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Scripture

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ISAAC'S BLESSING: GENESIS 27

The account of Isaac's blessing¹ is one of the most fascinating stories in the Old Testament, and though at times the average Christian reader is a bit scandalized at the trick played on a blind old man by his shrewd wife and her favourite child, the fact remains that he will readily admit the story's literary excellence and beauty. However, the narrative as it now stands is the inspired word of God and as such it has a theological and salvation-historical significance; it embodies a message for the Christian believer, and it is the purpose of this essay to try to understand it.

Gen. 27 in its present form is a saga,² i.e., a prose narrative about the exploits of the heroes of antiquity, and the key to its interpretation is furnished on the one hand by the actual course of the history of Israel and Edom and on the other, by the etymological puns in the story of Jacob and Esau which take for granted the history of the two nations and endeavour to interpret it in the most remarkable fashion. Historically speaking the Edomites³ were a group of Semitic tribes that had occupied the southern-most parts of Palestine somewhere around 1200 B.C., and from the ethnical viewpoint they belonged to the Aramean family. The Israelites believed that some sort of blood-relationship existed between them and the Edomites (Num. 20,14; Deut. 23,7), but at the same time they felt that these latter had not been fair to them as they were on their way to the promised land (Num. 20,14; Cf. Am. 1,11); accordingly the earliest Israelite traditions were cognisant of

¹ For a detailed study of the blessing with relevant parallels from Ugaritic literature cf. S. Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel* (Studies in An.Or.Civil.32), Chicago, 1963, pp. 35-47.

² The entire saga is in the last analysis built around a very simple theme derived from family life, namely, the father's excessive love for the first-born and the mother's predilection for the younger or youngest child and the little trick these latter play on the father; this theme communicates to the saga in Gen. 27 its genuinely human touch and makes it true to life and experience.

³ On the history of the Edomites and their relations with the people of Israel, cf. M. Noth, *The Old Testament World*, Philadelphia, 1964, especially pp. 79, 81f. etc.

hostilities between the two nations, and as we shall see in the course of our study this enmity continued to persist even in historical times.

Another tradition the Old Testament has preserved about the Edomites is a detailed list of their kings (Gen. 36,31-37)⁴ who are said to have reigned in the land of Edom before there was any king in Israel (v. 31); the Edomites had therefore attained a rather high degree of culture, social organization and statehood much before Israel, and the most remarkable thing about their kingship is that it was not dynastic by elective and charismatic (if one may so put it), for according to the king list the individual rulers were not sons of their predecessors. This tradition is most trustworthy and gives an exact record of conditions in Edom as they were known to the people of Israel, and there is also a special reason for its preservation, for it served to account for the Israelite belief that Esau, the eponymous ancestor of the Edomites, was the elder brother of Jacob, Israel's own ancestor (Gen. 25,23-26).

At a later period in history Edom lost its independence and became part of David's empire (2 Sam. 8,13f.). We do not know what exactly was the reason for the conflict between David and Edom,⁵ but in any case the Old Testament records that the great king inflicted a merciless slaughter upon the Edomites, and elsewhere it is also reported that Joab, David's commander-in-chief, stayed in Edom for six months and put to death every male in the country (1 Kg. 11,15f.).⁶ Of the members of the royal family only a little child named Hadad⁷ succeeded in escaping to Egypt with some servants of his father (1 Kg. 11,17-20), where he remained till the death of David and Joab and then returned to his native land and kept up resistance against Solomon (1 Kg. 11,14, 21f.). Hadad's action was counted as sheer mischief by the Israelites, and though we do not know anything at all in detail about his insurrection, it is evident that his success was very limited; for Solomon had control of Ezion-Geber and thence was able to undertake commercial enterprises, and so what is most likely is that the Edomite prince had occupied some of the remotest and most inaccessible areas of the land.

⁴ Cf. A. Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, New York, 1967, pp. 262f., 320f.

⁵ It is possible that there was some sort of provocation on the part of the Edomites (compare 2 Sam. 10,4), or it might even be that there was none; in this case David marched against them either to gain control over the trade routes in the south or to have his rear safe so that he could proceed without fear to the north and subdue Syria.

⁶ This statement is obviously a pure hyperbole of the story-teller.

⁷ It is remarkable that according to the king list in Gen. 36,31-39 the name Hadad was borne by two kings of Edom before the emergence of the monarchy in Israel, and accordingly we are here dealing with Hadad III of Edom.

In the age subsequent to the collapse of the empire of David and Solomon king Jehoshaphat of Judah (873–849) had still dominion over Edom, for he was able to resume the maritime operations of Solomon and despatch ships from Ezion-Geber to Ophir, and moreover at that time there was no king in Edom but only a deputy of the king of Judah (1 Kg. 22,47f.). We also know that when Jehoram of Israel (849–842) sought the help of Jehoshaphat and marched against king Mesha of Moab who had revolted against the northern kingdom after the death of Ahab, the combined forces passed through Edom, and it would seem that the Edomites lent them a helping hand (2 Kg. 3,8f.).⁸ However at a slightly later date during the reign of Jehoram of Judah (849–842),⁹ a weak ruler, the Edomites staged a successful revolt and gained their independence (2 Kg. 8,20–22). A few decades later the Judaeen king Amaziah (800–783) made an effort to reconquer Edom and even inflicted a crushing defeat on the Edomite army (2 Kg. 14,7), and under his successor Uzziah or Azariah (783–742) the sea port of Elath was again under the control of Judah.

The next revolt of the Edomites was during the reign of Ahaz (735–715) at a time when this ruler, because of his unwillingness to join the anti-Assyrian manoeuvres in Syria-Palestine, was being threatened by Aram and Israel (2 Kg. 16,5f.); they expelled the Judaeen garrison stationed at Elath, and it would also seem that they even joined hands with the two foes of Ahaz in attacking Judah (2 Chr. 28,17). We now come to another deed of the Edomites which the Israelites could never forget or forgive, viz., their complicity in and rejoicing over the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Ps. 137,7); their joining forces with the Babylonians was the most abject and despicable form of treachery the Israelites could imagine, and hence we find the prophets and poets invoking divine vengeance upon them (Jer. 49,7ff.; Ez. 25,12–14; 35,1–15; Ob. 10–14; Lam. 4,21ff.; Cf. too Is. 34,5; Joel 4,19). And finally after the deportation of the Judeans the Edomites who were under pressure from the Arab tribes gradually moved into the southern regions of Judea (1 Ezz. 4,50) and settled down there. The subsequent history of the relations between the Edomites and the Jews does not concern us here, and for the purpose of this study the above survey is quite sufficient.

What history tells us is that, though the Israelites were convinced of their affinity with the Edomites, the relations between the two peoples were never cordial; whenever there was an able ruler in Judah the land of Edom remained a vassal, but there was open revolt when the Judaeen

⁸ In vv. 9f. there is reference to the king of Edom, which is certainly inaccurate; of course it is only a technique of the story-teller or writer to give colour to his account.

⁹ Not to be confused with the ruler of the northern kingdom bearing the same name.

kings were weak or were being threatened by their foes. All these historical experiences were the object of detailed and intense theological reflection on the part of story-tellers in Israel who, with a view to accounting for what they saw and heard, pushed the conflicts back to the age of the eponymous ancestors of the two nations and composed a series of sagas on the basis of popular etymology. According to their ways of looking at things Esau and Jacob, the two ancestors of the Edomites and the Israelites, recapitulated in themselves the whole history of their descendants;¹⁰ even more, they were themselves in conflict at a time when they were still in the womb of their mother, and it is this awareness that comes to the fore in the Esau-Jacob-cycles of sagas in the book of Genesis. Let us examine the etymological stories which will clarify what has been said.

Esau is represented by the Israelite story-tellers as the elder brother, for they knew that the Edomites had emerged on the scene of history before them and had evolved to nationhood, but at the same time in spite of his remarkable physical strength, he is extremely dull and stupid;¹¹ this caricature serves to explain why the Israelites under David were able to subdue the Edomites. We do not know what exactly is the meaning of the name Esau, but the saga-makers in Israel interpreted it in terms of the hairy mantle (in Hebrew *śe'ar*) covering his body as he came out of his mother's womb and connected it with the name *Śe'ir*, another traditional designation of the land of Edom (Gen. 25,23).¹² Esau is also supposed to have been reddish (Hebrew *'adhmoni*) in colour (*ibid.*), and this observation of the story-teller is suggested by the apparent affinity between the words *'adhmoni* and *'edhom* (Edom). A further instance of this etymological pun is found in the story of Esau's sale of his birthright to Jacob in exchange for the latter's red pottage which in

¹⁰ Here we have therefore an instance of the corporate conception of personality in ancient Israel; by reason of the bond of solidarity uniting later generations with their ancestors what is true of the former can be predicated of the latter and *vice versa*. For a discussion, cf. W. H. Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Facet Books—Biblical Series 11), Philadelphia, 1964, *passim*. The individuals who figure in so many sagas of Genesis are in reality the community as such, and they recapitulate in themselves community experiences covering a long span of time so that it is at present impossible to draw the line of demarcation between the individual and the group.

¹¹ This caricature is truly surprising particularly since the Israelites held the Edomites in admiration for their marvellous wisdom (cf. 1 Kg. 5,10f.; 10,1-3; Jer. 49,7; Ob. 8; Job 2,11; Prv. 30,1; 31,1. Bar. 3,22f.).

¹² The land had then two names which were interchangeable. Edom figures the cuneiform documents as *Udumu* and in Egyptian documents, as *Aduma*; Se'ir was also the name of the mountain range in the country, and it too is attested by Egyptian documents as well as by the Amarna letters.

Hebrew is called 'adham, the red thing,¹³ and because he bought and ate Jacob's 'adham Esau came to be known as 'edhom (Gen. 25,29-34). The authors of set purpose thus represent Esau as a *minus habens*, for they carefully note that he despised his birth right.¹⁴

At the moment of his birth the younger brother is said to have been catching hold of Esau's heel ('aqeb) and for this reason he was named Ya-'aqob (Gen. 25,26); here again the saga-makers are playing with the Hebrew word for heel and interpreting the name of their ancestor¹⁵ in terms of the historical fact of the subjugation of Edom by Israel (cf. Gen. 27,36). Jacob was also smooth, in Hebrew 'is halaq (Gen. 27,11), but now *Halaq* is also the name of the mountain on the southern borders of Judah (Jos. 11,17; 12,7); this geographical phenomenon has then given rise to the idea that Jacob was a smooth man.

There is not the least doubt that the ancient Israelites, as they heard these anecdotes about Jacob and Esau, burst into thunderous laughter, but it would be a serious mistake to fancy that these stories and all the subtle play on words were meant primarily for amusement; on the contrary they were intended as so many means to enunciate the theological truth that the Israelites and not the Edomites were the chosen people of God, and this consciousness of election is also ultimately responsible for the Israelite belief that the Edomites were destined to serve them. According to the saga-makers' point of view the historical conflicts between the two peoples had already commenced when their ancestors were in their mother's womb, for Rebekah felt that the children were struggling together within her (Gen. 25,22f.).

All that has been said so far about the history of the relations between Israel and Edom as well as about the theological speculations based upon them can be seen neatly synthesized in Isaac's blessing over Jacob and Esau. The ancients had a most realistic conception of the spoken word¹⁶ and they believed that the words of malediction and benediction uttered

¹³ It is possible that Esau, the professional hunter living on meat, fancied that the red stuff prepared by his brother was really a blood soup but was later on disillusioned on finding out that it was a simple vegetable preparation (cf. G. von Rad, *Genesis* (OT Library), London, 1961, pp. 361f.).

¹⁴ Cf. G. von Rad, *op. cit.*, pp. 262f. Perhaps it could even be that their remark was motivated by their preoccupation to water down the element of sin in Jacob's subsequent deception of his brother.

¹⁵ The name is really theophoric, meaning "May God protect".

¹⁶ In their view the spoken word was a power going forth from the speaker and producing an effect outside him, setting in motion a new *fieri* that gives birth to a deed or thing. As O. Procksch, with the help of Kantian philosophical categories, has put it, the word is dynamic and dianoetic, for there stands behind it a *dynamis* and a *nous*, so that it produces an effect and also renders it intelligible (cf. *TWB*, IV, pp. 89f.). This is quite true of the Israelite conception of blessings and curses as well.

by parents or those in possession of special powers would infallibly affect the persons concerned and guide and govern their destiny; blessings imparted by parents or by others in authority shortly before death were also viewed in the same way and held responsible for the actual course of events in the lives of the children and even of peoples (Gen. 49; Deut. 33), and this is precisely what we come across in Isaac's blessings over his two sons who now stand in the story as representative personages recapitulating in themselves their descendants and their multifarious experiences.

For a proper understanding of the blessings in the Old Testament we must also remember that their objects were threefold, viz., human and agricultural fertility, governmental and military sovereignty and finally physical and spiritual salubrity,¹⁷ and though it is true that all these elements may not be found together in every individual blessing, the fact yet remains that it is on this pattern that the poets in Israel were wont to compose the blessings put in the mouth of the great men of antiquity. The pattern is quite perceptible in the text we are studying, which, from the literary point of view, is also a master-piece of Hebrew poetry and is remarkable for the use of several subtle poetical procedures that render their composition most beautiful and attractive. These will be noted in the course of our exposition.¹⁸

Strictly speaking v. 27 has not the form of a blessing, but nonetheless it is a clear enunciation of Jacob's physical salubrity:

"See, the smell of my son
is as the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed!"

The old man is blind, but his sense of smell is still intact and so he can verify by experience that the one who has approached him is indeed his son of predilection. There is certainly an element of the *pathétique* in the blind man's desire, and at the same time there is also a tense moment of suspension, a moment that is most painful to Jacob who is going to fulfil his father's desire. Lastly it is also good to remember that the Oriental reacts strongly to smells (compare Ct. 1,3).¹⁹

The theme of v. 28 is agricultural fertility: God will give Jacob of the blessings from above and from below:

"May God give you of the dew of heaven
and of the fatness of the earth,
and plenty of grain and wine."

¹⁷ Cf. S. Gevartz, *op. cit.*, p. 47 (with an appeal to the author's unpublished dissertation on curses).

¹⁸ Many of these procedures are now known from Ugaritic poetry as well, but in this popular study it is not possible to touch upon them.

¹⁹ Cf. G. von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

Now in the Hebrew Bible there are several parallelistic pairs of words which have a normal sequence, but when these are to be repeated the poets of Israel are wont to adopt the reverse order of words in the pair;²⁰ this remark is of the utmost importance for a proper understanding and appreciation of vv. 28 and 39. Heaven and earth form a fixed parallelistic pattern in prose (Gen. 1,1) and in poetry (Deut. 32,1; Is. 1,2) and there are not wanting instances of its inversion;²¹ now in v. 28 the words occur in the usual order, and these remarks are valid with regard to the phrase dew and fatness. However when we turn to the words over Esau, we find that the entire sequence is reversed:

"Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be,
and away from the dew of heaven on high."

The sense of Isaac's words is clear enough: all fertility has been granted to Jacob and so Esau cannot expect anything in that sphere.

V. 29 is made up of two distinct blessings, but both of them have political or governmental supremacy as their object. The first blessing runs as follows:

"Let peoples serve you,
and nations bow down to you."

Here again the poets use two fixed pairs, to wit, peoples and nations (Ps. 47,4; 57,10; 108,4) and serve and bow down (Ps. 72,11).²² Now when we turn to the words over Esau, we come across the second pair in the reverse order:

"By your sword you shall live,²³
and you shall serve your brother."

Sovereignty has been bequeathed to Jacob and therefore Esau has to serve him, but he will nevertheless continue to live by his sword.

In what follows Isaac once again accentuates the position of supremacy Jacob has received over all peoples and nations:

²⁰ Many of these fixed pairs are studied in detail with relevant Ugaritic parallels in S. Gevirtz' book (n. 1); cf. too the same writer's articles, *The Ugaritic Parallel to Jeremiah 8:23*, *JNES* 20 (1961) pp. 41-6.

²¹ The most remarkable instance of this procedure is Gen. 2,4b which has caused a good deal of headache to exegetes. Gen. 1,1 began with the expression in the normal order and when it has to be repeated afresh at the beginning of a new account of creation, the author (or the redactor who is responsible for the fusion of the two accounts) adopts the practice of reversing the sequence, and thus Gen. 2,4b appears to be the work of a clever writer with an exquisite sense of literary finesse.

²² The curious thing about this verb (in Hebrew *yistahaweh*) is that it is an *ishtafel* form of the root *hayah*, which is also attested by Ugaritic.

²³ Since the poet here uses the verb *hayah*, one is justified in adopting the rendering, "You shall bow down on your sword" (compare Gen. 48,12). The sense would be that after a long and tedious struggle with Jacob Esau would be worn out and bow down in fatigue to his brother.

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"Be lord over your brothers,
and may your mother's sons bow down to you."

The expressions brothers and mother's sons are again a fixed pair found in poetical (Ps. 50,20) as well as prose texts in the Old Testament (Deut. 13,7; Jdg. 8,19).²⁴ but the same cannot be said of the verbs to be lord and to bow down; however as the poet has already used the traditional pair in the preceding clause, he is perhaps merely adopting a new technique in order to gain literary effect: he introduces a variant and thus achieves the parallelistic pattern a-b//c-b.²⁵

The last clause in Isaac's blessing is concerned with Jacob's spiritual salubrity and it serves to make him immune from all harm:

"Cursed be everyone who curses you,
and blessed be everyone who blesses you."

Here again the words curse and bless are used as a fixed pair, for they occur elsewhere in the Old Testament in the normal (Num. 22,12; Jer. 17,5-7; 20,14; Prv. 3,33) and in the reverse order both in prose (Num. 22,6) and poetry (Num. 24,9).²⁶

From the analysis given above it is clear that Jacob has been endowed with physical as well as spiritual slubrity and governmental sovereignty, but no mention is made in the poem of his military superiority over Esau, the reason for which is certainly the historical fact that after David's death the Israelites did not have full control over Edom; and on the basis of this well-founded assumption we can also conclude that Isaac's blessing saw the light of the day some time after the death of David, i.e., somewhere during the reign of Solomon. Lastly one is also struck by the fact that though the blessing has spoken about agricultural fertility, its correlative, viz., human fertility, has been left out; this omission was motivated probably by the fact that this theme was to be introduced elsewhere in connection with Jacob (Gen. 28,3).

A few words must be added here about the character of the story as a witness to God and the realization of his salvific designs for mankind. The Jacob-Esau saga, as the inspired word of God, is a confession of one of the greatest truths of Israel's faith, that is, the nation's election:

²⁴ Hence there is no sense in asking as to how Isaac could speak of the several brothers of Jacob even though the OT speaks only of his two sons; the poet is not thinking at all of the story in Gen. 25,23ff., but he is rather using a stereotyped poetical phrase.

²⁵ Cf. S. Gevirtz, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 43f.

²⁶ There is nothing corresponding to this clause in the words over Esau; the present Hebrew text has the words, "But when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck," but this statement is in prose and is certainly a floss occasioned by Edom's overthrow of the rule of the Judeans over the land (cf. *The Jerusalem Bible, ad locum*).

Yahweh, the lord and master of history who directs it to the goal he has long since fixed, by a supremely free act of his has chosen the people of Israel as his own, and among the various other peoples of this world none, not even the Edomites who were the kith and kin of Israel had had priority on the scene of history, has been the object of this choice. Jacob, the ancestor of the twelve tribes constituting the chosen nation, is to be instrumental in the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham, but this plan of God is apparently going to be frustrated as Isaac loves Esau more than his brother and decides to bless him, but other forces are at work of which the father is unaware, and these intervene and change the old man's plans so that at the end he blesses Jacob with an irrevocable blessing.²⁷

Theologians in Israel were always aware of all this so that in the post-exilic age Malachi adduced the fact of Yahweh's love for Jacob and hatred for Esau to convince his contemporaries of the Lord's love for them (1, 2f.). And lastly the Apostle Paul too appealed to the Jacob-Esau saga in order to show that God's purpose of election would be realized not because of human works but because of his call (Rom. 9, 11). The Christian believer, as he reads the story in Genesis, will always do well to remember that he has been the recipient of this call of God, and if this is so the ultimate reason is only a supremely free act of the God and Father who has been revealed to him in and through Jesus the Messiah.

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²⁷ Even when everything is said, one has to admit that Jacob has told a pure lie and has been guilty of the sin of deception; even the ancient Israelite story-tellers, in spite of all their eagerness to extol their ancestor, were not wholly unaware of the wrong done by him (cf. v. 12) and so they endeavour to shift the blame over to Rebekah (cf. v. 13); besides they also represent Jacob's painful and prolonged exile as well as the trick Laban played on him (Gen. 29, 23) as a punishment due to his sin and in this way they do "poetic" justice to the culprit. Christians are often shocked at what they call the moral insensibility of Jacob (or of the inspired writers); well, there is no denying of the fact that the story in its present form points to a less developed form of man's moral consciousness, a particular stage in the evolution of the ethical values when shrewdness and the ability to manage things by hook or by crook were counted as virile virtues, but let us remember too that man by his very nature is selfish and inclined to sin, and only God's special action can help him to get out of this miserable plight. That God did actually intervene in history on behalf of sinful man is the testimony of the NT, but the Scriptures also lay stress on the fact that this intervention was preceded by a slow and gradual process of preparation consisting in the choice and education of a particular historical group; the story of Jacob's trick, when viewed against the background of the finished picture of the history of salvation in the NT, marks, we must concede, the initial stages of the process of education just mentioned, of that movement upwards in history which has its climax in the person and work of our Lord.