

## **Did Jacob steal the blessing?** Exegesis on Gen 27 - 28

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**Summary** It looks like there is consensus among the Old Testament commentators that Jacob was successful in his attempt to steal the blessing of his father and that with it he stole also the blessing given by Yahweh to Abraham. The thesis of this article is that Jacob may have been successful in stealing the right of the firstborn according to the contemporary law, but the blessing announced over him by Isaac in Gen 27:27-29 was so different from what Yahweh promised to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3 that it cannot be considered “stolen”. The “real thing” was given to him in Gen 28:3-5.

It seems that the overwhelming opinion amongst exegetes is that, with the help of his mother Rebekah, Jacob managed to steal the blessing, which his father Isaac had planned to give to his firstborn twin son – his brother Esau (Gen 27:27-29). According to the answer the mother received from the Lord, to her question while she was still pregnant, (Gen 25:23) the “older should serve the younger”, and Rebekah understood it to mean that the firstborn twin, Esau, did not ought to receive the blessing of the firstborn and so she did everything possible to make sure that her favourite, Jacob, got what was his by rights. This led to the deception of the twenty seventh chapter where Isaac assuming that he is giving Esau the blessing, in reality pronounces the fathers’ blessing on Jacob.

The event of the stolen blessing is in no way framed to make the Israelite patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob, look ideal. On the contrary, as VON RAD comments, “the funny and comical side of things is stressed here.”<sup>1</sup> There arises here a very compelling tension between the seriousness of Gods’ intention with the descendants of the patriarchs, the doubtful characters of two rival brothers, the tragic dispute between the Lord and Isaac and the strife of Isaac and Rebekah. On Esau’s side is his father Isaac, and on Jacob’s side is his mother Rebekah, but from the readers’ view neither of them should receive the Lords’ blessing. The first scorns the birthright (Gen 25:32 “What good is the birthright to me?”) and because of the birthright, the second uses his brother’s hunger and later deceives him. “

Jacob receives the blessing because of the Lord’s promise to Abraham being valid. To put it in a new testament way, “not by works but by him who calls” (Rom 9:12). In spite of the fact that the blessing is not supposed to be a prize for Jacob’s good deeds, nor approval of his noble character, the question remains whether the way in which his father gave it to him was the realization of Gods’ will according to *hominum confusione et Dei providentia*,<sup>2</sup> or whether it was more like a dead end which showed where the dispute of the patriarchs with God is leading.

### **Theft of the blessing was successful**

In spite of the fact that in the commentaries doubts appear about Isaacs’ blessing which he gave to Jacob when he was dressed up as Esau, most of them agree on the opinion that Rebekahs’ dreamed of theft of the blessing was successful.

On the side which confirms the failure of the theft we can quote RAŠI who comments on Isaac’s words, “and he will be blessed” like this: “because of this, we cannot yet say that if Jacob had not deceived his father he would not have received the blessing. This is why he blessed him with the

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<sup>1</sup> VON RAD, G. Genesis p. 265

<sup>2</sup> This is the slogan of the Swiss federation, and reads in full: *Hominum confusione et Dei providentia Helvetia regitur*

balance of ( )”<sup>3</sup> It seems that RAŠI is implying here that the blessing pronounced for Esau was pronounced in such a way that “some would be left for Jacob”. On the contrary his comments on verse 35 are that he explains the term “lest” ( ) as “wisdom” ( ), thus confirming the validity of the realized transaction. On one side then, RAŠI doubts the significance of Jacobs’ theft ( if he had not stolen it he would still have been blessed), but on the other side he does not doubt the content of the stolen blessing in fact he calls its theft “wisdom”.

AUGUSTINUS remarks that this blessing cannot lose its prophetic significance,<sup>4</sup> he even claims that it is the preaching of Christ (praedicatio est Christi), to all nations.<sup>5</sup> He identifies Christ with the heavenly dew which is spoken of in Isaacs’ blessing the fruitfulness of the earth according to AUGUSTINUS is the gathering of the nations and grain with wine means the body and blood of Christ in the sacraments. AUGUSTINUS points out that Isaac is horrified when he realizes that he has blessed the one he did not want to, but he does not complain that he has been deceived. According to AUGUSTINUS then Jacob was successful in receiving the blessing by deception.

CALVIN similarly sees the fulfillment of Gods’ promise in Isaacs’ blessing. Isaac, in the role of father, is the instrument of the Holy Spirit, with which Gods’ will is fulfilled: “these are not simply wishes like those a father is used to addressing to his children, but there is contained in them the promises of God; because Isaac is Gods’ authorised interpreter and instrument used by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> CALVIN claims literally that this blessing was valid and effective and repeating it in ch 28:3 was only to support Jacobs’ faith. CALVIN therefore adds the full weight of God’ s promise to the blessing as it was pronounced in 27:27-29.

Although WESLEY, in his Notes on the Old Testament, observes that Isaac dedicates two great promises of Abraham to Jacob in ch 28 he in no way doubts the deceptive way the blessing was acquired. Isaac confirms the blessing which he gave to Jacob and “either he recalled Gods’ statement, or because he was filled, more than usual, with the Holy Spirit, he was aware when he gave Jacob the blessing that God said Amen to it.”<sup>7</sup> From this note it is evident that in spite of Isaacs’ disagreement with the Lord he is the agent of his blessing.

KEIL, in a well known commentary from the 19<sup>th</sup> century says that Isaacs’ blessing “does not reach the full height of Gods’ benefits of salvation ”,<sup>8</sup> and that Jacob does not receive the blessing until 28:3-4. In spite of this we can already see two elements of Abrahams’ blessing in chapter twenty seven: here, according to him, *in abundance*, includes possession of the land and, *in rule over the nations*, a blessing of descendants. KEIL sees the problem as being mainly in the third part of the blessing which instead of blessing the nations starts by cursing those who curse him. It seems from KEIL’ s interpretation that Jacob did steal a part of Abrahams’ blessing after all, although it was not until the twenty-eighth chapter that he got it in full.

The Czech ecumenical translation with commentary only sees the difference in the format of Isaacs’ blessing. “Dew, together with other gifts spoken of, points to the promised land”<sup>9</sup> and freedom and Gods’ protection also belong to the blessing. Jacob receives all of this in chapter 27.

VON RAD evaluates Isaac’ s blessing in chapter 27 as “...strangely independent from otherwise quite uniformly formulated patriarchal promises (12:1-3; 13:14-16; 22:17; 26:24; 28:3f, 13-15etc.)”.<sup>10</sup> In accordance with the critical division of the text into its sources, VON RAD

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<sup>3</sup> DESSAUER, J Der Pentateuch nebst dem Raschi-Commentare, p.219

<sup>4</sup> „nullo modo vacare arbitramur a significatione prophetica“ (AUGUSTINUS, Questionum in heptateuchum libri septem, I/79)

<sup>5</sup> AUGUSTINUS De Civitate Dei XVI/37

<sup>6</sup> CALVIN Genesis, 27:29.

<sup>7</sup> WESLEY, J John Wesley's Notes on the Old Testament, 27:27

<sup>8</sup> KEIL, C F – DELITZSCH, F. Commentary on the Old Testament

<sup>9</sup> Genesis p.168

<sup>10</sup> VON RAD, G. Genesis p. 278

does not consider the blessing in chapter 28:3-4 to be a continuation of chapter 27. He also claims that “the speaker is convinced, that in the human battle to gain a blessing from a dying man, Gods’ plans are, in the end, realised”.<sup>11</sup> Jacob, therefore, stole the blessing.

Contemporary commentator V.P.HAMILTON (NICOT 1995) hardly mentions the value of the stolen blessing, but from the way in which he interprets it, it would seem that doubts about its content do not come into consideration. He says of the blessing in chapter 28 that “Isaac deserves respect because the blessing which he gives him is Abrahams’. It is the only time he mentions his father...Isaac recognises his own role as a link in the chain, the means by which to carry it forward”.<sup>12</sup> The author does not compare the blessing spoken in the twenty eighth chapter with the one in the twenty seventh, but states that, “...the son got it and deceived him”.<sup>13</sup>

One of our own commentators, FAZEKAŠ says on the one side that “Rebekah and Isaac achieved what they wanted by their own lie...God fulfilled his promise through this human confusion,”<sup>14</sup> but on the other side he calls the blessing in 28:3-4 “Gods’ blessing” as opposed to the “fathers’ blessing” in chapter 27.<sup>15</sup> In the background of the first, (“fathers’ “), blessing, nature is blessed by God, whereas in the second, (“Gods’ “), the Lord is the centre. This discernment is a very close claim that Jacob did not steal the blessing, he only made sure of his father’s confirmation of the right of the firstborn. It seems that with this he is in conflict with the above quoted claim that here God fulfilled his promise.

The opinion of exegetes, who state that Jacob was successful in stealing the blessing, are, as it were, confirmed by Isaacs’ words in 27:33 “and he will be blessed” ( ). We need to ask though, to what degree the words of a surprised patriarch are a reliable interpretation of what happened and what Jacob really desired. If it was about Jacob wanting the right of the firstborn confirmed by his fathers’ last blessing, we need to say that he was successful. If, in Chapter 27, Isaac understood his blessing to place the firstborn within in the frame of his own descendants, we need to state the same. The problem is that this understanding of the blessing, (as the legal emplacement of precedence), is not in agreement with the way the Old and New testaments see the blessing from the point of view of the history of salvation. Abraham’s blessing, which meant salvation for mankind, could not be stolen.

The theft of the blessing is seemingly confirmed in the New testament also when it speaks of how Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau *in faith*. This assertion is, of course, rather brief for us to be able to apply it to the act of Jacobs’ deception alone. Beneath the words “he blessed in faith” ( ) it is necessary to include the blessing from 28:3-4, especially since we realise that Isaac’s dispute with the Lord in the twenty seventh chapter of Genesis can hardly be called a sign of his faith. The same can be said of Heb 12:17 ( ). Even though some of the commentators see Esau’s repentance here, the logical interpretation is that it is about a change of mind in his father: “(Esau)...was refused, because he did not achieve a change of mind (in his father)”. Isaac imagined that he was blessing Esau. When he realised that it was a trick he was terribly upset ( )<sup>16</sup> and it seems that he immediately changed his opinion in favour of Jacob. The fact that it did not suit Esau, is not proof that his blessing pronounced over Jacob was all right as regards God’s promise, but it was about the way it was given up and the agreement with God’s original

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<sup>11</sup> VON RAD, G. Genesis p.280

<sup>12</sup> HAMILTON V.P. The Book of Genesis 18 – 50, p.235

<sup>13</sup> Tamže, p.234

<sup>14</sup> FAZEKAŠ, L. Ludski ľudia, p.107

<sup>15</sup> Tamže, p.118

<sup>16</sup> The interpretation of Isaac’s reaction is, in a large sense, an act of psychological exegesis which is always very problematic. Modern commentators see here the „angry disturbance“ (HAMILTON V.P. The Book of Genesis 18–50, p.223.) VON RAD claims though that it is about a „shock described using such a superlative as is hardly heard in the narrative from Genesis (VON RAD, G. Genesis, p.278.)

aim. Isaac claims that the father's blessing is final and from this finality it is not possible to derive its abrahamic content. Esau here, no doubt, loses his birthright, which he scorned before, but Jacob still does not get what, according to the Lord's decision, should be his, and that is the blessing of Abraham.

### **The problem of "the stolen blessing"**

This complicated question would not be so important if there were not several weighty exegetical, theological and ethical problems linked in with it.

First, it is necessary to introduce the problem of exegeses: is it possible to interpret 27:27-29 as one of the expressed patriarchal blessings spoken for the first time in 12:1-3?

Further problems are theological: the blessing is in the hands of man – Jacob simply must do something so that God's blessing will not miss its mark! Isaac is in control of the blessing and can give it to whoever he pleases. Can the Lord help this situation without man?

Isaac is in dispute with God. He favoured the viable Esau, while God's oracle, which his wife received, prefers the homely Jacob. Maybe he thought that it was just a woman's mistake, whatever, he dared to go against God's decision. How is it possible that in this state he passed on God's blessing? Is it possible to believe and not obey?

What is the character of the blessing? Isaac was thinking about Esau – is it possible then that he could bless Jacob? Is God's blessing of a physical nature that it could be independently transferred to his intentions.

I guess that most of all, the ethical problem of lying because of God's blessing steps to the forefront. Even though it is clear from the whole testimony of the bible that God's chosen and blessed ones never follow human merit, it is also clear from the smallest point in the bible that sin and God's blessing eliminate each other and cannot exist together. In the situation where Jacob even lied about the fact that "the Lord, your God gave me success (finding an animal)" could he be the recipient of God's blessing?

This problem is closely linked with the psychology of faith: is it possible to desire the true blessing of God and lie because of it?

### **The theft of the blessing was not successful**

These problems do not arise if Jacob did not steal the blessing. To support this claim it is possible in the first place to show the comparisons between the patriarchal blessing of Gen 12:1-3, the "stolen blessing" in Gen 27:27-29, and the "abrahamic blessing" in Gen 28:3-4.

Looking at the comparisons, first of all (1) the motive steps forward. At the beginning of the "stolen blessing" (27:27-29) is Isaac's relationship towards Esau who, "smells like a field that has been blessed by the Lord". Indeed the name of the God of the patriarchs is mentioned but the central point is clearly Esau and the smell of the field. (2) The inheritance of the land is not mentioned, as if it was already certain, or it did not matter about *where* the blessing took place.

Instead there is a list of signs of fruitfulness: dew, rich earth, grain and new wine.<sup>17</sup> (3) Descendants also seem to be obvious. This is about his superiority over others – nations are to serve him and he is to be lord over the other children of his mother who will bow down to him ( directed against Jacob). Superiority here is taken to mean ruling where as in the abrahamic blessing the greatness of his name is linked with the essential blessing of others ( ). Abraham is not only *blessed* but he is a *blessing* and in this is his greatness. Esau (“Jacob”) does not get anything like this, his greatness is in his ruling over others. (3) This “stolen blessing” draws closest to the abrahamic one in its images used at the end where Isaac introduces his own version of the relationship between cursing and blessing in relation to Esau. The significant difference can be seen in that Abraham being a blessing to others is not dependent on whether or not he is being blessed. The Lord does say though in 12:3 “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.” ( ) but even here the sympathy vote is not displayed towards him as a condition sine qua non. Tying it in with the second verse, (“he will be blessed”), it is about the scale of God’s blessing on the basis of sympathy towards Abraham and a warning to those who would curse him. Different to this, Esau is supposed to be protected by the curse so that no one will curse him and his blessing for others is totally dependent on their sympathy towards him – “(may) those who bless you be blessed” ( ) In the abrahamic blessing the deciding factor is God whereas in Isaac’s blessing intended for Esau the deciding factor is the attitude towards Esau. To summarize we could say that Esau should be a wealthy lord who is a blessing for others only if they first bless him whereas Abraham is a blessing independent of whether people bless him or not although he is also protected from their curses by the terror of the Lord.

In comparing Gen 12:3 with 28:3-4 they look different. (1) The motive here is Abraham’s blessing which is mentioned twice. It is as if Isaac was not entirely sure of himself, he does not pronounce his own blessing but uses the blessing his father received from the Lord. (2) Jacob is supposed to become “the society of nations” ( ) but nothing is said about them ruling over others, which was the central point with Esau. This agrees very well with the basic motive for life of the patriarchs which was always about plain survival, (barrenness, physical and religious danger), and not about superiority over other nations. It is about expanding on the words of the blessing in Gen 12:2 where the Lord says “I will make you a great nation”. (3) Similarly in the question of inheriting the land the sound of a fight can be heard. Isaac stresses that “Jacob and his descendants should have it” ( ). This concept does not only mean *to inherit according to inheritance law* (Gen 15:3-4), but also *to own* (Gen 15:8), *to suffer want* (Gen 45:11), or *to expropriate* (Gen 24:60). While the blessing meant abundance for Esau, for Jacob it meant victory in the fight for the land which had been promised to Abraham.

We can also see from Esau’s reaction that Jacob has been given the true blessing now. Along with this blessing, (as opposed to the stolen blessing), comes the prohibition to take a wife from the daughters of Canaan, and in connection with this is the sending of Jacob to Padan Aram . Isaac uses this to tie in with his own “wooing” and returns to an exclusive faith in Yahweh, which he had blessed before and Esau broke away from.

The blessing from 28:3-4 is again repeated in 28:13-15 where the Lord speaks to Jacob in a dream. These words contain again three elements from ch 12: (1) land, (2) descendants and (3) a blessing for other nations. Not a word about a curse, just the promise of protection which clearly compensates it.

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<sup>17</sup> This wording is so similar to the ugarit text that one commentator does not see here grain and wine but the gods Dagan and Tirosh.

### **Suggestion for an answer**

According to the above analysis of the patriarchal blessings it would seem to me to be a convincing conclusion to say that Jacob did not steal the blessing. According to the habitual rights of those times he did steal the birthright which had so little in common with the Lord's promise to bless Abraham's descendants that Esau could easily have been given it. Rebekah and Jacob did not have to make such an effort, because by stealing this blessing Jacob did not receive anything from the Lord, he only gained the true standing of the firstborn in the family law of that time.

Jacob's effort to steal the blessing was a sign of his desire for the right things whereas Esau despised his birthright. The event was a vigorous punishment of Isaac's foolishness and Esau's flippancy, but it had nothing to do with the passing on of Abraham's blessing.