Jacob, Esau, and the Constructive Possibilities of the Other

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Abstract: The points of contact between Genesis 27 and 32–33 have inspired significant commentary through the years, much of which has revolved around the question of whether the latter should be understood as the fulfillment of Isaac's pronouncements over Jacob and Esau in the former. This essay highlights the role of the displaced firstborn Esau in these narratives, suggesting that a reading which is attentive to the unchosen brother can offer fresh perspective for thinking about some of the complexities surrounding blessing and fulfillment in the Jacob Cycle.

Key words: Jacob, Esau, Genesis 27, Genesis 32–33, blessing, election, particularity, otherness

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The stories concerning Jacob in the book of Genesis present a number of complexities. Along with various historical and source-critical questions (on which, see Blum 2012), a perennial interpretive issue has been how to make sense of the relationship between election, blessing, and fulfillment in this cycle of stories. It is clear by the conclusion of the Jacob-Esau narratives that, in the world of the text, Israel's ancestor Jacob is the chosen son, the one through whom the line of Abraham will continue. And yet, from antiquity readers have struggled to reconcile the climactic scene in Genesis 32–33 with pronouncements found in earlier chapters, as a close reading of these stories leaves the reader with a number of nagging questions related to whether or not Jacob's blessing has indeed been fulfilled. In what follows I suggest that giving further attention to the role of the unchosen brother Esau can offer fresh perspective for thinking about the complex dynamic of election, blessing, and fulfillment in these narratives.

1. Genesis 27 and Genesis 32–33: points of contact

The broad contours of the Jacob Cycle are well known. Genesis 25:19–34 and 26:34–28:9 (hereafter referred to as Gen 27) recount the story of Isaac's two sons, highlighting the birth of the twins, Jacob's acquisition of Esau's birthright, and the younger son's deceptive acquisition of the blessing of the firstborn with the assistance of his mother. The events in these chapters lead to Jacob fleeing for his life, leaving his

homeland to live with his uncle Laban for what turns out to be twenty years (Gen 28:10–32:1). The scene in chapters 32–33 then recounts Jacob's return to the land of promise, and the climactic reunion with his estranged brother.

Numerous points of contact between the events of Genesis 27 and Genesis 32–33 have been highlighted, including narrative, thematic, structural, and verbal resonances. To begin with, commentators have long pointed out the general narrative and thematic resonances between Genesis 27 and 33. As von Rad notes, Genesis 33 needs to be read in relation to Genesis 27, "for its relation to the story of deception is unmistakable" (von Rad: 325; cf. Schmid: 214). Fishbane and others have come to similar conclusions on structural grounds, arguing that chapters 27 and 33 can—indeed, should—be read in light of one another (Fishbane: 51; Dicou: 123).

In addition to these broad resonances, there are also verbal links to consider, with key terms and phrases such as "bowing down," "neck," "kissing," and "weeping" all recurring in these chapters. While Isaac's blessing of Jacob notes that "sons of his mother" will bow down to him (Gen 27:29), in Genesis 33 Jacob and all his family bow down before his brother (Gen 33:3; cf. 33:6–7). In Genesis 27, Jacob's deception of his father is sealed with a kiss (Gen 27:27), while in Genesis 33, Esau welcomes his brother with a kiss of his own (Gen 33:4). Further, Jacob refers to his brother as "lord" and himself as Esau's "servant" throughout Genesis 32–33, seemingly contradicting the blessing bestowed on him by his father in Genesis 27 ("be lord over your brothers," Gen 27:29). Finally, perhaps the most intriguing linguistic resonance is Jacob's use of the word *berakah* in place of *minḥâ* in 33:11. While Jacob has throughout the narrative been

referring to his gift for Esau with the expected term *minḥâ*, he abruptly switches his terminology in v. 11 and refers to the gift as *berakah*, the word normally used for "blessing" in the larger cycle of stories, including prominent use in chapter 27.

Thus, there are a number of aspects of these texts—thematic, structural, and linguistic—that invite the reader to consider how Genesis 27 and Genesis 32–33, and the themes found therein, might be understood in light of one another.

2. Making sense of Genesis 27 and Genesis 32–33: interpretive approaches

What, then, might the events in Genesis 32–33 have to do with the blessing bestowed in Genesis 27? Jacob comes before his brother, bowing to Esau instead of being bowed to, referring to Esau as his lord, and offering gifts and perhaps even a blessing to his brother. As Alter notes, this episode "has a look of disconfirming what has been so abundantly confirmed" (Alter: 47). There are a number of reading strategies with which interpreters have approached this issue through the years. These are heuristically grouped below into three categories that give a sense of the various ways in which the relationship of these texts and issues can be understood.

2.1 The blessing is not at stake

The first interpretive approach sees Jacob's bowing and subservient language as irrelevant to earlier blessings, because there are other issues at work in the text. Thus, a common reading in both the early Jewish and Christian traditions is that the announcement and blessings in Genesis 25 and 27 refer to a "future Jacob," and these

were never meant to be fulfilled in the patriarch's lifetime. Some early rabbis interpret Jacob's acquiescence to Esau within an eschatological framework, noting that in the end Jacob's blessing and dominion will be evident (*Gen. Rab*. 78.12.3–5). Meanwhile, for many church fathers, this future Jacob means the church. Augustine writes,

> And when Jacob came to him, he bowed down to him from a long way off. So how shall the elder be slave to the younger, when the younger manifestly bows down to the elder? But the reason why these things were not fulfilled in the actual history of the two men is to make us understand that they were said of a future Jacob. The younger son received the first place, and the elder son, the people of the Jews, lost the first place. See how Jacob has filled the whole world, has taken possession of nations and kingdoms (Augustine, *Sermon 5.5*).

Thus, for many pre-modern readers in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, figural readings of these stories indicate that Jacob's reception of the blessing is not at stake as there is another referent that makes sense of the narrative.

A not dissimilar interpretive move is made by those who are interested in exploring source-critical questions and concomitant political-historical realities. Such readings attempt to understand the complexities of the Jacob Cycle in terms of later events in Israelite history, and can take several forms. Some, such as Gunkel, understand Genesis 33 as an explanation of Edom breaking free from Israelite domination that commenced under David (2 Kgs 8:20–22; Gunkel: 306–08). Blum offers a more nuanced

reading in this vein, arguing that Genesis 27 and 32–33 can be explained in terms of traditions with particular historical and geographical referents. In Blum's view, Genesis 27 was an earlier text, written from the perspective of Judah and aware of Edom's subjugation at the hands of David. Genesis 33, however, was written from a northern perspective, challenging the imperialistic tendencies of the south, and explaining the change in fortune that has taken place with regard to Judah and Edom. Here historical-political realities in Judah and Israel account for the complex portrayal of Jacob and his brother (Blum 1984: 147).

Consequently, the non-fulfillment of the blessing in Genesis 33 is, for many pre-modern and modern readers, a non-issue. The blessing of Jacob as such is not at stake, as the text points beyond itself to broader spiritual, historical, or political realities.

2.2 Jacob is blessed in spite of appearances to the contrary

A second interpretive approach can be found in readings which suggest that Jacob is blessed in spite of any appearances to the contrary. This approach again takes on several forms. One example is found in the work of John Calvin, who notes that, regardless of what appears to be happening in this scene, Jacob is the one who is truly blessed. Indeed, for Calvin, Genesis 32–33 offers an example of Jacob's spiritual foresight. He writes, "If any one object, that in this manner he depreciated his right of primogeniture; the answer is easy, that the holy man, by the eyes of faith, was looking higher; for he knew that the effect of the benediction was deferred to its proper season, and was, therefore, now like the decaying seed under the earth" (Calvin: 206–07). He

continues, “Therefore, although he was despoiled of his patrimony, and lay contemptible at his brother’s feet; yet since he knew that his birthright was secured to him, he was contented with this latent right, counted honors and riches as nothing, and did not shrink from being regarded as an inferior in the presence of his brother” (207).

This is a common reading in the Christian tradition—that Jacob has his eyes on a higher, spiritual prize, and is willing to concede some material, temporal gains because of enlightened spiritual foresight (see also Ambrose’s *Jacob and the Happy Life* and Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Genesis*). As happens quite often in readings of Jacob and Esau, however, Calvin cannot resist also denigrating Esau, as he writes: “even while cruelty was pent up within, the feeling of humanity may have had a temporary ascendancy. For even in the reprobate, God’s established order of nature prevails. … It is no wonder, that for the sake of his servant Jacob, [God] should have composed the fierce mind of Esau to gentleness” (Calvin: 208).

A related interpretive approach makes the argument that it is not Jacob’s spiritual foresight that sets him apart, but his deceptiveness as a trickster that helps him keep his brother at bay and the blessing in hand (on the trickster motif, see Niditch 1987). In these readings, the cunning Jacob is indeed blessed, and Esau once again walks away empty handed. Rashi, for instance, stresses that Esau’s pity was aroused by Jacob’s gifts and prostration (Rosenbaum and Silbermann: 161). Gunkel notes that Jacob is using flattery and “psychologically compelling speech” to persuade the easily duped Esau (Gunkel: 344, 355). Petersen, drawing on Marcel Mauss and the anthropological study of gift-giving, suggests that Jacob’s gifts were not given as a decoy or flattery, but to

"overpower Esau economically" (Petersen: 20). Petersen makes the claim that Esau is being duped by his brother and, like his uncle Laban, has to go home on his own, the victim of Jacob's quick wit:

> Genesis 33 presented a dire situation, a fraternal encounter that might have eventuated in fratricide. That potential calamity was averted by Jacob's use of the strategy of gift giving and his ability to conduct verbal warfare. Moreover, Esau played by those same rules. By accepting the gift, he agreed not to attack Jacob. And by engaging Jacob in dialogue, he opened the door to a resolution through a war of wits rather than a war of weapons. (Petersen: 21).

For Petersen, however, this does not reflect poorly on Jacob, but points to his triumphal status: "Esau lost that war, but honored the game by leaving the playing field after he had lost a second time" (Petersen: 21). John Anderson has recently offered a more theologically nuanced argument for the trickster motif. In Anderson's reading, Jacob the trickster deceives his brother, but it is with the help of his God; Jacob returns to the land of promise safely, his blessing intact, because he has worked with God "to thwart Esau and any threat he may pose to the promise" (Anderson 2011: 171; cf. 160–69).

Consequently, in spite of appearances to the contrary, a host of commentators note that Jacob is indeed blessed; this may be because of his spiritual foresight, or because of his mental acumen and trickery. Regardless, it is Jacob who is blessed, and Esau, more often than not, the object who is to be overcome.

2.3 Partial or non-fulfillment of the blessing

A third reading strategy attempts to make sense of the complex portrayal of Jacob in these chapters, while resisting the urge to defend Jacob or to explain away the narrative and theological complexities. This interpretive stream cites Genesis 32–33 as proof of the partial non-fulfillment, if not outright failure, of the announcement and blessings given in Genesis 25 and 27. As Turner notes, "Rather than showing the inexorable, or perhaps simply inevitable, fulfillment, the reader may perceive a well-documented succession of incidents which guarantee their non-fulfillment" (Turner: 134–35). Jacob, in referring to Esau as his lord and himself as Esau's servant, and in bowing down to his brother, is in fact living out the reversal of the announcement and blessing of Genesis 25 and 27. Noting that after the blessing of Genesis 27, all seventeen occurrences of "serve" or "servant" refer to Jacob, Clines quips that "Jacob serves everyone; no one serves Jacob. So much for the blessing" (Clines: 60–61). For Clines, Turner, and others, the promise of Jacob's dominion over his brother is (at best) partially fulfilled in the scene in Genesis 32–33 (cf. Crüsemann 1994).

There are, then, a variety of approaches that can be taken when trying to make sense of blessing and fulfillment in the Jacob Cycle, producing readings that vary greatly depending in large part on the perspective from which the text is engaged. Is there a way to account for the tensions that emerge in and between these various interpretive approaches? That is, can the complexities of the narrative be acknowledged while

allowing for the fact that the tradition likely envisages that Jacob is indeed blessed? And is it possible to read these narratives in a way which recognizes Jacob's status as the chosen son, while avoiding triumphalism? In comparing the readings noted above, a recurring issue is the fact that there tends to be little room for understanding Esau in constructive terms with regard to the main dynamics of the story, and I would suggest that paying more attention to the unchosen brother in this cycle of stories may offer a way forward that can help navigate some of these tensions.

3. The divine-human connection in Genesis 32–33

Interpreters have, over the years, offered readings that make note of the portrayal of Esau in these narratives, and a number of these are more sympathetic to the unchosen brother and his role in the story (see, e.g., Kaminsky: 54; Heard: 128–30; Spina: 14–34). Keeping in mind such readings that begin to account for Esau, I would like to push the issue further by suggesting that the unchosen brother is *central* to the narrative as it unfolds. One reason for this suggestion is the recurring and somewhat surprising theme in Genesis 32–33 that both implicitly and explicitly connects the human and the divine (Anderson 2016). There is an intersection of the human and the divine that becomes clearer as the scene develops, and which raises interesting possibilities for thinking about Esau and his place in the story. A number of such examples are worth highlighting.

One might first note the broad framework of Genesis 32–33 in the larger cycle of stories. Genesis 32 occurs just after Jacob's separation from his uncle Laban, following a tense series of encounters (31:51–54). While there are several points of correspondence

between Jacob's separation from Laban and his encounter with Esau, it is also worth noting that these two familial encounters structurally envelope Jacob's meeting with the opponent at the Jabbok. Indeed, when read in light of one another, Jacob's encounters with Laban, the stranger at the Jabbok, and with Esau reiterate what Jacob's opponent will declare when changing his name to Israel: Jacob is truly one who struggles with both God and humanity (Gen 32:28).

Further, a number of linguistic issues also highlight the relationship between the divine and the human in these chapters. As he begins his journey back toward Canaan, Jacob sends gifts and messengers ahead to his brother Esau (Gen 32:4–6). These messengers deliver Jacob's message to Esau, which includes the reason for the gifts which he is sending ahead of himself: "that I might find favor (*ḥēn*) in your eyes" (32:6). The term "favor" (*ḥēn*) will play an important role in these chapters, along with "gift" (*minḥâ*) (Fretheim: 203–06). When Jacob and Esau have reunited in chapter 33, Esau asks about the gifts which Jacob had sent to him. Jacob reiterates the message which the messengers had earlier delivered: these were meant "to find favor (*ḥēn*) in the eyes of my lord" (33:5). This leads to a discussion between the brothers as to whether or not Esau will keep this gift. Finally, Jacob implores,

> No, please, if I have now found favor (*ḥēn*) in your eyes, then accept my gift (*minḥâ*) from my hand. For I have seen your face as one sees the face of God because you have accepted me favorably. Take, please, my blessing (*berakah*)

> which was brought to you, because God has been gracious (*ḥēn*) to me, and because I have all I need (Gen 33:10–11).

In the text just quoted, two issues are noteworthy. First is the surprising use of *berakah*: up until this point Jacob has referred to his gift for Esau with *minḥâ*, a term which recurs in 33:10. However, in vs. 11, Jacob urges Esau to take his *berakah*, the word normally used for blessing. Whether this is an "unconscious double-entendre" (Fishbane: 52) on the part of Jacob or an attempt to undo past wrongs (Levenson: 67), its use in this encounter brings to mind the events of Gen 27 and the complex past which these brothers share. Second, while Jacob here uses the familiar language of "favor" and "gift," there is a shift in how these terms are used. As Fretheim notes, with Esau's favor already gained, "The gift is now offered by Jacob, not to obtain favor, but in gratitude for God's favor … made visible in the face of Esau" (Fretheim: 204).

Along with these word plays, readers have long suggested cultic overtones in Jacob's language in vv. 10–11, pointing to further intersections of the human and the divine in Genesis 32–33 (see Rashi on these verses, in Rosenbaum and Silbermann: 162). Weinfeld, for example, notes that

> "This *minḥâ* and Esau's acceptance of it function representatively by signaling "favor" (*ḥēn*) and "favorable acceptance" (*rāṣâ*) between the two hostile brothers. J pointedly draws out the meaning of this *minḥâ* for the sphere of human relationships by using it like a sacrificial term. … Thus even in the case of the

> profane *minḥâ* the term's cultic-sacral connotation can adroitly be brought into play; this presupposes that the *minḥâ* offering was accorded an extremely wide sphere of efficacy in mollifying the deity … and similarly presupposed such efficacy being operative in the secular sphere" (Weinfeld and Fabry: 416).

Returning to the nocturnal encounter at the Jabbok in 32:25–32, several more elements in this scene point to the fluid relationship between human and divine in these chapters. To begin with, the identity of Jacob's opponent has led to much commentary and speculation. We read in 32:25 that "a man" wrestled with Jacob. A common refrain in rabbinic interpretation is that this refers to Esau's guardian angel (*Gen. Rab.* 72:3). Gunkel and others have argued that the assailant was a local river spirit (Gunkel: 350–53). Spina, meanwhile, has suggested that Jacob's opponent is an "everyman," conjuring those with whom Jacob has struggled: Isaac, Esau, and Laban (Spina: 24). The most common reading, however, is that Jacob here encounters the God of his fathers (cf. Hos 12:4–5). There are difficulties with this reading as well, specifically in relation to theophany and anthropomorphism; and yet, Jacob's name for the site, Peniel ("face of God"), and its etiology ("because I have seen God face to face") make this a plausible interpretation (Moberly 1992). Whatever the case, the text is both ambiguous and suggestive, and attentive readers have long noted the interplay of human and divine when attempting to identify Jacob's opponent.

The encounter at the Jabbok also contains a number of linguistic resonances that point to the intersection of Esau and the divine. In 32:25 the text notes that the man

"wrestled" with Jacob until daybreak. In the following chapter, when the brothers finally reunite, we are told that that Esau "embraces" Jacob (33:4). We see here, as commentators have noted, a close phonetic resemblance between Esau's embrace (*ḥabaq*) and Jacob's encounter at the Jabbok (*ʾabaq*). Further, when Jacob names the site Peniel, he comments that he has seen God face to face and his life was spared and he was delivered (32:31). This statement reminds the reader of Jacob's prayer earlier in the chapter, where we find the same root used as Jacob beseeches God to "deliver" (*naṣal*) him from Esau. Both of these resonances invert Jacob's (and the reader's) expectations, and again bring together the human and the divine: Jacob receives a fraternal embrace when he expects another struggle; and while he assumes he will need deliverance from his brother, it is the stranger at the Jabbok, he later realises, that was in fact the real threat.

The encounter at the Jabbok points to a final trope in these chapters: the use of the term *panîm*, "face" (see Simian-Yofre: 589–615). We find this term used in a variety of ways throughout ch. 32, beginning with Jacob dispatching gifts and messengers ahead of himself (literally, "before his face"; 32:4, 17). There is a heightened use of this term in 32:21, as Jacob details in an internal monologue how he hopes the scene will play out: "I will cover his face with these gifts I am sending ahead of me. After this, I will see his face, and perhaps he will lift up my face." In this verse, the term "face" is used in several ways: Jacob hopes to appease his brother ("cover his face," a phrase with cultic overtones), so that when he meets him ("see his face"), his brother will forgive him ("lift up my face"). The "face" motif resurfaces in the Jabbok scene, discussed above. After

the encounter with and subsequent blessing from the stranger, Jacob names the site Peniel ("face of God"), noting that he has seen God "face to face" and lived (32:31). Finally, the use of this theme climaxes in the reunion of the estranged brothers. In 33:10, Jacob says to Esau, "I have seen your face as one sees the face of God because you have accepted me favorably." As Fokkelman notes, "Esau's behavior is definitively coupled with God's behavior. The meeting with Esau lies in a single perspective with the meeting with God" (Fokkelman: 226).

4. The constructive possibilities of the other

There are, to be sure, elements in these chapters that complicate an entirely positive reading of Esau. Nevertheless, the text of Genesis 32–33 encourages the reader, in a number of ways, to consider the intersection of the human and the divine, and with this to give due attention to Esau and his place in the narrative: the dual (and cultic?) usage of the language of appeasement and pacification used by Jacob; the imagery invoked by the stranger in renaming Jacob; Jacob's use of "favor" to refer both to God's provision and Esau's acceptance; and Jacob's explicit comparison of seeing the face of Esau and seeing the face of God. Indeed, the narrative goes to great lengths to let the reader know that this association is not lost on Jacob. The God whom Jacob asks for protection and deliverance becomes his foe, before blessing him. And the one from whom Jacob assumed he needed deliverance instead welcomes him with a fraternal embrace, a surprising and playful narrative inversion. This might suggest that the reader,

like Jacob, is encouraged to consider more attentively the significant place of Esau in this narrative.

An implication of giving attention to Esau and the divine-human motif is that such a reading can offer an alternative to the interpretive predisposition toward triumphalism, or the assumption that such triumphalism is inherent in the text and tradition. As noted above, many readers explain the unexpected dimensions of these texts in ways which depict Jacob as triumphant and deserving of his blessing, or as indicative of the ethnic/nationalistic superiority implicit in the text. In either case, such readings often lead to a disregard for or denigration of Esau. However, the text does not need to be read in this way; while many readers over the years have found reason to doubt Esau and his intentions, giving the unchosen brother the benefit of the doubt in this instance can open up interpretive options beyond readings that downplay or denigrate Esau and his place in the story.

Indeed, allowing for interpretive options beyond triumphalist readings can allow more space for Esau to be considered in constructive terms with regard to the dynamics of blessing and fulfillment within the narrative. To return to the examples noted above, much is made of Jacob's bowing before Esau, referring to him as lord, and attempting to give back the "blessing" to his brother. It is quite natural to see these as indications of the non-fulfillment of the earlier blessing, as the imagery and language are quite similar. And yet, if Esau is allowed to be more than a foil for Jacob, one can make the case that it is Esau's acquiescence concerning the blessing and birthright, seen in his gracious behavior in Genesis 33, which allows for an unexpected (and, in many ways, counterintuitive)

fulfillment of Jacob's blessing. Just when it seems like the announcement and blessing of Gen 25 and 27 have been turned on their heads—with word plays and motifs building narrative tension that suggest such an outcome—Esau's magnanimity entails that Jacob's story will continue, and he will return safely to the land of promise. A surprising precedent for this reading is found in *Gen. Rab.* 78.11. Commenting on the reunion of Isaac's sons, R. Aibu states that as Jacob was returning to the Promised Land, "the blessings were still unsteady in [Jacob's] possession. Where did the blessings become securely in his hand? Here: [when Esau said] 'keep what you have for yourself.'" If Jacob is blessed, this is, at least in part, due to an unwarranted and surprising act of kindness experienced in the encounter with his estranged brother.

5. Conclusion

Readers of Genesis are forced to navigate a number of complexities that emerge in the stories of Jacob and Esau, and one such issue relates to how these texts might point to the fulfillment of Jacob's blessing when the narrative itself seems to indicate otherwise. Not surprisingly, a wide variety of interpretive approaches have been employed through the centuries that highlight these tensions. Giving more sustained attention to Esau, I have suggested, may provide alternative models for thinking about the dynamics of blessing and fulfillment in the Jacob Cycle. A close reading of these chapters demonstrates a recurring motif that links the human and the divine in Genesis 32–33, with a number of implicit and explicit associations that encourage the reader to consider more carefully Esau's place in the story. Recognizing the significant place of

the other in this account can help mitigate the triumphalism that is common in readings of these chapters, which in turn can allow the reader to consider the constructive (and surprising) role Esau might have in the unfolding story of Jacob and his blessing. When read from this perspective, Esau is a reminder that there is room to reflect on these complex issues—blessing and fulfillment, identity and particularity—in light of, not in spite of, the other.

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