

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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ISAAC BLESSES JACOB (*GENESIS 27*)

Abraham and Isaac both received the Covenant from the LORD in a way that pleases the ordinary student of the Bible looking for a good story: God unexpectedly chose them from the nations, and promised blessings to them and to their descendants – a happy ending.

But Jacob was different. He wasn't legally in line to inherit anything of the Covenant. And though he was made an heir of the Covenant, it wasn't a situation that one would have liked to see; in fact, it makes modern Bible students cringe! Thus Jacob has earned the reputation through the ages as a deceitful, scheming thief who did whatever it took to grab other people's property. So, only *reluctantly* do we acknowledge him as belonging in the list of Patriarchs.

And yet – it seems that nowhere in the Bible has anyone condemned Jacob for his actions. In fact, God didn't condemn him either; the only things we find in the Scriptures about Jacob are all positive. That means we in the modern age are the only ones condemning him for the way he got his inheritance – the Biblical testimony is unanimous in his favor.

As usual, when modern theory runs contrary to the Bible's plain statements, that means we must look at the situation again more carefully. There *was* deceit – but it was much more complicated than a simple lie. There was a larger spiritual crisis below the surface that Rachel's and Jacob's actions were addressing. Not only was Jacob struggling to inherit a greater treasure than this world has to offer, he was paving the way for all the sons of God to inherit them also – *in the same way*.

Isaac's instructions to Esau – It's surprising (to us now, anyway, with our hindsight) that Isaac would have even considered giving the blessing to Esau. Unfortunately this points out several things about families that are true even in our day: *first*, a believer may be walking with God, yet he may be blind to spiritual problems in his own family. Our natural affections often cloud the spiritual issues. We were told that Isaac “who had a taste for wild game” loved Esau. Evidently his paternal love, and personal tastes, clouded his spiritual eyesight so that he could see neither the true nature of Esau's soul nor the fact that the LORD had rejected his elder son. This is not the only occasion we see similar shortcomings happening in the

Scriptures. Isaac was totally at fault here.

Second, the spiritual Promises that God gives his people aren't necessarily for their children as well. If this had been simply a matter of property, it wouldn't have been a problem to pass it on to Isaac's firstborn. But God has a say in this matter, since the Treasures belong to him. *He* gives them to those he chooses; we don't decide that. They always come from his hand; children don't inherit spiritual blessings from their earthly fathers but from the Father in Heaven. Nobody has the Key to Heaven, nobody has the right of entry into God's presence, nobody can cleanse his own soul in readiness to see the Holy God. All these things – and the rights to

them – must come from Heaven. So, although parents would like to pass on these treasures to their children, they should not expect to have the final say on the matter or even a valid meaningful opinion.

We are told later that, indeed, God did have the overriding decision:

Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad — in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls — she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (Romans 9:11-13)

We aren’t really told anything about Jacob’s character, and Esau certainly wasn’t a stellar character, so God’s choice obviously wasn’t based on their good deeds. It was based, instead, on his own will in bestowing his gifts on the undeserving.

And that’s why families often deceive themselves about how much God is actually “blessing” their children, or how much of God’s goodness the children have actually received through their parents. We are using the wrong criteria to judge the case: a good home, proper training, rich opportunities – but none of these change the heart. There are certain things that only God can do.

As far as the Blessing itself went (which we will look at later), it was obviously a specific treasure that, like money, passed from one person to another. It was not a feeling of goodwill, or a general-purpose salutation that we often use (as in telling someone to “have a good day!” – which may or may not coincide with reality). One son was going to receive something from

God, and the other would not – there wouldn’t be anything left for the son rejected.

Obviously the Patriarchs were still learning the rules here. Isaac received the Covenant by his miraculous birth, not by being the firstborn – which definitely did not follow tradition in a society that routinely passed property down to the firstborn son. And now, his younger son instead of the elder would inherit it, and that through deceitful means. Yet through it all, God directed events in the way that pleased him and accomplished his purposes, without necessarily telling anyone what he was doing or why.

Rebekah’s instructions to Jacob – Rebekah, we are told (Genesis 25:28) was the parent who loved Jacob. It’s possible that she couldn’t get along with Esau; we aren’t told why, though we are told that she didn’t like Esau’s ways of mingling with the pagans. Jacob was a “quiet man, staying among the tents.” Perhaps it was a personality issue.

We are told a few things about Rebekah, however, that would help interpret this story. For one thing, she had a history of making the right decisions. When Abraham’s servant traveled to her family’s home in Haran, she willingly agreed to return with him to marry someone she had never even seen before – but who was the Heir of the Abrahamic Covenant. She also detested Esau’s pagan Canaanite wives, and complained to her husband about them: “I am disgusted with living because of these Hittite women.” And this family crisis concerning the blessing would prove to be another right decision on her part, as shown by the outcome.

Second, Rebekah also had an advantage that the others (at least we

aren't told that they were in on it) did not have. When she went to inquire of the LORD concerning her troubled pregnancy, the LORD told her that the older son would serve the younger son. A revelation from God is always the beginning point of faith and the basis of a righteous act in God's eyes. Isaac may not have known the right thing to do, but Rebekah did.

Third, something she said to Jacob was telling about her true hope, and the state of her faith. Isaac had told Esau that he wanted his son to prepare for him a special meal, "that my soul may bless you before I die." Rebekah quoted Isaac's words to her son Jacob, but she added this phrase in the quote: "... and bless you ***before the LORD*** before I die." (verse 7) We don't find that phrase in Isaac's words to Esau in verse 4. Probably Esau heard what he wanted to hear (about the blessing, not the LORD!) and Rebekah heard the whole thing, including this phrase. That part, evidently, impressed her; she wanted the LORD's intervention in her son Jacob's life, with its attendant Covenant blessings.

Rebekah was so intent on getting this done that she even called down Isaac's curse – if he actually ended up cursing Jacob for deceiving him – upon her own head. "Let the curse fall upon me." In other words, we may want to blame Jacob for deceiving his father, but his mother took full responsibility for the act. She was acting upon what she thought was the right thing to do, what the LORD wanted done. A curse, in those days, was just as real as a blessing – she would have been shunned by her husband and her family, and thrust out into the world on her own (remember Hagar's fate?), with "no hope and no God." But she was willing to endure the

short-term curse for the sake of the long-term blessing. "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Philippians 3:7-8)

From the very start we are told that Rebekah was the major player in this family crisis: the deceit was her idea, she devised the desperate plan of Jacob bringing a meal to his father in the guise of Esau, and she willingly took all responsibility for the outcome. In an authoritative, parental tone she told Jacob to "obey my voice as I command you." We can surmise that Jacob didn't think much of his brother; we know that Rebekah didn't – for the right reasons. And Rebekah was included in on God's counsels from the very beginning, when the sons were still in her womb. So the only conclusion we can draw from all this is that Rebekah was determined to do *the right thing* in God's eyes; there is simply no justifiable way to fault her (or Jacob!) without taking sides against God and for Esau.

Before we leave Rebekah, we should note that she provided the meal for Jacob to take to his father. Esau later prepared his own meal for Isaac, but Jacob – for whatever reason – let his mother take care of it for him. This Feast – like a sacrifice brought to the Father? – was put into Jacob's hands, a work not of his own making. Rebekah knew what Isaac liked. The text calls it "tasty" or "savory" six times, as if to emphasize that *this* was the thing that most pleased Isaac. Let's put it another way: the son who didn't deserve the Blessing brings the only thing that pleases his Father (the sacrifice of Christ) – it's a Feast provided for him by another – and thereby receives the Blessing. Does this

sound familiar, Christian? Jacob learned the principle that would guide him the rest of his life: *he* won't have to do the work that will result in receiving the blessings of his Inheritance. Someone else would do it for him.

Jacob approaches his father – There were at least five ways in which Jacob deceived his father into thinking he was Esau.

- He said he was Esau.
- He presented the food as if it were “wild game” caught quickly.
- Isaac touched the hairy garment on Jacob's arm, thinking it was Esau's arm.
- Jacob then said again, in answer to a direct question, that he was in fact Esau.
- Isaac smelled the outdoors on Esau's clothing that Jacob was wearing.

Isaac may not have been able to see, but he was trying to make certain that he was going to bless the right son. So in spite of details that raised doubts in his mind, he was convinced of his son's identity – *and blessed the wrong son*.

The problematic part of this story concerns how Jacob lied to his father – not once, but twice, even when Isaac asked him directly if he were really Esau.

A lie, as we've all been told since our youth, is always wrong. And that's why Jacob has inherited such a bad reputation over the centuries. This seems like a clear example of deliberate deception to get what he wanted from his brother and father.

But when we examine the details a little closer, it's not such a clear-cut

case. The LORD had planned to give this inheritance to Jacob all along. In fact, let's review each player in the story and see what they thought ought to be done about the Inheritance:

- God decided Jacob would have it.
- Rebekah learned about it from God.
- Jacob was born struggling with his brother for it.
- Esau despised it.
- Isaac had the wrong son in mind to be his rightful heir.
- Rebekah told Jacob to seize it.
- Isaac finally accepted Jacob as the heir.
- God verified Jacob as the heir.

I don't think that anybody can argue with the fact that, in the end, everyone wanted Jacob to have this inheritance except Esau, who was the only one who fought against the process – and we are told plainly the state of *his* heart. In reality he *didn't* want what his father had for him, though Isaac didn't know that.

One more consideration: we saw that Esau “despised his birthright” some time before this story. In chapter 25 he had sworn to Jacob that he would “sell” his birthright to him, and Jacob made a legal agreement with him on the spot. Would their father Isaac have known about this agreement? Would Esau have been open to his father about this? Probably not, since he seemed to be given to lying anyway. He wouldn't have told Isaac about something that would have imperiled his inheritance. So it was *necessary* that God, Rebekah and Jacob “deceive” Isaac so that events would turn out like Esau, unfortunately, had already agreed to legally.

And as the story turned out, Jacob *was* the right son to receive the Covenant; Esau would have dismissed it as worthless.

So – why the lies? Simply because *the inheritance did not belong to Jacob*.

The central lesson in this story is not *how* Jacob went about getting the inheritance, it's the fact that he tried to get something that wasn't his in the first place. People use deceit to get whatever they want; lies and fraud are commonplace among humanity. The real issue here is that Jacob wanted his brother's inheritance. So at this point the question isn't so much "should he have lied?", but "should he have reached out for something that wasn't his?"

It was not a crisis of morality but of legal rights. We are being taught a critical characteristic of the true heirs of the Abrahamic Covenant. Whether we plead with God for something or use a stratagem to get it, the fact is that *none of us* have the right to receive any good thing from God, least of all the Covenant Promises.

In light of the fact that everyone except Esau wanted Jacob to inherit the estate, we are forced to reconsider the real implication of Jacob's "lie." Let's look at it from a different angle: *it was Isaac who didn't know what was going on*. He was being blinded by his love for the wrong son, by his personal tastes, and by his ignorance of God's will, as he insisted on following tradition. Rebekah simply decided that she and Jacob would have to deceive Isaac for the family's good – and then sort out the issue later with her husband. She realized beforehand that she certainly could not talk him out of what he was so determined to do. Rather than persuading her husband directly, she and

her son obtained what they wanted from him – what God had determined would belong to Jacob alone – and then brought Isaac into the picture later.¹ Essentially, then, it was God who was deceiving Isaac, even as Isaac was in the process of choosing the wrong son.

Any way you look at it, the legal right to the Covenant (as the whole of Scripture teaches) is not based on one's actions but solely on God's choice. On the negative side, if Esau had received the blessing, he would have despised the very heart of the Covenant; being born first didn't prepare his heart for receiving any good thing from God. We know of course that the only thing that Esau cared about was material property; he cared nothing for the spiritual Covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants. So Esau was unaware of, nor did he care about, the spiritual loss he suffered. And the fact that Jacob got it by deceit was *not* what made the Covenant legal for him – God had already decided to give it to him.

But there is something theologically critical about God's Word, Rebekah's faith, and Jacob's determination to lay hold of what Esau did not want – the *spiritual* Covenant, the inheritance of God. The real boon here that they focused on was the "Treasure lying in the field" (Matthew 13:44) that was going unclaimed, and would have gone unused, if Jacob hadn't boldly reached out for it himself.

¹ This of course doesn't justify anyone's lying to get something. God had already pronounced his word on the subject, and Rebekah was acting on that Word through her faith. An ordinary lie can't claim such authority! The deceit here has a theological aim: our own identity crisis before God.

In time Jacob would learn that he didn't need to use deceit – in fact he didn't need to do anything except believe – in order to receive blessings from the LORD. His God had already determined to bless him richly as the chosen heir.

Another side to this story was Isaac's role in respect to the legal aspects of the Covenant. The Covenant was a Treasure to be passed down from the father to his son; it was a gift that Isaac had received from *his* father, and he was responsible to carry out the requirement of passing it on to his legal heir. What he didn't know yet was that, by God's decree, it was being given to the son who would learn to appreciate it and enjoy it in its spiritual fullness; it was not going to be wasted.

But what's so interesting here was that Isaac was blind to the identity of his son. When Jacob took on the exact appearance of the *firstborn son* – *that's* what Isaac "saw." He gave this family Treasure to a son who didn't deserve it; he was not the son for whom it was intended. If Isaac had known of the deceit, Jacob would have inherited a curse instead of the Blessing. And yet Jacob received the full gift *as if he had really been the son for whom it was intended*. During this transaction he looked like the firstborn, he smelled like the firstborn, he acted like the firstborn. So *on that basis* he was accepted as the firstborn.

And that is one of the crucial aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant. The inheritance of the Son – the Eternal Son – who has been given the fullness of his Father in Heaven – the Father now passes it on to other brothers and sisters *who in no way deserve this inheritance!* The Father is "blind" to our sinful

nature, because we have claimed the Son's identity and taken on his Spirit, his character, his righteousness, with the result that we "look like" the Firstborn Son in all ways. The Father doesn't take into consideration in the least whether we deserve anything from him, nor whether we are pleasing sons in our own nature (which we aren't!). Solely because we are in Christ, we receive what rightfully belongs to the Son alone. The Father doesn't see us but instead sees his own Son. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20) Are we what we claim to be? In no way! And yet, just as Jacob posed as his brother Esau, here we are posing as if we are children of the Father in Heaven, covered over with the image of the true Son, and we end up as heirs of *his* Treasure.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:29)

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Therefore the inheritance can never be taken away from us.

And just as Rebekah, the wife of Isaac, helped bring her son into the inheritance, so the Bride of Christ – the Church – helps the chosen heirs come into their inheritance. She even provides the Meal which most pleases the Father.

Isaac blesses Jacob – Isaac's blessing presupposed the *right* to bless. Isaac

understood the real significance of the Covenant and what it would mean for his progeny. That's why he was so careful about making sure he had the elder son in hand: one son would inherit a name in history, and the other would get nothing.

The Covenant was transferable property. When we analyze his blessing, we can easily recognize the four basic Covenant Promises that were first made to Abraham.

The terms of Isaac's blessing were the following:

- land**
 - The smell of a field
 - Heaven's dew
 - Earth's richness
 - Abundance of grain & wine
- nation**
 - Nations will serve you
 - Peoples will bow to you
- son**
 - A lord over your brothers
 - Mother's sons bow to you
- blessing**
 - Who curses you will be cursed
 - Who blesses you will be blessed

What is easy to see is the physical side of this Blessing: the material wealth, the political power, even the international reputation and influence as Israel would grow into a nation among nations. What is not so obvious is what the book of Hebrews tells us was the revelation given to the Patriarchs:

Abraham ... Isaac and Jacob [were] ... looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:10)

There would be only one reason that other nations would bow down to Jacob's descendants: the special work done only in Israel, the work that other nations need that could in no way be

done by them – this is what God did among his people the Israelites. The Law, the Temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the righteous Kingdom – all these things were unique to Jacob's descendants. They were of incalculable value to whoever inherited them, not just for this life but also for the life to come.

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of *the God of Jacob*, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." (Micah 4:1-2)

The richness that would draw other nations to this People was not just fertile fields and the good life (which can be found all around the world, not just in Israel), but rather the "treasures of Heaven" which are worth far more than the good life, or silver and gold. For such things men and women will come.

Shock and grief – Isaac went into shock when he realized he had blessed the wrong son. It was his duty as the Covenant heir to pass on the Promises to the next in line, the legal heir of the family. This deceit (as he saw it) that Jacob perpetrated upon him and Esau was not only a personal grief, but a threat to the Covenant itself. He had been given a great Treasure and now it looked as if he had failed in his responsibility, and put future generations at risk – as if the Promises could be had by theft and lies, with the result that they would come to nothing in the end. To Isaac, it was a completely unforeseen

situation; concerning such a serious matter, everyone was supposed to play by the rules!

What the outcome demonstrated most clearly to Isaac was that this Covenant inheritance had not been in his control. It may have been Isaac's duty to pass on the Blessing to his son, but the LORD had decided which son to bless – not Isaac. There were bigger issues at stake in the Kingdom of God that Isaac had been unaware of. The Treasure of Heaven needs an executor who knows the needs of future generations as well as the significance of events in the past, the spiritual world as well as the physical, and the demands of the Kingdom, not just the local situation. In light of this, man must certainly do his part, but the LORD must direct it all to his ends, not ours.

I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps. (Jeremiah 10:23)

Esau's wailing of despair, no doubt, was heard across Isaac's entire camp. "He cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry." The pain was twofold: he received nothing from his father, and that decision would never be reversed. The Blessing of Jacob, and Esau's desolation, were final.

It's Esau's tragedy, not Jacob's deceit, that the Scriptures focus on in this story. "For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears." (Hebrews 12:17) What it meant was that from now on, the LORD would invite Jacob and his Family to share his Feast in the Kingdom of Heaven, and Esau and his descendants "will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be

weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 8:12) And for all their wailing and pleas for repentance and forgiveness and a second chance, the Heavens will be as brass – there will be no answer from God except rejection.

One would think – as Esau presumed of his father Isaac – that the LORD would relent upon seeing his son's grief; but that was not to be. We little understand how seriously the LORD takes his Covenant, and how furious he is when we treat it so lightly. Remember that Esau showed his heart when he sold his birthright for a bowl of stew. God owed him nothing.² In contrast, Jacob desperately wanted the birthright and Blessing as one would expect from a true Son of God.

As if to pound this lesson into our hearts, the New Testament goes on to say: "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God" (Hebrews 12:15) ... and then it uses Esau's doom as an example of what will happen to us if we aren't also passionate about the Son's inheritance, and in fact if we also reject Jacob's method of gaining the inheritance.

If this fails to convince us, Jesus' story about those who are included in the wedding ceremony contains his prediction that even the unbelieving Jews are going to be rejected by their God and thrown out into darkness, with no chance of a reprieve from their eternal doom. "Many will come from east and west [*Gentiles*] and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in

² And here we see the pointless exercise of preaching moralisms. Repent all you like, it's not what we do, nor how we feel in our desperation, which moves God's heart; it's being passionate over his free grace, not our rights. What we consider a crisis may not be one to him.

the Kingdom of Heaven, while the sons of the Kingdom [*the Jews*] will be thrown into the outer darkness.” (Matthew 8:11-12) Jesus considered the Jews the heirs of Esau, not of Jacob, in spite of their claims to the contrary.

Those who lose out on the inheritance will inevitably pin the blame on others instead of on themselves – another evidence of the spiritual state of their hearts. Esau was lying when he accused Jacob of taking away his birthright (see Genesis 25:29-34), which shows the real nature of his “repentance” before Isaac. Jacob did *not* deceive Esau about the birthright issue – that was Esau’s own fault when he traded it away to Jacob. If Jacob lied to get the inheritance, Esau also lied to cover over his own sin of despising God.

Isaac’s doom upon Esau – What is remarkable about this story – something that we who are parents and have children and understand what caring for them means – is that Isaac gave Esau *nothing*. When Esau specifically begged, “Have you but one blessing, my father?” – a plea that would have broken the heart of even the hardest parent – Isaac in helplessness answered that it was all given to Jacob. Again, we are faced with the *totality* of the Inheritance, that we must receive all of it or none of it. Second, it is not in the hands of man to give; it comes from God, and it’s a spiritual inheritance. And third, once given, it can’t be changed.

If we really understood the crisis in this story, why would we claim to be God’s children, and expect good things from God, if God has never given us any reason for that confidence? Is it enough to cry and complain until he gives us what we want – as Esau did? Or are there deeper spiritual issues that only

God sees, things that we will see only if he is merciful to us?

The unexpected part is that the elder brother received nothing, while the younger brother received everything. The Covenant is targeted to certain individuals – those with faith; it’s not open to whoever claims it. There are conditions, and those conditions will be strictly observed. God is moved by higher spiritual realities than parental affection. Israel herself will also learn that she will be measured by her passion for the spiritual inheritance of Heaven. Some will be in God’s new Family, and some will not.

The Point – *Take the Inheritance of the Firstborn Son*. It doesn’t belong to you, and someone else will have to prepare the right Sacrifice – the Feast – for you to take to your Father, the Feast that most pleases him. And you *must* look like the Heir if you want God to bless you with his inheritance. The Son must give you his life, his righteousness, his Spirit, if you would look like a true son of God. So in effect we are covered with a righteousness that is not ours, claiming an inheritance to which we have no legal right. It’s a deceit (of God’s making!)³ but the very heart of our salvation, and our only hope to eternal life.

But if you do not passionately desire this Covenant blessing given to Abraham and his Family, if this world presents a greater appeal to you than what God wants to give mankind from

³ There were *seven* deceits recorded in Genesis through which God worked on behalf of his faithful ones: Abraham and Sarah with Pharaoh and Abimelech (2); Isaac with Abimelech; Jacob with Isaac; Tamar with Judah; Levi and Simeon with the Shechemites; and Joseph with his brothers. Deception is an established military principle.

Heaven (nothing less than the Son's estate), then you will receive nothing from God, and no change of heart on your part will move God to change his mind about you, even when you realize your mistake. There is no greater tragedy to witness than the agony of a lost soul who despises the Covenant.

‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ (Luke 16:24-26)

And even those who thought they would certainly receive the Inheritance because of their “faith” or good works or religious life or good reputation or church affiliation will find that God doesn't play by their rules. He chooses his own children and rejects the rest.

Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away. (Luke 8:18)

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