Jacob's tribulations

Gildas Hamel

May 15, 2018

Genesis 25-27

What does the conflict of two brothers mean, and why is the older vs younger brother conflict framed as the struggle between twins who clearly share the same birthday? When reading the Bible, we are following the interpretation of writers who take the point of view of the younger one, who inherit the "blessing," a metathesis not only of Cherub, but also of first-born (though the vowels don't work). Blessing is not a new theme but appears very often in the cycle of stories regarding Isaac and Jacob. The notion of covenant and promise is more in the background. It now takes the shape of various "blessings."

Jacob steals his father's blessing. The trickery of Israel's ancestor (Jacob = Israel) may have been seen at one time as an ironic comment on the domination exercised by the Israelite kingdom over Edomites in the south. The Edomites are painted not only as rejected by Yahweh, but also as blockheads bent on war and looting, a convenient mockery of inconvenient neighbors. The tricks and lies used by Rebekah and Jacob (or later Laban) receive no moral judgment, or at least this moral judgment is hard to detect. What is the explanation for this apparent lack of moral guidelines in a book that is otherwise laced with it? One answer is theological: history is guided by a divine will that uses even (or rather especially) faults, ill will, and even wickedness for its own purpose. A more practical and historical explanation is that the Judaean later writer and tradition found it convenient enough to retain the northern traditions about Jacob, including his homeric-like trickster and heroic aspect, to make a discreet point about the shenanigans of later kings through their ancestors.

Commentary

25.21 Rebekah is barren (because she was both beautiful and loved? Beauty and/or love act as a fullness of blessing and seem to trigger brakes on fruitfulness), but after a prayer or plea by Isaac will be granted twins.

26.44–45 By choosing spouses from among the Hittites, Esau is marking the extremes of exogamy. This is a justification, rhetorically speaking, for what happens next in ch. 27. Strangely enough, these women are named. In the normal, real situation, a woman was a foreigner in her new husband's family. A struggle between the mother and wife, especially regarding the older son (assumed to be the provider of support to his old mother, after his father), would easily come about. For instance, to act like Rebekah does with her husband, i.e. manipulating him, could be problematic within the extended family. [the shock of ch. 27 is softened by her attitude??]

27.1 וַיְהִי֙ כִּֽי־זָקֵ֣ן יִצְחָ֔ק וַתִּכְהֶ֥יֶן עֵינָ֖יו מֵרְאֹ֑ת וַיִּקְרָ֞א אֶת־עֵשָׂ֧ו | בְּנ֣וֹ הַגָּדֹ֗ל וַיֹּ֤אמֶר אֵלָיו֙ בְּנִ֔י וַיֹּ֥אמֶר אֵלָ֖יו הִנֵּֽנִי׃ *Isaac became old, and his eyes were so weakened he couldn't see. He called Esau, his elder son, and said to him, "My son"; he answered him, "Here I am".*

We have a repeat of the short conversation and closeness between father and son that existed in Gen 22 between Abraham and Isaac. Should one take this to be a signal by the writer that one should treat the rest of this story as a near sacrifice of sort, which indeed it is. Esau is the elder born, a long-desired child. And there is some ground later on in the story to think that Esau and Jacob come to some uneasy understanding.

Isaac loses his sight. A later midrash ("interpretation") finds a beautiful reason for it: during the scene of his binding in Gen 22, the angels of the Lord cried in Heavens and tears fell on Isaac's eyes, blinding him or weakening his eyesight. In this story, however, not only sight is affected but also touch and taste. Is smell affected? One could argue that it is not, as Isaac seems to recognize the smell of Esau's clothes. Yet, he doesn't seem to have paid close attention to, or been impressed by, the cooking Rebekah has been doing for forty years or more of communal life (twenty years of waiting for the birth of the twins, and about twenty at least for the growing up). The spicing up of the food is perhaps to be understood by the audience as so intense that Isaac is to be forgiven for being a little confused. Another possibility is that the writer sees Isaac not so much as clueless as he seems to be, at least superficially, but actually aware of the unusual going-ons and

accepting of them as being part of divine will.

So, if Isaac's hearing remains clear, are we to conclude that he knows he is being deceived, that is to say, is his judgment also impaired? Surely the audience assumed that Isaac knew that his wife would listen. Didn't his mother Sarah listen to others' conversations?

27.2 Isaac thinks he is near death and needs to adjudicate his succession. Twins, separated by a few minutes at birth, cannot be called older and younger sons. What is going to differentiate them? We learn that they are not real twins. Occupation, physical aspect, and maternal and paternal preferences (love), separate them.

Jacob at Bethel; dream and vow (28-29)

In the way of an introduction: Jacob, "blessed" (remember the metathesis of blessed / Cherub / first born) and whose blessing is the human form of a divine blessing, is actually fleeing a mortal enemy, his twin brother. He is about to fall in the clutches of his twice-removed cousin, Laban the Aramaean (28.5). He is also going to marry in his "mother's house." Note that the blessing given to Abraham uses farming imagery ("seed") for the notion of generation.

I'm following Westermann (1985), pp. 450–60. Jacob took one of the stones of the "place" ("place" means "temple," as we already saw in Gen 22, the sacrifice of Isaac), in the evening, and placed it under his head to sleep. Now that he is at the edge of the cultivated area and the desert, we find him without tools (making stew) and all at one with nature. The reformulated covenant that he receives from Yahweh sounds like an expansion of the blessing given him by Isaac. Promise and blessing have been fused here.

Commentary

28.11 מקום=place. This word has the double meaning of place and sacred temenos or temple where visions and dreams may occur.

28.12 The stairs, not a ladder, is "set (מצב) in the ground": there are strong echoes here of מצבה and מצבות, which are standing stones representing ancient divinities. See the picture below (fig. 1) from a Late Bronze temple at Hazor where standing stelas represented gods and goddesses. This verb root נצב appears at the beginning of the promise in v. 13: "Yahweh

stood before him...": the use of the word seems to be a re-investment of problematic religious vocabulary (late monarchic period? exilic?).

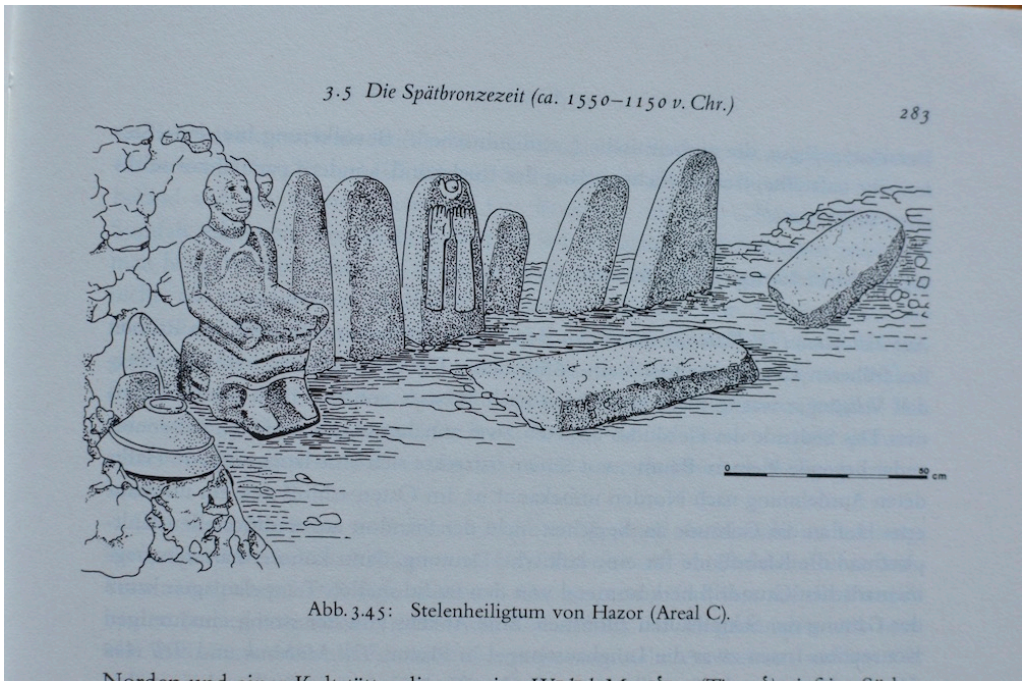

Figure 1: Steles Hazor

28.15 "I will be with you ... protect you ... and I will bring you back to this land." Abraham, who was the first one to "return" from a general Eastern direction (though Gen 12 doesn't say it quite that way), did not want Isaac to leave the "land." But Jacob, who is closer to his brother Esau than Isaac was to Ishmael, and therefore more hated (?), has no choice but leave the same territory they both inhabit. Ishmael was expelled on the margins of the land, after all, and married "Egyptian" women, i.e. more distant women (as his mother was more distant).

28.18 it is moving to think of a person alone, rising "early in the morning," setting up a sacred pillar (מצבה) and pouring oil on it. What does this last ritual signify?

28.19 The name Luz, almond-tree, evokes the notion of early spring, on the margin of the desert, from which one appreciates both the notion of planted fields, properties, laws and customs with a constraining calendar,

etc. as well as the notion of freedom and renewal that the desert suggests: risk and return to fundamental values.

28.20 it is strange that the vow invokes first of all אלהים as a protector (but note: as provider of security, food, clothing, material goods in other words) and then יהוה as an equivalent form. Note that the vow appears to contradict the promise in verse 15: there is no need of a vow if God promises this security and protection in advance (wouldn't it be impious?).

Setting

The story is traditionally attributed to the Yahwist author or J (13-16, 19) with some inflections or additions from a presumed Elohist writer, E (11, 12, 17-22, omit 19). This explanation is based on the names of God, doublets, and the notion of revelation in a dream. But the text could be read as a unit englobing 10-12, 16-19, with the other parts being accretions. Note that the name of the divinity, Elohim (אלהים), is found as a clear, separate name only in the last verses, 20-22. This story might have developed over a few centuries in the following manner (I'm following Westermann's commentary):

1. the first stage would be a story centered on the Bethel sanctuary, a very old sacred place that was presumably important already in the early Iron Age (after 1200 BCE) and had its own local traditions.

2. According to Westermann, J in the early royal period would have given new meaning to this story in the patriarchal context, making Jacob significant as a common ancestor of large kin groups. The monarchy would be keen to project a feeling of unity via the kinship shared by different tribes and clans. But Westermann accepts the notion of immigration of tribes, which I don't. J may come from the late royal period (8th to 7th centuries?), or even the exilic period (Van Seters).

3. The third stage would be the connecting of the promise of a land and the history of worship, with vows and tithes at local sanctuaries. When would that writing have occurred? Westermann doesn't say. I suspect it would be in the exilic period.

Genesis 29

29.1 Jacob continued his journey to the land of the "sons of the East," or Easterners.

29.2 He looked and here …: there were three herds lying "on it," i.e. beside it. The word for watering (ישקו) sounds like the word for kissing. Does verse 3 imply that more flocks are to come?

29.4 A conversation surprisingly started by Jacob revolves around identity (part of the topos of the well type-scene). The answers are very brief: do they convey a mistrust of Jacob, or Laban, or both?

29.6 Rachel is coming with her father's herd, we are told. Is it a way to say that Laban has no sons, or do we assume that shepherdesses were as common as shepherds? Compare to Moses in Exodus 2:16 where it is the seven daughters of Jethro who also water the herds. It is very convenient that there is no man. Laban's resistance later is understandable: he has no son to help him with farming tasks and provide protection to his old parents, so he tries to keep Jacob as long as possible.

29.7–8 Jacob takes over, as if he knew the customs of the place: what is the storyteller implying? Just a superiority of Jacob who we know lived "by the tents?" Are the local herders' ways inefficient or just proof of laziness? Jacob saw how beautiful Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother, was, but he was also attracted to Laban's herd. He rolls or uncovers the stone, by the superhuman force of love (?), and waters the flock (exactly the reverse of Abraham's servant).

29.11 Kissing (//water, וַיִּשַּׁק), raises his voice, cries.

29.13 Laban runs, as should anyone who is very hospitable, such as Abraham does in 18, or the women and men portrayed in any standard story at the well, but is it for the same reason as Abraham, Rebekah, or others? Laban remembers a visit twenty years before, perhaps, by a rich envoy, the servant of Abraham (the audience remembers, I mean, and this remembrance is threaded in, or colors everything). If that servant had presents, what is the son likely to bring? Laban embraces and kisses him.

29.15 The wages of Jacob: Is Laban disappointed? Does he know of the "promise?" It is strange that the wage is set: is it a way to prevent marriage, since it makes the worker dependent on the employer? The marriage is theoretically a perfect one, since it is between paternal cousins. We learn again about Rachel's beauty (the text insists), but we only learn about Leah's soft eyes, i.e., that is the best one could say about her. Laban

knows that Jacob will stay another span of time: love is a great currency. When the feast or drinking-feast, literally, happens, the fine, cautious son of Isaac is deceived by appearances. In his discussion with Laban, he asks the same question as was used by Isaac regarding Jacob and Esau: Why the deception? The answer is that it is not the local custom, and Jacob has no recourse as a foreigner.

Chapter 30

In the stories of Adam, Noah, and Abraham, we saw that divine intervention was direct, unmediated. In the cycle of stories about Jacob, however, divine action becomes more indirect and the idea of providence is more and more developed, before it appears fully developed in the Joseph saga. History is presented as propelled by divine agency, even in events that don't seem caused by it. But causality is attributed to one single agent, not to various gods, such as the *terafim* of Laban, or chance (τυχή in Greek). The events, often of small import, seem to have their own force and push each other forward. Each character's agency leads to a "chosen" event. The old stories—J document presumably, perhaps from the late monarchic period—are without clearly expressed divine agency. But the story is re-written by an author keen on suggesting the logic at work in divine actions. When Jacob flees the first time, he hits upon Bethel, the house of God. Laban's tricking of Jacob into marriage with Leah leads eventually to a deal, to wealth, jealousy, and a new fleeing. The love-apples are "exchanged" by Rachel against a night with Jacob (30:16–24). In 30:22, "God remembered Rachel ... heard!" The narrator replaces the bit regarding Joseph's birth as caused by a love potion. We end up with a long chain of causes and effects in which divine intervention is effectively hidden.

Women are featured prominently in the stories of Abraham, Isaac and especially Jacob, but not Joseph. They mainly function as mothers (Rebekah) but are recognized as persons, regardless of motherhood. The patriarchs and their sons, except Joseph perhaps, represent the interests of a community. Women can become the bearers or champions of the person and her interests. This is not true yet with Hagar, or even with Sarah, but a little with Rebekah (though she is more of a type). Both Rachel and Leah, however, are persons with a private history, due to their being loved or hated and to their own suffering.

Commentary

30.1 ותרא רחל כי לא ילדה ליעקב ותקנא רחל באחתה *Rachel saw (was considering) that she hadn't given child to Jacob and she became jealous of her sister.* Four boys have been born to Leah: Reuben, Simon, Levi, and Judah. A span of time has gone by, perhaps ten or twelve years. The word for Rachel's jealousy reminds one of the Cain and Abel story, as "jealousy" sounds like the "acquiring" by Eve of Cain.

30.14–16 The love "apples" or דּוּדָאִים sound suspiciously like the דֹּדִים or kisses of *Song of Songs.*[1] The situation is the inverse of that of Esau and Jacob in the story of the stew, in which Esau comes back tired from "the field" and Jacob is ready with a stew. Here, it is Reuben, son of Leah, who comes back from the field and Rachel who is ready to give access to Jacob (another form of cooking?). Rachel is in the situation of Esau. She desperately needs something, food for love and life, and is willing to let go of her "birthright," or right of "first night." Rachel and Leah are, generally speaking, in the situation of Jacob and Esau.

30.16 Jacob is a pale figure in this situation, obeying his wives. Note that Leah has had eight children (four initially, then two through her slave, and two more of her own), whereas Rachel had only two through her slave Bilhah and must wait longer before finally having Joseph ("he will add—or gather") and Benjamin.

30.22 וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־רָחֵל וַיִּשְׁמַע אֵלֶיהָ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רַחְמָהּ׃ Note the midrashim on this verse (with Rashi following suit here). All the children are the result of a sacrifice: lack of consideration in Leah's case, the desperate use of slave women in both cases, and Rachel's sacrifice of her status and self-respect in regard to the love-fruit, as well as Leah's sacrifice of the fruit.

30.24 Joseph, from a root meaning "he will add," or "again" and even "complete."

30.25 As soon as Joseph is born, Jacob asks to return home (to Canaan) with his family. We know from the previous stories that the promise goes to Joseph because he is the son of the loved one, the miraculous, unexpected son, as Isaac was.

30.27 Laban is very polite in answering Jacob's request, invokes the Lord (!), and talks of the blessings that accrued to him thanks to Jacob.

---

[1] Note the translation given by Rashi: *yasmin* in Arabic (Ishmaelite tongue).

30.29–30 Jacob is again the super-shepherd here, as he was at the well scene at the beginning. "When will I work for my own household?" The story describing the competition between Jacob and Laban develops something already seen in the case of Abraham and Lot.

30.31 This is an appealing contract from Laban's point of view. He is making sure that there will be no confusions as to ancestry.

References

Westermann, Claus. 1985. *Genesis 12–36 : A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg.