Genesis 27: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Genesis chapter 27 Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau.

So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, I heard your father speak to your brother Esau. Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I may eat it and bless you before the Lord before I die.
Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I command you. Go to the flock and bring me two good young goats, so that I may prepare from them delicious food for your father, such as he loves.
And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies. But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man.
Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse upon myself, and not a blessing. His mother said to him, Let your curse be on me, my son.
[1:30] Only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me. So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious foods such as his father loved.

Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau, her older son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob, her younger son. And the skins of the young goat she put on his hands, and on the smooth part of his neck.
And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob. So he went into his father and said, My father. And he said, Here I am.
Who are you, my son? Jacob said to his father, I am Esau, your firstborn. I have done as you have told me. Now sit up and eat of my game, so that your soul may bless me.
But Isaac said to his son, How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son? He answered, Because the Lord your God granted me success. Then Isaac said to Jacob, Please come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not.
[2:36] So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him and said, The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau. And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy, like his brother Esau's hands.

So he blessed him. He said, Are you really my son Esau? He answered, I am. Then he said, Bring it near to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you.
So he brought it near to him, and he ate. And he brought him wine, and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, Come near and kiss me, my son. So he came near and kissed him.
And Isaac smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him and said, See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed. May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine.
Let people serve you and nations bow down to you. Be Lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you.
[3:41] As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, Esau his brother came in from his hunting. He also prepared delicious food and brought it to his father.

And he said to his father, Let my father arise and eat of his son's game that you may bless me. His father Isaac said to him, Who are you? He answered, I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.
Then Isaac trembled very violently and said, Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me? And I ate it all before you came and I had blessed him. Yes, and he shall be blessed.
As soon as Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry and said to his father, Bless me, even me also, oh my father.

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But he said, Your brother came deceitfully and he has taken away your blessing. Esau said, Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times.
[4:41] He took away my birthright and behold, now he has taken away my blessing. Then he said, Have you not reserved a blessing for me? Isaac answered and said to Esau, Behold, I have made him lord over you and all his brothers I have given to him for servants and with grain and wine I have sustained him.

What then can I do for you, my son? Esau said to his father, Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, oh my father.
And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. Then Isaac his father answered and said to him, Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be and away from the dew of heaven on a high.
By your sword you shall live and you shall serve your brother. But when you grow restless you shall break his yoke from your neck. Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him.
And Esau said to himself, The days of mourning for my father are approaching. Then I will kill my brother Jacob. But the words of Esau, her oldest son, were told to Rebekah.
[5:50] So she sent and called Jacob her younger son and said to him, Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice.

Arise, flee to Laban, my brother in Haran and stay with him for a while until your brother's fury turns away. Until your brother's anger turns away from you and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will send and bring you from there. Why should I be bereft of you both in one day? Then Rebekah said to Isaac, I loathe my life because of the Hittite women.
If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me? Genesis chapter 27 is doubtless one of the most important passages in the Old Testament.
It's a parting of the ways. The legacy of Abraham and Isaac is now going to pass through Jacob rather than Esau. The destiny of the promises given to Abraham hang upon the outcome of the events of this chapter.
[6:54] Will it be through Edom that things are fulfilled or will it be through the descendants of Jacob? Discerning the meaning of the events of this chapter is not entirely easy.

Many people have different theories about who are the good characters, who are the bad characters. Do we side with Jacob or should we side with Esau as the wronged brother and Isaac as the deceived father?
It's not entirely clear. When we're trying to answer such questions, it's extremely important that we pay attention to the wider narrative that surrounds it. There are certain clues to the meaning of this narrative that can be found later on and also beforehand.
Another thing we need to bear in mind is that characters are not necessarily good or bad. We've very often been taught to read these passages determining whether someone is good and faithful or unfaithful and wicked.
We are looking for a black or white reading of the text and its characters. But yet often the characters are in full colour and it's not entirely clear where they stand.
[7:59] They represent different traits or sometimes they're good and sometimes they're acting in ways that are flawed or lacking discernment. Sometimes they're lacking faith, acting in a wicked way.

But these are three-dimensional people and it's dangerous to read them in a simplistic black or white fashion. Another thing to notice is that certain characters have particular traits associated with them and those traits can play in different ways in different contexts.
Sometimes those traits will play out in a very positive way and sometimes in a not so positive way. For instance, the character of David plays out both positive and negative aspects of Jacob's traits. He has that association and that association has a certain ambivalence to it. There are ways in which it can be a positive thing but there's also ways in which it can be a negative thing.
One further thing to notice before we look at the passage more directly is that the story of Genesis is a single story, particularly the story of Abraham and his descendants. We can very easily read the story as if it were just one event after another, detached stories that are strung together and we're just supposed to look in each one for messages about faith or unbelief.

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[9:16] But as we read through it carefully, we'll notice that specific events cast shadows over what happens later. We can think about the story of Hagar. The story of Hagar is still playing out in the story of Jacob and Joseph, his son.

Hagar's story does not end in chapter 21 but continues all the way through to chapter 37 and 39 as her story is played out in different ways in the story of Joseph.
It's important then to pay attention to the consequences of events, the way that they play out in the later narrative if we are to discern something of their meaning. With this particular story, there are various events that happen later in Jacob's life that either resemble or are consequences of what happens here.
A few examples. First, there is the confusion of the older and the younger in the case of Leah and Rachel. That confusion hangs over the rest of the story that follows with the rivalry between the two sides of Jacob's family.
But that mixing up of the firstborn and the younger is the same sort of thing as we're seeing with Esau and Jacob in this passage. A further example is found in Genesis chapter 37 when Jacob himself is deceived concerning the death of his son Joseph.
[10:37] And what is used to deceive him is a goat and a coat. Just as Esau's coat and a goat are used to disguise Jacob to Isaac, his father, so the brothers, his sons, use a goat and its blood upon a coat to deceive their father.

So there's a similar theme playing out there. You can also think at the very end of Jacob's life, he mixes up the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, blessing the older second and the younger first.
So in some ways there's a reiteration of the order of the blessing. We'll also see further connections in chapter 32 and 33, wrestling with the angel and the things that happen after that.
So all of these events help to comment and to reflect upon the meaning of the events here. We ought not read this passage by itself, but must connect it with this broader scope of the narrative and what's taking place.
Let's notice some further connections. You can think about the importance of two goats and those two goats may connect with something that we've already seen.
[11:52] In the stories of Ishmael and Isaac in chapters 21 and 22, Ishmael is sent out into the wilderness by the hand of Hagar and Isaac is sent up to the mountain to be offered on the temple mount.

And this may be playing out the pattern of the day of atonement. We may see a similar pattern here. Why are there two goats? We know a ritual in which there are two goats. We can see a similar thing later on in the story of Joseph and Judah where there are goats in both cases.
There's one goat offered to the father. That's the goat associated with the blood of Joseph. And then there's another goat that's sent into the wilderness by the hand of Hira the Adolamite.
So again, we're seeing interesting connections. Might be helpful to begin by taking stock of the characters as they stand prior to the events of this chapter. First of all, we see Isaac who has been offered up by his father Abraham.
He favours the oldest of the two twins, Esau, on account of his hunting prowess. Rebecca, on the other hand, has received a prophecy concerning the twins saying that the older would serve the younger and she favours Jacob.
[13:04] Esau has taken two Canaanite wives, which has been a cause of grief to his parents, and he's despised his birthright. On the other hand, Jacob, the younger twin, has received an unflattering name, doesn't really seem to have much going for him, and has earlier on tricked Esau out of his birthright.

And at this point, we see Isaac about to die, or thinking he's about to die. He's old, his eyes are dim, he's lacking perception, both physically and spiritually.
He favours his older son, in many ways, because of his older son's aptitude. But yet, when we think about the older son, he's associated with the field. He's associated with hunting.
We've already seen characters who are associated with hunting. We can think particularly of Nimrod. We can think back further, who's associated with the field? It's the character of Cain.
And the character associated with tents is the character associated with keeping livestock, with keeping sheep, and that's Abel. This opposition between the two brothers is similar to a Cain-Abel opposition.

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[14:11] And Cain, that character, is supported by the father, whereas the Abel character is supported by the mother. Why might this be the case? If you think about it, Isaac wants someone to bring forward his legacy, and in many ways, Esau seems the most apt to do so.

He's not a faithful son in certain respects. He's taken these Canaanite wives. But yet, on the other hand, he seems to be someone who has energy and vigor and virility to him.
He's someone who has the sort of force of personality and will to take forward the covenant.
Whereas Jacob seems very weak. Throughout this chapter, Jacob does hardly anything.
He's pushed into everything by his mother. His mother takes the initiative for him in sorting out the plan. She tells him what to do. She prepares the goats for him. And she dresses him.
And she prepares all the other food. And then she pushes him into the situation. In this way, we see that Rebecca's really the one that's taking the initiative. Again, she's the one who's overhearing this conversation in the first place.
[15:17] The conversation between Isaac and Esau. And she's trying to act, recognising the significance of what's taking place. Isaac is about to put everything into Esau's hand.

Esau is the one that seems the most strong and virile and vigorous, the sort of person that you want to take these things forward. But yet he's not faithful. And she thinks there is this other son, this son who should be blessed, this son that shouldn't be ignored.
And as we read through the passage, we'll see that the blessing that is actually given is one that excludes the other son in many ways. It leaves nothing for the other son. And it seems as if Isaac is going to give everything and exclude Jacob from the blessing at all.
And so she wants to take the initiative. She wants to get Jacob to push himself forward and make a case for himself, to go before his father, to bring some food and to make a case for himself, to present himself as a son worth blessing.
Now, is she expecting that Jacob will deceive his father at this point? I don't think so. What's presented at this point is not a plan of deception in the initial stage.
[16:29] What's presented is the possibility that he can go before his father and present a case for himself, bring food before his father and present himself as a son that is also worth blessing.

Yet Jacob has qualms. He knows that unlike his brother, he's not a hairy man. He's not a man of action. He's not a doer. He's not a hunter. He's not a man of the field. And his father will recognise this.
He will see through his presentation. He will see that he's not the man his brother is. Why should he get a blessing? Indeed, bringing himself to mind at that point might lead his father to curse him rather than bless him.
And so his mother tries to make things even easier for him. She says, If you are cursed, let that curse be on me rather than upon you. And then she goes even further to give Jacob even more confidence.
She dresses him in Esau's clothes. See, you can be a man like Esau. Put on his garments. As you wear his garments, you can be like him. And then she goes further still and puts skins of goats upon his hands and the smooth part of his neck.
[17:34] See, he's a hairy man. Just put these things on and you'll be a hairy man too. Don't worry about it. You can go before your father. And so he goes into his father and presents himself.

My father. And the father's response is, Here I am. Who are you, my son? The father recognises that there's something wrong, that this isn't quite what he expected.
It doesn't actually sound like Esau. And Jacob then makes the faithful statement, I am Esau, your firstborn. He's not going to present himself as Jacob. He's going to hide behind Esau and this disguise that he's put on.
And he brings in the food, not as Jacob, but as Esau. Rather than making a case for himself, as his mother had suggested, he ends up to avoid judgment by his father pretending to be his brother.
Now, going back, it's important to remember that when this plan was first suggested, there was no mention of disguise. There was no mention of pretending to be Esau. There was just the matter of making a case for himself and bringing food to his father so that he might be blessed.
[18:42] And as we've gone through this, we've seen that it's Jacob's qualms that lead him to be dressed up. And those are primarily for his own confidence to present him as someone, in his own eyes, someone who could be like his brother Esau.

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And then he goes in before his father and then he pretends to be his brother and deceives him. He's brought near by his father and then he's felt, but it seems as if his father is still not completely convinced.
He's still saying, are you really my son Esau? After he's blessed him, he does not recognize him. His hands are hairy like his brother Esau's hands, but his voice is Jacob's.
There we see the two traits that the brothers are associated with. Esau is a man of his hands, a man of action, a man of skill, whereas Jacob is a man of the voice, a man who's a skilled deceiver earlier on, someone who's able to use his voice to achieve things.
But now we have the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau and the father isn't able to discern them. There's a confusion between the two and in that confusion, he blesses Jacob.
[19:50] The interesting thing here is that it's not the case that Jacob says, oh, it's Esau and then blesses him. Rather, he's just not recognizing him.

And even after he's blessed, he's asking, are you really my son Esau? In some respects, it seems as if whatever Isaac wants to ascertain about the identity of this person has been ascertained even without knowing that person's identity.
He knows it is his son, one of his sons, and he knows that the character has the hands of Esau and the food of Esau. And so whoever this character is, even though he might sound like Jacob, he's a fitting recipient of the blessing.
And so he smells his son and blesses him. And the blessing that he gives him at this point is an important one, as we'll see later on in the story. It's worth remembering details, such as, let people serve you and nations bow down to you, be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you.
That detail becomes important later on. After he has finished blessing Jacob and Jacob has left his presence, Esau comes in. He's prepared food too.
[20:58] He's brought it to his father and his father is shocked. Again, the question, who are you? I am your son, your firstborn, Esau. Isaac is clearly shocked at this point.

He trembles very violently and asks the identity of the person who came in and gave him the food earlier. And yet he does not judge Jacob here. He does not condemn what Jacob has done.
He says he came in deceitfully, but he doesn't follow up that blessing with a curse. Rather, he declares that the blessing will stand. Even though Jacob had acted out of deceit, he still had the qualities, the qualities that led him to be blessed.
Esau lifts up his voice and weeps and proceeds to plan to take his brother's life. Rebecca, hearing this plan, sends Jacob away to her brother, Laban, hoping that a few months away from home perhaps might lead to his brother's anger dying down.
And she says that she does not want to be bereft or miscarried of them both in one day. Again, an important expression and we might get back to that in the future. And then the chapter ends with a statement of Rebecca's anguish at the wives of her son Esau, the Hittite women.
[22:18] The Hittite women were mentioned at the very end of the previous chapter and so their occurrence here again highlights the fact that Esau's unfaithfulness is the foregrounded reality.

He has despised his birthright, he has married unfaithfully and now he has lost his blessing. It's not necessarily a good thing that Jacob has taken his blessing in this way and deceived his father and Jacob will receive many negative consequences for what he has done here.
But yet it was the appropriate thing to happen as regards Esau. Esau should have lost the blessing and he did. One question to reflect upon. Within this chapter we can see themes not just of the stories that I've mentioned but also of the story of the binding of Isaac, the sacrifice of Isaac in chapter 22.
Can you see some of those and how might they help us to read the meaning of what's taking place?

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