

Did Jacob steal the blessing?

Exegesis on Gen 27 - 28

Pavel Hanes

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 spoken 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” blessing. The “real thing” was given to him in Gen 28:3-5.

It looks like 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 had received from the Lord, to her question while she was still pregnant, (Gen 25:23) the “the elder shall serve the younger” (RSV), 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 father’s 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 comic and ridiculous characteristics are emphasized”¹ There arises here a very powerful tension between the seriousness of God’s 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 reader’s view neither of them should receive the Lord’s blessing. The first despises the birthright (Gen 25:32 “...of what use is a birthright to me?” - RSV) 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 faithfulness to his promise to Abraham. To put it in a New Testament language “not by works but by him who calls” (Rom 9:12, NIV). In spite of the fact that the blessing is not supposed to be a reward for Jacob’s good deeds, nor approval of his noble character, the question still remains whether the way in which his father gave it to him was the realization of God’s will according to the adage *hominum confusione et Dei providentia*,² or whether it was more like a dead end which revealed where the dispute of the patriarchs with God is leading.

Theory 1: Theft of the blessing was successful

In spite of the fact that in the commentaries doubts appear about Isaac’s blessing which he gave to Jacob when he was dressed up as Esau, most of them agree on the opinion that Rebekah’s contrived plot was successful.

On the side which confirms the failure of the theft we can quote RASHI who comments on Isaac’s words “and he will be blessed” like this: “So that you may not say that had Yaakov not tricked his father he would not have received the blessings, therefore he affirmed it

¹ VON RAD, G. *Genesis* p. 265

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

and [now] knowingly blessed him.”³ It seems that RASHI 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 27:35 say that the term “deception” (*mirmah*) means “wisdom” (*khokhmah*), thus confirming the validity of the realized transaction. On one side then, RASHI doubts the significance of Jacob’s 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”.

AUGUSTINE remarks that this blessing cannot lose its prophetic significance,⁴ he even claims that it is the preaching of Christ (*Benedictio igitur Iacob praedicatio est Christi*) to all nations.⁵ He identifies Christ with the heavenly dew which is spoken of in Isaac’s 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 God’s promise in Isaac’s blessing. Isaac, in the role of father, is the instrument of the Holy Spirit, with which God’s will is fulfilled: “these are not bare wishes, such as fathers are wont to utter on behalf of their children, but that promises of God are included in them; for Isaac is the authorized interpreter of God, and the instrument employed by the Holy Spirit; and therefore, as in the person of God, he efficaciously pronounces those accursed who shall oppose the welfare of his son.”⁶ CALVIN claims literally that this blessing was valid and effective and repeating it in chapter 28:3 was only to support Jacob’s faith. CALVIN, as we can see, gives 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 Abrahamic promises 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 recollecting the Divine oracle, or having found himself more than ordinarily filled with the Holy Ghost when he gave the blessing to Jacob, he perceived that God did as it were say Amen to it.”⁷ From this note it is evident that in spite of Isaac’s disagreement with the LORD he is considered the agent of his blessing.

KEIL, in a well known commentary from the 19th century says that Isaac’s blessing “could not rise to the full height of the divine blessings of **salvation**”,⁸ and that Jacob does not receive the blessing until chapter 28:3-4. In spite of this we can already see two elements of Abraham’s blessing in chapter twenty seven: here, according to KEIL, *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 Abraham’s blessing after all, although it was not until the twenty-eighth chapter that he got it in full.

The Czech ecumenical translation of the Bible with commentary only sees the difference in the format of Isaac’s blessing. “Dew, together with other gifts spoken of, points to the promised

³ <http://www.tachash.org/metsudah/b06r.html> (27 April 2007)

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

⁵ AUGUSTINUS De Civitate Dei XVI/37

⁶ CALVIN Genesis, 27:29.

⁷ WESLEY, J John Wesley’s Notes on the Old Testament, 27:33

⁸ KEIL, C F – DELITZSCH, F. Commentary on the Old Testament, The Pentateuch, p. 276.

land”⁹ 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 of the otherwise rather uniformly formulated patriarchal promises (12:1-3; 13:14-16; 22:17; 26:24; 28:3f, 13-15etc.)”.¹⁰ In accordance with the critical division of the text into its sources, VON RAD 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, God’s plans are, in the end, realised”.¹¹ Jacob, therefore, is seen as successful in stealing 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 “To Isaac’s credit, the blessing he gives to his son is the blessing of *Abraham*. This is the only time Isaac mentions his father. ...Isaac recognizes his role as that of a link in a chain, a transmitter”.¹² The author does not compare the blessing spoken in the twenty eighth chapter with the one in the twenty seventh, but states that, “...his son took advantage of him and deceived him”.¹³

One of our Slovak commentators, L. FAZEKAŠ says on the one hand that “Rebekah and Isaac achieved what they wanted by their own lie...God fulfilled his promise through this human confusion,”¹⁴ but on the other hand he gives only to the blessing in 28:3-4 the title of “God’s blessing” as opposed to the “father’s blessing” in chapter 27.¹⁵ In the background of the first, (“father’s”), blessing, nature is blessed by God, whereas in the second, (“God’s”), the Lord is the centre. This exposition 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 to me that with this the expositor is in conflict with the above quoted claim that here God fulfilled his promise.

Critique

The opinion of exegetes, who say that Jacob was successful in stealing the blessing, are, as it were, confirmed by Isaac’s own 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 actually happened and what Jacob really was after. If it was about Jacob wanting the right of the *firstborn* confirmed by his father’s last blessing, we have to say that he *was* successful. If, in Chapter 27, Isaac by *blessing* understood the position of the blessed within his family, 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 Jacob’s deception alone. Under the words “By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau” (Heb 11:20) it is necessary to include the blessing from 28:3-4, especially when we realise that Isaac’s disagreement with the LORD in the twenty seventh chapter of Genesis can hardly be called a sign of his *faith*.

⁹ Genesis p.168

¹⁰ VON RAD, G. Genesis p. 278

¹¹ VON RAD, G. Genesis p.280

¹² HAMILTON V.P. The Book of Genesis 18 – 50, p.235

¹³ Ibid. p.234

¹⁴ FAZEKAŠ, L. *Ludskí ľudia*, p.107

¹⁵ Ibid., p.118

The same can be said of Heb 12:17 (“He could bring about no change of mind” NIV). Even though some commentators see Esau’s repentance here, the logical interpretation is that it is about a change of mind in his father (as NIV translated). Isaac imagined that he was blessing Esau. When he realised that he was tricked he was terribly upset¹⁶ and it looks like he immediately changed his opinion in favour of Jacob. The fact that he did not grant Esau’s request, is no proof that the blessing pronounced over Jacob was right as regards God’s promise. It was only the proof, that he has given up his attempt to put Esau before Jacob. 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.

Problems related to “the stolen blessing”

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

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

(2) Further problems are theological: the stolen blessing is in the hands of man – Jacob simply *must* do something so that God’s blessing will not miss the mark! Isaac is in control of the blessing and can give it to whoever he pleases. Can the LORD help get out of this problem without the help of man? Isaac is in dispute with God. He favoured the energetic Esau, while God’s oracle received by his wife, prefers the stay-at-home Jacob. Maybe he thought that it was just a woman’s mistake, in any case - he dared to go against God’s decision. How is it possible that in this state of mind he was able to pass on God’s blessing? Is it possible to *believe and not obey*?

Another theological question: what is the character of the blessing? Isaac was blessing Jacob and thinking of Esau – is it possible then that he could bless Jacob? Is God’s blessing of a physical nature that it could be transferred independently of intentions?

(3) I guess that the ethical problem of lying is the most serious. Even though it is clear from the whole testimony of the Bible that God’s election and blessing never follow human merit, it is also clear that sin and God’s blessing cannot coexist. In the situation where Jacob even lied about the fact that “the LORD, your God gave me success (NIV)” could he be the recipient of God’s blessing? This problem is also closely linked with the psychology of faith: is it possible to desire the true blessing of God and lie because of it?

Theory 2: 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 original patriarchal (Abrahamic) blessing of Gen 12:1-3, the “stolen blessing” in Gen 27:27-29, and the “Abrahamic blessing” in Gen 28:3-4. (NIV)

¹⁶ 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.)

PATRIARCHAL BLESSING	"STOLEN" BLESSING
<p>Gn 12:1-3 The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. ²"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."</p> <p>Gn 28:3-4 May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. ⁴ May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham."</p>	<p>Gn 27:27-29 So he went to him and kissed him. When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed. ²⁸ May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness-- an abundance of grain and new wine. ²⁹ May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed."</p>

Looking at the comparisons, first of all (1) the motive steps to the foreground. At the beginning of the "stolen blessing" (2:27-29) is Isaac's relationship towards Esau who, "is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed". 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 even mentioned, as if it was already certain, or else, 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.¹⁷ Progeny also seem to be a matter of course. The blessing is mainly about Esau's 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 (or Jacob, if he could have stolen it) 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 received positively. The Lord does say though in 12:3 "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; (NIV)" but even here the sympathy vote for Abraham is the condition of blessing *sine qua non*. Different to this, Esau is supposed to be protected by the curse so that no one will curse him and his being a blessing for others is totally dependent on their preliminary sympathy towards him – "May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed. (Gen 27:29 NIV)" 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.

¹⁷ 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.

Comparing Gen 12:3 with 28:3-4 – the blessing looks significantly different. (1) The motive in chapter 28 is to pass on the blessing of Abraham who is mentioned twice. It is as if Isaac had not been 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 “community of peoples” (NIV) but nothing is said about them ruling over others, which was his 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 into a great nation”. (3) Similarly in the question of inheriting the land the sound of a fight can be heard. Isaac stresses that “you and your descendants ... may take possession (J-R-Sh) of the land” (NIV). This word does not only mean to inherit according to the inheritance law (Gen 15:3-4), but also to own, 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) blessing for other nations. Not a word about a curse, just the promise of protection which clearly compensates it.

CONCLUDING REMARK

According to the above given analysis of the patriarchal blessings I think that it is safe to say that Jacob did *not* steal the *blessing*. According to the customs of those times he may have stolen the birthright which had very little in common with the promise of the LORD to bless Abraham’s descendants. Esau could have been given this and still not “have the real thing”. Rebekah and Jacob need not to have made 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 strict punishment of Isaac’s foolishness and Esau’s flippancy, but it had nothing to do with the passing on of Abraham’s blessing.

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