Jacob
The Story of a Family

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Michael Scharf Publication Trust
Yeshiva University Press

Jonathan Grossman

JACOB
The Story of a Family

The Noam Series

Translated by Sara Daniel

The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of
Yeshiva University Press

Maggid Books

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First English Edition, 2025

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.korenpub.com

The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

ISBN 978-1-59264-505-3, *hardcover*

Printed and bound in the United States

The Noam Series
is dedicated to the memory of

Dr. Noam Shudofsky *z"l*

by his family and friends

Noam loved the study of Tanakh
and enabled generations of students to
*"Understand and discern, to listen, learn and teach, to observe,
perform and fulfill all the teachings of the Torah with love."*

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Preface

This is the third volume of the Noam Series – a series of literary readings of the book of Genesis – that Hashem has granted me the privilege to write. The first volume explores Genesis 1–11, the second is dedicated to the Abraham cycle, and the present volume focuses on the Jacob cycle. The story of Isaac, Abraham's son and Jacob's father, is tucked away at the beginning of his son's narrative cycle, and we will discuss the significance of this below.

When Jacob reaches Egypt at the venerable age of one hundred and thirty, he summarizes his life to Pharaoh: "The years of my wandering are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, and I have not reached the age my fathers reached in their own wanderings" (Gen. 47:9). This is a rare glimpse into Jacob's perception of his own life with all its trials and tribulations. As the Roman dramatist Seneca expressed two thousand years ago:

> And so there is no reason for you to think that any man has lived long because he has grey hairs or wrinkles; he has not lived long – he has existed long. For what if you should think that that man had had a long voyage who had been caught by a fierce storm as soon as he left harbour, and, swept hither and thither by a succession of winds that raged from different quarters, had

> been driven in a circle around the same course? Not much voyaging did he have, but much tossing about. ("On the Shortness of Life," trans. John W. Basore)

Did Jacob spend his life being merely tossed about? Though this is Jacob's own summary, the reader of his story will see a far more complex journey: a journey accompanied by angels that teach him how to walk the fine line between heaven and earth; a journey where he meets the love of his life by the well as he flees for his life from his brother; and above all, a journey which sees the birth of twelve tribes, whose own struggles are recorded in the closing chapters of Genesis that overlap with the end of their father's journey. Jacob's story does not end where it begins. Rather than come full circle, his path will ultimately widen and fan out into the story of a nation named for his literal and figurative struggles.

The Noam Series is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Noam Shudofsky (1933–2005), an accomplished man whose entire life was devoted to the world of education, both formal and informal. Noam began his career as a Bible teacher, and advanced along the administrative path until he became the principal of the Ramaz Yeshiva of Manhattan, for approximately forty dedicated years. He was extraordinarily devoted to his students and staff. His love for the Bible did not wane even after he was no longer actively teaching, and he was especially drawn to the literary approach of Bible study, an approach embraced by this work. Jewish identity was an inextricable part of his identity, and he maintained that every person must fulfill himself not only in an intellectual sense, but in life itself. Indeed, Noam was deeply involved in the international Jewish community. His intense efforts – both overt and covert – for the Jews of Russia, who were persecuted solely because of their Judaism, deserve special mention. His holy work and gifts for the land, state, and people of Israel continues to this day, his legacy perpetuated by his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, many of whom live in Israel, as he and his wife Nechi dreamed. Nechi passed away on the seventh night of Hanukkah 5778 (2017), and I would like to dedicate this volume to her memory as well. Writing this book in their memory was a special privilege for me, and I was also privileged to become acquainted with

his entire family, people whose lives are deeply rooted in love of Torah and love of humanity, and imbued with humility and devotion.

With great pleasure, I wish to thank everyone who helped bring this book to light, from its first conception to its final design. This journey began during a weekly course I taught to outstanding students of the Bible Department of Herzog College in the year 2016; the lively, sometimes fiery debates that took place during this course comprise much of the raw material for this book. Special thanks are due to my student Netanel Spiegel, whose wise, thorough notes were indispensable to me.

If Jacob's story is the story of a family, I wish to extend thanks to friends who are like family to me: Binny Shalev and R. Itamar Eldar, whose wisdom and insight are this book's engine and fuel. May they always be blessed with good health and joy to continue spreading their holy work and inspiration.

This book was originally published in Hebrew, and Sara Daniel undertook the challenge of translating each word – along with its nuances and connotations – into English. I am grateful for her literary sensitivity and keen knowledge of Bible study, and I thank her with all my heart.

My sincere thanks also go to publisher Matthew Miller and Maggid's dedicated publication team and the editors of the wonderful series this book now belongs to – Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Caryn Meltz, Ita Olesker, Rina Ben Gal, Nechama Unterman, Debbie Ismailoff, Esther Shafier, and Doron Chitiz – whose generosity and professionalism guided this book's publication from start to finish. Special thanks go to Rabbi Dr. Stu Halpern, the Senior Advisor to the Provost of Yeshiva University, who oversaw this book's publication through Yeshiva University. His expertise and broad experience made every consultation a creative, original learning experience, and I thank him for his friendship and partnership.

Last but not least, of course, thanks are due to my own family – my wife, children, and grandchildren, who accompany me on every journey into the world of reading, writing, and study; who so patiently and so fruitfully hear out every thought and dilemma; who color every ordinary day with joy.

During the preparation of this volume in English, my father passed away – Prof. Avraham Grossman, of blessed memory. I discussed

many of the narratives I analyze in this book with him, and I do not have words enough to express how profoundly he influenced my work, or the depth of the desire for learning and truth that he instilled in his children. May this book be for עילוי נשמתו as well.

Jonathan Grossman
Shevat 5785

Introduction

How many times is Jacob's name mentioned in the Bible? Biblical concordances disagree: according to Lisowsky's Hebrew concordance, it appears 349 times;[1] Mandelkorn notes only 345;[2] while Even Shoshan lists a full 350 instances of Jacob's name.[3] Such dissent about a mere technical issue certainly anticipates the extent of controversy and tension surrounding more fundamental questions about Jacob's character. Barely a scene of his life escapes exegetical debate about whether the Torah is praising or criticizing Jacob; about whether an action of his or his family is considered worthy or sinful. Though biblical narrative is usually characterized by its elusive, multifaceted nature, it is clear in exegesis as early as Midrash and as recent as contemporary scholarship that the deep, fundamental dissent inherent to Jacob's character far exceeds the usual range of dispute.

Jacob's character is indeed complex, and his inner world is largely hidden from the reader's eye. This complexity is an inherent, fundamental

1. Lisowsky, *Konkordanz*, 1623–24.
2. Mandelkorn, *Concordance,* 1441–42.
3. Even Shoshan, *Concordance,* 477–78.

part of the narrative objective and plot development.[4] Jacob himself summarizes his life in bleak, heartrending brevity before Pharaoh: "Few and hard have been the years of my life" (Gen. 47:9); and surprisingly, the text seems to sympathize with him, as emerges from a comparison between the biblical summary of Jacob's life and his fathers': "These are the days, the years of Abraham's life: he lived one hundred and seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in his ripe old age, aged and satisfied, and was gathered to his people" (Gen. 25:7–8). The summary of Isaac's life, though shorter, also mentions that he dies "aged and satisfied": "Then he breathed his last, and died, and was gathered to his people, aged, satisfied with his years" (Gen. 35:28–29).

"Aged and satisfied" is not a common phrase; elsewhere, it summarizes the lives of other patriarchal figures, Job (Job 42:17) and David (I Chr. 23:1), where the narrator presumably employs it to generate a connection with Abraham and Isaac. Yet it is absent in the account of Jacob's death: "Jacob lived in Egypt for seventeen years; the years of his life were one hundred and forty-seven.... There Jacob finished instructing his sons. And he drew his feet back onto the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people" (Gen. 47:28; 49:33). The Sages already note the absence of the verb "and he died";[5] in the context of our discussion I wish to note, rather, the absence of Jacob's characterization

4. Right now, I am ignoring the general question relevant to the ancestral cycles: in which cases are Jacob's actions considered a symbol that represents the entire nation. This question especially concerns his interactions with Esau (Edom) and Laban (Aram). On the problem of reading Jacob and Laban's interactions as a foreshadowing of Israel's relationship with Aram, see below, in my discussion of chapter 31. The reader must be conscious of the disparity between Jacob the individual and Jacob the representative of a nation, and this awareness in itself can solve inconsistencies throughout the narrative cycle. Jacob, for example, is represented as a shepherd (25:27; ch. 30; 32:21; 33:18, and others), but he receives blessings that are more appropriate for a farmer (27:27–29). These blessings are justified not only because they were intended for Esau, but because in this scene, Jacob represents Israel, who will need blessings for fertile land (*Zobel,* "Jacob," 196). See further in Zobel for the significance of "Jacob" in prophetic and wisdom literature (202–8).

5. Typical of the Sages, they provide a midrashic explaination for this: "Our patriarch Jacob did not die.... I am interpreting a verse, as it is stated: 'Therefore do not fear, Jacob My servant, says the Lord, neither be dismayed, Israel, for I will save you from afar, and your seed from the land of their captivity' (Jer. 30:10). This verse juxtaposes

as "aged and satisfied." Thus both Jacob and the narrative itself present a complex portrait of his life, devoid of the overtones of joy that summarize the lives of Abraham and Isaac. To a great extent, Jacob's life is indeed tragic, and it is up to the reader to consider the meaning of this tragedy and its contribution to the Jacob narrative cycle.

Jacob's complex characterization is also related to a fundamental surprise that arises throughout the narrative cycle.

JACOB: CHOSEN ANEW

The story of Jacob and his election as part of the chosen line is surprising in itself. In the book of Genesis, Abraham is singled out to form a covenant with God, and God promises that his son Isaac and his descendants will perpetuate this covenant for all eternity: "God said: 'Nonetheless: Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.... I will establish My covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you this time next year'" (Gen. 17:19–21). The plain meaning of "establishing a covenant" with Isaac is that Abraham's covenant with God will be perpetuated through Isaac. In light of this, at the start of the Jacob cycle, the reader has no reason to suspect that there will be another process of election and rejection between Isaac's sons – ostensibly, both of Isaac's twin sons will be part of the nation founded by Abraham. This dynasty, fanning out into a nation through Isaac, will presumably be referred to as "the children of Isaac" (or, in the words of Amos, "the House of Isaac" – 7:16). Just as there is no "Zebulun cycle" or "Gad cycle," there ought not to be a "Jacob cycle." Essentially, Jacob should not only be compared to Zebulun or Gad, but to his father Isaac, as there is no Isaac cycle either. This is for the simple reason that Isaac is not characterized as an independent figure, but as Abraham's son, as the one through whom Abraham's blessing will begin to be fulfilled.[6]

Jacob to his seed: Just as his seed is alive [when redeemed], so too [Jacob himself] is alive" (Taanit 5b).

6. See further below, in the analysis of Genesis 26.

"These Are the *Toledot*"[7]

This issue is sharply underscored by exploring the book of Genesis' inner division into units beginning with the phrase "*Elleh toledot*" – "This is the story/These are the descendants":[8]

2:4: "This is the *story* of heaven and earth when they were created."
6:9: "This is the *story* of Noah."
10:1: "These are the *descendants* of Noah's sons."
11:10: "These are the *descendants* of Shem."
11:27: "These are the *descendants* of Terah."
25:12: "These are the *descendants* of Ishmael son of Abraham."
25:19: "This is the *family story* of Isaac son of Abraham: Abraham was Isaac's father."
36:1, 9: "These are the *descendants* of Esau – that is, Edom"/ "These are the *descendants* of Esau, ancestor of the Edomites, in the hill country of Seir."
37:2: "This is the *story* of Jacob's family."

The recurrence of the key phrase "*Elleh toledot*" invites a reading of the entire book of Genesis through the perspective of selection and rejection; through the underlying tension between universal and national: "Within the flow of human history, from the universal to the particular, the genealogies indicate God is separating out by selection a righteous lineage by whom He chooses to bless the world of nations."[9] This is indeed a fundamental reading of Genesis: how the Israelite nation gradually forms as parallel dynasties are rejected. This is presumably related to the selection of certain characters and their deeds, and it is also likely – corresponding with the worldview of R. Judah Halevi – that the *toledot* pattern in Genesis reflects the legacy of "divine influence"

7. Translator's note: For the sake of preserving the multivalence of the Hebrew word, I have retained the transliteration *toledot* in most of the text.
8. Besides Genesis, this formula appears twice elsewhere in the Bible: "These are the *toledot* of Aram and Moses" (Num. 3:1); "These are the *toledot* of Peretz" (Ruth 4:18).
9. Mathews, *Genesis I*, 34.

and "essence (*segula*)" that begins with Adam and is passed on through Seth to Enosh and Noah, from individual to individual, until "the sons of [Jacob] were all worthy of the divine influence, as well as of the country distinguished by divine spirit. This is the first instance of the divine influence descending on a number of people, whereas it had previously only been vouchsafed to isolated individuals."[10] In any case, the "*toledot*" pattern is marked by a surprising omission: If its purpose is indeed to highlight the chosen line, how can it be that Abraham is missing from this list? After the *toledot* of Shem and Terah, the next in the series are Ishmael and Isaac. Where is the *toledot* heading of Abraham, the ultimate founder of the covenant with God?

One fascinating solution is proposed by R. Yoel Bin-Nun: the text compensates for this omission with a double mention of Abraham in Isaac's *toledot* heading: "This is the family story of Isaac son of Abraham: Abraham was Isaac's father" (25:19). Instead of moving forward to Isaac's descendants, the text first looks back a generation to emphasize that "Abraham was Isaac's father." The emphasis on Isaac's father is echoed in the book of Chronicles: after reporting that "Abraham's sons were Isaac and Ishmael" (II Chr. 1:28), the rejected line is mentioned first: "Ishmael's firstborn was Nevayot, then Kedar, Adbeel, Mivsam … (v. 29)"; but when the focus shifts to Isaac, Abraham is mentioned once again: "Abraham had a son, Isaac. The sons of Isaac were Esau and Israel" (v. 34).

There are various explanations for this surprising formulation,[11] but R. Bin-Nun argues that it is linked to the omission of "These are the *toledot* of Abraham" in Genesis – that through Isaac, Abraham's story is echoed once again, the narratives of father and son fused and inseparable. The exegetical implication of his argument is that two narrative cycles are ensconced within this heading: the story of Isaac, but that of Abraham as well. Below I will discuss how each *toledot* heading tells the story of the father's children, and in this context the significance of

10. *The Book of Kuzari*, I:95, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld.

11. I believe that the most convenient explanation is that the verse is a foil to Ishmael a few verses earlier: "These are the descendants of Abraham's son Ishmael, whom Sarah's maidservant, Hagar the Egyptian, bore to Abraham" (Gen. 2:12). Whereas Ishmael is the son born to the maidservant Hagar, Isaac is born to Abraham (Grossman, *Abraham*, 406).

R. Bin-Nun's theory will emerge in full: the narrative cycle devoted to Jacob and Esau (headed by "the *toledot* of Isaac") also relates the story of Isaac, who is the "*toleda*" of Abraham. In this sense, two *toledot* overlap.

Yet the basic question still stands: Why isn't there a separate narrative cycle for each patriarch? Why isn't there a *toledot* heading for Abraham, rather than a double mention of Abraham in Isaac's heading instead?

To solve this conundrum, I wish to clarify the meaning of the term "*toledot*" in its context within Genesis. Ibn Ezra interprets the word in the sense of "events": "These are the *toledot* – events, in the sense of '*ma yeled yom*,' which literally means 'What will the day bear.' Similarly, [this is the meaning of] 'This is the story of Jacob'" (Ibn Ezra on Gen. 6:8). By contrast, Ramban argues that the meaning of *toledot* is "descendants":

> "These are the *toledot* of Noah" – it has been explained as "events," in the sense of "what will the day bear," thus alluding to the entire section that follows. But this seems incorrect to me, for events that befall a person are not his "*toledot*." The literal meaning of the word is correct: "These are the *descendants* of Noah's sons"; "These are the *descendants* of Ishmael." This means "These are the *descendants* of Noah" – Shem, Ham, and Japhet. But it repeats "Noah had three sons" because the description was interrupted with "Noah was a righteous man, a person of integrity" to inform why he was the one chosen to build the ark. (Ramban on Gen. 6:8)

The debate is clear: assuming that these *toledot* headings introduce the unit that follows them,[12] there are headings that introduce genealogical lists (such as the *toledot* of Ishmael, 25:12), and headings that introduce long, winding narratives far richer than a genealogical list (such as the "*toledot*" of Terah, which introduces the story of Abram, or of Jacob,

12. Some propose that these headings are conclusion formulae (Wiseman, *New Discoveries*, or, more complex: De-Witt, "Generations"), but this is a problematic reading others have dismissed; see, for example, V. P. Hamilton, *Genesis I*, 9; Mathews, *Genesis I*, 32–33.

which opens the Joseph saga). This multivalence is aptly reflected in modern translations that translate the word "*toledot*" based on its context; it suffices to illustrate this with the two instances of the expression in chapter 25:

> 25:12: "These are *the descendants* of Ishmael" (New Jerusalem Bible), "This is *the line* of Ishmael" (JPS); 25:19: "This is *the story* of Isaac" (New Jerusalem Bible, JPS).

Rashbam, however, proposes a definition that can apply equally to both contexts:

> And now, intelligent people will perceive what the *Rishonim* explained. "These are the *toledot* of Jacob" – these are the history and events that befell Jacob. But this is nonsense, for every instance of "*elleh toledot*" in the Torah and Writings is either about the figure's children or, more often, his grandchildren, as I explained regarding *"elleh toledot* Noah"… his children's children, how he had three sons, and the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded him to bring them into the ark for twelve months, and after they left, "children were born to them after the flood" (10:1), until they increased to seventy, who became the seventy nations, as it is written, "from these the nations spread out"… (Rashbam on Gen. 37:2)

Rashbam points out that "*toledot*" refers not only to children, but also – more importantly, even – to grandchildren. Once a person has grandchildren, they have established their own household, their own clan.[13] Rashbam clarifies that the function of the *toledot* headings in Genesis is not merely to relate the names of children and grandchildren, but to explain how these ancestors managed to establish their household, their clan, their continuity – how their grandchildren came to be. According to this reading, *toledot* means both "events" and "descendants" – these headings describe the person's descendants, and

13. See further in: Wenham, *Genesis I*, 55–56.

sometimes, how these descendants came to be, despite the complications along the way.[14]

This insight has broad significance for deeper understanding of the themes and objectives of the entire book of Genesis. For our purposes, I wish to adopt Rashbam's reading in order to tackle our opening question. The omission of Abraham's *toledot* in no way detracts from the importance of the Abraham narrative, which indeed occupies a central place within Genesis, under the heading "These are the *toledot* of Terah" – that is, how Terah is granted grandchildren. Rather, the missing *toledot* heading of Abraham reflects upon the story of Abraham's *children* – upon the lack of Isaac's narrative cycle. Isaac is the sole protagonist in just one chapter (26), and even this chapter begins after the Jacob narrative has already begun. The absence of Abraham's *toledot* does not undermine the figure of Abraham, but of Isaac.

Yet we cannot stop here either – the question of why there is no Isaac narrative does not ring true. We began by asserting that if Isaac is the chosen one, then there is no real need for an Isaac narrative, for the birth of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, marks the end of the suspense regarding who will inherit Abraham's legacy and covenant with God. Ishmael is clearly rejected from the start, just as Isaac is clearly chosen, but at no point of the narrative is there any hint that the process of election and rejection will continue with Isaac's own children.

The real surprise, therefore, is not the absence of Abraham's *toledot*, but rather, the existence of Isaac's *toledot*. The fact that there is no Isaac narrative cycle can be taken for granted, for Isaac's birth is the culmination of all that leads up to it. Isaac is not a hero in his own

14. R. David Zvi Hoffmann disagrees; he sees the expression "*toledot* of Isaac" as the story of Isaac and not his sons', and thus claims that Jacob's story centers around his father. Jacob sets out to Padan Aram at Isaac's bidding, and eventually returns to his father. Similarly, he argues that Joseph's story also revolves around his father Jacob, and it is thus called the "*toledot* of Jacob" (37:2). This may be at least partially true of Joseph's story, but Jacob's story hardly revolves around his father. Sara Schwartz claims that the "*toledot*" formula in this case and in two other cases (2:4, 6:9) introduces the story of the *toledot* figure himself, and not his sons'. In this case, however, she concedes that the "*toledot* of Isaac" introduces both his story and his son's story (Schwartz, "*Toledot*").

right – he is Abraham's happily ever after. The great surprise is the existence of the Jacob narrative cycle. Isaac's *toledot* mark the beginning of a new saga; for whatever reason, new conflict arises and even though Isaac inherits his father's legacy, Jacob must be elected anew. God's election of Abraham must be reestablished, and it must be reestablished solely through Jacob.

This reading assumes that originally, Esau was supposed to be part of Abraham's chosen line and covenant.[15] But Esau is rejected, and it is up to Jacob to assert his position as an heir of Abraham's covenant. Elie Assis compares Ishmael's exclusion to Esau's rejection and reaches a similar conclusion:

> God intervenes and asserts that only Isaac is the chosen son, commanding Abraham to expel Ishmael. This is not the case in the next generation. God does not tell Isaac what to do; there is no divine interference in the struggle between the twins; nor is it declared that only Jacob will succeed their father. The difference between God's intervention in the two narratives is tremendous. This lack of divine intervention does not mean that Isaac must decide whom to select and whom to reject, as most commentators have understood; rather, it means that there is no question of selection at all – no issue of rejection clouds the story in the first place. God's passive stance supports the theory that Isaac assumes that both of his sons will continue his legacy, and neither of them will be excluded.[16]

Assis is correct that Isaac does not initially intend to reject one of his sons, but we can take a step further: God's passive stance reinforces the theory that God Himself intended that both of Isaac's sons would continue in his footsteps.

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15. Nava Gutman proposes that Isaac assumes that both sons will inherit him, while Rebecca does not (Gutman, "Voice"). I disagree, and propose that this was the original plan and part of Abraham's chosen line – see especially below in my analysis of chapter 27.
16. Assis, *Identity in Conflict*, 58

This paradigm can be traced in several midrashim, notably in *Midrash Shir HaShirim Zutta*:

> Concerning Jacob and Esau: the name Jacob could have been bestowed upon Esau. Esau could have been called Jacob, and Jacob could have been called Esau; Esau could have produced kings, and Jacob priests; the first blessings would have befitted Esau, and the second Jacob; Leah and Zilpah could have married Esau, and Rachel and Bilhah Jacob; but all of these gifts were taken from him. (*Shir HaShirim Zutta*, ch. 1)

This unexpected crisis in Isaac's household is what leads to the Jacob cycle – to a story of a renewed covenant after one member of the covenant withdraws and departs to Edom. Contrary to initial expectations, the chosen people of Abraham's covenant with God are not "the children of Isaac," but rather, "the children of Israel."

JACOB AS ABRAHAM

> The spirit of my father grows strong in me… (Shakespeare, *As You Like It,* Act I, Scene I)

This reading is based on many assumptions and touches upon fundamental disagreements in analyses of the biblical narratives, especially concerning Rebecca's prophecy during her pregnancy (25:23) and the theft of the blessings (ch. 27), and I will discuss these in depth below. For now, I wish to support this reading based on the close analogy between Jacob and Abraham. Jacob essentially retraces his grandfather's footsteps and undertakes the same journey. Although this deserves further attention, for our purposes it will suffice to point out the main similarities.[17]

17. For further comparison between the two cycles, see Grossman, "Abraham and Jacob."

1. Jacob's Journey: Back and Forth

Leaving His Parents' Home

Jacob's abrupt flight from Canaan is one of the most unexpected reversals of the ancestral cycles. His father Isaac also plans to leave the land temporarily, but God forbids him to do so, so that the blessings of Abraham may begin to be fulfilled through him (see the discussion of ch. 26 below). God even promises Isaac that He will be with him and he will inherit the land "for the sake of My servant Abraham," and for this reason, he may not leave the land, even temporarily. Yet Jacob now flees the land and reaches Haran without any setbacks or prohibitions. God does not forbid him to leave the land promised to his father and grandfather; on the contrary, He encourages him and promises that He will accompany Jacob on his way until he returns to Canaan in order to fulfill Abraham's blessing. Through this promise, the reader learns that Jacob must return to the land of his father's birth and begin the journey anew.

Thus, like Abraham, the first revelation of Jacob's life concerns his departure from his land, his birthplace, and his father's house. Abraham hears the word of God when he sets out from Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan, while Jacob is about to journey in the opposite direction, but there is a profound connection between these two revelations. This is evident in a unique phrase that only appears in these two episodes: "Through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed" (12:3; 28:14). This expression is of special interest because it concerns the distant future and purpose of the nation and its role in history. Abraham and Jacob's journeys are inherently related to separation and segregation from the society around them, but God's initial revelation to them both hints that ultimately, their destiny is to channel blessing for all the nations, to be the connecting link for blessing between God and the whole world. It is no wonder that Isaac never hears this directly from God – he is the heir of his father's blessing and legacy, and it is taken for granted that all this applies to him as well. Yet it emerges that Jacob *does* need to hear of this destiny, of the divine purpose of the chosen nation, on the eve of his departure to Haran, the land his grandfather left when he was seventy-five years old.[18]

18. In my analysis of God's revelation to Jacob at Bethel, I will point out further connections between this revelation and the revelation to Abraham after he parts ways

Perhaps Rebecca and Isaac's instructions to Jacob also echo God's first command to Abraham. Rebecca urges her son, "Now, my son, listen to me. Flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran" (27:43), and Isaac adds, "Go at once to Padan Aram … and there marry a daughter of your mother's brother Laban" (28:2). Abraham, too, departs for Haran after he is commanded to leave his father's house: "Go – from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house – to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation" (12:1–2). The possessive *lekha* appears in God's command – "*lekh lekha*," and in Rebecca and Isaac's words – "*beraḥ lekha, kaḥ lekha*," in both instances following a verb rather than a noun in an unusual grammatical form.[19]

If there is indeed a connection between the two sets of instructions, then the obvious difference between them is that Abraham is commanded to leave by God, whereas Jacob is bid by his parents. God will appear to Jacob soon after, but his initial departure is motivated by family reasons, unlike Abraham. We will yet see how this motif accompanies and shapes the entire Jacob cycle.[20]

The Journey Back to Canaan

Not only does Jacob's departure from his father's house recall Abraham's; his return to Canaan echoes his grandfather's path so closely that one wonders whether Jacob's departure to Haran is undertaken solely that he might reenact Abraham's journey to Canaan on his way back. Cassuto points this out and defines their journeys as "a journey of three parts," wherein each part concludes with the building of an altar. Abraham's journey unfolds thus:

1. From Haran to Shechem, where he builds an altar: "There he built an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him" (12:7).[21]

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with Lot. See below.

19. Rashi, based on the Midrash, explains: "For you – for your pleasure and your benefit," while others such as Ramban and Radak do not see this as unusual.
20. The fact that Abraham sends his servant to find his son a wife, while Jacob travels himself, also supports this reading.
21. Based on the fact that Abraham's first stop is in Shechem, it appears that Abraham – like his grandson Jacob – also enters Canaan from the east.

2. From Shechem to the region of Bethel, where he is granted great revelation (13:14–17). There too he builds an altar: "And from there he moved on to the hills east of Bethel, and pitched his tent with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord" (12:8).
3. From Bethel to Hebron. This final stage completes the process of acquiring the land, and it is also concluded with the construction of an altar: "So Abraham took his tent and came to settle by the Oaks of Mamre, in Hebron. There he built an altar to the Lord" (13:18).

Jacob's return to the land recalls his grandfather's journey – he, too, comes back to Canaan in three stages, and he builds an altar after the first two:

1. From Haran to Shechem. Jacob enters from the east, and before he continues on to his father in Hebron, he builds an altar: "There he erected an altar and named it El Elohei Yisrael" (33:20).
2. From Shechem to Bethel. Like Abraham, Jacob is granted (double) revelation in Bethel, and he also erects an altar there: "There he built an altar and called the place El Bethel, because it was there that God had revealed Himself to him as he fled his brother" (35:7).
3. From Bethel to Hebron. Like Abraham's, Jacob's journey finally ends when he reaches Hebron, where his father is. Although Jacob does not build an altar, he joins his father, who lives in Hebron and presumably already has an altar for worship.

The similarity between these journeys invites a comprehensive comparison. Sometimes certain components feature in different stages – for example, the motif of sight is especially salient in God's revelation to Abraham during the first stage of his journey, with emphasis on how God "appears to him" (12:7), whereas a similar motif appears in the second stage of Jacob's journey: "Build an altar to God, who appeared to you"; "Because it was there that God had revealed Himself to him" (35:1, 7). It is important to note that in Bethel, Abraham also "called on the name of the Lord" (12:8), and he does not name the places he passes through.

Jacob, by contrast, does not call on the name of God, but he repeatedly gives names: "There he erected an altar and named it El Elohei Yisrael" (33:20) at the end of the first stage; "There he built an altar and called the place El Bethel" (35:7) at the end of the second stage.

What is relevant to our discussion, however, is the overall similarity between the two patriarchs' journeys to the land. Cassuto compares these journeys to Israel's entrance to the land, and thus reads the meaning of this connection as symbolic foreshadowing, "like father, like son." Even if he is correct, instead of merging Abraham and Jacob's journeys into a single symbolic process, I wish to emphasize how Jacob follows in Abraham's footsteps – rather than Isaac's. Unlike his father and son, Isaac builds an altar in Beersheba, and it is there that he "calls on the name of the Lord" (26:25). In this way, Isaac continues his father's legacy, but does not repeat it, and he extends the range and sphere of his altars and blessings. Jacob, by contrast, builds altars in precisely the same places that Abraham does. As Cassuto summarizes: "Jacob follows the exact same path that Abraham walked, camped in the exact same sites, and built altars in the exact same places."[22]

2. Two Spheres of Conflict: Parting Ways with His Brother, and Forming a Covenant with a Foreigner

The two main conflicts in the Jacob cycle (with Esau and Laban) are parallel to two conflicts in Abraham's life.

Conflict with a Foreigner

Jacob's relationship with Laban is parallel to Abraham and Isaac's relationships with Pharaoh and Abimelech – foreigners. Abraham (ch. 12) and Isaac's (ch. 26) interactions with the foreign leaders play out in three main scenes: (1) the patriarch deceives the foreign leader by presenting his wife as his sister; (2) the foreign leader bestows great wealth upon him; (3) they then form a pact, with the leader seeking to appease as well as reproach.

These elements are all present in Jacob's conflict with Laban. Laban is technically kin, but in the narrative he represents Aram; moreover,

22. Cassuto, *Genesis and Its Structure*, 247.

relatively to Esau, he represents conflict in a more distant sphere than the nuclear family. Their relationship begins with an act of deception in which a woman is mispresented as her sister, with similar language. When Jacob discovers that his wife is in fact her sister, he accuses, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, did I not? Why did you deceive me?" (29:25); when Pharaoh discovers that Abraham presented his wife as his sister, he accuses, "What have you done to me? Why did you not tell me she was your wife?" (12:18), and Abimelech similarly accuses Isaac: "What is this you have done to us?" (26:10).

The comparison continues in the next scenes: Jacob acquires great wealth through Laban, leading to envy (just as the Philistines envy Isaac for the wealth he acquires through Abimelech), and their relationship concludes with a pact of reconciliation in Gal-Ed, with Jacob reproaching Laban. In both narratives, God appears to the foreign leader and warns them not to harm the patriarch: "God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and told him, 'You will die because of the woman you have taken. She is already married'" (20:3); "That night God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream and said to him, 'Take care not to say anything to Jacob for good or for bad'" (31:24).

I will discuss the connection between these conflicts below – especially in the context of Isaac's narrative being placed within the Jacob narrative – but for now, I wish to point out the most striking difference between these scenes. Abraham and Isaac are the ones who deceive the foreign king, whereas it is Jacob who is deceived by Laban. This difference contributes to Jacob's characterization as a tragic figure, as we will explore below.

Conflict with a Brother

Abraham and Jacob both part ways with a "brother." After leaving Ur of the Chaldeans and his brother Nahor, Abraham later parts ways with his nephew, Lot, who represents Terah's third son Haran (who died young). Lot accompanies Abraham on his journey, and their parting is described in more depth than Abraham's parting from his brother Nahor in Aram Naharaim. It is difficult to evaluate the Torah's representation of Lot. Should Lot have remained with Abraham until the end, or should Lot never have joined Abraham in the first place, because Abraham should

have left his birthplace without anyone else from his father's house?[23] Either way, following the quarrel between their shepherds, Abraham and Lot part ways, and Lot settles in Sodom. Lot is repeatedly referred to as Abraham's "brother" (13:8; 14:14), which is unsurprising, given that Lot symbolizes Haran's branch of the family tree after his death. Abraham and Lot's parting is described thus: "The land could not support them living together; so many were their possessions that they were unable to live side by side.... So Lot chose for himself the entire plain of the Jordan. He traveled eastward, and the two men separated.... Lot settled in the cities of the plain, pitching his tent near Sodom" (13:6–12). Jacob and Esau's parting is described similarly. Even when the brothers are reconciled, they do not live together in Canaan (Esau actually leaves for Edom before Jacob's return, and I will discuss the dramatic implications of this fact in context), and the text's justification is the same: "[Esau] moved to another region, away from his brother Jacob, for their possessions were too great for them to remain together; because of all their livestock, the land where they were living could not support them both. So Esau settled in the hill country of Seir. Esau is Edom" (36:6–8). It is worth noting that this description – "their possessions were too great for them to remain together" – does not appear elsewhere in the Bible, and that following their parting, God appears to both Abraham and Jacob at Bethel and makes them similar promises. I will discuss the significance of this in more detail below, but for now, I wish to point out a further dimension of this complex comparison.

The connection between Abraham and Jacob's parting is revealed as even more profound when we note that both Lot and Esau turn to the east and settle among the people of the land. Lot settles in Sodom, and thereby parts ways with Abraham's blessing; Esau, born into the chosen line as Jacob is, forfeits Abraham's heritage when he moves to Edom and establishes an independent national entity.

There is an allusion to a meeting between these two spheres of fraternal conflict – with Esau and Lot – in the Jacob cycle. The Ammonites settle the territory from the Jordan to the Jabbok: "From the Jabbok to the

23. For a discussion of this question, see Cotter, *Genesis*, 91; Vaughn, "Disobedience," 117–23; Grossman, *Abraham*, 43–45, 68–69.

Ammonites, for the border of the Ammonites was strong" (Num. 21:24). This may be in dialogue with Jacob's struggle with the angel: when Jacob reaches the Jabbok, the angel stops him and hints that from that point on, the territory belongs to the descendants of Lot, and he may not pass. This, in turn, is echoed by Moses when he prevents the Israelites from passing through Ammonite territory and conquering it (Deut. 3:16).

3. Change of Name and Bodily Harm (*Gid HaNasheh* and Circumcision)

Abraham's name change in Genesis 17 is echoed in two separate episodes in the Jacob narrative: one at the Jabbok pass (Gen. 32), and the second at Bethel (Gen. 35). I will discuss the significance of this doubling below, but in the context of our comparison, Abraham's name change is parallel to both scenes in the Jacob narrative.

God names Isaac before his birth, but Abram's name is changed to Abraham, and Jacob's name is changed to Israel. A comparison of these changes shows that they are obvious analogies:

Abram to Abraham (Gen. 17)	**Jacob to Israel (Gen. 35)**
The Lord appeared to him and said, "I am El Shaddai."	God appeared to him…"I am El Shaddai."
No longer shall you be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham.	Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob: Israel shall be your name.
I will make you exceptionally fertile, I will turn you into nations; kings will come from you.	Be fertile and multiply. A nation, a community of nations will come to be from you. Of your loins, kings shall come forth.
I will give you and your descendants after you the land where you now live as strangers.	The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I surely give to you; to your descendants after you I will give the land.
When He finished speaking with him, God went up from Abraham.	God went up from him at the place where He had spoken with him.

This comparison leaves no room for doubt – Jacob's name change clearly echoes his grandfather's name change and the blessing that "El Shaddai" bestows upon him.

However, even before "El Shaddai" changes Jacob's name, the mysterious figure at the Jabbok tells Jacob that his name is now Israel. There, his name change is accompanied by bodily harm, by a physical injury, just as Abraham's name change is linked to the command of circumcision. Abraham must undergo circumcision, whereas Jacob is left "limping on his thigh" (31:32). In both scenes, this physical change has permanent religious implications. The children of Abraham are commanded to circumcise their sons forever, and to this day, Jews do not eat the *gid hanasheh* (sciatic nerve) in commemoration of Jacob's injury at the Jabbok.

Abraham's circumcision and Jacob's wound may even be similar: some read the vague terminology of Jacob's injury as a euphemism for a wound on his sexual organ, while others take the euphemistic language a stage further and argue that the wound itself is inflicted on his thigh as a euphemism for damage to his sexual organ. Ibn Ezra argues against this reading, but nonetheless, there is room to consider whether the *gid hanasheh* is symbolically linked to reproduction and fertility. In biblical language, the thigh is sometimes associated with progeny, as Jacob's own descendants are described: "Those who were descended of Jacob's thigh were seventy people in all" (Ex. 1:5; see also Gen. 46:26). The Sages already note this when Abraham's servant places his hand "under his master Abraham's thigh and swore this by an oath to him" (24:9) to bring a wife back for Isaac, as Rashi comments: "The one who swears must hold an object of a mitzva in his hand, such as a Torah scroll or tefillin, and circumcision was his first mitzva, which he achieved through pain, and it was the most dear to him."[24] The same may be true of the oath Jacob makes Joseph swear to him: "If I have found favor in your eyes, place your hand under my thigh and promise to deal kindly and truly with me: do not bury me in Egypt" (Gen. 47:29).[25] If so, it may

24. Rashi on Gen. 24:2 (based on Genesis Rabba 59:8). This may be the significance of Jacob's vow by "The Fear of his father Isaac" (31:53), as proposed by Koch, "*Pahad Jishaq*," 113–14; Ratzabi, "Fear"; Malul, *Society, Law, and Customs*, 207–13. Compare especially to Job 40:17.

25. See, for example, Malul, *Society, Law, and Customs*, 210–11; Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 170–71. For my position on the connection between these vows and birth, see Grossman, *Abraham*, 357–58.

well be that the wound Jacob sustains hints to the blessing of fertility. Ultimately, Jacob's name is changed in conjunction with an explicit blessing of fertility – "Be fertile and multiply. A nation, a community of nations will come to be from you. Of your loins, kings shall come forth" (35:11), so there is good reason to link the two.

The connection between circumcision and *gid hanasheh* is further reinforced given that both are acts of physical harm of an organ associated with reproduction that yet invoke divine blessing of fertility. Moreover, beside the mitzvot of circumcision and the prohibition of eating the *gid hanasheh*, there is only one additional command-blessing in the book of Genesis: "God blessed them, saying, 'Be fertile and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it'" (1:28).[26] If *gid hanasheh* is, in one way or another, also associated with fertility, then all three mitzvot of Genesis are interconnected and linked to the blessing of fertility and birth.

This underscores a difference between Abraham and Jacob. I will first look at the prohibition of eating the *gid hanasheh*, which draws a chiastic parallel between the religious taboo and what befell Jacob (32:33):

That is why, to this day, the Israelites do not eat the *gid hanasheh*
by the *hip socket*:
because he wrenched Jacob's *hip socket*
at the *gid hanasheh*.

This structure reflects the connection between a prevalent custom in Israel and the personal life of Jacob. Note that the verse is not formulated as a command, but rather as an explanation of an existing custom; indeed, the Mishna claims that the prohibition of eating the *gid hanasheh* is not derived from this verse:

26. That God's words are considered a commandment is based on the double introduction "And God blessed them" / "And God said to them" Although some read the Ramban's commentary to mean that based on the repetition of the verb, this is an "actual blessing" and not just a bestowal of fertility, as it is in the context of animals (Gen. 1:22). According to this reading, the verse pronounced to humanity, "Be fruitful and multiply," is also not a commandment but a blessing.

> [*Gid hanasheh*] only applies to pure animals, but not to impure animals. R. Yehuda says: Even to impure animals. R. Yehuda says: Was the *gid hanasheh* not prohibited [from the time of] Jacob's sons, yet an impure animal was still permitted to them? They answered him: It was prohibited at Sinai, but it was mentioned in that context. (Mishna Ḥullin, 7:6).

The Sages hold that the prohibition of eating the *gid hanasheh* only applies to kosher animals, as a non-kosher animal is entirely prohibited anyway. R. Yehuda argues that the prohibition does apply to non-kosher animals, claiming that when Jacob struggled with the angel – before the Torah was given at Sinai – there was not yet any distinction between pure and impure animals, so the prohibition of *gid hanasheh* was a general prohibition. To this, the Sages reply that Jacob's struggle was not the source of the prohibition – it was only its origin story, "mentioned in that context."

The talmudic Sages' debate touches upon a further debate about the meaning of the phrase "*benei Yisrael*" – does it mean Israelites, or the literal sons of Israel? The Sages hold that it was the Israelite nation who refrained from eating the *gid hanasheh*, not Jacob's sons, as in the Tosefta: "They said to R. Yehuda: It does not say 'Therefore the sons of Jacob – Reuben and Simeon – do not eat the *gid hanasheh,*' but 'the Israelites' – those who stood at Mount Sinai" (Tosefta Ḥullin 7:4). R. Yehuda may have been of the opinion that Jacob's family did refrain from eating the *gid hanasheh* as a tribute to his struggle, as Radak writes: "Jacob's sons declared it forbidden in honor of their father, who was struck there, and they forbade their children" (Radak on Gen. 32:33).[27] The most straightforward reading, however, is that of the Sages – that "*benei Yisrael*" refers to the Israelite nation, as "to this day" applies to the Israelites who continue to uphold this custom.

This illuminates the most dramatic difference between these two commandments of Genesis. Circumcision originated as a divine

27. This is also implied by Bekhor Shor: "Therefore the Israelites do not eat – as a commemoration, for their father fought with the angel and it could not overcome him … it is a commemoration of honor and greatness."

command to Abraham, as part of a divine covenant, while the prohibition of eating the *gid hanasheh* began as a human response to Jacob's experience. Even the setting of each scene contributes to the different tones of the two commandments: Abraham fulfills God's commandment of circumcision "on that very day," whereas Jacob's mysterious struggle, the source of the prohibition of eating the *gid hanasheh*, takes place at night.

These differences form part of the complex comparison between the two narrative cycles, as we will discuss below.

4. Parting with the Son

Just as Jacob's departure from his father's house is parallel to Abraham's departure from his father's house; just as the conflicts he suffers throughout his life are comparable to the conflicts that accompany his grandfather's; so too is the final episode of the Jacob cycle – the sale of Joseph – parallel to the final episode of the Abraham cycle: the binding of Isaac.[28]

Firstly, the overall plots follow a similar pattern. Both Abraham and Jacob must part from the beloved son born to their wife after years of barren hope. At each story's end, Abraham and Jacob embrace the son who seemed lost to them forever.

But the similarities between them transcend the general narrative backbone; the two episodes share concrete details and even common language that proves that this parallel is intentional.

The story of Isaac's binding begins with God summoning Abraham and his iconic reply of "Here I am" (22:1). The sale of Joseph opens with Jacob addressing his son Joseph, who also replies, "Here I am" (37:13). This is followed by instructions to go to a certain place and perform a certain action. God orders Abraham to "take your son … and go" (22:2), while Jacob orders Joseph to "go" (37:14). Abraham does as he is told, and on the third day, "Abraham looked up and, in the distance,

28. The structure of the Abraham cycle shows that the cycle ends with the binding of Isaac, while from this point on the scenes involving Abraham should be considered a transition from the first generation to the fulfillment of Abraham's blessings in the second generation (see Coats, *Genesis*, 28; Grossman, *Abraham*, 18–23).

he saw the place" (22:4). Joseph, too, does as he is bid, and when he reaches his destination, "they saw him from a distance" (37:18).

A moment before he slaughters his son, an angel appears to Abraham and tells him: "Do not lift your hand against the boy; do nothing to him" (22:12). Similarly, just before the brothers kill Joseph, Reuben stops them: "'Do not lift a hand against the boy,' for his plan was to rescue him from their hands" (37:22). A ram is sacrificed in place of Isaac, and instead of killing Joseph, the brothers kill a goat and dip his coat in its blood in order to convince Jacob of Joseph's death. Even Reuben's return to his brothers after he finds that Joseph is no longer in the pit – "He went back to his brothers" (37:7) – echoes the end of the binding narrative: "Abraham went back to his young men" (22:19).[29]

Here, too, the similarity between the two episodes underscores their differences. The binding of Isaac is commanded by God, and Abraham becomes the archetype of the obedient believer. By contrast, Jacob does not part with his son because of divine command, but through a negative act of sibling rivalry. Joseph answers "Here I am" as the human son of a human father.

Jacob as Abraham

This comparison illuminates how Jacob clearly follows in the footsteps of his grandfather.[30] Not only does Jacob make the same journey as Abraham; the main complications that plague Jacob throughout his life also echo the issues that Abraham faces. Unlike Isaac, who succeeds his father, Jacob begins anew. His re-initiation into the covenant does not negate Abraham's initiation; rather, it serves to reaffirm their connection with God and His path.

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29. I propose elsewhere that Joseph in Potiphar's house can be read as a continuation of the same plot, hence my comparison between the angel's words to Abraham, "Now I know that you fear God: for you have not withheld from Me your son, your only one" (22:12) and Joseph's words to Potiphar's wife, "No one in this house has greater authority than I. He has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How could I do so great a wrong? It would be a sin against God!" (39:9). See further in Grossman, "Abraham and Jacob," 20.
30. Cassuto mentions additional connections, like giving the barren wife's maid to her husband. See Cassuto, *Genesis and Its Structure,* 263.

Certain verses that discuss God's choice of the patriarchs mention Abraham and Jacob, but overlook Isaac. As Isaiah describes in several prophecies: "And so, this is what the Lord has said – Abraham's Redeemer – to the house of Jacob: 'No more will Jacob be ashamed, his face no more grow pale'" (Is. 29:22); "And you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I chose, children of Abraham who loved Me" (41:8); "You are our Father though Abraham would not know us, though Israel would not recognize us. You, Lord, are our Father, named our Redeemer since time began" (63:16).

The Psalmist, too, sings: "Recall the wonders He has done, the marvels and judgments He has pronounced, O seed of Abraham His servant; O children of Jacob, His chosen ones" (Ps. 105:5–6); and Isaac's absence is especially salient when the book of Micah ends on this note: "You will show truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham, as You swore to our fathers in the earliest days" (Mic. 7:22). The verse's parallel structure equates Abraham and Jacob with "our fathers," thus excluding Isaac from the patriarchy.[31]

In certain contexts, Abraham and Jacob indeed seem to share a status that differs from that of Isaac – both need to earn their way into the covenant. While the blessing is realized through Isaac, Abraham and Jacob both receive the blessings and pass them on to their children. In this, Joseph resembles Isaac: he is born blessed.

Jacob as Abraham?

Of course, Jacob is by no means identical to Abraham, and his narrative cycle presents a completely new perspective. While both travel from Haran to Canaan, they cover different geographical regions: Abraham is most active in Hebron and Judah; Isaac settles in Beersheba; while much of Jacob's drama takes place on the east side of the Jordan (Mahanaim, Sukkot, and Penuel), and in Bethel and Shechem.

Beyond their geographical spheres, a close comparison of grandfather and grandson in fact highlights the fundamental *differences* between

31. Ibn Ezra proposes that Isaac is absent in this verse because he is also the father of Esau-Edom (on Mic. 7:20). Radak, by contrast, proposes that the expression "our fathers" in the second stich alludes to the missing father – Isaac (ibid.).

their character and theological perception. This serves to illuminate a hidden thread woven throughout the book of Genesis.

The Hero and the Tragic Figure

The first obvious disparity between these two figures is their characterization. Both characters must leave their father's house to wander, both suffer conflict with their family and foreigners, and both believe they must part with their son. Yet throughout, Abraham is characterized as an active hero whose actions and choices propel the plot forward, while Jacob is a tragic figure who reacts to the circumstances that befall him. One salient example of this difference is how Abraham (and Isaac) intentionally deceive the foreign king and present their wives as their sisters, so that upon learning of their deception, the king indignantly cries: "What have you done to me/us?!" (Gen. 12:18; 20:9; 26:10). By contrast, Laban is the one who deceives Jacob by switching Leah and Rachel, so that it is Jacob who cries, "What have you done to me?!" (29:25).

Similarly, while Abraham initiates his parting from Lot following tension between them, Jacob is forced to run away to escape his brother's rage. When Esau – like Lot – later leaves Canaan for his own land, he does so for his own purposes, when Jacob is not even in the country.

Such differences are evident in every episode: Abraham willingly circumcises himself by divine command, while Jacob is unwittingly injured during an encounter with a divine figure – circumcision is a commandment that requires active participation, while refraining from eating the *gid hanasheh* prescribes passivity. Abraham willingly sets out to sacrifice his son, again by divine command, while Jacob's son is torn from him against his will, without his knowledge.

In every scene, Abraham is characterized as an active hero. He submits to God, but he *chooses* to submit to Him. He chooses to follow divine orders and leaves his father's house, offers up his son, parts ways from Lot, and deceives the foreign ruler. He forges his own path according to his moral and spiritual values.

By contrast, although Jacob suffers similar trials to Abraham, he submits to what befalls him, a tragic man of faith whose hands are bound. He is forced to leave his father's house to flee for his life, he is deceived

by Laban, and he flees from Haran when he realizes that Laban's "manner toward him was not what it had been" (Gen. 31:2).

We will yet explore the deeper intricacies of Jacob's complex character, but for now this overview colors him as a tragic figure. He is driven from scene to scene against his will, yet all the while he maintains a deep, living connection with his God. Jacob is not tested with active tests of faith as Abraham is; rather, his test is to maintain his faith and his connection with God despite his difficult reality, and to maintain his belief in God's promise despite the long years he spends in Laban's household.

FROM DIVINE PRESENCE TO DIVINE ABSENCE

The Jacob narrative cycle is also unique in its theological context within Genesis, which gradually sees a shift from God's manifest shaping of reality to the world becoming the realm of human responsibility (while God peeks through the lattice). Abraham is granted revelation after revelation – God even visits him in his own tent, accompanied by a divine host. Joseph, by contrast, receives only hidden messages through dreams, and with the exception of a single revelation to Jacob (Gen. 46:2–4), God's providence of Joseph is entirely hidden. It is up to the characters to perceive God's hand in their lives.

The Jacob narrative cycle lies in between: between Abraham and Joseph; between open revelation and hidden providence. Jacob is also granted revelation, but not to the same extent as Abraham. Jacob's sublime dream of angels phases into revelation, a fusion of Abraham's revelations and Joseph's dreams. Both Sarah and Dinah are captured by foreign rulers, but while God strikes Pharaoh with terrible afflictions in retribution, and appears to Abimelech to reproach him, it is Jacob's sons who take vengeance on Hamor and Shechem for the assault of Dinah – nor is God's stance on this affair entirely clear.

In fact, God's stance remains unclear throughout most of the Jacob cycle. Only a meticulous literary analysis will yield the text's (complex) evaluation of Jacob's theft of the blessings; and even a rigorous literary analysis does not unequivocally reveal whether the text approves of Jacob's exploitation of his brother's ravenous hunger. This lack of obvious judgment led several scholars to assume that moral

assessment is irrelevant in these narratives,[32] while others even surmise that the pursuit of moral values in these kinds of stories is downright anachronistic.[33] These views have fallen victim to the coy nature of the Jacob cycle. Indeed, there is no clear moral assessment in these narratives – not because it is absent or irrelevant, but because it is hidden.

The transition from open divine revelation to human initiative is especially salient through the narrative dichotomy. Jacob's eventual success in Haran is attributed to two factors: God watches over him, as promised when he sets out, but at the same time, Jacob uses his own wits. I will yet discuss how these two factors are intertwined, but for now, it suffices to point out how this dichotomy is immanent to these narratives; neither is sufficient in itself. The Abraham cycle glows with divine revelation; the Joseph cycle is propelled by human initiative and free will; in the Jacob cycle, the two threads are woven together. Let us now follow these two sets of footprints.

32. A salient proponent of this approach is Gunkel, *Genesis*, 319.
33. Niditch, *Biblical Folklore*, 49–50. See also the discussion (and justified reservations toward the approach in question) of Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth*, 147–48.

Pregnancy, Birth, and Childhood (Gen. 25:19–34)

> Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them.
>
> – Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act II, Scene V

Despite what many teenagers would like to believe, a person's story begins with their parents; and the same is true of the Jacob cycle, which begins with a description of his parents' marriage. In fact, the description of his parents' union foreshadows events that will later play out in the protagonist's life: "When Isaac was forty he married Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel *the Aramean of Padan Aram*, sister of Laban *the Aramean*" (25:20).

Given that Rebecca's origins are already known from the detailed story in Genesis 24, this repetition seems superfluous, especially to the description of Jacob and his twin's birth.[1] Rashi reads this emphasis as praise for Rebecca: "Daughter of Bethuel the Aramean, sister of Laban – had it not yet been mentioned that she was the daughter of Bethuel and the sister of Laban, and from Padan Aram? This serves

1. Rebecca's birthplace has several different names. In Genesis, she lives in "Aram Naharaim" (24:10); here, it is called "Padan Aram." Most assume that this is the same place with different names (see, for example, Hamilton, *Genesis II,* 175; Mathews, *Genesis II*, 385). For a different opinion, see, for example, Westermann, *Genesis II,* 412.

to praise her, for she was the daughter of a wicked man, the sister of a wicked man, and from a place of wicked men, but she did not emulate their deeds" (Rashi on Gen. 25:20).

Rebecca's praise in this verse can also be read in the opposite sense: she is worthy *because* she is from Padan Aram and not from Canaan. Abraham emphasizes to his servant that he is unwilling for Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman, and the text therefore emphasizes that Rebecca is indeed from Aram, from Abraham's own Aramean family.

Yet the language of this verse is not only in dialogue with the story of finding a wife for Isaac; it also anticipates Jacob's own experience.[2] Laban will prove to play a significant role in Jacob's life when he himself seeks a wife. This foreshadowing has great significance for the narrative cycle – it is already clear from the beginning that Jacob's journey to Haran is not the coincidental result of his theft of the blessing but rather a fundamental part of the plot, and the story of Jacob's birth opens with emphasis on the Aramean side of Jacob's family.

Jacob's narrative cycle takes place in three geographical spheres:

1. Introductory stories before Jacob's departure for Haran (how Jacob ends up in Padan Aram).
2. How Jacob establishes his family and fortune in Haran.
3. Jacob's return to his father in Hebron (and what happens on the way).

The first of these three sections opens with Isaac's marriage and emphasis of the bride's geographical origins. The second section describes Jacob's journey to Padan Aram to find a wife, given that, in the words of his mother Rebecca, "If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like them, one of the women of the land, why should I go on living?" (Gen. 27:46). Jacob's exile ends when he reaches Shechem (see the discussion in context), and the first concern upon his return is the question of Dinah's marriage to Shechem son of Hamor, the prince of the land.

Effectively, Jacob's narrative cycle opens with the title "These are the *toledot* of Isaac" (the eighth appearance of this heading in Genesis),

2. As proposed, for example, by Wenham, *Genesis II*, 174.

and consistent with the pattern throughout Genesis, the narrative focus is on the establishment of Jacob's family – Isaac's grandchildren. We will yet discuss the extent of influence the wives' origin has on the plot development. The most important part of the narrative cycle takes place where his family is established, in Padan Aram, and Jacob's narrative cycle ends when Jacob returns to his father and presents his family to him.

BARRENNESS, PREGNANCY, AND PROPHECY (25:21–23)

Isaac's "*toledot*" could have begun with more drama: Rebecca, like Sarah before her, is barren, and she and Isaac must pray to God to open her womb. After Abraham and Sarah's long, painful ordeal, the reader is prepared for narrative focus on this complication. Yet the news of Rebecca's barrenness is mentioned almost incidentally, and solved in a single breath with its mention: "And Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, for she was childless. The Lord granted his plea and Rebecca became pregnant" (25:21). It is strange that Isaac's prayer for help is mentioned even before his plight, so that his actual plight – childlessness – seems secondary to his prayer. This may serve to reinforce his characterization as a man of prayer, as introduced in the previous chapter: "Isaac was just coming back from the direction of Beer-lahai-roi .... He had gone out in the field toward evening to meditate" (25:62).[3] Moreover, it creates the impression of a fast-paced story: Isaac prays, God answers his prayers, and Rebecca conceives. This sequence belies the fact that twenty years go by before Jacob and Esau are actually born! Some debate whether Isaac prays for twenty long years before his prayers are answered or whether he only prays after twenty years of infertility, whereupon God immediately responds.[4] I see no reason to assume that Isaac only begins praying after twenty years, but the very dilemma reflects the disparity between the actual unfolding of events and their representation in the text, where it seems that God answers Isaac as soon as he prays. The parallel structure of the two halves of the verse contributes to this reading:[5]

3. See Grossman, *Abraham*, 391.
4. Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth*, 46.
5. Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 88.

> Isaac *pleaded* with *the Lord* on behalf of *his wife,*
> He granted his *plea, the Lord,* and *Rebecca* became pregnant

Of course, in contrast to this impression, a quick calculation reveals that Isaac and Rebecca are married for twenty years before she becomes pregnant: Isaac marries Rebecca when he is forty years old (25:20), and the twins are born when he is sixty (25:26). The pace of verse 21 conceals the disparity between the fabula (the actual sequence of events) and the syuzhet (the way the story is told). Although technically both Abraham and Sarah *and* Isaac and Rebecca suffer decades of infertility, from a literary perspective, it is not accurate to state that "the barren condition of Rebecca parallels the Abraham-Sarah narratives."[6] The prolonged, detailed suffering of Sarah; the constant pleas and trials of Abraham, who eventually challenges God (15:2–3); the repeated divine promises – all this cannot possibly be compared to the brief sequence before Jacob's birth, which presents both crisis and solution within the same sentence.

The text seems more interested in emphasizing God's response to Isaac's prayer than the couple's plight, and showing that Isaac is blessed rather than distressed. On the one hand, there is archetypal importance that Isaac's sons are born to a barren mother – as was Isaac himself – thus emphasizing God's providence and intervention. On the other hand, the reader is not invited to share the couple's desperate anticipation for a child as they wait and grieve month after month for twenty long years. Jacob is indeed born following special divine intervention, but his parents' pain is downplayed. I will explore the full significance of this design in the context of chapter 26, the only chapter in Genesis devoted entirely to Isaac.

To Inquire of the Lord

Following Isaac's prayer, Rebecca also seeks God during her pregnancy:

> But the children clashed within her. She said, "If this is so, why am I living?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. The Lord said to her, "Two nations are inside your womb;

6. Mathews, *Genesis II*, 386.

two peoples are to part from you.
People will overpower people,
and the greater shall the younger serve." (25:22–23)

The juxtaposition of the couple's prayers, verse after verse, invites comparison between them.[7] Isaac prays to God about their painful barrenness and Rebecca prays to God about her painful pregnancy; just as God responds to Isaac's prayers, He responds to Rebecca; Isaac prays for Rebecca to become pregnant, and Rebecca prays because she is pregnant. The verses' structure makes it easier to compare the two parents: at first Isaac is the active subject in the text (vv. 19–21), but once Rebecca becomes pregnant, the narrative focus shifts to her (vv. 22–23).

This parallel also reveals the difference between Isaac and Rebecca, and we will yet explore how significant a difference it is: Isaac prays to God, but Rebecca "went to inquire" of God. What does "inquire" mean, and where does she go to do so? The theory that she goes to Isaac and asks him to pray on her behalf is not convincing;[8] Isaac does not seem to be aware of the prophecy, and if Rebecca had indeed asked Isaac to pray for her, it would likely have been explicit in the text.

A different exegetical direction perceives Abraham as Rebecca's advisor. Ibn Ezra, for example, writes: "The Lord told her through a prophet, or through Abraham himself, as he did not die until her sons were fifteen years old" (on Gen. 25:23). This reading is developed further in the book of Jubilees (19:15–30), where Abraham plays a decisive role in Rebecca's bond with Jacob – Abraham perceives Jacob as the chosen son, blesses him, and asks Rebecca to help fulfill this choice.[9] Yet this theory is clearly absent in the text itself. Could it be that Abraham plays so crucial a role without any such mention in the narrative? Would Abraham be aware of the prophecy without sharing it with Isaac?

7. See also Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 45–46.
8. Mathews, *Genesis II*, 387. Fleming claims that Rebecca receives the prophecy herself, directly (Fleming, "She Went to Inquire"), but this reading is problematic.
9. In this respect, Tal Ilan's rejection of the view that the book of Jubilees esteems women is correct (Ilan, "Review," 161–64). On the contrary: in the biblical narrative Rebecca is Isaac's equal or even superior regarding who is their chosen son, whereas in Jubilees, Abraham replaces Rebecca.

In any case, how Rebecca receives this prophecy[10] is only secondary to the content of the prophecy itself.[11] Yet the verb "inquire" – *lidrosh* – sets a certain tone for the prophecy and cannot be overlooked. In other places in the Bible, the verb "*lidrosh*" is associated with knowing the future (such as Ben-Hadad's inquiry of Elisha: "Will I recover from this illness?" – II Kings 8:8) or other hidden information (such as the whereabouts of Saul's donkeys). One of Moses' roles as prophet and leader is to answer the people's various questions: "The people come to me to inquire of God" (Ex. 18:15). Even if "the primary meaning of 'inquiring of God' was once consulting with an oracle about the future, as was prevalent throughout the middle east, but with time, this phrase also came to be associated with making pilgrimage to God's temple and keeping His commandments,"[12] the primary connotations still linger.

It is interesting to note that the disparity between Isaac, who prays, and Rebecca, who inquires, is expressed so subtly. Isaac's prayer is not represented with the more typical verb "*lehitpallel*," but rather, using the verb root A-T-R, which some associate with rite and ritual, especially sacrifice.[13] This is not evident in biblical Hebrew, but it is true of Arabic and Ugaritic, where the verb root A-T-R means slaughter or sacrifice. Some scholars posit that this means that Isaac makes sacrifices in his wife's presence.[14] I am not convinced that all biblical instances of prayer (with the verb root A-T-R) involve sacrifice,[15] but even if they

10. Sarna (*Understanding Genesis*, 182) claims that the text is vague as to where Rebecca "went" in order to disassociate her from any kind of cultic ritual.
11. Wenham, *Genesis II*, 175.
12. Saviv, "Seeking the Lord," 38.
13. This may be true of Ezekiel 8:11: "Each man had his censer in his hand, and a dense cloud of incense was ascending (*va'atar*)" (although in Ezekiel, the root A-T-R also means, simply, "prayer" – 35:13). If A-T-R is indeed related to sacrifice, then the names of three towns of Judah (or Simeon) are all related to the world of sacrifice: "Livnah (a play on *levona*, frankincense) and Eter (*atar*) and Ashan (a play on *ashan*, smoke)" – Josh. 15:42; see also Joshua 19:7.
14. Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 46. For further discussion, see Grossman, *Sacrificial Service*, 18.
15. See, for example, the plague of frogs, when the root A-T-R is simply pleading and crying out to God (Ex. 8:4–8).

do, then both Isaac and Rebecca receive what they seek. Isaac prays for pregnancy, and Rebecca indeed becomes pregnant; Rebecca seeks information and understanding about her future, and she indeed learns what is to come. In the words of Rashbam: "*To inquire of the Lord* – through the prophets of that time, as written 'to inquire of the Lord,' and as written: 'When the people come to me to inquire of the Lord'" (Rashbam on Gen. 25:22).

Describing Rebecca's action with this specific word takes on further significance in the broader theological context of Genesis. Rebecca receives God's word only after she attempts to seek it. This is a fundamental difference from the Abraham narrative cycle, where God appears to Abraham and Sarah time and again, even visiting them in their own home to announce the impending birth of their son, his name, and the future blessing that awaits him. The Jacob cycle opens with Isaac's prayer and with Rebecca's active search for the word of God, thus coloring the new narrative cycle in different theological tones than the first parts of Genesis.

Moreover, the fact that this prophecy is granted in response to Rebecca's "inquiry" also has specific implications. Rebecca asks to know what will become of her, and why her unborn child moves so frantically within her; the answer she receives is a glimpse into the future. This, I believe, settles an exegetical dilemma: Does the prophecy impart a moral message about the worthy path to follow, or is it merely an image of the future?[16] The use of the verb "*lidrosh*" shows that this not a commandment or moral directive, but an answer to Rebecca's question about herself and her children.[17]

Based on this narrative framework, we will now explore God's words to Rebecca and attempt to decipher what future awaits Rebecca

16. See, for example, Humphreys, *Character of God*, 163; Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth*, 42.
17. Assis argues that this prophecy does not refer to covenantal election or rejection, but rather to which son will be the head of the family (Assis, *Identity in Conflict*, 58–59). This reading is consistent with the plot, whereas Esau is only excluded much later. Yet the emphasis on "nations" and "peoples" implies that the two brothers will split off into two different nations.

and her sons. This prophecy lies at the heart of the scene's chiastic structure:[18]

A. Isaac's marriage at the age of forty: "When Isaac was forty he married Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Padan Aram, sister of Laban the Aramean" (v. 20).
  B. Isaac's prayer and Rebecca's pregnancy: "Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, for she was childless. The Lord granted his plea and Rebecca became pregnant" (v. 21).
    C. Rebecca goes to inquire of the Lord: "But the children clashed within her. She said, 'If this is so, why am I living?' So she went to inquire of the Lord" (v. 22).
    C'. God's reply: "Two nations are in your womb, two peoples are to part from you. People will overpower people, and the greater shall the younger serve" (v. 23).
  B'. Rebecca gives birth: "When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb" (v. 24).
A'. Isaac becomes a father at the age of sixty: "Isaac was sixty years old when they were born" (v. 26).

Isaac's age at his marriage and at the twins' birth reveals that twenty years pass during these brief lines. Even so, the verses of this scene do not focus on the plight of their barrenness, but rather on the difficulty of Rebecca's pregnancy.

The two inner components of the structure relate that Rebecca becomes pregnant (B) and gives birth (B'). Most biblical pregnancies are immediately followed by birth and the child's naming, such as: "The man knew his wife Eve / and she conceived / and gave birth to Cain, saying, 'With the Lord's help I have made a man'" (Gen. 4:1), or the birth of many of Jacob's own sons: "And Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son / and named him Reuben" (29:32). Here, the formulaic biblical sequence is interrupted with rare focus on the pregnancy itself, setting this birth story apart from other birth stories.

18. For a similar concentric structure, see Mathews, *Genesis II*, 385.

The two central components (C–C') describe the suffering that moves Rebecca to inquire of the Lord. Aptly set in the scene's center, these verses transcend time and place and encapsulate the distant future of the two unborn children struggling within their mother's womb, "explaining the whole Jacob and Esau story in much the same way that 12:1–3 illuminates the Abraham story."[19]

Clashing Within Her

As stated, God's answer to Rebecca can only be fully understood if we understand her question. She is moved to inquire of the Lord when "the children clashed (*vayitrotzetzu*) within her" (25:22). Rashi cites two possible meanings of the word *vayitrotzetzu*:

> Our Sages interpreted it as an expression of "running," of "movement": when she would pass by the entrances of Shem and Eber [a place of Torah study], Jacob would move and struggle to get out, and when she would pass by the entrance of places of idolatry, Esau would struggle to get out. Another interpretation: they would clash with each other and fight about the inheritance of both worlds. (Rashi on Gen. 25:22)

The Septuagint seems to understand it in the sense of "running" or "movement" (ἐσκίρτων), but from a semantic perspective, it is more convenient to read the word in the sense of "crushing" or "smashing" (compare with Judges 9:53; Is. 36:6), as if the two brothers are crushing each other in prenatal sibling rivalry.[20] Some read their struggle as an actual physical struggle,[21] while others interpret it as the beginning of the struggle for primogeniture: the kicks and shoves that Rebecca feels are the two brothers shoving inside her, struggling to get the best position

19. Wenham, *Genesis II*, 180.
20. BDB, "R-TZ-TZ," 954: "The children *crushed* (thrust, struck) one another within her." By contrast, Zimran (*Conflicts*, 79), claimed that this verb has no connotations of a fight or tension.
21. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 288; Wenham, *Genesis II*, 175.

in order to be born first.[22] In either case, the reflexive form of the verb root reflects how *both* brothers are struggling, clashing with each other.

Thus, the rivalry between Jacob and Esau begins even before their birth, and grows along with them. Many years will pass before their struggle (*hitrotzetzut*) in the womb will conclude – at least openly – with reconciliation initiated when Esau runs (*vayarotz*) toward Jacob and embraces him (33:4), but their relationship will always be characterized with tension.

What does Rebecca learn from this response? Firstly, that she is carrying twins – which in itself explains her intense discomfort. Moreover, the fierce movement within her is in fact the beginning of a lasting struggle between the brothers: "Two nations are in your womb, / two peoples will part from you. / People will overpower people / and the greater shall the younger serve" (v. 23).

The first half of the verse announces that Rebecca's twins will grow into two nations. The second half describes their future rivalry: the text hints that throughout history, one will overpower the other, but ultimately, the younger brother will triumph over the elder brother.[23]

TWO BROTHERS (25:24–28)

> As thou sayest, charged my brother, on his
> blessing, to breed me well: and there begins my
> sadness … for my part,

22. Similarly: Y. Zakovitch, "Jacob, Deceit," 126; Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 88.
23. The Sages famously read this line as an ambiguous statement that can be read either way, and many adopt this position (see, for example, Shapira, "Jacob and Esau," 261–62), and grammatically, the line is indeed ambiguous. However, it seems more likely that the prophecy wishes to point out what is unusual about the pregnancy, and it is therefore more likely that the older brother will serve the younger brother, unlike convention, which dictates that the firstborn is the most powerful. As mentioned, Elie Assis notes that the prophecy that the greater will serve the younger does not entail the rejection of either brother (Assis, *Identity in Conflict,* 36–37) – it is only a comment about who the head of the family will be, but it does not actually exclude either brother from the covenant. However, given that the prophecy predicts that each brother will form his own separate nation, there is room to discuss whether the prophecy does in fact hint that one brother will be rejected.

> he keeps me rustically at home. (Shakespeare, *As You Like It,* Act I, Scene I)

R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once said: "If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you."

Yet a person is clearly shaped by the people around them, especially their family. This applies sevenfold in the world of literature, where characterization is inherently forged through analogy to other characters in the text (or even other texts). Though comparison between siblings is ill-advised in the real world, it is a crucial, even necessary tool for reaching full understanding of a character in the world of literature[24] – especially in the case of twin brothers whose mother is warned of their rivalry before they are even born.[25] This prophecy invites comparison between them, and the brothers are defined and fully characterized in relation to each other.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Jacob and Esau's birth, childhood, and relationship with their parents are related entirely through comparisons between the two brothers:

Birth:
The first came out red. His whole body was like a hairy cloak, so they named him Esau. Then his brother emerged, his hand grasping Esau's heel (*akev*), so he named him Jacob (*Yaakov*).

Occupation:
Esau became a skilled hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was an innocent man who stayed among the tents.

Parental Love:
Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebecca loved Jacob.

24. See further in Garsiel, *Literary Study*, 17–18.
25. See for example in Roubach, "Two."

These descriptions all mention Esau before Jacob (as opposed to the alternating descriptions of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4), true to their birth order, which creates a sense of order and clear comparison. Yet in each parallel, a certain element in the text challenges this order and apparent symmetry:

Birth (vv. 24–26)

> When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb.[26]
> The first came out red. / His whole body was like a hairy cloak, / so they named him Esau.
> Then his brother emerged, / his hand grasping Esau's heel, / so he named him Jacob.

The symmetry is clear: first, each baby is born / then characterized with a certain feature / then named. At the same time, subtle asymmetries hint at the tension that bubbles beneath the surface. When the first child born is referred to as "the first," we can assume that readers would expect him to be followed by "the second" – in fact, the term "the first" is meaningless unless it is followed by "the second." Yet Jacob is described not as "the second" but as "his brother." The text is already affected by the tension in the prophecy of Rebecca's pregnancy – the fact that Jacob is not relegated to "second" place despite their birth order foreshadows how the primogeniture will be challenged as the twins mature.

26. Some scholars claim that the "*vehinei*" in the birth scene cannot be an expression of surprise, because Rebecca already knows that she will have twins (see, for example, Zakovitch, "Jacob, Deceit," 133–34; Westermann, *Genesis II*, 413). Others argue that the word refers to surprise that the twins are born healthy, or that the prophecy is indeed true (see, for example, Gunkel, *Genesis,* 289).

Asymmetry is also evident in the brothers' naming: "they" name Esau,[27] while "he" names Jacob.[28]

These asymmetries frame the most significant difference of all: the newborn Esau is described by his appearance ("red, his whole body was like a hairy cloak"), but Jacob is described by his actions ("his hand grasping Esau's heel").[29] The reader, expecting a comparison that will emphasize the differences between the brothers, is confused, because the text describes the brothers using two disparate semantic fields. What does Jacob look like? Did Esau do anything unusual at his birth? One can compare a symphony by Mozart with a symphony by Beethoven, but how does one compare a symphony by Mozart with an apple?

The significance of this symmetry – and its repeated undermining – will only emerge after a close analysis of the sparse information provided about the two brothers. Esau is ruddy[30] and hairy. Theoretically, the description could be read thus: "His whole body was red – like a

27. The meaning of *Esav* is not entirely clear; perhaps the most logical reading is that it a partial anagram of *Se'ar*, hair (Westermann, *Genesis II*, 414); but we cannot rule out its association with the word *Me'useh*, "squeezed, pressed," as in "There were their breasts squeezed, there were their virgins' nipples fondled" (Ezek. 23:3). Perhaps the twins' vigorous wrestling meant that Esau emerged "squeezed" or "squished" (see further in Hamori, *Woman's Divination,* 56–58).

28. Several scholars assume that Jacob's original name was *Yaakov'el*, associated with God's protection (see, for example, Hamilton, *Genesis II*, 178). In the narrative, his name was shortened to *Yaakov* to link him to the heel he grasps during his birth. R. Yoel Bin-Nun claims that the omission of the theophoric element of Jacob's name is calculated to disassociate him from the pagan heroes who are named for their gods (Bin-Nun, *Chapters of the Fathers,* 119–23). It is worth recalling, however, that Jacob's name is later changed to a theophoric name – Israel.

29. Garsiel, *Midrashic Name Derivations,* 66.

30. Edom's association with "red" invites various opinions. Most assume that the word *Edom* is derived from *dam*, blood (Shalem, "Colors," 66), but other red entities are not associated with blood – such as the red heifer, the red horses in Zechariah, or the descriptions of Edom and David as "ruddy." Above, I adopt Snaith's view of the law of the red heifer (Snaith, *Numbers*, 271). Athaliah Brenner writes that the assumption that red means darkly tanned is inconsistent with the description of the now homeless leaders in Lamentations, whose skin is once "ruddy" but is now "blacker than pitch" (Lam. 4:7–8) – Brenner, "White and Red," 170–71. However, there is a difference between tanned skin and blackened skin, and the verse can also be understood if "red" means "tanned."

hairy cloak," so that the "hairy cloak" would in fact describe Esau's bold red coloring, rather than his hairiness. However, the important role that Esau's hairiness plays later on in the narrative rules out any such ambiguity in this line: Esau is clearly both ruddy and hairy – two components that will characterize his future descendants: his nation will be called "Edom," which literally means "red" (possibly based on the red soil of its hills) and they will live on Mount Seir, which literally means "hairy" (Gen. 36:9). Later on, Esau demands that Jacob give him "some of that *red* stuff" (25:30), so we will postpone further discussion of Esau's association with the color red to that context.

Esau's ruddiness and hairiness serve to characterize him as a bestial wild man, reminiscent of Enkidu from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.[31] Enkidu's most striking feature is his hairiness (*šu'uram pagaršu*),[32] and he dwells in the wild, among the animals, who fear his shaggy visage.[33] Esau, too, is "a man of the field" (25:7), a shaggy wild man at home amongst the animals he hunts.[34]

Although it later emerges that Jacob is smooth-skinned compared to his hairy brother (27:11), there is no physical description of the newborn Jacob. Rather, the only information provided about him is the fact that he comes out of the womb with "his hand grasping Esau's heel." Symbolically, this can be read in two ways: as a manifestation of the conflict that begins in the womb, with Jacob grasping at Esau's heel in an attempt to stop him being born first;[35] or, alternatively, as a sign of Jacob's dependence on his twin brother – he must grasp Esau's heel to

31. Speiser, *Genesis*, 196; Hendel, *Jacob,* 116–21; Hamilton, *Genesis II*, 181; Hamori, "Gilgamesh."
32. Hamori, "Gilgamesh," 633.
33. Shifra and Klein, *Those Distant Days*, 193, lines 196–97.
34. See also: Galender, *Genesis II*, 236–37; Roland Hendel lists other pairs who represent a similar struggle between two cultures: Horus the Egyptian war god and his cousin Seth (Hendel, *Jacob*, 122–25); Hypsornius and Ozus – two brother gods who, according to Philon, also clashed (125–28).
35. See Rashi, Radak, and Ḥizkuni in context; Hamilton, *Genesis II*, 178; Wenham, *Genesis II*, 177.

be helped out of the womb.[36] In the wider context of the narrative, the first reading is more convincing – Jacob's tiny fist grasping Esau's heel is the first sign of the fraternal conflict Rebecca anticipates even before their birth, and this conflict will continue in the next scene, when Jacob attempts to wrestle the primogeniture away from the ravenous Esau.[37]

The brief account of the twins' birth is thus revealed as a complex structure indeed: the apparent symmetry of their descriptions is subtly undermined by the descriptions themselves. As I will yet argue, the characters' free choice is of utmost importance to the plot's development. The characters' capacity for choice is a meta-principle in biblical narrative in general, and it plays an especially crucial role in the Jacob cycle. For this very reason, the description of the twins' birth is of critical interest: Is their fate already sealed at their moment of birth? Does their first shrill cry already designate one as the heir of Abraham's legacy, and the other as the ruler of the Edomite hills on the eastern side of the Jordan? At first glance, the description of their birth seems to anticipate their later choices, but the image of the newborn Jacob grasping his brother's heel tilts the scale toward a different reading. The complex conclusion of their birth story is that the brothers indeed have different natures that set them along certain paths, but ultimately, their future will be determined by their own actions and choices.

At the same time, the verses' broken symmetry reveals a different aspect of the brothers: Esau's description is self-contained and independent, but Jacob is characterized in relation to his brother. This is evident in their names: Esau is named for his appearance, but Jacob is named for his attempt to control his brother.

This pseudo-symmetry is also evident in the next stage of the twins' life:

36. Galender comments that the fact that Jacob grasped Esau's heel implies that he did not emerge from the womb by himself, but that he needed his brother's help to be born (Galender, *Genesis II*, 233, n. 6).

37. R. Eliezer Hadad proposes that grasping the heel symbolizes a snake – who strikes its enemies on the heel (Gen. 3:15, 49:17). The snake is a slippery, smooth creature, and this generates further contrast between the smooth, slippery Jacob and the hairy Esau. See Hadad, "The Crooked."

Occupation (vv. 27–28)

> The boys grew up.
> Esau became a skilled hunter, a man of the field
> while Jacob was an innocent man who stayed among the tents.

Once again, while the structure initially appears symmetrical, a closer look at this description reveals subtle deviations. The difference in tense – "Esau became (*vayhi*)" and "Jacob was (*haya*)" underscores the contrast between them. The verse mentions Esau's occupation – "a skilled hunter," as well as his sphere of action – "a man of the field." Both of these descriptions can be paralleled with the description of Jacob, "who stayed among the tents." The latter seems to refer to shepherding (as in Gen. 4:21),[38] which can be contrasted with Esau as hunter. Moreover, given the biblical motif of conflict between farmers and shepherds,[39] there is room to debate whether this can also be contrasted with Esau being "a man of the field." Does this mean that Esau worked in the field, a man of the soil? In any case, the statement that Jacob "stayed among the tents" is a foil to Esau's sphere of action: Esau ventures out into the wild, into the open fields, while Jacob lingers by the tents, staying close to his home. Esau comes back, tired from his day in the field, while Jacob remains by the hearth.

But Jacob is also characterized with a more obscure description – "*ish tam*," which is generally translated as "an innocent man" (or "plain," "simple," "quiet"). Is this in parallel with "a skilled hunter (*ish yode'a tzayid*)"? A hunter is certainly a profession, but what about "*ish tam*"? Some read the word *tam* in a different sense than its common biblical meaning – based on the Arabic, *tim*, "*tam*" can be understood in the sense of "being conquered," "submissive," and in the context of the verse: a person who stays at home.[40] This certainly creates a striking

38. For example: Ibn Ezra and Bekhor Shor (unlike Rashi); Gunkel, *Genesis*, 290.
39. This is evident in the first biblical narrative about brothers: Cain and Abel (Gen. 4). Some, in fact, claim that this is the narrative's central objective; others do not. See my discussion of this in Grossman, *Beginnings*, 113–15.
40. Driver, "Vocabulary," 281.

contrast between Esau – the man of the field – and Jacob, who stays at home: "*tam* implies someone who finds satisfaction in a quiet life at home … in contrast to the wild life of the wild hunter."[41] This reading is already supported in the next scene, where Esau comes in after a day in the field to Jacob, who is cooking at home. Most exegetical attempts to draw a contrast between "an innocent man" and "a skilled hunter" load connotations onto the latter as an expression of cruelty and deception.[42] A more straightforward reading, however, simply admits that once again, these are different categories: Esau is characterized by two separate descriptions of an occupation, while the words "*ish tam*" describe Jacob's personality. An "*ish tam*" denotes a virtuous, moral person, upright and just, such as Job: "[Job] was innocent (*tam*), honest, God-fearing, and always turned away from evil" (Job 1:1).[43]

The childhood midrashim of Esau as a devious, evil hunter and Jacob as a righteous Torah scholar linger with many readers, but the literal text does not pass any moral judgments on Esau, and merely presents him as a hunter who works in the open field. Once again, while the text seems to invite comparison between the twins, the descriptions of each do not belong to the same semantic fields, thereby preventing full comparison between them.

This formulation seems intentionally misleading, and this may be the reason that the word "*ish*" is used twice to describe Esau ("*ish yode'a tzayid ish sadeh*"), but only once for Jacob ("*ish tam yoshev ohalim*") – this imbalance is calculated to upset the symmetry of the verse.

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41. Keil and Delitzsch on this verse. See also Speiser, *Genesis*, 195; Hamilton, *Genesis II*, 181.
42. Rashi, based on the Midrash, writes about Esau: "He ate of his game – he knew how to lure and deceive his father with words." Ibn Ezra's commentary reflects a desire to maintain symmetry by showing how Esau's occupation reflects his character: "Hunting is a world full of deceit, for most animals are caught through deceit, while Jacob is Esau's opposite because he is an innocent man" (see also Ḥizkuni). See also: Garsiel, "Literary Structure," 71; Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 91.
43. Wenham proposes that Jacob's description hints that he was independent and cut off from the outside world (Wenham, *Genesis II*, 177). I prefer Von Rad's approach that this hints to Jacob's sense of morality (Von Rad, *Genesis*, 261). Frank notes that characterizing Jacob as "an innocent man" is antithetical to his name, which has the root A-K-V, deceit (Frank, "The Face of God," 8).

It is also interesting to note that within the sequence of the twins' birth and occupation, each brother is characterized as "whole" in a different sense: Jacob is "whole" in a moral sense, while Esau is "whole" in a physical sense, born with hair like a fully grown person.

The symbolic tension hinted through the brothers' characterization – the tension between raw, wild nature and the civilized culture of the tent – may move the reader to search for hints of which twin is the suitable heir for Abraham's legacy, but at this point, if the reader is able to overlook the story's end, the contrast between the brothers can be read as complementary personalities that will build God's nation together, combining the powers of nature and culture to serve God as one.

Parental Love (v. 28)

> Isaac loved (*vaye'ehav*) Esau because he ate of his game,
> and Rebecca loved (*ohevet*) Jacob.

The third description hints to troubling family dynamics. Differences in appearance, nature, and occupation can all bring welcome diversity to a family. Many, for example, describe the differences between Judah and Joseph as complementary forces that strengthen a budding nation. But each parent favoring a different child can result in unwanted tension within the family unit, and the seeds planted in this verse will later grow uncontrollably, tearing the family apart.

Like the two previous contrasts, the apparent symmetry of this verse is also undermined. The chiastic structure (Isaac loved – Rebecca loved) underscores how each parent favors a different son, but whereas Isaac's love for his son is explained – "because he ate of his game" – no explanation is given for Rebecca's love of Jacob. This difference can be ascribed to a technical reason: Isaac's love for Esau and his game will feature later on, when Isaac sends Esau out to hunt for his favorite game before he blesses him, so it is already mentioned here.[44] Rashbam writes similarly: "Esau's love for Isaac and Rebecca's love for Jacob is already

44. For example: Mathews, *Genesis II*, 392.

mentioned here to inform of what is to come: Isaac wanted to bless Esau, but Rebecca deceives him so that he blesses Jacob" (Rashbam on 25:28).[45]

Yet this difference can also be read in the same light as the other deviations in the text, which subtly portray Jacob in a more favorable light. Isaac's love for Esau is conditional – and conditional on food, no less – while Rebecca's love (conveyed in present tense!) for Jacob is unconditional, whole like Jacob himself.

What, then, is the meaning of this brief yet complex description? The apparent contrast between the brothers is challenged again and again, the comparison between them disqualified again and again. The apparent symmetry seems to characterize one brother in relation to the other, creating a sense of competition and rivalry, and Esau repeatedly seems to have an advantage over Jacob – he is the firstborn and favorite of Isaac, the heir of Abraham's legacy, while Jacob is loved by his mother, who comes from lowly Padan Aram.

Yet each time, a closer reading reveals that it is Jacob who has the advantage. Rebecca's favoritism seems to result from the prophecy she receives during her pregnancy, which dictates that the greater will ultimately serve the younger. Even though Esau is the "first," Jacob evades characterization as "the second," which perhaps anticipates the scene where Jacob will relieve his brother of his rights as the "first." As mentioned, Jacob's depiction as "*ish tam*" without any correlation to Esau's description, and the conditional aspect of Isaac's love for Esau, both subtly tilt the text in Jacob's favor.

Yet why aren't the brothers explicitly pitted against each other in a full-frontal comparison? If there is indeed underlying preference for Jacob, why isn't Esau vilified openly? Some exegetes do sketch out such a portrait of Esau, even based on these verses, such as Radak: "Rebecca only loved Jacob, because he followed the path of life while Esau followed the path of death – not only did he avoid wisdom and the ways of

45. I believe that Rashbam implies that Esau's occupation anticipates the theft of the blessings narrative, as he writes, "A skilled hunter – to hunt game to bring back," which is a direct quote from the latter scene (27:5), thus connecting the two scenes. On Rashbam's tendency to suggest foreshadowing, see Jacobs, "Foreshadowing."

God, but he chose an occupation that placed him in danger every day, and he was rash and reckless" (on Gen. 25:28).

But this reading is not explicit in the narrative; on the contrary, he is presented as a logical candidate for the heir of Abraham's covenant. In this way, the narrative manages to hold the stick at both ends: the apparently neutral portrait of the brothers allows the narrative to present Isaac's love without making him seem foolish, but beneath the surface, there are repeated hints of Jacob's potential.

At the end of the narrative's description of their birth and childhood, Esau and Jacob both seem to be suitable heirs of Abraham's covenant – complementary forces that will build a new nation together. To employ Claude Lévi-Strauss' discourse about mythology, Esau and Jacob respectively represent wild, unadulterated nature and civilized culture – the raw and the cooked. Virtuous, upright Jacob the shepherd will bring justice and morality to the children of Abraham's covenant, while wild Esau, grounded in reality, connected to nature, will channel God's blessing of earth and abundance, making the nation thrive.[46] The reader will not be sorry if the birthright is claimed by Jacob – it is best if virtuous Jacob sets the tone for the new nation, keeping wild, fierce, groundbreaking Esau in check. Together, Jacob and Esau will produce a powerful, blessed nation – at this point, there is no reason to suspect that the two will part ways. Yet Rebecca knows of a different future – and Rebecca loves Jacob.

SALE OF THE BIRTHRIGHT (25:29–34)

> Ay, better than him I am before knows me. I know
> you are my eldest brother; and, in the gentle

46. It is intriguing that the father loves wild Esau, and the mother loves cultured Jacob. Based on Claude Lévi-Strauss' structuralistic opposition between "nature" and "culture," William Hendricks shows that the father is associated with culture and the mother with nature (Hendricks, "Structural Study"). There is certain logic in ascribing culture to the father, who transmits tradition, and nature to the mother, who gives birth. Here, there is a reversal of these positions, and it is Isaac who goes out to the field and loves his wild son, while Rebecca is the one who lives in Sarah's tent (24:67) and loves her tent-dwelling son.

> condition of blood, you should so know me. The courtesy of nations allows you my better, in that you are the first-born; but the same tradition takes not away my blood, were there twenty brothers betwixt us: I have as much of my father in me as you; albeit, I confess, your coming before me is nearer to his reverence. (Shakespeare, *As You Like It,* Act I, Scene I)

After their prenatal struggle to be born first, this scene sees the brothers fighting like teenagers. There is no actual physical struggle, but every word that passes between them is rife with conflict. Moreover, the evaluation of the characters in this scene is particularly complex. On one hand, Jacob is portrayed as a manipulative opportunist who exploits his brother's hunger in order to attain the birthright. In the words of R. Abraham Saba, a fifteenth-century refugee of the Spanish Inquisition:

> It is difficult to defend the virtue and holiness of Jacob. Where is his sympathy; why does he treat his brother so cruelly? It is written, "If your foe is hungry, feed him bread" (Prov. 25:21); it is true all the more so of your own brother of your own flesh! (*Tzror HaMor* on Gen. 25:31)

Indeed, later on in the narrative, Esau will define this scene as a deception: "Is he not rightly named Jacob? Twice he has supplanted me. He took my birthright and now he has taken my blessing!" (27:36). Jacob does deceive Esau and Isaac in order to steal the blessing, but does Esau have the right to begrudge Jacob for their earlier transaction, when he explicitly agreed to forfeit the birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew? It emerges that Esau perceives this as an act of exploitation, a precursor to the theft of the blessing.[47]

47. The connection between the birthright and the blessing is mentioned in Ancient Near Eastern texts, where it seems that the firstborn is endowed with the power to bless and curse. This is implied (indirectly) by the curses appendixed to a vassal contract, threatening those who violate it: "May Marduk – the firstborn son – strike

On the other hand, Esau is portrayed as impulsive and irreverent of his birthright ("Esau disdained his birthright"!). In a moment of hunger, he is prepared to forgo his primogeniture. It is therefore no wonder that over the generations, while some exegetes side with Esau, many others side with Jacob, such as Radak:

> One day Jacob was cooking a stew, and Esau came in exhausted. Jacob's stew appealed to him, and he asked him for some. This story illustrates Jacob's virtue and Esau's rashness and impulsivity, for he was a glutton, while Jacob did not indulge in worldly pleasures, as is evident from the fact that he was cooking lentils, which is the least of dishes. The fact that he only agreed to give some to Esau at the price of his birthright, even though he was his brother, is also proof of his stature and wisdom – that he would not give up what he toiled to prepare for himself to an empty, reckless person who does not cherish the way of life, who in his gluttony was unable to wait until he prepared his own food, so that he craved the lentil stew that appealed to him – of this very situation it is said, "He who bestows gifts upon the rich will only lose" (Prov. 22:16). (Radak on 25:29)

In order to extol Jacob, Radak is forced to paint Esau in the least flattering of colors, as someone "empty and reckless." The midrash even surmises that Esau came home exhausted from all the murders he had committed that day.[48] On the other hand, Victor Hamilton points out that Esau's request contains a polite word of request ("*Let me* gulp down" – *hal'iteni na*), while no such word is found in Jacob's request ("First sell me your birthright"), and concludes that "Jacob is the aggressive one, dictating the terms of the transaction."[49]

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with irrevocable sin and curse, as your fate" (ANET, 538). In this text, Marduk's primogeniture is linked to his ability to curse.

48. See also Nissan Ararat, who believes that this story reflects the brothers' qualities: Jacob is the naïve innocent man, who provides for guests, while Esau is the sly hunter who disdains the birthright (Ararat, *Truth and Grace*, 103–04).

49. Hamilton, *Genesis II*, 183. To be precise, it is not clear that the word "*na*" functions as a polite request word; it is more likely expresses urgency, "right now!" as Onkelos,

We will attempt to assess the characters' evaluation in the narrative through its analysis, but I first wish to point out a further complication related to the scene's purpose.

The apparent objective of this scene is to show how Jacob obtains Esau's birthright; even though Jacob cannot prevent Esau from being the first to leave their mother's womb, he manages to win the birthright later on. However, how is this transaction of any use to Jacob? Other scenes in the Bible show that the father has the power to choose his own successor, but nowhere else are the sons given the privilege of choosing the "firstborn" among them. Abraham, following divine command, banishes Ishmael from his household, but it is obviously not up to Ishmael and Isaac themselves. Jacob himself will one day choose Judah as the "firstborn" in Reuben's place, and select Ephraim over his brother Menashe, but do the sons themselves ever have any choice in the matter? If Isaac chooses Esau as his successor, then the twins' transaction will be meaningless.

A few scholars have noted a fifteenth-century BCE text discovered in Nuzi with an intriguing parallel to this scene, proposing that it illuminates the significance of Jacob and Esau's agreement as a business transaction. The Nuzi text describes how a man named Tupkitilla sells his birthright (the ownership of a grove) to his brother Kurpazah in exchange for three sheep,[50] illustrating that the financial aspect of a birthright can indeed be passed on from brother to brother.

Yet it is difficult to prove from one text that transferring a birthright was indeed prevalent in the ancient world. Some scholars rightly argue that the Nuzi transaction is no different from any other transaction, and there is little focus on the significance of the actual birthright.[51] While one might propose that Jacob and Esau are only arguing about the firstborn's financial advantages (as Ibn Ezra suggests), this reading is not convincing: there is no mention of any such assets in the scene. While the book of Deuteronomy dictates that the firstborn inherits a

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for example, translates: "Let me taste it right now"; other modern translations have "Quick, let me have some of that red stew!" (NIB, NIV).

50. Gordon, "Biblical Customs," 5.

51. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 92–93.

double share, there is no reason to assume that this was the practice during Abraham's time, as Rabbenu Baḥya notes (and this custom was not the norm elsewhere in the Ancient Near East).[52]

It thus seems that the narrative focus is not on the outcome, but rather on Jacob and Esau's characterization in this scene, on the conflict between them, and how they manage this conflict.

The Scene's Structure

This brief episode is arranged in a concentric structure:[53]

A. Once when Jacob was cooking a stew,
  B. Esau came in, starving, from the field.
    C. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me gulp down some of that red stuff. I am starved!"
      [That is how he came to be named Edom.]
      D. Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright."
        E. And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die. What use to me is a birthright?"
      D'. But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore, and sold Jacob his birthright.
    C'. Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew.
  B'. He ate, drank, got up, and left.
A'. Thus – Esau disdained his birthright.

The structure itself often reveals much about the narrative process. Putting the structure aside, we will first explore the narrative components.

Esau "comes in, starving (*ayef*)" (B). Some read this as "exhausted,"[54] but the more logical interpretation is that he is "starving," hungry and thirsty. This meaning is clear in other verses, such as "He

52. "It was not the firstborn's privilege then to have twice the share of his father's possessions as later commanded in the Torah, but a privilege of leadership and honor, for he was to take his father's place and rule over the rest of his brothers, and they would honor him as their father" (Rabbenu Baḥya on Gen. 25:31).
53. Compare to Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 95.
54. For example: Wenham, *Genesis II*, 177; Westermann, *Genesis II*, 417; Kiel, *Genesis II*, 230.

said to the people of Sukkot, 'Please, provide loaves of bread for the men following me, for they are starving'" (Judges 8:5); "They served honey and curds from the flock and cheese from the herd for David and his troops to eat, for they thought, 'The troops must have grown hungry, weary, and thirsty in the wilderness'" (II Sam. 17:29).[55]

At the scene's end, Esau eats and drinks – that is, he is no longer "starving," and "he left." This constitutes a solid narrative framework: the scene begins when Esau enters Jacob's tent, starving, and ends when he leaves the tent, sated; that is, it all takes place on Jacob's turf. The story of Cain and Abel, by contrast, a different conflict between a farmer and a shepherd, takes place "in the field," and ends with the wild brother's gory victory. Here, the brothers meet in a more civilized domain – Jacob's tent – as he symbolically tends to his stew by the hearth.

The next two components (C–D) open with two requests: Esau asks to "gulp down some of that red stuff," while Jacob asks for Esau's birthright. The two corresponding components (C'–D') show that both brothers receive what they have asked for: Esau gets the food he craved, and in return, Jacob receives the birthright. Several issues catch the eye: first of all, Esau's use of the verb "let me gulp down" (*hal'iteni*) is unusual – it is, in fact, a *hapax legomenon,* a unique word in the Bible. The Akkadian verb *la'ātu* means "to swallow,"[56] and in rabbinic literature, the root is used to describe how animals are fattened, thereby connoting coarse, bestial "gulping." If this later use can be projected onto earlier texts, then it indeed characterizes Esau as a glutton; as Rashi explains, "I will open my mouth – pour a lot into it, as we learned: one may not force-feed a camel [on the Sabbath] but one may pour food into its mouth" (Rashi on 25:30). Even Esau's description of the stew as "red stuff" creates the impression that he is so ravenous that he doesn't even care what Jacob pours into his mouth.

Esau's plea for food, so desperate that he does not pause to see what Jacob is actually cooking, is followed by a surprising narrative anecdote: that his exclamation gives rise to the name of his future nation.

55. For *ayef* in the sense of "thirsty," see also Deut. 25:18; Jer. 31:24; Ps. 63:2; Prov. 25:25; Job 22:7.
56. CAD, l, p. 6

This is baffling: Why is Esau's rash description of the food so important that his descendants are named for it? Abarbanel proposes that this parenthetical statement does not refer to his future nation, but rather, it explains that Esau called the stew "red stuff" because of the stew's color (that is, it should be translated not "That is how he came to be named Edom" but "That is why he called it 'red stuff'").[57] This is a creative reading indeed, but it is an awkward syntactical fit, and the word אדום is vowelized as "Edom" with a *segol,* not as the color "red" with a *kamatz*.

The Torah may be mocking Esau with this description, intentionally ascribing the name of his future nation to something as trivial as the stew he craved. I have already noted that Edom may be named thus for the red color of its hills, and this scene adds another level of symbolism. Esau is born "red," which is one explanation for his future name, and this scene further reinforces his connection with this color.

What does the color red symbolize in the Bible? In some contexts – life. This is especially striking in the context of the laws of *tzaraat* – biblical skin-blight. The mark of the disease is white, and when the afflicted individual finally returns to life and society, his offering is bound in red – the red blood of the bird is further wrapped up with a scarlet thread. This requires more comprehensive analysis, of course, but in our context, the intensity of the color red reinforces Esau as a vivid, wild character – a ruddy, hairy creature who wolfs down his food like an animal.

The identity of this "red stuff" is only clarified when Jacob serves Esau "bread and lentil stew." Jacob supplements the red stew with bread, somewhat mitigating his initial miserly attitude toward his brother. Now it emerges that Jacob does not refuse out of stinginess, but out of his desire for the birthright, and once the transaction is complete, Jacob feeds his brother generously.

These two elements take on further significance if we adopt Ramban's reading that Esau had no idea what Jacob was cooking and thus

57. "This does not mean that for this reason, Esau is called Edom … but that Esau was so tired that he called the stew 'red stuff'.… Out of sheer exhaustion he did not recognize exactly what it was and he [was too hungry] to ask, but simply referred to it by its appearance: 'red stuff'" (Abarbanel on 25:30).

refers to it by its color: "That red stuff – it was red from the red lentils in it, or perhaps other red ingredients, but Esau did not know what it was and referred to it as 'red stuff'" (Ramban on Gen. 25:30). David Daube takes this a step further, and posits that when Esau ravenously asks for "that red stuff," he assumes that it contains meat. Jacob does not correct him, but uses his brother's desperation to secure his promise of the birthright, so that Esau only discovers that he has sold his birthright for a mess of lentils after he begins to eat.[58] Wenham also adopts this reading:

> And what was it [Jacob] gave? Not a rich meaty stew, that the word "red" back in v. 30 suggested, but only a dish of lentils. With this last-minute revelation we should be stunned. Fancy trading all those treasured rights of inheritance for a mere bowl of lentil soup. We are left to admire Jacob's sharpness and wonder at Esau's folly.[59]

This reading certainly sheds new light on Esau's later complaint: "Is he not rightly named Jacob? Twice he has supplanted me. He took my birthright and now he has taken my blessing!" (27:36). From the carnivorous Esau's perspective, he has certainly been deceived if the hearty meat stew he was expecting turns out to be a dish for vegans.

I am not convinced that this reading is supported within the plot. If Daube's reading was sound, we would expect to hear of Esau's disappointment with his first bite, but the swift sequence of verbs implies that he is satisfied: "He ate, drank, got up, and left." Perhaps the description that Jacob adds "bread" to the deal implies that he supplements the stew with bread and other dishes – "bread" is often a biblical synonym for food in general, or even a whole meal in the Bible (Gen. 18:5; Judges 19:5; and many more) – in which case Jacob does not deceive Esau, but ends up giving him the meat he expects and craves.

Nonetheless, the Ramban and Daube's reading reveals a literary technique employed in this scene: the reader does not know what food Jacob is preparing, so that he or she shares the perspective of Esau, who

58. Daube, *Biblical Law*, 193–95; and see also Von Rad, *Genesis*, 261.
59. Wenham, *Genesis II*, 178.

demands to eat without knowing what he will be served.[60] This is not a negative thing in itself – perhaps the stew's aroma appeals to him, or perhaps he is so hungry that he doesn't care what he eats – but under these specific circumstances, his disinterest becomes significant. How can it be that Esau sacrifices his birthright without even determining what food is bubbling inside Jacob's pot? Rabbenu Baḥya notes the careful order of the information presented in the narrative:

> Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew – Here, the text reveals that what was mentioned earlier – "Jacob was cooking a stew" – is in fact a lentil stew.… This shows Esau's arrogance, pride, and inferiority. The text did not want to specify what kind of food it was before the sale, so that the reader would believe that it was a special, esteemed dish, given that he sold his birthright for it; for this reason, the text only mentions what kind of dish it was after the sale, as if to say: the stew mentioned before, the stew that Esau sold his very birthright for, was none but a measly lentil stew! This is a sign of his wicked qualities, and of his disdain for the birthright. (Rabbenu Baḥya on Gen. 25:34)

Kayyom – First

Before we discuss the central axis of the narrative, I wish to focus on an intriguing expression Jacob repeats to Esau. In both of Jacob's replies to Esau (D–D'), he requests that Esau will perform a certain action "*kayom*." He first asks that Esau sell him the birthright *kayom* and then attempts to ensure his agreement with an oath: "Swear to me *kayom*." How should this word be understood?

Many explain the word in the sense of "right now," such as Radak: "Finish a complete sale *today*"; Ramban: "This very moment"; Rashbam: "Immediately, right now sell me the birthright share of my

60. Gunkel proposes that Esau calls the stew by its color because he does not realize that it is lentil stew, and by "red stuff" he means a stew with bread (according to the Septuagint, it is a stew with a lot of vegetables). In any case, Gunkel also believes that the stew's contents were a surprise for Esau (Gunkel, *Genesis*, 291).

father's estate."[61] Others, however, propose that the biblical meaning can also be "first," before anything else is done.[62] This is generally how the sin of Eli's sons in Samuel is interpreted – they take off a portion of meat for themselves *before* the rest is offered as a sacrifice: "And if the man would say to him, 'Let them *first* (*kayom*) burn off the fat, then take as much as you want,' he would reply, 'No, hand it over at once – if not, I will take it by force'" (I Sam. 2:16). Similarly, before Saul returns home upon learning he is to be king, Samuel tells him to "*first* (*kayom*) stand here and I will let you hear the word of God" (I Sam. 9:27) – first, before he returns home.

If this is indeed the biblical sense of the word, then Jacob's emphasis to Esau is clear: he is seizing the moment and securing Esau's promise *first*, before Esau satisfies his hunger. Esau's agreement does not suffice for Jacob; he insists on Esau's oath *before* he eats.

The Narrative Climax

Surprisingly, it is not the transference of the birthright that forms the central axis of this scene, but rather, Esau's rejection of it: "And Esau said, 'Look, I am about to die. What use to me is a birthright?'" (v. 32). While Jacob and the text itself use a possessive suffix that ascribes the birthright to Esau – "*your* birthright" (v. 31); "*his* birthright" (v. 33) – Esau himself does not refer to it as "*my* birthright," but rather as "*a* birthright" (v. 32). This already hints to his indifference to this privilege.[63]

In light of the narrative design, I wish to return to our two opening questions – to the narrative objective, and the text's complex character evaluation. The scene's central axis implies that the narrative's objective is not to convey that the birthright is transferred from Esau to Jacob. God can choose Jacob even though he is the younger twin, and Isaac can still decide to bless Esau as the head of the family, regardless of what

61. Also: Speiser, *Genesis,* 195; Gunkel, *Genesis,* 292.

62. Rotenberg, "*Kayom*"; Westermann, *Genesis II*, 416. This reading is already suggested by Gesenius (in the later versions of his book – this comment is missing in earlier versions – *Hebräische Grammatik*, Leipzig 1889, 110). He differentiates between "*kehayom*" – right now, and "*Kayom*" – before anything else (Gesenius, *Hebräische Grammatik*, 112).

63. See also Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth*, 48.

the brothers decide between themselves. Rather, more than anything else, this scene illustrates Esau's attitude toward the birthright and its accompanying role as the head of the family. Not only is he willing to sacrifice it for mere food, he does not even bother clarifying *what* food Jacob will serve him, thus characterizing him as capricious, rash, and greedy. By contrast, whether the exchange has any practical implications or not, Jacob takes it seriously, and even has Esau swear on the transaction. This contrast subtly sways the reader in Jacob's favor.[64]

Esau's exclamation, "What use to me (*lamma ze li*) is a birthright?" echoes his mother's complaint during her pregnancy, "If this is so, why am I (*lamma ze anokhi*) living?" (25:22). This parallel hints that Esau is unknowingly validating this prophecy (with an oath!); before their birth, Rebecca hears that the elder shall serve the younger, and now the elder is indeed selling his birthright to his younger brother.[65]

The contrast between wild Esau and cultured Jacob has already been evident from birth, and now this characterization is reinforced through their actions. Esau is concerned about basic, short-term needs – food – while Jacob covets the birthright, which has long-reaching implications for his leadership and role in the family. This also follows from the scene's conclusion (A'). As already noted, the scene is framed by Esau's entrance and exit from Jacob's tent, but one last statement, outside the narrative framework, serves as its parting note: "Thus – Esau disdained the birthright" (v. 34). The scene could have ended otherwise: with focus on Jacob's selfish refusal to share his food with his starving brother, or with focus on the birthright exchanging hands – something in the vein of "and the birthright belonged to Jacob and his descendants to this day" (see, for example, I Chr. 5:1–2). Concluding with focus on Esau's attitude toward the birthright proves that the central axis's content

64. Gunkel adds that this disparity between the brothers is also reflected in their occupations. Esau is a hunter, living in the moment, while Jacob, a shepherd, must take the future into account in order to best care for his flock (Gunkel, *Genesis,* 291).

65. Zakovitch believes that the transaction presents Jacob as the rightful owner of the birthright, unlike their birth story (Zakovitch, "Jacob, Deceit," 130). See also Garsiel's reservations about Zakovitch's proposal that this refers to an alternate tradition (Garsiel, "Literary Structure," 67ff.).

is intentional – that the narrative objective is to highlight Esau's disdain toward the birthright.

Yet, as is often the case in biblical narrative, this evaluation is not black and white. Jacob is also subjected to subtle criticism that will be further developed as the cycle continues. Mirroring the final component (A') and its harsh criticism of Esau, the scene opens with an unusual verb: "Jacob was *stewing* a stew (*vayazed Yaakov nazid*)" (29). This verb does not feature elsewhere in the Bible in this sense, and it is semantically jarring – one does not "cake a cake" or "soup a soup."[66] The prophet Elisha, by contrast, "cooks (*uvashel*)" a stew (II Kings 4:38).[67] What is the significance of this unusual verb?

Some exegetes focus on this verb's connotations – the root Y-Z-D usually appears in the sense of "*zadon lev*," to act presumptuously or insolently.[68] The Midrash already notes the connection between the verb's two meanings:

> R. Ḥizkiya taught: [The use of the term *yazid* in this context teaches] that a man can get heated up (*mezid*) and produce sperm, but a minor cannot .... R. Mordekhai said to R. Ashi: From where may it be inferred that this word *mezid* means "heated up"? As it is written: "And Jacob cooked (*vayazed*) a stew." (Sanhedrin 69a)

Even without delving into the Talmud's actual question, for our purposes it suffices that the Sages connect "But if one schemes (*yazid*) against another and kills him by stealth" (Ex. 21:14) with "Jacob was cooking (*vayazed*) a stew."[69] Indeed, based on this verse, some exegetes believe

66. Translator's note: The word stew *is* used as a verb in English, but it is far more common to say "prepare a stew" or "cook a stew," whereas to "stew a stew" is not idiomatic, and sounds odd.
67. See also BDB, "*nazid*," 268.
68. See especially Shapira, "Jacob and Esau," 262–64. Westermann adds that the verb "*vayazed*" is at play with the sound "*tzayid*" which is characteristic of Esau. This connects the two brothers – one "*zad*" (makes stew) at home and one "*tzad*" (hunts) in the field.
69. R. Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin sees the connection between the verses as a lesson that the intentional murderer only does so when his evil inclination is particularly fierce: "When his urge is boiling over" (*Tzidkat HaTzaddik*, 250).

that Jacob intentionally timed his cooking to coincide with Esau's return home – that is, that he was cooking up a scheme, knowing how to exploit his brother's weakness. As the kabbalist R. Mordekhai HaKohen of sixteenth-century Safed writes:

> "Jacob was cooking a stew" – he was cooking up a scheme. Jacob thought: "Esau disdains and scorns everything – if so, for what would he sell me the birthright? Soon he will come in, starving and exhausted and ravenous, but he always brings game and prepares delicious food! I will prepare a different kind of food, something out of the ordinary, something nutritious … something he will crave to eat, so that he will sell me the birthright for it." (*Siftei Kohen* on Gen. 25:29)

This may be too specific or too far-reaching an accusation to load onto a single verb, but the general direction is convincing: that the verb "ויזד" raises associations of intention, of deliberate manipulation.

This invites a second look at the narrative framework (A–A'). The very first and very last phrase both contain unusual verbs, and together they form a perfectly balanced microcosm of the entire scene:[70]

Jacob	cooked	a stew
Esau	disdained	the birthright

This framework hints to the scene's exchange: Jacob cooks a stew, Esau owns the birthright; Jacob gives Esau the stew in exchange for the birthright. "*Vayivez*," disdained, certainly casts criticism on Esau, but the connotations of "*vayazed*," cooked, suggest that Jacob, too, is not as innocent as the previous verses suggest – he acts with certain intent, scheming and showing no mercy for his starving brother.

70. The verb "*vayivez*" in this form appears once more in the Bible, describing Haman's attitude toward Mordecai and the Jews (Est. 3:6). Given that Haman represents Amalek, who is Esau's grandson, this supports the claim that Haman and Mordecai's relationship is in dialogue with Esau and Jacob's (as stated in Midrash Esther Rabba, 7:10). See further in Shapira, "Esther," 144–50; Grossman, "Dynamic Analogies," 399–403.

Of course, it is problematic to cast such harsh criticism based solely on a word's secondary connotations, but as we will see later on (especially in the story of the mandrakes), the text will refer back to this scene with more explicit criticism against Jacob.

In conclusion, this scene reinforces the narrative's descriptions of the brothers' birth and childhood. Esau's coarse wildness is reflected in his manner and his speech ("let me gulp down" / "that red stuff"). Even more striking, however, is the tension between the hunter roaming in the open field and the domestic figure stirring a pot upon the hearth. One of the fathers of structuralism, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, believes that certain binary oppositions form the basis of culture, and this is particularly expressed through myth. Universally, myths consist of underlying binary oppositions – of elements that oppose or contradict each other – and these tensions are resolved over the course of the myth. One of the most fundamental binary oppositions that constitute myth is nature-culture. Nature is wild, impulsive, visceral; culture is rational and calculating. Lévi-Strauss explores this tension, in part, through what he refers to as opposition between "the raw and the cooked."

The act of cooking inherently processes wild, unadulterated nature. Cooking unprocessed food is an act of mediation between nature and culture. Wild animals eat their food raw, so that the process of cooking essentially belongs to culture. Lévi-Strauss explores this theme through different kinds of cooking, processing, and preparation, but for our purposes, his initial distinction sufficiently illuminates our scene.

I have already pointed out that the narrative framework highlights Esau's movement from outside to inside and back outside again while Jacob remains inside, cooking.[71] Ever since his birth, Esau has represented wild nature, while Jacob is the quiet dweller of tents. It is inside the tent that culture, Jacob, is able to negotiate with and subdue nature, Esau. When Esau craves "that red stuff," nature is submitting to culture – he is

71. It is interesting that according to Strauss, the more food is processed, the lower its status in society. In his opinion, human society appreciates wildness, and roasted meat – which is only heated with fire – is prized more than stewed meat that is cooked in water (this claim is interesting given the cooking method of the Passover sacrifice). Wildness, too, is vital for the establishment of a nation, but it is better that the birthright is in Jacob's hands.

sacrificing his natural primogenital right in exchange for the products of culture, thus allowing Jacob to dominate. The concept of a birthright is in itself a cultural concept, a social construct that dictates the hierarchy within family and society. Though the reader may shift uncomfortably at Jacob's merciless exploitation of his brother's hunger, it is nonetheless reassuring that the birthright, the family reins, are now in the hands of cultured Jacob rather than wild Esau.