably the best ones. It is likely that it was precisely by being in these fields too much that Esau became attracted to the Canaanite women that he married.
4. Esau, for all of his flaws, is immediately obedient to Isaac.

B. Meanwhile, Rebekah, who has probably been anticipating just such a development, overhears the conversation and develops a very bold and risky plan. Understanding the importance of the blessing, she knows that she must act now or never.

C. In the second interpersonal scene, Rebekah describes the situation quickly to Jacob and convinces him to carry out his role.

1. It is clear that she is the one in charge and that Jacob, while pointing out the obvious problem in the plan (i.e. that his skin, scent and voice are nothing like Esau's) is willing to trust her.

2. She does change Isaac's description of the blessing to a "blessing before the Lord," emphasizing God's role. Jacob, unlike Esau, understands the religious significance. Rebekah may also be justifying the deception on the grounds that God wants the final result of Jacob receiving the blessing.

3. The meat comes from among the family herds. At one level, Jacob has to take the animal from the family herd because, even if he does know how to hunt, he will not capture an animal before Esau. But also, at a deeper level, this conferral of blessing on the shepherd rather than on the hunter, indicates a transitioning of society to a more domestic economy.

4. There is cooperation between the talents of Jacob and Rebekah, indicating the joint roles of man and woman. But there is also an almost comic element in Jacob wearing Esau's (presumably over-large) clothing and camel hide.

D. In the next scene, Jacob brings the meal to Isaac and obtains the blessing.

1. Jacob begins by calls to Isaac "Father." Isaac, puzzled, responds, "Here I am; who are you, my son?" There is a parallel with the exchange between Abraham and Isaac at Mount Moriah. See Gen. 22:7. There, the father was keeping the son Isaac in doubt. Here the son is deceiving the father, also Isaac.

2. Jacob flagrantly lies to Isaac in what is probably the worst scene of the event.

3. Isaac is understandably suspicious, both because of the speed that the meal was provided and because of Jacob's voice. Jacob probably made some effort to imitate Esau, but it would be very difficult, especially on such short notice.

4. Isaac is partially deceived because Rebekah has made the hide of goats similar to Esau's skin. (She may have done so sometime before, anticipating just such an event.)

5. Isaac, still suspicious, eats and drinks a great deal. His judgment probably becomes more impaired.

6. Finally, however, when he smells Jacob, with Esau's clothes, Isaac is convinced. The scent of the fields no doubt brings back glorious memories of his own time in the wild, where he is now unable to go.

E. The blessing is threefold: agricultural/economic, political, and (to some degree) spiritual.

1. The agricultural and economic blessing is a notion of combining heaven and earth, with the dew of the heavens combining with the fertile earth. The blessings of God would often take the form of combining heaven and earth. See, e.g., Ps. 85:12; Is. 45:8. The result is grain and wine, which would become bread and wine, the offering of Melchizedek, and later the offering of Jesus at the Last Supper.
2. The political blessing calls for Jacob (whom Isaac thinks is Esau) to rule over his brothers and over nations. Later on, the prophets and psalmists would promise a future king and Messiah who would rule over nations, but in God's righteousness and holiness. See, e.g., Ps. 2:6-11, 72:1-17, 110:1-7; Is. 9:5-6, 11:1-17; Jer. 23:5-6; Ezek. 34:23-31; Micah 5:1-5; Zech 9:9-10. It does not appear that Isaac fully understands the idea.
3. The final blessing is spiritual, but incomplete. It does contain the promise to Abraham that nations that bless his family would be blessed, and nations that cursed him would be cursed. But there is no notion here of all nations being blessed through him. Compare with See Gen. 12:3, 18:18, 22:18. It appears that Isaac does not fully understand, or is unable to confer, that blessing.
4. Note worthily, the blessing does not include land or descendants, which is some indication that it does not in itself confer the covenant. It is likely that Isaac wanted the covenant to go to Esau and is giving the blessing of power and prosperity that (he thinks) are needed for it.

F. Right after Isaac leaves, Esau returns and prepares the meal, apparently without anyone else's help. He then asks Isaac for the blessing, and Isaac realizes that he has been deceived.

1. The text describes the poignancy for Isaac and Esau both.
2. For Isaac, there is the loss of his power to give the special blessing of his soul, and the fact that he has sacrificed it for another. Dr. Leon Kaas suggests that the scene may have brought back to mind, the event on Mount Moriah,

when Abraham was called to sacrifice Isaac. See *The Beginning of Wisdom* 396.

3. The text portrays the entirely innocent Esau in a sympathetic light. Esau asks over and again for Isaac's blessing, but Isaac knows that the power has been given to him once for all.

4. But, in a final creative act, Isaac gives Esau an ambiguous blessing. The blessing is three-fold, with each aspect having a potentially positive and negative side.

a. The first aspect is that he will live either "off of" or "far from" the fertility of the land and the dew of the heavens. It is not clear which one he means, and perhaps the meaning could be either.

b. The second aspect is that he will live by the sword. On the one hand, that warlike state may be negative. On the other hand, it is exactly the adventurous life that Esau seems to like.

c. The third aspect is that he will serve Jacob, but also that, when he is restive, he will throw off Jacob's yoke. Jacob and his line of Israel will rule for a time, but not forever. There may be a reflection here that God wanted religious rule for a time, but not forever. In any case, Edom would be under the dominance of Israel as a whole and then Judah in the south after the breakup of the Davidic kingdom in 921 B.C. However, during the reign of the corrupt Jehoram (849-842 B.C.) the Edomites rebelled against Judah and threw off its dominance. See 1 Kings 8:20-24.

G. The similarities and contrast between the blessings to Isaac and Esau may say something about religious and secular power.

1. The blessing of prosperity (clear for Jacob, ambiguous for Esau) reflects the fruitfulness of the earth, not great wealth in gold or silver. There is a suspicion in Jewish and Christian thought about having too much wealth that one does not have to

work for. See, e.g., Duet. 8:11-15, 17:17; Ps. 49:14-15; Prov. 28:11, 20-22. The blessings of prosperity are more along the lines that one be able to enjoy the fruit of their labor. See, e.g., Duet. 7:12-15; Ps. 128:2-4

2. The prosperity for Jacob emphasizes the bread and wine, signs of the sacred. Bread, wine and oil would especially be signs of God's blessings. See Ps. 4:8, 104:14-15, Joel 2:24, Is. 55:1-2.

3. It is Esau, not Jacob, who will live by the sword. With the exception of the conquest of the Promised Land, the religious power was not meant to be war-like. See, e.g., Duet. 17:16; Matt. 26:51-52.

4. All nations are meant to bless the religious power and the religious power should have influence. But Esau, representing secular power, can always become restless and overthrow its influence. The power of religious authority works through freedom.

H. Esau is understandably angry at Jacob and resolves to kill him after Jacob has died. He still loves and respects his father, and thus does not want to cause him anger or sorrow. Despite Isaac's infirmities, he still wields much power.

- Esau makes this resolution internally. It is not clear whether he actually would have carried it out, for he is very impulsive.

- It is not clear what he means to accomplish by killing Jacob. For, if Isaac is dead, he cannot then confer the blessing upon Esau. It may be simple anger, a desire to show his power, or a desire to make sure that he gets all the animals and servants.

I. Rebekah somehow figures out about Esau's intentions, perhaps by overhearing him as well. She, like everyone else, thinks Isaac will die soon. And so she tells Jacob that he must flee to her family's homeland for the time being. The flight will enable Isaac to seize the property and control the servants, but that is not of the greatest importance.

- As usual, the focus is on Rebekah. It is her plan, and she concludes that she is worried that she will lose both Jacob and Esau on the same day.

J. In order to give an excuse for Jacob's flight, Rebekah comes to Isaac with concerns about Jacob's marriage. She does not want to distress Isaac by giving him the real reason.

1. Isaac, for all of his faults, still cares about marriage. When reminded about Esau's foreign wives, he may also have been persuaded that he gave the blessing to the right son.

2. Although her argument to Isaac does not present the whole truth, it probably does present part of it. She probably did have a real concern about whom Jacob would marry, a concern she does not present to him.

K. In the final scene, Isaac calls Jacob and, before sending him forth, gives him now the blessing that God gave to Abraham and ,through him, to Isaac.

1. Isaac greets Jacob and apparently has forgiven him.

2. Isaac then gives Jacob the instruction to go the land of his uncle Bethuel to find a wife. Jacob emphasizes Bethuel, while Rebekah emphasized her brother Laban, emphasizing her knowledge of who was in charge.

5. Isaac makes it plain that Jacob's wife must come from the daughters of Lot and no one else. There were almost certainly other women in the line of Terah, Abraham's father, for Abraham had only instructed his servant to find a wife for Isaac from the general family. See Gen. 24:3-4. But Isaac seems to sense that that one line was preserving the true faith.

6. Isaac then confers the full blessing of the covenant upon Isaac, handing off this covenant to the next generation.

- Here, he uses the mysterious term "God Almighty" (El Shaddai), the term God used for Himself in renewing the covenant with Abraham when promising him the a son by Sarah. See Gen. 17:1. With the prior blessing to Jacob, he had used the more general term for God, Elohim.

- The blessing directly refers to blessings God gave Abraham and specifically includes the blessings of countless descendants and the land. The last word on Isaac's lips are that of his father, Abraham.

7. Although Isaac will live decades more, his role has now passed onto Jacob.

L. One is left at the end with the clear idea that the covenant was passed onto Jacob, rightfully so, but also the uncomfortable feeling that great blessings of prosperity and power went to him because of deceit.

1. It should be noted that there is no approval of the deceit. In fact, Jeremiah and Hosea would condemn it as a model of future deceit by the Chosen People and others. See Jer. 9:3; Hos. 12:4.
2. While it seems almost certain that God intended that Jacob inherit the blessings of the covenant, it is not as clear that God wanted him to receive the full blessings or prosperity and power. That combination of spiritual power with material power and wealth could be dangerous and corrupting. The friendship between the spiritual power of Isaac and the worldly power of Abimilech and his associates described in chapter 26 may have been more the model that was intended.
3. Nevertheless, God's blessings are controlled by Isaac, even if Isaac was deceived. God allows people to have their way even if that may not have been His initial intention, as He later lets the Chosen People have a king "like other nations," despite His warning against it. See 1 Sam. 8. God guides events in order to fulfill His covenant, but He allows us a large share in how it plays out.
4. It is arguable that the deceit of Isaac is a partial punishment for his use of deceit against Abimilech. Rebekah learned from Isaac's example. Jacob likewise will soon receive a taste of his own medicine as his uncle Laban deceives him regarding his marriage.

III. Having received the blessing of the covenant, Jacob must now leave home and travel to the land of Laban and his household.

A. Beginning with Abraham, it is a constant theme that those blessed by God must often leave home, at least for awhile and sometimes permanently, to carry out their mission.

- In this case, it is particularly important for Jacob, whose inclinations are to stay at home. Unlike Abraham's servant, who went with his master's wealth in an organized attempt to find a wife for Isaac, Jacob appears to leave with little wealth, except his cleverness.

B. Shortly after setting out on his journey, he has a critical dream of angels ascending and descending upon a ladder.

1. Up to this point, Jacob has not shown any particular piety. But now that he has the covenantal promises, God will begin giving him visions. He grows in devotion to match his responsibilities.

2. The openness to the vision seems to be related in some way to sleeping on a rock from a sacred shrine, probably one that Abraham established, in what will be called Bethel.

a. It is not clear whether the rock has some power of its own as a relic, or whether Jacob was showing his increased desire for the holy by sleeping on that sacred rock.

b. There does seem to be some self-discipline growing, as sleeping on the rock could not have been very comfortable.

3. Jacob first sees angels (here called messengers) ascending and descending upon a ladder from earth to heaven and back.

a. The text does not give an explanation for this vision. It seems that Jacob is seeing what happens invisibly, either in sacred sites or all over the world.

b. Jesus will later tell the honest but doubting Nathaniel, and thus by extension all of His disciples, that he will see angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. John 1:51.

4. God then makes promises to Jacob.

- a. The first three promises reiterate the covenant with Abraham and Isaac, the promises of great descendants, the land and blessings for all nations. God thus affirms the blessings that Isaac gave.
- b. God also promises that He will be with Jacob wherever He goes and protect him for the sake of the covenant. At one level, the promise is needed because Jacob is probably nervous at going so far from home and needs reassurance. At another level, however, it is the glorious promise to all of God's people that He will be with us always. The idea is that God is not like a watchmaker winding up the universe and seeing it work, or like a great king commanding subjects at a distance, but rather loves His people and is close to them. See, e.g., Duet. 4:7. That notion will be fulfilled in Christ and His presence with us, especially in the Church and the sacraments. See, e.g., Matt. 28:20.

5. This event is the first of three of God's manifestations to Jacob. The other two appearances would occur when Jacob and Esau are about to be reconciled and the third when Jacob and his family are about to settle down again in the Promised Land and Jacob tried to cleanse them of all their idols. See Gen. 32:23-31, 35:9-12.

C. Upon awakening, Jacob begins to sense the divine, having previously been unaware, a sense that begins in him a deep conversion.

1. Jacob admits that he did not hithero recognize the divine in that place, or perhaps anywhere. Jacob has grown up with Isaac in the midst of God's blessings. But, as with so many people, he must travel elsewhere to find the divine.
2. As with Abraham before him, and the saints continuously, he feels an overwhelming awe and a fear at the divine. See, e.g., Gen. 15:12; Is. 6:5; Luke 5:8; Rev. 1:17-18. It appears to be the first time he has felt such a sense of God; and he is both attracted and afraid of it. Fear of the Lord is ever at the beginning of wisdom. Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:10, 9:7; Sir. 1:12.
3. The conversion is still immature, for Jacob attaches an excessive importance to the place, rather than the openness to God. But it is a start.

a. Jacob calls the place Bethel, which means "house of God." It would become an important city, in the area of the

tribe Ephraim.

b. Bethel would become a pagan site, but would then be reconsecrated as the tribe of Ephraim took it over. See Judges 1:22-25. The Ark of the Covenant was housed in Bethel for a while during the era of the judges, between the leadership of Joshua in the first decades after the entry into the Promised Land and the establishment of the kingship about 1020 B.C. See Judges 20:18-28. When Israel became divided after Solomon died in 922 B.C., the first king of the north, Jeroboam I, sinfully established a religious shrine in Bethel to keep the northerners from going to Jerusalem. See 1 Kings 12:26-33.

c. After the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C., the town became a part of Samaria. It was apparently destroyed in the 5th or 6th century B.C., but then be rebuilt under the Hellenistic era launched by the conquests of Alexander the Great (333-323 B.C.) It flourished as a city until the early Middle Ages when it declined, never again to return. There have been many excavations in recent years.

4. Jacob pours oil over the "the head of the stone" that he was sleeping on. The gesture anticipates the pouring of oil upon future priests and kings, who would also have the role of bringing the power of heaven to earth. See, e.g., Ex. 29:17; 1 Sam. 10:1. The pouring of oil seems to be a natural gesture that God will later take up for consecrations. It is now used in the Church, both for the blessings of churches and for the sacraments of Confirmation and Anointing of the Sick, as well as a symbolic gesture in Baptism. With the sacraments, it is meant to reflect a consecration to God for a special purpose. (Anointing of the hands is a part of the sacraments of Holy Orders and Anointing of the Sick.)

D. Jacob then makes a three-fold promise based upon his experience of the divine.

1. The promise is premised upon God protecting him, providing for him, and bringing him back to his own land. There is not the full confidence we would like, but perhaps that is understandable, given that he is just beginning his real life of faith. God does sometimes give signs to confirm one's faith. See, e.g., Is. 7:10-16. Likewise, although considering it to be a

weakness in faith, Jesus would give signs if people were honest in seeking them. See, e.g., Mk. 9:14-29. The miracles in John are, in fact, called signs, intended to bring about belief, as He does with St. Thomas a week after the Resurrection. See John 20:24-31. In this case, the dream already confers this promised sign. The question is whether God is really the author of the dream.

2. The first promise is that, if God brings him back, Jacob will accept the God of his father as his God as well. The implication is that he, now at least in his 40s, has not done so already. He is open to believing in the true God, but he wants evidence.

3. The second promise is related to the first one, namely, that he will build a shrine at that location for the glory of God. Of course, God does not need the glory we give him through buildings, but He still approves of them because it is fitting and helpful to salvation. See, e.g., 2 Sam. 7:1-16.

4. The third promise is to give to the Lord a tenth (tithe) of everything God gives him. This promise not only reflects the idea of the tithe that Abraham gave to Melchizedek and anticipates the idea of the tithe so common in Jewish and Christian thought, but also indicates a growth in Jacob's spiritual life.

a. First, with this third promise, Jacob for the first time refers to God in the second person, rather than in the third person. His prayer is becoming more personal.

b. Second, Jacob begins to recognize that his gains come from God, and thus his obligation to be grateful, with the tithe only giving back to God a portion of what God gave to him.

E. Jacob's spiritual growth, however, will take time to develop, with many ups and downs. His first meeting with Rachel and twenty years working for Laban, as well as his subsequent return, will recount much of that journey of faith.