

# THE DECEPTION FOR THE BLESSING

## Genesis 26:34—29:8

The fourth episode of the Jacob Narrative (Gen. 26:34—29:8) is the longest narrative in the entire Jacob Narrative. As Figure 1 indicates, the author's narrative style is artistically balanced. It needs to be because of the many and very vehement emotions that are released, which reaches its climax in Genesis 27:30-38 (X) in which the deception of Jacob and Rebekah is discovered by both Isaac and Esau, all of which our writer desires us to thoroughly understand.

The symmetrical composition of this episode has as its main purpose to arrange the material around four main characters (a complicated action which occurs partly in the absence of the firstborn). The conflict initiated in episodes one (Gen. 25:19b-26; 8 verses) and two (Gen. 25:27-34; 7 verses) is continued here, but greatly deepened that the togetherness of the entire family is broken in a tragic way. And all this because Jacob, supported by Rebekah, his mother, pursued the goal of the LORD's oracle (Gen. 25:23), but by the wrong means! They desired to obtain what was the firstborn's right (double portion of the inheritance, priestly function of the family, and ruler), even at the cost of the ties of blood that connect them with Isaac and Esau. Reverence and solidarity, both valuable assets in the world of the ancient Near East, they despise, and together divide the family into two parties (reminiscent of Matt. 10:34-37).

### Literary Analysis of Genesis 26:34—29:9

Prologue: Esau marries daughters of the Hittites (26:34-35)

- A Isaac and the son of the blessing/firstborn [=Esau] (27:1-5a)
- B Rebekah and Jacob conspire to deceive Isaac (27:5b-17)
- C Jacob deceives Isaac for the blessing (27:18-27a)
- D Isaac (positively) blesses Jacob (27:27b-29)
- X The Deception Discovered (27:30-38)**
- D' Isaac (negatively) blesses Esau (27:39-40)
- C' Esau seeks revenge against Jacob because of the deception (27:41)
- B' Rebekah and Jacob plot to lessen the effects of his deception (27:42-45)
- A' Isaac and the son of the blessing/firstborn [=Jacob!] (27:46—28:5)

Epilogue: Esau marries a daughter of Ishmael (28:6-9)

Figure 1.

## Analysis of the Literary Structure

**A Isaac and the son of the blessing/firstborn [=Esau] (Gen. 27:1-5a)**

**A' Isaac and the son of the blessing/firstborn [Jacob!] (Gen. 27:46—28:5)**

In both A and A' Isaac sends off the “firstborn” for the benefit of his life; in A it is the intended “blessing” which Isaac will bestow on Esau, but in the end (A') it is Jacob who has received the blessing and has usurped Esau's position of firstborn. And again, he deals Esau a decisive setback, for because of Rebekah's prompting, he sets out in search of a “proper” wife on a journey similar to one which had once been undertaken for his father's bride (cf. Gen. 24), and thus he leaves Esau behind in his undesirable marriages with heathen woman.

**B Rebekah and Jacob conspire to deceive Isaac (Gen. 27:5b-17)**

**B' Rebekah and Jacob plot to lessen the effects of the deception (Gen. 27:42-45)**

Around the action of deception and that of seeking revenge, another ring is formed by B (Rebekah and Jacob conspire to deceive Isaac for his patriarchal blessing; vv. 6-17) and B' (Rebekah and Jacob once again conspire together, but this time to soften the results of their deception; vv. 42-45), in both parts a scheming mother who shows her son the way.

After Rebekah gives Jacob a summary of the events that just had transpired between Isaac and Esau (vv. 6-7), she speaks to Jacob only about this guile and his part in it. Her argument (B; vv. 8-13) is framed by the gentle but resolute pressure she exerts on Jacob. Consider the following:

B “Now therefore, my son, listen to me as I command you” (v. 8)

B' “Now therefore, my son, obey my voice . . .”. (v. 43)

It should be noted that twice in one vers in B and B' “her older son” and “her younger son” are (“brotherly”) side by side. These are fairly neutral terms, which correspond to the unalterable biological facts. But the word “firstborn” is nowhere used *descriptively*! The word is used only in direct speech by the son who appears before Isaac to receive the blessing (vv. 19 and 32)!

What does it mean when the word “firstborn” is never found on the lips of the parents? Negatively speaking, it means at least that the matter has already been decided (cf. Gen. 25:23); positively speaking it suggests that nowhere is Esau literally the “firstborn”, but only the “elder son”, because Jacob is destined to be the first of his generation and accordingly has bought the “birthright” in Genesis 25:27-34. Thus the “birthright” does not figure prominently in this episode (as it does in Gen. 25:27-34); it is

only the claim, the disputed position on the ground of which the struggle rages for the real issue of the “blessing”.

**C Jacob deceives Isaac for the blessing (Gen. 27:18-27a)**

**C' Esau seeks revenge against Jacob because of his deception (Gen. 27:41)**

Forming the next outward ring is C, wherein Jacob deceives Isaac (vv. 18-27a) and C', where we hear Esau's inner thinking, seeking revenge against Jacob because of his deception of their father (v. 41).

**D Isaac (positively) blesses Jacob (Gen. 27:27b-29)**

**D' Isaac (negatively) blesses Esau (Gen. 27:39-40)**

Flanking the heart of the thematic center of the entire episode (X) is D. Isaac positively blesses Jacob and in D' Isaac negatively blesses Esau. The negative blessing which Esau receives is the exact opposite of Jacob's which renders him the true blessing.

**X The Deception Discovered (Gen. 27:30-38)**

The center of the chiasmic structure answers Rebekah and Jacob's quest: “Will our deception be successful”? This tension is greatly increased by Isaac's investigations, made again and again (vv. 20-26), until the terrible climax in which Isaac discovers the deceit. For Esau the shock is even greater; his intense bitterness finds an outlet in brooding on revenge and that in turn leads to great apprehension on the part of Jacob and Rebekah.

Verses 30-38 form the thematic core of this episode (Figure 2). It is the clearly the crowning and literary climax of this episode. This may be seen by following factors:

- The words “Jacob had hardly gone out from” and “Esau his brother came in” in verse 30 are very important. They call to mind how Esau “came forth first” in Genesis 25:25 and how “afterward his brother came forth” (Gen. 25:26). During birth, Jacob had lost, but now he has won this round. Now he has been the first to go out, and now his brother Esau comes after him. Ironically, the tables have been turned. Full of triumphant feelings Jacob thinks he has realized his destiny which had been prophesied in an oracle.
- Verses 33 and 34 offer a moving parallel about the shock of the deception discovered: “Then Isaac trembled violently” (v. 33); “he [Esau] cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry” (v. 34). As early as verse 32, Isaac begins to realize the deception with the wording of the event, and in which Esau begins in verse 34 and extends to verse 38.

- Esau’s discourse is framed by the very sentence that indicates what is the most important thing for him: “Bless me, even me also, O my father!” (B, v. 34b; and B’, v. 38a). But this demand is enclosed in another literary closure in verse 34a (a) Esau cries out bitterly before he speaks, and after his entreaty to his father (a’) he “lifted his voice and wept” (v. 38b). Twice he also asks his father for the impossible, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me” (v. 36c and 38a)? Thus the chiasmic structure of this episode has an internal chiasmic structure found at its very heart (Figure 3).

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### Literary Structure of Genesis 27:30-38

Introduction: Jacob and Rebekah’s ruse is discovered by Isaac (Gen. 27:30-33)

- a “When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry (v. 34a).
- b and said to his father, ‘Bless me, even me also, O my father’ (v. 34b).
- c And he [Isaac] said, ‘Your brother came deceitfully, and has taken away your blessing’ (v. 35).
- Then he [Esau] said, ‘Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing’. And he said, ‘Have you not reserved a blessing for me?’ (v. 36)?**
- c’ But Isaac answered and said to Esau, ‘Behold, I have made him your master, and all his relatives I have given to him as servants; and with grain and new wine I have sustained him. Now as for you then, what can I do, my son’ (v. 37)”
- b’ And Esau said to his father, ‘Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father’ (v. 38a-b)
- a’ So Esau lifted his voice and wept (v. 38c)

**Figure 2.**

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- As noted in Figure 2, the episode reaches its singular climax in verse 36 wherein Esau bitterly and correctly articulates the explanation of Jacob’s name. The ambiguity around “Jacob” (bq(y) when he took hold of his brother’s heel at birth has now disappeared (Gen. 25:26); here is the definite proof that the “taking hold of the heel” is unequivocal and unfavorable, connoting deception. Within the immediate context, Isaac stated: “Your brother came deceitfully, and has taken away your blessing” (v. 35). Now Esau bitterly retorts: “Is he not rightly name Jacob (bq(y), for he has supplanted me (y**nbq**(y**w**) these two times”? Esau has

been supplanted (the verbal form of the Hebrew consonants which make up the name “Jacob”), and the first occurrence is explicitly told to us by Esau when “He took away my birthright” (cf. Gen. 25:27-34). So then, the chiasmic center links directly with the scene of the pottage of lentils, in that the former episode as the cause becomes the results of this episode. One may say that one thing leads to another.

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### **The Literary Core of Genesis 26:34—28:9 (Genesis 27:36)**

“Then he [Esau] said,

- v. 36a      (a) for is not he is called ( ) r q) his name (wm#)  
                  (b) Jacob (bq (y)  
                  (b') for he has supplanted me (ynbq (yw)  
                  (a') these two times (Mym (p hz)?
- v. 36b      (a) My birthright (ytrkb)  
                  (b) he took away (xql ),  
                  (b') and behold, now he has taken away (xql )  
                  (a') my blessing (ytkrb)”.

Figure 3.

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- The literary artistry of our author is not lacking even in the heart of the chiasmic center (v. 36), for within its structure, there is clear poetic and chiasmic parallelism (Figure 3). In verse 36a, (b) and (b') go together because of Esau's obvious word play on Jacob's name and the Hebrew verb “supplant”. The parallelism between (a) and (a') is not as readily apparent except when one examines the Hebrew idiom of Esau's redundancy: “he is called Jacob” would have been sufficient, or even “his name is Jacob”; but in poetic style, Esau employs both to balance “these two times” in (a')!
- v.            Additionally, (b) and (b') in verse 36b are balanced by the same verb “to take”. However, for this to work chiasmically, our author proleptically placed the noun “my birthright” before the verb “to take”, which is not the normal Hebrew sentence order! Whereas the normal Hebrew sentence order is verb, subject, object(s) following, here the direct object “my birthright” is placed before the verb. These verbs are enclosed by “birthright” (ytrkb) and “blessing” (ytkrb) in (a) and (a') respectively. This parallel in (a) and (a') brings the much sought

after blessing into juxtaposition with that of the birthright. Whereas the words “birthright” and “blessing” display alliteration, they also rhyme with the possessive pronoun “my” attached to each word.

The key words in this episode, then, are “blessing” (ytkrb; the noun [“blessing”] occurs seven times [7x1] and its verbal form [“to bless”] exactly twenty-one times [7x3]) and “birthright” (ytrkb). One only needs to note the transposition of the Hebrew consonants in these two words to understand the significant word play and pun occurring in verse 36. Such literary devices, which remain invisible in the English translations, serve to bond various individual parts together for the original Hebrew reader.

The entire chiasmus of verse 36 emphasizes that Jacob’s task is now complete. Jacob obtained Esau’s birthright with a pottage of lentils (cf. Gen. 25:27-34), and now, he has obtained his blessing as well. Esau’s remarks are a concise summary of the sense of the narrative thus far. Esau has lost everything, and Jacob has gained it all.

To perceive this parallelism in verse 36 (as well as in other places) is not necessarily to understand the effect it has in a text. But parallelism, like other formal features in a text, does help to structure the text and thereby has an impact on how its meaning is arrived. By observing this parallelism, the reader suddenly understands the relationship between two separate narrative sequences. Jacob’s acquiring of the rights of the firstborn (Gen. 25:27-34) is equated with his acquiring the blessing in Genesis 27.

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