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## **A MODERN LOOK AT THE ANCIENT HERMENEUTICS OF THE BIBLICAL ESAU AND JACOB**

**Abstract.** *This article stresses that some contemporary biblical commentators consider the Patriarch Jacob as an opportunist who “supplanted his brother Esau by asking him to sell the birthright” (Rosenblatt, & Horwitz, 1995, p. 240). Nonetheless, Henry M. Morris voices that the biblical text does not establish such a connection (Morris, 1976, p. 417). Derek Kidner also emphasizes the fact that “the context does not comment ‘so Jacob supplanted his brother,’ but ‘so Esau despised his birthright;’ and Hebrews 12 shares its standpoint, presenting flippant Esau as the antithesis of the pilgrims of Hebrew 11” (Kidner, 2008, p. 152). Likewise, R. Kent Hughes affirms that “the closing line of the episode gives us the divine commentary because it does not say, ‘Thus Jacob took advantage of his brother, and Esau despised his birthright,’ but only that ‘Esau despised [disowned] his birthright.’ Esau’s own sin sealed his fate” (Hughes, 2004, p. 337). Therefore, the goal of this research paper is to encourage all the readers of the biblical text for the more balanced and careful hermeneutical approach by suppressing all modern emotional judgments in the case of such an ancient narrative, which stems from strange cultural conditions and a different moral atmosphere. (Rad, 1972, p. 267). For the integrity of this investigation, the research represented how through the history, Hebrew and Christian communities generally interpreted this biblical passage and, in particular, viewed the life of Esau and Jacob.*

**Keywords:** *The Book of Genesis, Biblical Exegesis, Ancient Hermeneutics, Carnal Esau, the Patriarch Jacob.*

**A deceiver revealed himself.** Ancient theologians always noticed that chapter twenty-seven of the book of Genesis begins with a depiction of

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Isaac's health complications, which motivated him to pass on the blessing to his children. Biblical scholars agree that it happened when the Patriarch Isaac was 137 years old, the age at which his oldest brother Ishmael had already died (Genesis 25:17) (Lange, & Gosman, 1868, p. 494-96). Due to his blindness and weakness of old age Isaac thought his own end was near. For that reason, Isaac started a conversation with his oldest son when both Esau and Jacob were 77 years old. The careful study of this and the next chapter revealed that Isaac preserved a unique blessing for each child based on their individuality and inner character. The son who inherited the right of the firstborn was granted with the material prosperity and the headship of the family or the political leadership (Genesis 27:28-29). In contrast, the spiritual leadership through the inheritance of Abrahamic blessings had been completely preserved for the Patriarch Jacob. As a result, Jacob was chosen to prolong the living human chain that points out to the biological descendant (the Messiah) of a woman who one day would bring blessings upon all nations. Jacob and his descendants were also meant to inherit the Promise Land. Therefore, the Patriarch Isaac later said: "and may God Almighty bless thee and make thee fruitful and multiply thee that thou may be a congregation of people and give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee and thy seed with thee; that thou may inherit the land in which thou art a stranger, which God gave unto Abraham" (Genesis 28:3-4 JUB).

On the other hand, having the right of primogeniture, Esau was his father's natural heir; for this reason, the Patriarch Isaac started a conversation with 'his oldest son.' "I am old: I know not the day of my death. Now, therefore, take I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow and go out to the field and take me some venison and make me savory food, such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, that my soul may bless thee before I die" (Genesis 27:2-4 JUB). Derek Kidner points out that in this passage "we [*modern readers*] shall misjudge the situation if we overlook the evidence of Hebrews 12:16-17 in selling the birthright (Genesis 25:31)" (Kidner, 2008, p. 155). For this purpose, it is critical to reiterate that Esau absolutely freely sold his birthright to his brother Jacob (Genesis 25:29-34). In view of that, Saint Augustine of Hippo stated, "the birthright of the elder is transferred to the younger in virtue of a mutually accepted pact... and confirmed the deal an oath" (Augustine, & Grace Monahan, p. 16-27). Similarly, John H. Walton highlights that Esau despised his birthright and sold it to his brother Jacob for virtually nothing as if it were nothing by his own free will. (Walton, 2001, p. 151).

It is obvious that the old Patriarch Isaac thought of Esau as the true inheritor of the firstborn blessing. As a result, he asked his oldest son Esau to make savory food and come back to receive a blessing, which belongs to

the firstborn son (Genesis 27:3-4). If Esau was an innocent man, he would have revealed to his old father that sometime ago he sold his birthright to Jacob. Consequently, his brother Jacob must be blessed instead of him. Then, most likely, the biblical narrative would have developed differently. In contrast, a cunning hunter, Esau, as always, precisely knew how to trap his prey by using his dirty tactics (Kasher, 1959, p. 12). By saying nothing to his father Esau went on the field for a hunt and clearly revealed that he was a deceiver who would not keep his sworn oath promises (Genesis 25:33). In misleading his old blind father, carnal Isaac violated his oath given to Jacob and wanted to steal a blessing that no longer belongs to him. However, at the age of 77 years old Esau, as a member of the covenantal community, must know that “a specific code of behavior must govern his actions, actions which give him a great responsibility and for which he himself is now answerable” (Paterson, & Babel, 1975, p. 25). This is for the same reason that even criminal law admits that “ignorance or mistake as to a matter of fact or law does not affect liability” (Molan, 2001, p. 224).

According to the biblical narrative, Rebekah was listening as her husband Isaac spoke with their oldest son, and when Esau left to hunt game and bring it back, she said to Jacob: “Now, my son, listen to me. Do exactly as I tell you. Go out to the flocks, and bring me two fine young goats. I will use them to prepare your father’s favorite dish. Then take the food to your father so he can eat it and bless you before he dies” (Genesis 27:8-10 NLT). In light of this discourse, it is important to point out that the narrator of the Bible never condemned deeds of the Matriarch Rebekah! And so, it is the reason why the Fathers of the Church writing permanently measured Rebekah’s engagements as an act of obedience to the Lord God Almighty. Consider that John Chrysostom spoke about Rebekah as an extraordinary woman who “was not concocting this only out of her own thinking but was also implementing the prediction from on high.” Then, Chrysostom concludes that “Jacob and Rebekah had done what was expected of them, the one needing his mother’s advice, the other playing her part completely” (Chrysostom, & Hill, (1986, p. 53).

Similarly, Saint Ambrose highly praised the Matriarch Rebekah when he said, “Rebekah did not prefer one son to another son but a just son to an unjust one. And indeed, with that pious mother, God’s mysterious plan was more important than her offspring” (Ambrose, Saint, Bishop of Milan, & McHugh (Trans.), 1972, p 149). In the same manner, a German theologian and a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther established on the ancient Patristic hermeneutical approach and also advocated that “Rebekah heard from fathers: ‘Your son Esau is unmanageable and headstrong. Therefore, he will not be the heir of the

blessing. Jacob, however, is godly and pious; therefore, he is destined to become the elder” (Pelikan, & Hansen, 1964, p. 386-390). Likewise, William Todd reasoned that Rebekah has been convinced that “Esau had forfeited his birthright” (Todd, 1978, p. 129). There is also evidence that the ancient Jewish communities believed that, based on the prophecy of God, the warning of the fathers, personal observation and the last deception of Esau in relation to his father, Rebekah was determined to defend Jacob from his godless brother, like her predecessor, the Matriarch Sarah (Genesis 21:10-11). Therefore, the Midrash identified that Rebekah executed the divine will in ensuring that Jacob received the blessings of a first-born son (B’reishit Rabbah 63.7; 67.9) (Weiss, 2008, p. 621).

During their conversation, Jacob expressed his concern that instead of blessings he could receive a curse. In response “his mother said unto him, upon me be thy curse, my son; only obey my voice” (Genesis 27:13 JUB). The ancients believed that in Rebekah’s readiness to accept the curse of others upon herself, she testified of her high spiritual maturity. (Chrysostom & Hill, 1986, p. 53). Therefore, Christine Garside gives emphasis to the fact that the matriarch Rebekah “is the first person in the [*Holy*] Bible to offer herself in reparation of someone else” (Allen, 1979, p. 166-171). The narrative reveals that previously, Abraham in his obedience to the Lord God was willing to sacrifice his beloved son (Genesis 22:9-12), and now Rebekah, in her obedience to God, demonstrates her willingness to sacrifice her life for the sake of her beloved son Jacob. Some theologians went further to argue that here “Rebekah is nothing less than a picture of Jesus Himself” (Jordan, 2001, p. 96). Then, the context makes known that to strengthen her hesitant son “Rebekah took good clothes of her eldest son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them upon Jacob, her younger son: And she put the skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands and upon the smooth of his neck” (27:15-16 JUB). Hebrew scholars share the view that since Jacob had legitimately bought the birthright from his brother Esau, Rebekah said, “Jacob has bought the birthright from Esau, it is only right that he should wear these clothes” (Townsend, 1989).

The Fathers of the Church had a similar positive view of Jacob’s actions. For example, Augustine stated that the patriarch Jacob “disguising himself in goat’s skins, placed himself below the paternal hands as though he were a scapegoat bearing away the sins of others” (Augustine, & Grace Monahan, p. 16-27). It is obvious that by connecting Jacob into a scapegoat described in the book of Leviticus 16, Augustine gives Jacob an extremely positive description and approved his deeds. However, knowing that there may be simple people who can be confused by Jacob’s actions Augustine wrote: “this trick on the part of Jacob may easily be mistaken for fraudulent

guile, if we fail to see in it the mysterious intimation of a great reality. That is why the [*Holy*] Scripture prepares us by the word: ‘Esau became a skillful hunter, and a husband-man; but Jacob a simple man living at home.’” Then, Augustine added: “Some translators have ‘guileless’ in place of ‘simple.’ But, whether we say ‘guileless’ or ‘simple’ or ‘without pretense’ for the Greek *áplastos* there can be no real guile in getting this blessing, since the man [*Jacob*] himself is guileless” (Augustine, & Grace Monahan, p. 16-27).

When Jacob came into the presence of his father, Isaac asked “who art thou, my son? And Jacob said unto his father, I am Esau, thy firstborn; I have done according as thou didst command me; arise, I pray thee, sit and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me” (Genesis 27:18-19 JUB). The ancients believed that by this action Jacob was doing two significant things. First, Jacob did protect his brother Esau from further sins by not allowing him to accept or steal the blessing, which now rightfully and legally belonged to Jacob (Genesis 25:30-34). Secondly, Jacob was protecting Abraham’s house of order from turning into a hunter’s lodge under the leadership of ungodly Esau (Freedman, 1961, p. 559). Thus, the ancient philosopher Philo stated, “When Jacob says to his father, ‘I am Esau,’ he speaks the truth according to the principle of nature, for his soul is moved in accordance with that form” (Philo, & Yonge, 1993, 4:207). Saint Thomas Aquinas, based on the ancient patristic view, also insisted that “it is not a lie to do or say a thing figuratively (Summa Theologica 2-2.110.3)” (Jeffrey et al., 1992, p. 656). In the same way, James L. Kugel indicated, “Jacob tells no lie” because as a new legitimate owner of the birthright in a legal sense he certainly was Isaac’s firstborn son (Kugel, 1998, p. 360).

It should be taken into consideration that substantial Patristic writings pointed out that the biblical narrator never condemned deeds of Rebekah or Jacob. Thus, in line with the early Christian view, Saint Augustine calls the reader to “notice that [*the Patriarch*] Isaac makes no complaint that he has been deceived” (Augustine, & Grace Monahan, p. 16-27)! Similarly, Ambrose depicted Jacob as a man “of piety without reproach” (Ambrose, Saint, Bishop of Milan, & McHugh (Trans.), 1972, p. 153). Modern-day scholars completely agree with the view that “the patriarch Isaac did not express any criticism toward Rebekah or Jacob for their previous deeds” (Hamilton, 1995, p. 234). In addition, speaking with Esau, the patriarch Isaac informed his oldest son of the following: “I have blessed [*Jacob*] and he shall be blessed” (Genesis 27:33). Moreover, Isaac had passed on to Jacob the exceptional covenantal Abrahamic blessing, which had been preserved exclusively for Jacob. At this historic moment, the Patriarch Isaac once again blessed his son Jacob, the future founder of Israel, saying: “May God Almighty bless you and give you many children. And may your

descendants multiply and become many nations! May God pass on to you and your descendants the blessings he promised to Abraham. May you own this land where you are now living as a foreigner, for God gave this land to Abraham” (Genesis 28:3-4 NLT).

Ancient sages, theologians, and biblical commentators paid great attention to the fact that when Esau found out that he could not change the outcome of his father’s decision, he fully reveals the true state of his wild inner being through his hatred of and willingness to kill his brother Jacob (Genesis 27:41). Esau acted this way because he “was a man with no depth of nature and no outlook into the eternal” (Grieve, 1920, p. 156). Daniel Goleman also advocates that the emotional intelligence or the ability to control one’s feelings is a manifestation of wisdom and maturity. The scholar also emphasizes that figuratively speaking, a person’s inability to control own emotions is a demonstration of his connection with “hell” (Goleman, 2005, p. 46). Besides that, it can be observed with great sadness an identical similarity between Esau and other firstborn son Cain, the man who was also angry with his youngest blameless brother. Esau acted this way because similarly to Cain he was the seed of evil (1 John 3:12) (Plaut, & Stein (Eds.), 2005, p. 173).

The narrator once more shows carnal Esau as the absolute antipode of his righteous brother Jacob by indicating that “Esau realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father Isaac; so he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath, the sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to the wives he already had” (Genesis 28:8-9). The third marriage of Esau does not indicate any positive change of his wicked character. For that reason, Devora Steinmetz articulates “Esau’s choice, of course, is wrong once again; much of the Abraham narrative had been directed at separating Isaac’s family from Ishmael’s. By marrying Ishmael’s daughter, Esau reforges a link which was forcibly broken and identifies himself with the line which is not chosen” (Steinmetz, 1991, p. 100). In conjunction with this passage, the Midrash points out that “the name Mahalath (the new wife of Esau) as derived from מַחֲלָת, [*Illness, disease,*] hence adding grief to grief, adding evil to a house already full.” Then, the Midrash concludes that “a wicked woman married a wicked man” (Zlotowitz, & Nosson, 1986, p. 1171-1172). Moreover, John E. Anderson appropriately argues that among the patriarchs of Isaac’s family Esau is the only character who never received a direct word from the Lord God. The biblical narrative describes that God spoke to Rebekah, Isaac, and Jacob; however, the Lord never spoke to ungodly Esau (Genesis 25:23; 26:2-3; 28:13-15). Therefore, a theologian concludes that “the narrative unmistakably portrays Esau not only as unfit to carry the promise forward but also as unfit to hear a divine word” (Anderson, 2011, p. 72).

The narrative then emphasizes Jacob's obedient and respectful attitude towards his parents, indicating that "Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and had gone to Paddan Aram" to find a suitable wife for himself (Genesis 28:7 NIV). Following an ancient tradition, *The Biblical Commentary of Jerome* underlines the fact that "Jacob's departure is not an escape, but a mission given by [*the Patriarch*] Isaac" (Brown, Fitzmyer, & Murphy (Comps.), 1968, p. 100). During his significant journey, Jacob reached a certain location where he had an exceptional dream from the Lord God Almighty, and he called this place Bethel (Genesis 28:19). Speaking of that specific place, Gordon J. Wenham accurately points out that in the close vicinity of Bethel the Lord preliminarily appeared to the Patriarch Abraham and gave him some astonishing promises. The Bible includes many passages that contain God's promises to the Abrahamic family (Genesis 15:18; 17:8; 24:7). Nevertheless, Hebrew and Christian scholars are confident that God's revelation to Abraham and Jacob near Bethel is the closest and most significant of all the covenantal promises (Wenham, 1994, p. 223).

According to the narrative, during that specific night the Patriarch Jacob had a dream from the Lord God "in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12). Talking about this account, Hebrew exegesis gives emphasis that the greatness of this revelation demonstrates "the uniqueness of the person [*Jacob*] for whom it was intended" (Zlotowitz, & Nosson, 1986, p. 1181). In addition, Kenneth A. Matthews points out that "Early Jewish interpretation found in this story opportunity for elevating the spiritual status of Jacob by casting him in the role of receiving exceptional revelation." The researcher also emphasizes that it was fueled mainly by Jesus' allusions to this event (John 1:50-51). Early Christianity saw that "Jacob's ladder is best understood as a type of Christ's mediatorial position, connecting heaven and earth" (Mathews, 1996, p. 443-444). In accordance with this ancient point of view, Victor P. Hamilton also notes that "Yahweh does not say a single word to convict Jacob for his behavior towards his father and brother" (Hamilton, 1995, p. 241). Moreover, John H. Walton claims that ancient believers were convinced that the personal appearance of the Lord God to the Patriarch Jacob was evidence of the complete divine approval of Jacob's behavior. (Walton, 2001, p. 154).

There is evidence that the ancient Hebrew and Christian sages, philosophers, historians, and biblical commentators have noted that the book of Genesis depicts the relationship of the two brothers Cain and Abel, as well as Ishmael and Isaac, in addition to Esau and Jacob resemble instances of fraternal rivalry when a younger brother always appears in a much more desirable light. In the outstanding case of Esau and Jacob,

scholars note that both of these twins came from the same womb, had the same parents and an identical environment. However, they are truly worlds apart. For that reason, Menahem M. Kasher notes that “when the boys grew, one [*Jacob*] went along the path of life and the other [*Esau*] along the path of death” (Paterson, & Babel, 1975, p. 11). The covenant relationship with the Creator, God’s plan of redemption, and spirituality were of no significance to the carnal man – Esau. Therefore, he prefers temporary food to his eternal spiritual position, saying, “What good is in my birthright” (Genesis 25:32 LEB)? After all, Esau on his own free will despised his birthright and sold it to his brother Jacob for nothing as if it were nothing. Therefore, *The NIV Application Commentary* highlights that Esau “valued it (*the birthright*) so cheaply that he sold it for a bowl of stew” (Walton, 2001, p. 151). It should also be emphasized that the New Testament author of the book of Hebrews fully supports the view that Esau’s sinfulness was the reason he freely sold his birthright. After this transaction, Jacob inherited the legal right to receive paternal blessings, which were reserved for the holder of the birthright, and this is exactly what Jacob received with the support of his pious mother Rebekah.

**Conclusion.** It is clear that ancient sages and theologians believed that Esau’s free-will driven sale of his birthright was in no way forced or coerced by Jacob. Based on her revelation from God, Rebekah enthusiastically helped and defended Jacob, as did her predecessor Sarah regarding her chosen son. By doing so, and placing herself in what might be a compromising position, Rebekah is the first person in Scripture noted as offering herself in the place of another: an early picture of Jesus. Her compassionate actions, coupled with Jacob’s underlying protection of his brother Esau by not allowing him to steal back or accept the birthright that he had clearly passed on, evidenced Jacob’s prominent and inevitable role in the line of the righteous seed. Following this ordeal, Esau’s response reveals his malicious and evil nature. Jacob, on the other hand, who experienced communication and deep relationship with God, was affirmed by the Lord God as a member of the righteous lineage leading to Christ.

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### СУЧАСНИЙ ПОГЛЯД НА АНТИЧНУ ГЕРМЕНЕВТИКУ БІБЛІЙНОГО ІСАВА ТА ЯКОВА

Ця стаття звертає увагу на той факт, що деякі сучасні біблійні коментатори розглядають патріарха Якова як опортуніста, який «витіснив свого брата Ісава, просячи його продати власне первородство.» Однак Генрі М. Морріс зазначає, що біблійний текст не встановлює такого зв'язку. Дерек Кіднер також наголошує на тому, що біблійний контекст не коментує «те, що Яків обдурив свого брата, але що Ісав зневажив власне первородство, а Послання до Євреїв 12 повністю поділяє цю думку.» Так само Р. Кент Хьюз стверджує, що «заклучна фраза біблійного тексту (Буття 25:36) вказує на вирок автора, оскільки він не говорить: «Таким чином Яків використав свого брата, а Ісав зневажив його первородне право, але лише те, що Ісав зневажив [відрікся] свого первородного права.» Тому «власний гріх Ісава запечатав його гірку долю.» Мета цього дослідження - спонукати всіх читачів біблійного тексту до більш зваженого та ретельного патристичного герменевтичного підходу, уникаючи сучасних емоційних суджень про біблійний наратив. Для цілісності цього дослідження стаття описує, як протягом тисячоліть юдейські та християнські богослови інтерпретували цей біблійний уривок взагалі і, зокрема, розглядали життя плотського Ісава та праведного патріарха Якова.

**Ключові слова:** Книга Буття, Біблійна Екзегетика, Древня Герменевтика, Плотський Ісав, Патріарх Яків.