CHAPTER 6

# "ISAAC TREMBLED EXCEEDINGLY"

(*Gen. 32*)

We sometimes meet admirable persons who make little or no impact on us until we see them in the context of other people. This is often due to physical weakness. Isaac seems to have been such a person. For this there is good reason.

God did not merely choose Israel to be his people; he made it. The birth of Isaac was miraculous – only the birth of the world's Redeemer was more so – so as to be an indication that God was beginning something new. This was confirmed by his being returned to his father, as if by a resurrection from the dead. Though it is nowhere explicitly stated, it is fairly clearly hinted that this outstanding example of God's sovereignty was made even clearer by Isaac's relative physical weakness, something that could in any case be expected of the child of aged parents. On the other hand the twenty years' wait before his sons were born (Gen. 25:20, 26) need not be attributed to physical incapacity. It can equally well be interpreted as a sign that not merely the beginning of Israel but also its continuance depended upon God.

Rebekah's delight, when she found that God had heard her husband's prayer and she was pregnant, soon changed to dismay when the twins in her womb seemed to be fighting. Her dismay was expressed by her incoherent cry, "If so, why I?" (25:22), for it could seem to be a withdrawal of the Divine favour. In her distress she went to inquire of

Jehovah. We are given no details of how or where, but the answer was clear. The two babes were to be the fathers of two nations very different in their natures. The struggle in her womb portended their future struggle and that of their descendants in which the younger would triumph. It is hardly credible that Rebekah did not share the oracle with her husband.

When the time came for the babies to be born, the first to emerge must have been a comic sight, dark reddish brown hair covering him all over. It was natural that he was called Esau, the hairy one. As the midwife tried to lift him she found that the second baby was holding him by the heel; so he in turn was called Jacob (*ya'aqob,* linked with *'aqeb*, heel). Because of what was to happen later, it is worth mentioning that this name was quite neutral. Indeed, it is possible that it meant "May he (God) be at your heels", i.e. be your defending rearguard, for archaeology knows such names in other Semitic languages, including a Ya'qub-ilu, i.e., May God be at his heels, from a Babylonian tablet from the time of Abraham.

The popular idea that the name means *deceiver* or *supplanter* (RV, mg.) is so implausible as to need no refutation. It is based on Esau's bitter cry in 27:36. One who catches you by the heel and throws you can well take advantage of the fact, and it may well be that Jacob himself came to understand his name like that (see next chapter), but basically the meaning has been imported from the way that Jacob behaved.

Extreme hairiness is popularly considered to be a sign of virility and strength; more often than not this is a superstition, but sometimes it is true, and so it was in Esau's case. We must think of the two boys growing up, Jacob slightly built, like the average Semite, but very tough, Esau a mountain of a man. Esau soon showed his liking for a wild and solitary life as he became "skilful in hunting, a man of the open plains" (NEB). Jacob, as the sequel shows, became a skilful shepherd, happiest when his tasks allowed him the

shelter of the family tent at night; Gen. 31:40 reminds us that this could not always be taken for granted.

To this is added the statement that he was an *'ish tam*. This has been a major problem for the translator. The Hebrew is simple enough. By analogy with other passages, e.g. Gen. 6:9, Job 1:1, it should have been rendered "a perfect man" (AV, RV), or better "a blameless man" (Moffatt, RSV, NEB), but this stuck in the translators' throats, for they could not bring themselves to say this of Jacob. AV, RV "plain" means simple or honest; RV, mg., Moffatt, RSV, JB, TEV suggest "quiet", with the alternative "harmless" in RV, mg. "Jacob lived a settled life" (NEB) and "Jacob was a retiring man who kept to his tents" (Speiser) are presumably paraphrases of "quiet", but how suitable are they for a Palestinian shepherd? Behind all these desperate translational efforts lie partly an inherited bias against Jacob, partly a failure to realize adequately that words like perfect and blameless must in a book like the Bible be interpreted in their setting, which is here a comparison with Esau, the wild hunter. The root of *tam* means to be complete. Jacob was a complete man, all sides of his personality developed, in contrast to his brother who was all muscle and physical desire.

We now meet the strange statement, "Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his game" – venison is more specific than the Hebrew warrants. There is no evidence elsewhere that Isaac was one of those gluttons whose god is their stomach. In any case the sequel reveals that Rebekah was quite capable of making a dish out of a home-grown animal as tasty as any meat brought home by Esau. Very often some food or drink has a symbolic meaning for many, and we must assume that the game stood for all that Esau was in Isaac's eyes. All too often fathers allow some quality which they miss in themselves but find in one of their children to cause them to overvalue that son or daughter. If Isaac was comparatively weak, Esau's bulk, strength and hunting skill provided a compensation for his own failings and caused

him to shut his eyes to his equally obvious faults. "But Rebekah loved Jacob" is the natural and inevitable corollary, the more so as Esau almost certainly used his superior strength to bully his brother.

Little harm would have been done, had not Isaac, quite obviously, persuaded himself that his wife had misunderstood the oracle and that Abraham's blessing was to be continued through Esau. God had been quite fair. He willed that through Jacob the blessing should be passed on, but Esau would have the birthright. Isaac hinted what he would do, while Rebekah and Jacob planned how to accomplish God's will, holding, as they obviously did, the popular maxim, "God helps those who help themselves".

Let any who are anxious to criticize and condemn them, pause a moment. The blessing, which God had given to Abraham and his descendants was something under God's control. He had passed over Ishmael, the first-born, to confer it on Isaac. The oracle had implied in reasonably unambiguous language that once again it was to come to the younger. It was clearly something that belonged to Jacob, and Rebekah and her younger son considered that Isaac's clearly suggested intention was nothing less than blatant robbery. What would their critics do, if they were faced with a comparable position, especially, if there were no court of law to turn to? Their critics will indubitably answer that they should have trusted God. Of course they should, but the many controversies about church property and funds – surely God's property! – which have come before secular courts show how easy it is to say what is right, and how hard it often is to do it.

The day came when their planning began to bear fruit. One day Esau came home from his hunting, tired, famished and apparently empty-handed. By strange coincidence there squatted Jacob cooking a rich red soup, which smelt delicious – had Rebekah given her son some cookery hints? Esau said to him, "Let me swallow some of the red, this red, for I am exhausted." "Certainly," said Jacob, "if you will

sell me your birthright for it." "Certainly," said Esau, "what is the use of a birthright, if one is dying?" So Esau sold his birthright, confirming it with an oath, and had his soup with bread thrown in. The comment is, "Thus Esau despised his birthright".

Most readers react violently. The opinion of many of Jacob and his meanness can hardly be reproduced here. Let them think a second time. Esau did not come across Jacob somewhere in the wild but by the family tents. Dying of hunger is a slow process and within half an hour he could have had a square meal. The enigmatic way in which Esau asked for the soup (masked by the standard translations) reveals what really lay behind the incident. Esau did not think of lentils, when he saw the rich red soup. He must have thought it was blood soup with magical virtues, and was doubtless intended to – this was before the Mosaic legislation. The Noachic prohibition of the use of blood for food (9:4), if not forgotten, was probably widely ignored. One feature of the magic was that the name of the vital element should not be mentioned.

The mocking nickname, Edom (Red), doubtless used behind his back, shows that there was more in the incident than Jacob's taking advantage of Esau's physical passions. What deception there was lay in his getting what he asked for but not what he expected. Heb. 12:16 holds up Esau as the example of the immoral or irreligious man who sold his birthright for a single meal. We may, however, well stop and ask ourselves, whether he would have done it, had his father not told him that he would be giving him something far more precious. With a man like Esau it is impossible to tell, but the possibility must not be dismissed out of hand.

The years passed and Isaac's sight failed him. Though he was to live on for many years yet, this premature blindness (he is the only comparable biblical character of whom it is recorded) made him fear that he would die, his duty unfinished. An old man making up his mind to do some-

thing big and decisive rarely finds it easy to hide his excitement; so when Esau came at his father's summons, Rebekah was hiding behind the tent curtains to discover what was exciting her husband. Obviously Isaac could have blessed him then and there, but he wished to make the ceremony as formal as possible. Perhaps, too, he thought that the game would silence the last nagging doubt at the back of his mind.

This was the moment Rebekah and Jacob had feared and discussed over the years. Her husband was now going to pass on the precious blessing to the wrong brother, even though it was God's will, clearly expressed before his birth, that Jacob should have it. She and her son were representative of so many, then and now, who sincerely accept God's will, yet cannot trust him to carry his will through. There are so many who sincerely believe that they, or others, are indispensable, if God's purposes are to be fulfilled.

An urgent message brought Jacob hurrying to his mother. "The moment has come; we must act now, while your brother is out hunting". Two kids and their skins and Esau's best clothes would be enough to deceive an old man, who had allowed his senses to be the interpreters of God's will to him.

Once again we are repelled by the apparent cynicism of Jacob's protest, "I shall seem to him a deceiver; and I shall bring a curse upon me" (27:12, RV). He does not mind deceiving, providing he is not found out; he is afraid of his father's curse, but not of God. But this is to misinterpret what he really said. Jacob said to himself that the blessing was his and therefore underhand means to obtain his own could hardly be called deceit. What he said to his mother was, "I shall seem to be mocking him" (RV, mg., Moffatt, RSV – not NEB, JB, TEV). None of those involved, except perhaps Esau, really believed that a blessing bestowed in God's name bound God's hands, if it were against his will, though a father's curse would be a heavy load. To steal such a blessing could bring no blessing with it. But Isaac had so convinced himself that Esau was the man of God's choice,

that if he found another presenting himself, he would regard it as a mockery of a sacred task entrusted to him, rather than an effort to deceive.

Rebekah's answer, "Upon me be your curse, my son", has by some been compared with Lady Macbeth's, "But screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail". There is, however, a nobility about it that is often missed. A knowledge of Abraham's response to God's call had lived on in the family of Nahor, and we gain the impression in Gen. 24 that when Rebekah enthusiastically accepted her place as Isaac's wife it was with the consciousness that she would be filling a place in God's purpose. Over the years she must have tried hard to bring Isaac round to a recognition of God's will. Now that the crisis had come, she was prepared to pay the price, provided God's will was done.

Rebekah's stratagem worked. For a moment Isaac was puzzled. The voice was wrong, but the hair, the smell, the food, the wine were right, and so he poured out his soul in blessing for the good gifts of the earth, for earthly power and for God's favour.

Jacob had hardly time to leave his father's tent, his purpose accomplished, before Esau returned to the encampment. The suggestion is less that of a narrow squeak and more of God's sovereignty using the mistaken efforts of Rebekah and Jacob. An hour or less later, while his father was still in the happy stupor of digestion, he was disturbed by Esau's voice, "Come, father; eat some of your son's game, that you may bless me". "Who are you?" We can catch the growing perplexity in the answer, "I am your son, your first-born, Esau." Surely his father was not so senile that he had forgotten what had been arranged only that morning.

We are told, "Then Isaac trembled greatly", and this is the clue to much in the story. However much we may criticize Isaac, he remains one of the heroes of faith. The relative passivity of his life and bodily weakness had predis-

posed him to being influenced by his surroundings, by the impact of physical impressions, yet behind all was the desire to do God's will. There must have been many moments when he wondered whether his wife was not right after all. Esau's loss of the birthright must have shaken him for a while. Now suddenly he knew – he had no doubt that it was Jacob that had come to him (v. 35) – and he bowed to God's will. Not all Esau's tears could move him. Though he spoke of Jacob's guile (v. 35), there is no evidence that he ever reproved him, or Rebekah either, and he was prepared to bless him again, knowingly and willingly (28:1–4).

Esau could see no further than the physical and so he had no understanding of the spiritual mystery of the blessing. Surely there must be one for him as well. Jacob, the heel-man, had twice gripped him by the heel and thrown him. He chose to forget that he had thrown his birthright away, and he probably never grasped that the blessing was never intended for him. So he wept and insisted.

Isaac knew that a purely human blessing was an empty form of words. The spiritual blessing was Jacob's, and Esau had thrown away the physical blessing of the birthright for a few minutes of self-gratification, so there was nothing he could give him. So when Esau insisted he gave him something that sounded fine but was hollow, AV, RV, tx. have been misled by the ambiguity of the Hebrew – as Esau also may have been for the moment? Modern versions give the sense but not the ambiguity:

> Far from the richness of the earth shall be your dwelling,
> far from the dew of heaven above.
> By your sword shall you live,
> and you shall serve your brother.

The ambiguity simply cannot be indicated in English. It comes from the use of *min* in the Hebrew of vv. 28, 39. In the former it means a share of the natural blessings there enumerated, in the latter a separation from them.

Even the final comment is full of ambiguity. "The time will come when you grow restive and break off his yoke from your neck." To cast off the yoke of the one chosen by God meant ultimate destruction, and freedom gained by force of arms would ultimately bring a curse with it.

There remained only one thing for Esau, revenge. We are told that he said to himself that his father would soon die, and then he would kill Jacob. A man like Esau cannot keep his mouth shut for long. Soon what was decided in his mind was blurted out to others and was by them repeated to Rebekah. The very fact that both mother and son never doubted that Esau could and would carry out his threat is sufficient evidence of Esau's superior strength. Since they had not trusted God to give what he had promised, there was also no trust there that God could and would keep the man of his choice. So Jacob had to learn among strangers that personal cleverness and wisdom would not work out God's plans.