

## Was Isaac Deceived?

Of the three patriarchs of Judaism, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we know the least about the middle one. He is a "lad" when his father offers him up as a sacrifice. (*Genesis 22:5*) We can only speculate how old is a lad; was he eight or nine years old? In any event, it is this boy who, while going up the mountain, asks his father, "Where is the lamb for the offering?" (*Genesis 22:27*) Abraham answers that, "God will see to a lamb for an offering." (*Genesis 22:8*) And then we are told that the "two of them continued together." (*Genesis 22:8*) Thus, it appears that Isaac was a willing, though passive, participant in this greatest of tests that God had devised.

Yet father and son seem not to have had a close relationship. When Abraham sent his servant to seek a wife for Isaac (back in the old country of Charan), he does not consult with Isaac nor is Abraham present when the servant returns from Charan with the bride, Rebecca. (24:66)

Very little is known about Isaac except that, "After Abraham died, God blessed Isaac." (25:11) We are also told that there was a famine in Canaan and Isaac went to King Abimelekh and employed the same stratagem that his father had used twice, for Isaac "was afraid to say that [Rebecca] was his wife. Rebecca was so good-looking that the locals would have killed him because of her." (26:7) Yet Isaac deviates from the pattern of his father for as Abimelekh "was looking out the window, and he saw Isaac enjoying [*mitzachak*, in Hebrew, a pun on the word "laughter" which is the root name of Isaac, *Yitzchak*, in Hebrew] himself with his wife." (26:8) Now aware of her true status, the king complained, "What have you done to us? One of the people could have easily slept with your wife! You would have made me commit a terrible crime!" (26:10)

In this instance, Isaac is able to save the situation by his own act, unlike Abraham who relied on divine intervention when Abimelekh took Sarah. (20:6-7) In sum, Isaac is not as passive a personage as he appears to be when he was offered up by his father as a sacrifice.

In all events, Isaac is extraordinarily prosperous and becomes extremely wealthy. (26:12-13) His success engenders jealousy from neighboring tribes and Isaac is forced to move away. Still, he succeeds and enters into an alliance with Abimelekh who has recognized that God is with Isaac. (26:26-27)

Yet all of these episodes are told with only minor detail and lack the drama of the closing scene of Isaac's life, an episode that has left many with the impression that Isaac is not only passive, but feeble. It is the episode where Jacob, Isaac's son, steals the blessings from his father and that powerful scene has left the impression in the minds of many that Isaac was unworthy of his position and that it is his wife, Rebecca, who saved the day. And yet it shall be seen that Isaac is

not, in this particular episode, the incompetent personage that some would make him out to be, even as Rebecca is truly a worthy heroine.

### *The key episode*

The story of Isaac blessing his twin sons, Jacob and Esau, is replete with problems. Isaac intends to bless his eldest son, Esau, but Jacob (the younger of the two) engages in a successful deception and obtains the blessing intended for Esau. As described in the prior essay, Jacob suffered for his deception and himself was the victim of deceptions—a just retribution. However, the story of the blessing of Jacob and Esau is troublesome. The biggest question is whether a blessing can be stolen. If Jacob had stolen his father's sheep, by law the sheep would not have belonged to Jacob. Therefore, it must be asked whether a father's blessing, especially a spiritual/moral one, can be stolen? Additionally, Isaac's wife, Rebecca, favors her younger child, Jacob, and encourages him into undertaking the deception. What was the underlying cause of the dispute between the spouses? Why did Isaac favor Esau and Rebecca favor Jacob? The answers to these questions are in the text. This is the episode, in its entirety:

### **Chapter 27**

<sup>1</sup> Isaac had grown old and his eyesight was fading. He summoned his elder son Esau.

"My son."

"Yes."

<sup>2</sup> "I am old and I have no idea when I will die. <sup>3</sup> Now take your equipment, your dangle and bow, and go out in the field to trap me some game. <sup>4</sup> Make it into a tasty dish, the way I like it, and bring it to me to eat. My soul will then bless you before I die."

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca had been listening while Isaac was speaking to Esau, his son. Esau went out to the field to trap some game and bring it home.

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca said to her son Jacob, "I just heard your father speaking to your brother Esau. He said, <sup>7</sup> 'Bring me some game and prepare it into something tasty. I will eat it and bless you in God's presence before I die.' <sup>8</sup> Now, my son, listen to me. Heed my instructions carefully. <sup>9</sup> Go to the sheep and take two choice young kids. I will prepare them with a tasty recipe, just the way your father likes them. <sup>10</sup> You must then bring it to your father, so that he will eat it and bless you before he dies."

<sup>11</sup> "But my brother Esau is hairy," replied Jacob. "I am smooth-skinned. <sup>12</sup> Suppose my father touches me. He will realize that I am an imposter! I will gain a curse rather than a blessing!"

<sup>13</sup> “Let any curse be on me, my son,” said the mother. “But listen to me. Go, bring me what I asked.”

<sup>14</sup> [Jacob] went and fetched what his mother had requested. She took [the kids] and prepared them, using the tasty recipe that [Jacob’s] father liked best. <sup>15</sup> Rebecca then took her older son Esau’s best clothing, which she had in her keeping, and put them on her younger son Jacob. <sup>16</sup> She [also] placed the young goats’ skins on his arms and on the hairless parts of his neck.

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca handed to her son Jacob the delicacy, and the bread she had baked. <sup>18</sup> He came to his father.

“Father.”

“Yes, Who are you, my son?”

<sup>19</sup> “It is I, Esau, your first-born,” said Jacob. “I have done as you asked. Sit up, and eat the game I trapped, so that your soul will bless me.”

<sup>20</sup> “How did you find it so quickly, my son?” asked Isaac.

“God your Lord was with me.”

<sup>21</sup> “Come closer to me,” said Isaac to Jacob. “Let me touch you, my son. Are you really Esau or not?”

<sup>22</sup> Jacob came closer to his father Isaac, and [Isaac] touched him. He said, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” <sup>23</sup> He did not realize who it was because there was hair on [Jacob’s] arms, just like those of his brother Esau. [Isaac] was about to bless him.

<sup>24</sup> “But are you *really* my son Esau?”

“I am.”

<sup>25</sup> “Then serve me [the food]. I will eat the game that my son trapped, so that my soul may bless you.”

[Jacob] served it, and [Isaac] ate. He then brought [Isaac] some wine, and he drank it.

<sup>26</sup> His father Isaac said to him, “Come closer and kiss me, my son.”

<sup>27</sup> [Jacob] approached and kissed him. [Isaac] smelled the fragrance of his garments, and blessed him.

He said, “See, my son’s fragrance is like the perfume of a field blessed by God.

<sup>28</sup> “May God grant you the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, much grain and wine. <sup>29</sup> Nations will serve you; governments will bow down to you. You shall be like a lord over your brothers; your mother’s children will bow down to you. Those who curse you are cursed, and those who bless you are blessed.”

<sup>30</sup> Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob had just left his father Isaac, when his brother Esau came back from his hunt.

<sup>31</sup> He had also prepared a delicacy and brought it to his father. “Let my father get up and eat his son’s venison,” he said, “so that your soul may bless me.”

<sup>32</sup> “Who are you?” asked his father Isaac.

“I am your first-born, Esau,” he replied.

<sup>33</sup> Isaac was seized with a violent fit of trembling. “Who...where...is the one who trapped game and just served it to me? I ate it all before you came and I blessed him. The blessing will remain his.”

<sup>34</sup> When Esau heard his father’s words, he let out a most loud and bitter scream. “Bless me too, Father,” he pleaded.

<sup>35</sup> “Your brother came with deceit, and he already took your blessing.”

<sup>36</sup> “Isn’t he truly named Jacob (*Ya’akov*)! He went behind my back (*akav*) twice. First he took my birthright, and now he took my blessing!”

[Esau] pleaded, “Couldn’t you have saved me a blessing too?”

<sup>37</sup> Isaac tried to answer. “But I made him like a lord over you,” he said. “I have given him all his brothers as slaves. I have associated him with the grain and the wine. Where...what...can I do for you, my son?”

<sup>38</sup> Esau said to his father, “Is there only one blessing that you have, my father? Father! Bless me too!” Esau raised his voice and began to weep.

<sup>39</sup> His father Isaac then replied and said, “The fat places of the earth can still be your dwelling, and [you can still have] the dew of heaven. <sup>40</sup> But you shall live by your sword. You will have to serve your brother, but when your complaints mount up, you will throw his yoke off your neck.”

<sup>41</sup> Esau was furious at Jacob because of the blessing that his father had given him. He said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father will be here soon. I will then be able to kill my brother Jacob.”

<sup>42</sup> Her older son’s plans were reported to Rebecca. She sent word and summoned her younger son Jacob. “Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you,” she said. <sup>43</sup> “Now, my son, listen to me. Set out and flee to my brother Laban in Charan.

<sup>44</sup> Remain with him awhile until your brother’s anger has subsided.

<sup>45</sup> When your brother has calmed down from his rage against you, and has forgotten what you have done to him, I will send word and summon you home. But why should I lose you both on the same day?”

<sup>46</sup> Rebecca said to Isaac, “I am disgusted with life because of those Hittite women [that Esau had married]. If Jacob marries such a Hittite girl, from the daughters of this land, why should I go on living?”

## Chapter 28

<sup>1</sup> Isaac summoned Jacob and gave him a blessing and a charge. "Do not marry a Canaanite girl," he said. <sup>2</sup> "Set out and go to Padan Aram, to the house of your maternal grandfather Bethuel. Marry a daughter of your uncle Laban. <sup>3</sup> God Almighty will then bless you, make you fruitful, and increase your numbers. You will become an assembly of nations. <sup>4</sup> He will grant Abraham's blessing to you and your descendants, so that you will take over the land which God gave to Abraham, where you previously lived only as a foreigner."

<sup>5</sup> Isaac then sent Jacob on his way.

Isaac intended to bless Jacob all along

In this story Isaac gives three blessings. First, he blesses Jacob, though he thinks that it is Esau in front of him. (*Genesis* 27:28-29) The second blessing is after Jacob has left the tent and Esau comes in with the meal for his father. (*Genesis* 27:39-40) Both Isaac and Esau are upset that Jacob has obtained a blessing by deceit and Esau demands a blessing from his father, which is given. Afterwards, Esau announces that he will kill Jacob after Isaac dies. Rebecca goes to Isaac and tells him that she wishes Jacob to return to the home country of Babylon (where she had been born and where Isaac's father had been born) and for Jacob to find a wife from there. (Out of consideration for Isaac's feelings, she does not tell him of Esau's deadly intentions towards his brother.) Isaac asks for Jacob to come to him in order to give Jacob another blessing before he leaves. (*Genesis* 28:3-4) This will be the first time that Isaac has Jacob in front of him with Isaac knowing that it is Jacob in front of him.

As noted at the outset, this story poses serious problems. We must question what appears to be the attitude of the text towards the stealing of the blessings by Jacob. There seems to have a strictly formalistic conception of law in which a deception is sanctioned. It is difficult to believe that the deception by Jacob can affect who will receive Isaac's blessing. It does not seem right that a blessing obtained by Jacob through deceit should be upheld. This is especially true when one considers what is at stake. The blessing at issue is the right to be God's representative on earth. Who will bear God's banner? Can it really be that this moral right can be obtained by stealth?

Philo (First Century B.C.E and First Century C.E., Egyptian) tries to offer a justification for the deception, by commenting on the fact that (as noted in verse 15) Rebecca took Esau's best clothing and gave them to Jacob. He asks why Rebecca did this? Here is his answer:

The literal meaning is clear and conspicuous: it seemed that through the robe he who was not there was present. But as for the deeper meaning, the wicked man has another robe and many garments by which he conceals and covers himself, inasmuch as he cunningly contrives many matters of wrongdoing.

Philo often allegorizes biblical texts and he portrays the robe of Esau as symbolic of Esau's concealment of his wickedness, implying that Jacob and Rebecca had the right to do what they did.

Philo also deals with the quandary of how Jacob can be rewarded for an act of deceitfulness:

Now if he received [the blessing] through deceit, perhaps some may say that he is not praiseworthy; how, then, can [Isaac] also say "The blessing will remain his" [27:33] thereby affirming the blessing attained by deceit? But he seems to indicate by this statement that not every deceit is blameworthy. Thus it is that night-watchers are unable to seize and overcome robbers without deceit, and army commanders to defeat the enemy in war; but by ambushing them they seem to achieve their end. And those acts which are called stratagems have a similar principle and so do the contests of athletes for in these deceit and trickery are considered honorable, and those who by trickery overcome their adversaries are thought worthy of prizes and wreathes. So that no falsehood and blame attach to "with deceit" [27:35] but rather praise, as it is equivalent to "with art" for the virtuous man does nothing without art.

Philo has expressed a classical view of the story. Sometimes, for the good to triumph, deception must be used, the way a night-watchman overcomes robbers. In other words, the ends justify the means. Nonetheless, we are still left with our original questions. The blessing is Isaac's to give. It does not seem fit that the blessing can be obtained other than with the consent of the giver, namely, Isaac. If ownership to property cannot be obtained by stealth, how much more so should a blessing to be God's representative on earth which is obtained by deceit be void?

The answer is discernible after a close review of the three blessings that were given. The first blessing is given when Isaac believes he has Esau in front of him, although it is really Jacob. *The blessing that is given is a materialistic one:* "May God grant you the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, much grain and wine. Nations will serve you and governments will bow down to you." (*Genesis 27:28-29*) The second blessing is given by Isaac to Esau, with Isaac knowing that it is truly Esau in front of him and again the blessing is one of materialism: "The fat places of the earth can still be your dwelling and [you can still have] the dew of heaven." (The problem that Esau will face, however, is that he will "live by the sword and you [Esau] will have to serve your brother.") (*Genesis 27:39-40*) *Both blessings deal with wealth.*

It is the third blessing which reveals that Isaac truly understood the difference between his two sons and that Jacob is to be his spiritual heir. The scene opens after Esau has received his blessing, but he is furious that Jacob had sneaked in ahead of him to steal the blessings. (*Genesis 27:41*) Esau is furious and intends to kill Jacob (Verse 42). Rebecca learns of this and counsels Jacob to flee, while telling Isaac that Jacob wants to visit his Uncle Laban (Verses 43-46). While she does not tell her husband of Esau's murderous intentions, she tells him that Jacob is going to Mesopotamia to find a wife—not a Hittite, as Esau had married (Verse 46).

Knowing his son is heading for a long journey, Isaac summons Jacob to bless him. And in the opening of Chapter 28, for the first time, Jacob appears before Isaac with Isaac knowing that it is Jacob before him and Isaac's blessing is for him to "become an assembly of peoples. He [God] will grant Abraham's blessing to you and your descendants, so that you will take over the land which God gave to Abraham." (Genesis 28:3-4) Esau is furious and intends to kill Jacob (Verse 42). Rebecca learns of this and commands Jacob to flee, but before leaving she arranges for him to receive yet another blessing from his father.

Twice before Isaac had the opportunity to give blessings. The first time Isaac blessed Jacob thinking it was Esau; at that time Isaac only gave a materialistic blessing. The second blessing is given by Isaac to Esau, this time with Isaac knowing that it is Esau (for sure). Again, Isaac deals with the material aspects of life. It is only in the third encounter, when Isaac knows that he has Jacob before him, that the spiritual blessing, "Abraham's blessing," is given—the mantle of Abraham and of his special relationship with God. Jacob receives this blessing not because of any deception. It is the first blessing by Isaac of Jacob that involved deception and in it Isaac only refers to materialistic gains.

Remember that immediately before the second blessing by Isaac, Esau plead with his father, asking whether there was a blessing left over for him. Isaac comes up with a half-hearted formulation and promises Esau the "fat places of the earth," but the bad news is that he shall "live by the sword" (Verses 39 and 40). Yet there was a blessing remaining, the one Jacob will receive from Isaac ten verses later, Abraham's blessing. This, however, is not to go to Esau, but only to Jacob. All along it had been Isaac's intention to give this blessing to Jacob a little later.

### *Isaac's game plan*

It appears that the entire scene involving the three blessings plays itself out over a very brief period of time, as little as only one morning. Perhaps, before the deception by Jacob, Isaac's plan was to give Esau the materialistic blessing and a few days later to give Jacob the spiritual blessing. While Isaac was old, he did not believe that he was on his death bed for he tells Esau, "I am old and I have no idea when I will die." (Genesis 27:2) These are not the words of a man who feels deathly ill. Isaac presumes that he has some time left before his death so that he will later be able to bless Jacob also. However, events transpired so that, with Jacob leaving for Mesopotamia in order to find a wife, Jacob is forced to hurry up his game plan and to bless Jacob immediately.

It is not hard to imagine that Isaac's hope was to give Esau his blessing with a big fanfare, a feast preceding the blessing, and to permit Esau a period of time to enjoy the status conferred by this blessing. Thereafter, Isaac intended to give the more important blessing, the spiritual one, to Jacob. In order to preserve the relationship between the two brothers, it would not be surprising if Isaac intended to play down the importance of the spiritual blessing. After all, it is hard for a parent to tell one child that he or she is second to another. In order to

compensate for this hurt, Isaac is trying to make up for the slight by pumping up the importance of the blessing that is being given to Esau with the fanfare of the feast that Esau is to prepare.

As it turns out, after Jacob's deception, because Esau intends to harm Jacob, Rebecca tells Jacob to flee for his life and to find safety in Mesopotamia. However, before leaving, Rebecca (probably on the same day that Esau was blessed) tells Jacob to go into Isaac to receive his blessing and Isaac then gives Jacob the blessing of Abraham and charges him to marry a girl from the old country, from their own family, to "marry a daughter of your uncle Laban."  
(*Genesis 28:2*)

What was Rebecca's motive?

If it is correct, that all along Isaac had intended to give the blessing of Abraham to Jacob, then what was the dispute between Isaac and his wife, Rebecca? Why was Rebecca so intent on seeing to it that Jacob deceive his father in order to receive the blessing intended for Esau? It is clear that Rebecca is a prime motivator of Jacob, to the point of goading him into undertaking the deception. She goes so far (when Jacob hesitates to trick his father) as to take upon herself any punishment for Jacob's acts. (*Genesis 27:11-13*) Why was Rebecca so insistent on having her son deceive her husband?

There are two possibilities—either Rebecca knew what her husband intended or she did not know. The evidence of the text is clear that Isaac intended to and did give the blessing of Abraham to Jacob. Perhaps, Rebecca did not know this and wanted to make sure that the more worthy child received this blessing.

(Evidence for this approach is the fact that, excepting the end of the story of the blessings, not once do Rebecca and Isaac talk directly to one another (until *Genesis 27:46*.) But if that is the case, then *we must wonder why Rebecca believes that a spiritual blessing will be valid if obtained by stealth*. Additionally, most spouses, even when they disagree, know what the other one is thinking. This leads to the second possibility, that *Rebecca knew that Isaac intended to give the spiritual blessing to Jacob*. If this is so, then what was the disagreement between Rebecca and Isaac? What did Rebecca consider wrong in what Isaac was about to do?

Perhaps the dispute related to their conceptions of the world. As a father who loved both of his sons, Isaac was intending to split the material and spiritual blessings between his two children. Esau would receive the former and Jacob the latter. Rebecca disagreed. She felt that the material blessing had to go to the spiritual heir. Without the substance to sustain a family, Rebecca believed that it would be impossible to attain a high spiritual level. Isaac thought otherwise. Perhaps it was because he was the son of a wealthy man. (While Abraham had some struggles early on, by the time Isaac was born, Abraham had probably become wealthy. (See *Genesis 24:1*)) Isaac was second generation wealth and had even managed to augment the material successes of his father. The text makes this clear by telling us that Isaac "continued to prosper until he became very wealthy" to the point where he was envied by his neighbors. (*Genesis 26:12-14*) Isaac never knew material privation (or, at worst, barely knew privation) and, therefore, he underestimated the importance of physical

sustenance. Rebecca, as a youth, probably did not have as good a life. She first appears in the *Bible* after Abraham has sent his faithful servant to seek a bride for his son, Isaac. This is the scene when we first meet Rebecca, with her meeting a traveler by a well; unbeknownst to her, the stranger is Abraham's chief servant who has gone in search of a bride for his son Isaac:

## Chapter 24

<sup>17</sup> The servant ran toward her. "If you would, let me sip a little water from your jug," he said.

<sup>18</sup> "Drink, Sir," she replied. She quickly lowered her jug to her hand and gave him a drink. <sup>19</sup> When he had finished drinking, she said, "Let me draw water for your camels, so they can [also] drink their fill." <sup>20</sup> She quickly emptied her jug into the trough and ran to the well again to draw water. She drew water for all his camels.

In this episode, Rebecca gives water to drink to the servant of Abraham and then draws water for all of the camels in his caravan. These do not sound like the actions of a pampered young woman. We can be safe in assuming that she works in the fields, has calluses on her hands and does not take material wealth for granted. It is this background that animates her later belief that Jacob must have wealth to go with the spiritual blessing. She feels that Jacob will not fare well with only spiritual wealth. Rebecca, the former working girl, knows the importance (and, presumably, the limitations) of wealth. She wants Jacob, her favorite, to be well off not only spiritually, but materially. Isaac disagrees.

### *Isaac's trauma*

There is a reason why Isaac wishes to divide the blessings between his sons. While the ultimate trauma of Isaac's life had to have come when his father offered him up for a sacrifice (*Genesis 22:1-18*), the first shock Isaac suffers in his life is the expulsion of his half-brother, Ishmael. For many years Sarah and Abraham had been childless, so Sarah had given her handmaid, Hagar the Egyptian, to Abraham as a second wife. And then Hagar had a child, Ishmael. Years later, Sarah, too, finally gave birth (to Isaac) and Sarah resented Isaac's rival, the half-brother Ishmael. So Sarah expelled Ishmael and his mother Hagar from the camp of Abraham into the wilderness; only a miracle of God saved Ishmael and his mother. (*Genesis 21:9-21*) Perhaps Isaac empathized with his half-brother's fate and subconsciously feared a similar fate, one that would almost become a reality when Abraham offered him as a sacrifice to God. When giving his blessings, *Isaac did not want to choose between his sons, as had his father. Therefore, Isaac had initially intended to provide for both of his sons.* Rebecca (as Sarah before her) wants everything to go to one son, Jacob. Isaac, the harsh memories of the expulsion

of his half-brother in mind, resists the idea of entirely cutting off one child. Isaac's sympathy for his half-brother is not mere conjecture. The two were close enough so that they buried their father, Abraham, together. (*Genesis 25:9*) Furthermore, after the trauma of having his father binding him and offer his as a sacrifice, where does Isaac go? To The Vision of the Living Well—we know this because Isaac comes from there to meet his bride, Rebecca. (*Genesis 24:62*). And what is so special about that place? It is the place where Ishmael's mother, Hagar, had a vision from God. (*Genesis 16:14*) This is the way the *Bible* tell us that Isaac went to see his brother and the two commiserated and empathized with each other.

Abraham never blessed Ishmael; instead, God (through an angel) blessed Ishmael. (*Genesis 21:17-18*) Isaac, however, wishes (unlike his father) to bless both his children. But Isaac does not wish to entirely cut off one son and, in spite of Jacob's ruse, Isaac provides a blessing to Esau. Isaac (to his credit) is incapable of casting a son off without any blessing. In fact, both in the desire to include Esau in his blessings and in the perception that Jacob is his true spiritual heir, Isaac shows himself worthy of respect. Isaac, passive personage that he is, deserves more admiration than many are willing to give him. By the end of this episode, he emerges as more than merely the son of Abraham, but a patriarch worthy of his burdens.

It appears that Esau understood this motivation of Isaac—his counter-reaction to the expulsion of Ishmael. We know that Esau first married a local Canaanite and this vexed both his parents. (*Genesis 26:34-5*). After the episode of the blessing, with Jacob back in Charan seeking a wife, it is no accident that Esau (still seeking the favor of his father) marries a daughter of Isaac's half-brother, Ishmael. (*Genesis 28:9*) Esau, by this act is trying to unite the two branches of the family, even as Isaac tried to do this in his attempt to grant blessings to each of the twin brothers.

### *Opposites attract*

It should be noted that Rebecca's attraction to Jacob and Isaac's to Esau can be explained by the theory that opposites attract. The text clearly tells us that "Esau was a skilled trapper, a man of the field. Jacob was a scholarly man who remained in the tents. Isaac enjoyed eating Esau's game and favored him, but Rebecca favored Jacob." (*Genesis 25:27-28*)

As if to compensate for his failing eyesight and old age, Isaac identifies with the outdoorsman, Esau. Rebecca, having been exposed to the wily character of her deceptive brother Laban (who will later exploit Jacob, as demonstrated in the prior essay) is attracted to the scholarly Jacob. Ironically, Rebecca has more in common with her brother than she thinks and prompts a deception that would be worthy of her brother, Laban (whose trickery is described in the previous essay) and sets Jacob on a path of trickery.

### *Isaac confirms Jacob's blessing*

The story bears close examination at the point right after Jacob successfully carries off the ruse. When Esau comes in to give his father the meal which he has prepared, Isaac “was seized with a violent fit of trembling.” (*Genesis 27:33*) He now begins to worry whether Rebecca has been right all along. She had been arguing, we can conjecture, that as his eyesight had failed him so had his insight failed him; Rebecca contended that Jacob had to receive the material blessing to complement the spiritual blessing. Jacob has tried to snatch the former by deceit.

It is at this juncture that Isaac still has the right to take away the materialistic blessing he had given to Jacob, but he chooses not to do so. Isaac says, “The blessing will remain his [Jacob’s],” implying that Isaac could have changed his mind. (*Genesis 27:33*) He still cares for his oldest son and promises him the “fat of the earth,” but Isaac resigns himself to the fact that Esau will have to serve his younger brother. Isaac has been shocked into realizing that his wife has been right all along and that the spiritual blessing (which he has intended all along to give to Jacob) must be coupled with the materialistic blessing. More profoundly, Isaac trembles as he realizes that he cannot escape his father’s destiny. Abraham had failed and so has Isaac—neither will have all his children going forward in concert to do God’s will.

The prior sale of the birthright

The argument has been made by certain writers that Isaac changed his mind after Esau blurted out that Jacob had now deceived him twice. “First he took my birthright and now my blessing.” (*Genesis 27:36*) Esau is referring to an earlier episode when he had returned from the fields. Jacob was cooking a stew and Esau said to Jacob, “Give me some... for I am famished.” Jacob answered, “First sell me your birthright.” And Esau did so. (*Genesis 25:27-34*) The apologists for Jacob contend that this sale of the birthright by Esau to Jacob, regardless of the fact that Esau (as the verses tell us) was famished and therefore under duress, justified the later deception by Jacob of his father. But that answer is weak. Regardless of what the twins are willing to arrange between themselves, it is Isaac’s right to grant blessings to whom he chooses. It is not for the children to decide how the parent will act.

Also, it cannot be said that Esau’s prior sale of the birthright influenced Isaac’s decision to let Jacob’s blessing stand or justified Jacob’s actions. Isaac had already decided that Jacob “will remain blessed” (*Genesis 27:33*) and only three verses later does Esau mention the sale of the birthright. And, again, it was not for the brothers to trade the birthright between themselves. Isaac has the right to decide what blessings he will give to his children.

(And it should also be noted that Esau “rejected the birthright”, the right to a double share of inheritance—Under Jewish law, if there are five heirs, for example, the estate is divided into six equal shares and the eldest receives two shares; in the case of the two sons, Esau and Jacob, the division would be into three shares with Esau receiving two of them.—Esau rejects this material inheritance, possibly because he is the hunter, confident in his own prowess, certain that he can “make it on his own”. Esau’s cavalier attitude toward the birthright (in Hebrew, *b’chora*, see *Genesis 25:34*) is not reflected in his desire for

his father's blessing (in Hebrew, a very similar, but different word, *b'racha*, see *Genesis 27:5*). Indeed, one must admire a son who is more desirous of his father's praise than wealth.)

Further evidence that Isaac changed his mind

Other evidence that Isaac had changed his mind (and realized that Jacob must receive the material blessing) comes from the absence, in the first blessing (when Isaac blessed Jacob thinking he was Esau), of any reference to which brother shall serve which brother; there is only a generalized reference to the fact that "nations will serve you, government will bow down to you and you will be master over your brothers; your mother's children will prostrate themselves to you." (*Genesis 27:29*) The reference to "brothers" in the plural is to mankind in general and cannot mean that Esau (who Isaac thinks he is blessing) will rule specifically over Jacob because Esau had only one brother. (Similarly, in the same verse, the statement in the same verse, "your mother's children will bow to you," cannot specifically mean that Isaac's children will bow down to him as there is only one other child of his mother besides himself.)

Thus, in the first blessing, we are not explicitly told which brother will serve which brother. It is only in the second blessing (when Isaac blesses the real Esau) that an explicit pecking order is stated—"You [Esau] will have to serve [at times] your brother." (*Genesis 27:40*) It is only when Esau is before him (knowing that it is truly Esau), that Isaac states that Jacob will prevail over his brother, Esau, further confirming Isaac's prior blessing of Jacob. True, he trembled when he realized that Jacob had deceived him. (*Genesis 27:33*) Perhaps, he trembled because of the enmity between the brothers that Jacob's actions had to engender. Perhaps, Isaac trembled because he had been so easily deceived and Isaac understood how steeply his health had deteriorated. In any event, Isaac affirms that the blessing Jacob had received "will remain his." (*Genesis 27:33*) Isaac is resigned to the brothers not sharing a common destiny.

### *The ultimate answer*

Another basis for the dispute between Isaac and Rebecca can be understood after reviewing one additional text. This episode goes back to the very beginning of the Jacob and Esau story, one that began in Rebecca's womb:

### **Chapter 25**

<sup>19</sup> These are the chronicles of Isaac son of Abraham:

Abraham was Isaac's father. <sup>20</sup> When Isaac was 40 years old, he married Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel the Aramaean of Padam Aram and sister of Laban the Aramaean.

<sup>21</sup> His wife was sterile, and Isaac pleaded with God for her sake. God granted his plea, and Rebecca became pregnant. <sup>22</sup> But the children clashed inside her, and when this occurred, she asked, "Why is this happening to me?" She went to seek a message from God.

<sup>23</sup> God's word to her was, "Two nations are in your womb. Two governments will separate from inside you. The upper hand will go from one government to the other. The greater one will serve the younger."<sup>24</sup> When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb.<sup>25</sup> The first one came out reddish, as hairy as a fur coat. They named him Esau.<sup>26</sup> His brother then emerged, and his hand was grasping Esau's heel. [Isaac] named him Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when [Rebecca] gave birth to them.

<sup>27</sup> The boys grew up. Esau became a skilled trapper, a man of the field. Jacob was a scholarly man who remained with the tents.<sup>28</sup> Isaac enjoyed eating Esau's game and favored him, but Rebecca favored Jacob.

The text has foreshadowed the story. "The greater [or older] one will serve the younger" (Verse 23). The key to the dispute between Isaac and Rebecca is in the differing interpretations that each one of them had concerning the interpretation of God's words that the "greater one will serve the younger." Isaac believes that both of his children will together serve God's interests. Isaac and his half-brother, Ishmael, did not go forward towards a common destiny. Perhaps, it could not be because they did not share a common mother. Yet *it is Isaac's hope that Esau and Jacob (both born of Rebecca) will share in God's work. Isaac sees the need for a strong nation led by Esau, "a skilled trapper, a man of the field" (Verse 27). And this nation will be the ally of a spiritual nation, one led by Jacob, "a scholarly man" (Verse 27). Isaac hopes the brothers will go forward together, but the more important role is the spiritual one—that is the meaning of God's prophecy that "the greater one [the older one, Esau, the exemplar of power and materialism] will serve the younger [one, Jacob, the exemplar of study and spiritualism]."*

Rebecca understands these words differently. Presumably, she knew that Esau had spurned the birthright—either she had overheard the encounter (even as she would overhear Isaac requesting Esau to prepare a feast for him in order for Isaac to then bless Esau) or Jacob had told his mother what had happened. In any event, "Rebecca favored Jacob" (Verse 28). She took God's words literally, that Esau (the older) was to serve the younger one (Jacob). Rebecca does not believe that Esau and Jacob are to share a common destiny and she encourages Jacob to act deceitfully.

Isaac was the idealist hoping for the irreconcilable to be reconciled. Rebecca was the realist and her will determined the future that God had foreshadowed. (It should be noted that the prophecy given to Rebecca constitutes a perfect example of oracle language. The prediction foreshadows the plot line, but contains enough ambiguity to preserve suspense.)

*A feminist perspective*

There is a temptation, in this era of feminism, to turn Rebecca into a feminist heroine. For example, Professor Leon Kass wrote (*Commentary*, September 1991):

Isaac falls short... He prefers the wrong son... for a wrong reason; like his own father, he makes no provision for the marriage even for his favorite son, Esau, who, quite on his own, takes two Canaanite wives... Into the breach moves Rebecca. Thanks to her, Isaac is brought into a proper relation to his sons: thanks to her, Jacob is compelled to recognize the need for—and to obtain—the blessings of his father; thanks to her, fratricide is... averted... How does Rebecca do this? In the only way possible, not by force and not by confrontation, but by guile.

Yet it is difficult to view Rebecca as a perfect heroine. Her means are those of deception and she sets in motion a series of events that will torture Jacob until his old age. Her son will lead a life in which he will be deceived and (in turn) continue to deceive others. Additionally, Rebecca must be faulted for having had a superficial moral point of view. When confronted with the plot that his mother has proposed, for him to masquerade as Esau, Jacob replies, "But my brother Esau is hairy, I am smooth-skinned. Suppose my father touches me. He will realize that I am an imposter! I will gain a curse rather than a blessing!" (Verses 11 and 12) Rebecca responds by stating, "Let any curse be on me, my son." (Verse 13) Did Jacob really believe that he could be absolved in this manner? Philo answers this question as follows:

It is fitting indeed to admire the mother for the thoughtfulness of her goodwill, for she agrees to take upon herself the curse upon him, and to admire in the son his honoring of both his parents. For before he was drawn in opposite directions by his piety toward both, lest he seem to deceive his father and to desire what belonged to another; and as for his mother, lest he seem to disobey and disregard her when she addressed herself to him with a supplication. Wherefore he says very reverentially and worthy, not, "My father will rebuke me" but, "I will bring a curse upon myself; for even if he is silent and quiet out of beautiful love toward me, my conscience will nonetheless seize and reproach me as having done something deserving of a curse."

Philo sees a Jacob torn between conflicting duties to his parents and justifies Jacob's actions, but he offers no justification for Rebecca's actions. It seems as if Rebecca's conception of sin permits others to bear the blame for one's acts. Did Rebecca really believe that she could bear her son's sin? Perhaps she did not mean her words literally and they were only a form of bravado designed to induce Jacob to act. And while one may question what alternatives she had in dealing with her husband, it is clear that the masquerade molded Jacob's future into a series of events that no mother should wish upon her son.

*Summary*

In any event, Jacob's deception is successful not because he "stole" the spiritual and material blessings. Jacob received the spiritual blessing from Isaac, which had been Isaac's intentions all along. As to the materialistic blessing, Isaac realized that the ease with which he had been deceived was strong evidence that he did not really know what was going on in his own household anymore. He no longer trusted his own judgments and, by refusing to renege on the blessing to Jacob (and by actually affirming his mistake by emphasizing that Esau will serve Jacob), Isaac gave in to Rebecca. He realized that the brothers could never (after Jacob's deceitful actions) be eternal allies. The spiritual and material blessings, therefore, could not be separated and both had to go to Jacob. Isaac's destiny paralleled that of his father's—Abraham had to exclude one son and so must Isaac.

This is not to say that Jacob was correct in what he did. Jacob intended to and did successfully deceive his father and for this he suffered the deceptions of others all the rest of his days. While the text tells us that Abraham died at an "old age and contented" (*Genesis 25:8*) and that Isaac died "in a ripe old age" (*Genesis 35:29*), Jacob describes his years as having been "few and hard" (*Genesis 47:9*). Jacob paid the price for his actions.

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. When Rebecca said, "Let any curse be on me," that any punishment for Jacob's sin would fall on her, did Rebecca really believe that she could absolve her son in this manner? And does Jacob really believe that he will be absolved of his guilt?

Perhaps, Rebecca and Jacob share a formalistic view of blessings and curses, that a blessing (once given) cannot be retracted and that one may take another's curse upon one's head. Some hold that even Isaac held this belief and interpret the statement by Isaac to Esau (immediately after Jacob has stolen the first blessing)—"The blessing will remain his"—as having been stated by Isaac as a matter of fact, a statement said with resignation. It is as if Isaac were saying, "There is nothing I can do about the stolen blessing."

This author does not attribute such a formalistic view to Isaac, but is open to the possibility that Rebecca and Jacob subscribed to it. Possibly, Mesopotamians (such as Rebecca) believed in the formalistic nature of blessings and curses and Jacob (due to the influence of his mother) shared this belief. By contrast, Isaac, who had never lived in Mesopotamia, held a differing view. Alternatively, Rebecca's statement can be viewed as hyperbole and not as a literal offer to suffer any curse Isaac might utter.

2. Can support for the approach that Isaac intended Esau to share in the destiny of the Jewish people be found in *Genesis Rabah* 70,16, as mentioned by Rashi (Twelfth Century, French) in his commentary on *Genesis 29:17*? That verse describes Leah's eyes as "tender" and this is the relevant excerpt: [Her eyes were tender] because she thought that she would fall to the lot of Esau and so she cried, for everyone said, Rebecca has two sons and Laban two

daughters, the older [son will marry] the older [daughter] and the younger son [will marry] the younger daughter.

It appears that Leah is destined to give birth to six of the progenitors of the twelve tribes, according to the authors of *Genesis Rabah*. The issue is whether Esau or Jacob is to be her husband and what is to be Esau's role in the destiny of the Hebrews. Do you agree?