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Traces of Blessing (בְּרָכָה) and Birthright (בְּכוֹרָה): Revealing the Narrative of Jacob and Esau in a Fresh Perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to rediscover the classic narrative of Jacob and Esau in the Book of Genesis, focusing on the concepts of blessing (בְּרָכָה) and birthright (בְּכוֹרָה) and their theological and cultural significance. It examines these concepts fresh, considering their deeper spiritual, social, and historical dimensions. Through a critical historical hermeneutic approach and comprehensive textual analysis, this research examines how the relationship between Jacob and Esau reflects personal tensions and reveals the broader dynamics of blessing and birthright within the cultural context of ancient Israel. Ultimately, this study offers a new perspective on the long-standing narrative, providing richer insights into the theological and social implications of the story of Jacob and Esau, particularly concerning the themes of blessing and birthright.

Keywords:

Blessing, Birthright, Jacob and Esau, Genesis, Historical-Criticism.

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Introduction

In the Old Testament, the term “bechorah” (blessing/birthright) always refers to the status and rights of the eldest son or firstborn, as seen in the division and control of inheritance, as outlined in the provisions of family law in the book of Deuteronomy (*misphat habechorah*; Deut 21:15-17).¹ About inheritance, the law (UI 12-26) stipulates that the firstborn will receive two shares (*pi senayim*).² The standard interpretation of the two shares of the firstborn is typically viewed as based on the aspect of responsibility, ensuring the continuation of the family if the father has passed away.³ This explanation also implicitly attests to power in a patriarchal society. The firstborn is responsible for caring for his widowed mother and his unmarried sisters and represents the deceased father in leading the family life (cf. Gen 49:2).

In addition, the receipt of a larger inheritance from a firstborn may also be used to uphold or maintain the family's identity within a tribal or clan community. Consequently, although the Old Testament refers to the daughter as “bechorah” six times, as the firstborn among her brothers (Gen 19:31, 33, 34, 37; 39:26; 1 Sam 14:49), the word is never associated with the birthright.⁴ From this explanation, it can be inferred that the use of the word 'regarding rights' is limited to the eldest male child. Firstborn refers to a son who always receives top priority in a patriarchal family.

A “bechorah” has the highest hierarchical position above any other son after the father and is consistently listed first in the genealogy. The reason the Deuteronomic law gives for the rights and privileges of the firstborn is that he is “the first of his might.”

The word prowess (*'on*) in the OT is found only 10 times (Gen 49:3; Deut 21:17; Isa 40:26.29; Hos 12:4.9; Ps 78:51; 105:36; Job 20:10; 40:16) and always connotes a father's ability to procreate which can be seen in his firstborn son. That is why the daughter, though the firstborn, is mentioned not at the beginning but at the end (1 Chron 6:16-29; 7:1-4; cf. Gen 11:12-13) of the family *toledot*.⁵

The question then arises: what is the relationship between birthright and blessing? From an etymological study, it can be observed that the two terms are entirely unrelated; therefore, the answer to the question must be sought in the Old Testament texts themselves, which directly or indirectly discuss the theme. In Jacob's narrative (Gen. 25-36), blessings and birthrights occupy the most central place.⁶ Not only does the dominance of the theme of blessing color the entire narrative, but this passage also presents the history of the Israelite religion and the oldest “theology of blessing” in the Old Testament.⁷ Where the constellations of blessing and theology of blessing focus on increasing life through fertility and prosperity, especially in material terms.

In the narrative, especially in Chapter 27, the motif of blessing is evident, with Jacob being a determined and strong figure in obtaining the blessing.⁸ Another aspect that has attracted the attention of many researchers from this narrative is how Jacob received the blessing from his father, Isaac. Because he received the blessing not in the usual way but with the clever mind of his mother, Rebekah, it is no wonder that many theories and hypotheses have developed regarding this narrative.

However, while many studies have examined the themes of blessing and birthright in the Genesis narrative, several gaps in previous research warrant further attention.

¹ Benjamin Kilchor, “Levirate Marriage in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and Its Precursors in Leviticus and Numbers: A Test Case for the Relationship between P/H and D,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2015).

² Bill T Arnold, “Number Switching in Deuteronomy 12-26 and the Quest for Urdeuteronomium,” in *Zeitschrift Für Altorientalische Und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte* (Germany: Otto Harrassowitz GmbH & Co. KG, 2017), 175.

³ Anna Kuśmirek, “‘Jacob's Blessing’ (Gen 49:1-28) in Targumic Interpretation,” *Collectanea Theologica* 90, no. 5 (March 2021): 95-122, <https://doi.org/10.21697/ct.2020.90.5.06>.

⁴ Hans-Josef Klauck, *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 576.

⁵ Sarah Schwartz, “Narrative Toledot Formulae in Genesis: The Case of Heaven and Earth, Noah, and Isaac,” *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 16 (January 2016), <https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2016.v16.a8>.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 210.

⁷ Eugene H Merrill, *A Biblical Theology of The Old Testament*, ed. Roy B Zuck (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1991), 63.

⁸ Christoph Barth and Marie-Claire Barth Frommel, *Old Testament Theology* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2017), 72.

One of these gaps is the lack of in-depth studies examining the relationship between the concepts of “blessing” and “birthright” within the social and theological context of ancient Israelite society. Most studies focus more on comparative studies between Esau and Jacob, especially regarding how Jacob obtained blessings through deception, but pay less attention to the influence of family structure and patriarchy that shaped these inheritance practices. Existing research often treats the concepts of blessing and birthright as distinct entities without examining their interplay within the broader social context.

Furthermore, although a substantial body of literature discusses inheritance rights and blessings as separate themes, few studies explore how these narratives reflect or unveil the deeply embedded patriarchal ideology within ancient Israelite society. While Brueggemann underscores the social function of blessings, his analysis does not explicitly connect them to the broader structures of patriarchal power and control.⁹ Kuśmirek also observes that the roles of women and family hierarchies are often overlooked in traditional interpretations.¹⁰ Yet, the practice of prioritizing the eldest son in inheritance demonstrates the presence of a strong patriarchal system (Barth & Barth Frommel, 2017).¹¹ Therefore, a more comprehensive approach is needed—one that links inheritance rights and blessings with the power dynamics embedded within patriarchal culture.

Previous research that most often examines this topic, such as by R. E. Clements in his book *The World of Ancient Israel*¹² and by Bokovoy in his article *From the Hand of Jacob: A Ritual Analysis of Genesis 27*¹³, tends to focus on comparisons between birthright and blessing from an individualistic or narrative-critical perspective. Although Clements briefly touches on some socio-cultural aspects of inheritance, his analysis remains largely centered on theological themes

and literary patterns. Consequently, both studies often overlook how these inheritance systems are embedded in broader social and cultural frameworks, particularly the patriarchal norms that govern family structure, authority, and the transmission of power in ancient Israelite society. Meanwhile, research by Schwartz analyzes the scene of Isaac and Jacob's meeting (Genesis 27:18-29), focusing on the parallel structure through the repetition of Isaac's act of blessing. Sensory tests and Esau's physical identity mark reveal Isaac's character and motives for blessing Esau instead of Jacob.¹⁴ Therefore, a significant research gap lies in the lack of studies that explicitly link birthrights and blessings to the influence of patriarchal systems and the role of women in manipulating or contesting these rights. This study aims to fill that gap by offering a more holistic analysis of how the relationship between Jacob and Esau reflects personal tensions and broader socio-cultural dynamics, particularly how birthrights and blessings are shaped by the patriarchal ideologies that governed family, authority, and inheritance in ancient Israel.

Method

This study employs a qualitative method with a systematic literature review approach, in which the author collects, reads, and analyzes various relevant literature such as journal articles, theses, dissertations, and books related to the theme of birth rights, blessings, and the social and cultural context of ancient Israel.¹⁵ To deepen understanding, this study adopts a hermeneutic approach through historical criticism to uncover the social and cultural background behind the narratives of Jacob and Esau, particularly in the context of patriarchy that influenced inheritance practices.¹⁶ This approach is further enriched by source criticism hermeneutics, which examines

⁹ Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 78.

¹⁰ Kuśmirek, “Jacob's Blessing” (Gen 49:1–28) in *Targumic Interpretation*, 96”

¹¹ Jeremy Smoak and William Schniedewind, “Religion at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” *Religions* 10, no. 3 (March 2019): 211, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030211>.

¹² Ronald E Clements, *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 90–92.

¹³ David E Bokovoy, “From the Hand of Jacob: A Ritual Analysis of Genesis 27,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 1, no. 3 (2009), 35.

¹⁴ Sarah Schwartz, “Isaac's Dual Test in the Blessings Narrative: A New Reading of Gen 27:18–29,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43, no. 4 (June 17, 2019): 693–711, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089218786098>, 700.

¹⁵ Martyn Hammersley, *What Is Qualitative Research?* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 14.

¹⁶ Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 7.

various textual sources and how their interactions shape the narrative structure.¹⁷ By combining in-depth literature review and layered hermeneutic analysis, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between birthright and blessing, not only as theological and legal concepts, but also as a reflection of the patriarchal ideology that governed family structure, authority, and inheritance in ancient Israelite society.

Result & Discussion

The Social Context of Blessing and Birthright

In examining the relationship between *berakah* (בְּרָכָה) and *bekorah* (בְּכוֹרָה) in the narrative of Jacob and Esau, it is important to place these practices within the social framework of ancient Israelite society. The practices of blessing and inheritance took place within a strong patriarchal family system, where the firstborn son typically received a double inheritance and the family blessing as symbols of authority, responsibility, and the continuity of the lineage.¹⁸

Within the Deuteronomistic legal framework, the firstborn son received two portions of his father's inheritance (Deut. 21:15-17), which were not only economic but also served as social and moral legitimation in maintaining family integrity.¹⁹ Thus, inheritance rights reflect a strategic social position and express the family's power structure, where the firstborn is responsible for preserving the clan's name and honor.²⁰

The narrative of Genesis presents a dynamic that disrupts this order through the actions of Jacob, who, with the support of his mother, Rebekah, seizes the blessing that should have belonged to Esau. This action is not merely a depiction of personal ambition, but also reveals the agency of women in a patriarchal society. Rebekah emerges as a

strategic actor who, through social intelligence and an understanding of family traditions, plays a crucial role in shaping her children's future. The existence of this role indicates that women, despite operating within restrictive structures, can still influence the direction of family decisions.²¹

Rebekah's actions not only reflect domestic dynamics but also hint at subtle resistance to dominant social norms. Women are not merely objects in the patriarchal system but also subjects with the capacity to intervene and negotiate their positions within the power structure.²² In this context, the manipulation of blessings is not merely a moral deviation but also a form of rearranging social relations through unconventional means.

This narrative's relationship between blessings and inheritance rights cannot be understood in isolation from its social context. Blessings and inheritance rights operate in a symbolic field that contains values, norms, and power structures that shape ancient Israeli society. It reflects concepts of legitimacy, justice, and social status transformation. When Jacob successfully obtains the blessing through strategy and deception, a tension arises between inherited authority and acquired authority, between tradition and social innovation.²³

Furthermore, this narrative reveals the theological dimension of blessings as a manifestation of divine will. In ancient Israelite society, blessings were not merely understood as human gifts but as transcendent instruments legitimizing the social order. Therefore, Jacob's unlawful receipt of the blessing raises profound questions about divine authority, social justice, and providence's role in the people's history.²⁴

The implications of this action extend beyond the family realm into the collective sphere, where the blessing given to Jacob has consequences for the direction of Israel's history. This signifies that the practice of blessing and inheritance holds national

¹⁷ Joel S Baden, *Source Criticism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2024), 5.

¹⁸ Clements, *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives*, 13.

¹⁹ Firman Panjaitan and Dwi Ratna Kusumaningdyah, "Tragedi Keluarga Nuh Dan Pengabaian Anggota Keluarga: Tafsir Kejadian 9:18-29," *PASCA: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 17, no. 2 (2021): 134-48, <https://doi.org/10.46494/psc.v17i2.141>.

²⁰ Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 22.

²¹ Schwartz, "Isaac's Dual Test in the Blessings Narrative: A New Reading of Gen 27:18-29."

²² Kušmirek, "'Jacob's Blessing' (Gen 49:1-28) in Targumic Interpretation."

²³ Bokovoy, "From the Hand of Jacob: A Ritual Analysis of Genesis 27."

²⁴ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Pub.House, 1984), 70.

significance closely tied to the identity and continuity of the covenant community.²⁵

Thus, reading the story of Jacob and Esau within a social framework offers a deeper understanding of the dynamics of gender, power, and divine-human relations in biblical texts. This narrative not only conveys theological messages but also reflects the complexity of the social reality of ancient societies. Within this framework, the text serves as a mirror that both reflects and questions the norms shaping communal life, including inheritance, authority, and women's agency. This approach enables a sharper and more relevant reading of ancient texts in contemporary contexts, particularly in discussions about social justice, family structures, and gender roles in the inheritance of values and power.

By understanding the broad scope and depth of meaning of birthright and blessing in various contexts of human life and their comprehensive and irrevocable influence, it is necessary to go further to investigate how blessings are formulated, who has the right to bless, and the theological and social horizons of this concept. This is where the importance of examining *Formulation and Blessing Horizon* lies, which not only explains the origins and linguistic structure of the words "blessing" and "birthright" but also opens up insights into the depth of their meaning and impact in all dimensions of life, according to the testimony of the Old Testament.

Formulation and Blessing Horizon

The term blessing is translated from the Hebrew *berachah* as a noun formed from the verb *barach*, which is antithetical to curse (Judg 17:2; Hos 4:2). There are two verbs *barach* in the lexicon. Therefore, a clear distinction must be made between barach I (-kneel) and barach II (-bless).²⁶ The question is, do these two words have an etymological connection, as some researchers suspect? Until now, this question cannot be answered with certainty. The consensus is that only the

meaning of II is related to the concept of blessing, while the sense of I has no connection to the idea of blessing.

Although the word *barach* is found in Old Southwestern Semitic languages, its association with *krb* or *karabu* in Akkadian can be confirmed as unlikely.²⁷ The use of this word is prevalent in the creation narrative, the patriarchal narrative, the book of Deuteronomy, the writings of the Priestly source (P), and the book of Job. Although some of the books of the Torah, the early prophets, and the book of Ketubim discuss the theme of blessings, it is not central, except for the cultic blessings in Numbers 6:22-27 and some Psalms. The subject of the creation narratives is Jehovah, associated with the ability to procreate and multiply, thereby filling the earth. The purpose of procreating and multiplying is to fill the earth. Fulfillment is also often and variously classified as a blessing, abundance, wealth, or luxury as a direct result of a blessing.²⁸

In P's writings, blessings in the form of wealth are viewed as a positive phenomenon. It is interesting to note that plants are not blessed. This proves that plants are not counted as living beings in P's writing. In addition, the use of the word "brk" can be observed in daily life between people, particularly in greetings, both when meeting and parting - the Israelites blessed each other. The greeting here may be summarized in the word "shalom" (cf. Judg 19:20; 1 Sam 25:6; Gen 28:1.3).

Barach is a common word in the Southwestern Semitic languages, including Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Aramaic, where its meaning and usage are nearly identical to those in ancient Israel.²⁹ The syntactic analysis can be explained as follows: "*berachah*" in the OT is found seventy times and appears as a verb in various forms: *Qal*, *Nifal*, *Pi'el*, *Pu'al*, and *Hitpa'el*. In the *Qal* form, there are about seventy times, while the *Pi'el* form is 230 times (*Qal* not including passive participles). *Barach* II: *Qal* + Part. Pas. 71 times; *Pi'el* form 233 times; and other modifications 23 times. As a noun, it is found 71 times, and person names 39

²⁵ Karel Deurloo and Martin Kessler, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginning* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 21.

²⁶ Eugene E Carpenter, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 757.

²⁷ Carpenter, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 41.

²⁸ Keel Othmar and Silvia Schroer, "Creation and Blessing," in *Creation* (Penn State University Press, 2015), 70-76, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781575063607-007>.

²⁹ Carpenter, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 760.

times (total: 437 times). From that number, the dominant subject is humans or Allah.

Concerning the dominance of *Pi'el*, it needs to be explained that this derivative verb does not necessarily refer to a repetitive action (although this aspect should still be considered necessary) but rather to the act of blessing itself (the modified verb *Pi'el* means factitive-resultative, multiplicative, declarative and denominative). That is, the word blessing in the modified verb form *Pi'el* here is not interpreted morphologically but is dependent on the context. It is also interesting to compare the word 'blessing' in the Old Testament with its usage in the New Testament. The word in Greek is called *eulogeo* or, as a substantive, *eulogia*, which is found only 68 times in the New Testament. Based on the frequency of the use of the word blessing in the Old and New Testaments, it is clear that the book that most often uses the vocabulary of blessing or blessing is the Old Testament. This fact also raises the question, why is this so? Was the theme of blessing not central among early Christians during the New Testament period? While this is an interesting topic to research, a discussion of this question is not within the scope of this paper, as New Testament biblical scholars are best equipped to address it.

The horizon or spectrum of blessing encompasses the whole of human life from birth to death: a) the birth of a child is understood as a blessing or a blessed name as written in Isa 8:2, *Yeberekhya*; b) at the time of marriage; the blessing is formulated in the desire for offspring, prosperity, power, honor or popularity and longevity (at the marriage of Rebekah, her brothers pronounced a blessing for a great and powerful offspring, "You shall be thousands of thousands and may your offspring inherit the gates of his enemies" (Gen 24:60; cf. Ex 23:26; UI 28:49); c) at or near the death of a pater familias, the blessing is given (transferred) by the father (generally over the bed) to his heirs (Exodus 23:26; Deut. 28:49); c) at or before the death of a pater familias, the blessing is given (transferred) by the father (generally on the bed) to the heir. With this explanation, we can conclude that no period of human life is associated with blessings. The consequence is that a blessing is something that has an elementary impact, and a blessing that has been given cannot be taken back. That is, a blessing is something that is permanent and has a lasting effect on the subsequent course of one's life. Perhaps this can explain the magical aspect of blessings, where the family is

the place of origin. The triadic dimension also explicitly shows that blessing encompasses the entirety of human life and plays a crucial role. In other words, it can be said that the success or failure of a person's life is closely related to or depends on whether or not they are blessed. This explanation also underlines the initial opinion that the distance between blessings and curses is very close.

Formally, the subject of the blessing is either human (also as an intermediary) or God, who conveys the blessing as a complete life force to the object (whether human, divine, or material). Among Old Testament scholars, there is a consensus that the origin of the concept of blessing pragmatically means something helpful or efficient and is related to the fulfillment of blessing by the divine, which is a secondary "*theologization*." The controversy that continues to this day revolves around the question of whether the full power or force of the blessing initially occurs through an efficient action, a performative word, or a combination of both. In light of the variation of opinion, the question then becomes, where is the *Sitz im Leben* of blessing in the Old Testament? The difficulty in answering lies in determining both the historical origin and the basic meaning of the word 'blessing' itself, as well as the original context of blessing. Nonetheless, the opinion to be defended here is that the word 'blessing' or the ceremony of blessing remains in the family of blessings.

The contents of the blessing include: protection, care or protection; rescue (Gen 28:15; 49:22; Num 6:24); success or prosperity (Deut. 33:11); fertility and the power to multiply and increase the land or fields, livestock and people (Gen .1:22,28; 9:1; 12:2; 24:60;35:11; 49:25; Lev 25:21; Deut. 28:3; Ps 65:10; 67:7;128;144:12-14), as well as prosperity or greatness (Gen 24: 35; 26:12; Mal 3:10; Job 1:10), life force or vigor, longevity and health (Gen. 25:8; 35:29; Ex 23:25; UI 7:15; Job 42:12), strength, power, leadership, fame, popularity (Gen. 27: 29; Num 22; 1 Kgs 1:47), favor; the gift of God (Gen 26:3,28; 1 Sam 18:14; Ps 23; Num. 6:24); the order or sequence of creation (Gen. 1:31; 2:2); influencing the future (Gen 12:2; Deut. 7:12). Blessings (also without brk) are formulated as something objective such as warm clothing (Hag 1:6); restful sleep (Ps 26:6; Ps. 127:2); timely rain (Ps. 84:6); bountiful harvests (Hag. 2:19; Ps 85:13); a quiet and peaceful earth (Ps 26:6) including Sabbath (Gen .2:3; Ex 20:11).

In a broader sense, the content of

blessings can also be possessions but not the top of the list (Ps 128:5; 147:14), the desire for peace in greetings (Gen 43:27; Hak 6:23; 19:20) as well as correspondence (Est 9:30) and expressions of peace (Mi 5:4; Prov 3:17). It can be said that possessions or wealth are blessings, however, blessings are not limited to possessions. In addition, the word blessing is often coupled with several other terms that aspire to prosperity, for example, *ahab*, *chanan*, *khesed*, and *ratsa*, all of which are addressed to God. Theologically, then, the Old Testament consistently views Yahweh Himself as the ultimate source of blessing. From this explanation, we can conclude that blessing is the life force, the life that advances or increases. Perhaps it is in this sense that possessions can be explained as a form of improvement or success in life. Blessings are an emanation of the power and strength of God, the Creator of life.

Blessings only pertain to the living. There is no evidence that the dead can bless the living. The Old Testament does not mention blessing the dead, nor does it mention living blessings for the dead. Except for the inscription found in the tomb of *Kuntillet 'Ajrud*, which, when translated, reads, "I bless you by Jahwe of Samaria and by Asherata."³⁰ Similarly, another inscription says: "I bless you by Jahwe of Friend and by Assyria" (cf. Hab 3:3). On the *Kirbet el-Qom* inscription, there is also this sentence, "Blessed is Uriyahu by Jahwe and Masaryahu by Ashtaroth."³¹

The *Kirbet el-Qom* inscription dates back to the 8th century BC and is similar in content to the *Ajrud Kuntilet*.³² The word "Friend" from the *Ajrudite Kuntilet* inscription indirectly connects Jahwe and the desert region to the south of Canaan, showing that, in addition to the belief in Jahwe as a blessing God, it also implies the syncretism of religions at the time when the kingdom still existed. The mention of the name Asherata indicates that the worship of gods other than Yahweh was still ongoing. The formulation of the blessing is also found on the *Ketef Hinnom* inscription found during the excavations of 1975-1980, where the second phrase quotes Aaron's blessing from

Num 6:25 and the last phrase from verse 26: The LORD bless thee and keep thee; The LORD make his face shine upon thee...and bless thee in prosperity.³³

It should also be noted that man also blesses God in various situations, which is formulated in the Qal passive participle: *Baruch Adonai*. This short sentence grammatically should mean "blessed be Jahwe" (Ps 18:47.41:14; 145:1.2.10.31; Gen 24:27), but no Bible translates it this way. Since the passive participle is syntactically interpreted as a verbal adjective, the meaning of passive becomes less and less. As a result, the passive voice is no longer found in many Bible translations. Perhaps such a translation is motivated by dogmatic reasons that see "blessings only come from above" and not the other way around. Still, it may also be due to the influence of the LXX, which translates it with *eulogetos* Kurios or the Vulgate, which calls it *Benedictus dominus* (glorify the Lord). Martin Luther also followed this translation (*gelobt ist/sei der Herr*). Criticizing Luther's translation that reduced the meaning of blessing, Rudolph Kittel gave another translation, "*Jhwh ist/sei voll Segenskraft/gesegnet*" (Jahwe is full of blessing power). Kittel's version tries to retain the element of blessing.³⁴ However, this alternative translation does not exist in the in any language. Instead of a translation that still includes the blessing, most translations say "blessed be God" or "glorify God." The cultural understanding of each language is likely the reason behind these translations. For this reason, the various translations still maintain a clear distinction between 'blessing' and 'praise' from the same source word. This is the reason why, in the lexicon, there are always two meanings of *brk*: blessing and praising God. For example, 1 Sam 25:32;

"And David said to Abigail, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me:

And blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood...."

The word "blessed" in this sentence is a

³⁰ Smoak and Schniedewind, "Religion at Kuntillet 'Ajrud."

³¹ Judith M Hadley, "The Khirbet El-Qom Inscription," *Vetus Testamentum* 37, no. 1 (1987).

³² Hadley.

³³ Jeffrey Segovia, "'Treasures in Hell?' Exploring the Valley of Hinnom in the Biblical Concept of Gehenna and

in the Scrolls of Ketef Hinnom," *Philippiniana Sacra* 58, no. 277 (2023): 481-90,

<https://doi.org/10.55997/3001pslviii177a1>, 482.

³⁴ Carpenter, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 21.

translation of the passive participle *Baruch*, which David addressed to Abigail. The first address is God, and the second is Abigail's wisdom. This translation differs from the Zurcher Bibel 2008, where the former is blessed while the latter is blessed". The translation of LAI (Indonesian Bible Institute) *Baruch* means "blessed be" both to God and man. In contrast, the Zurcher version does not, as the translation "blessed be" is addressed to God. The address "blessed be" is the man. This means that the choice of translation depends on the address.

The horizon of blessing includes all aspects or activities of daily life: people give blessings in words of greeting (1 Sam 13:10; 25:14). In Gen 28:1, blessing is also interpreted as a greeting to those who are going on a journey just like at the time of farewell (Gen 32:1; 47:10): Bathsheba greeted David (1 Kings 1:31), Jacob greeted his brother Esau (Gen 33:11; cf. Jesus' greeting to his disciples (Luke 24:50) whose equivalent is the cultic blessing - given by the tribe or people (cf. Ex 39:43; Lm 9:22; Josh 8:33; 22:6; 2 Sam 6:18; 1 Kgs 8:55.66) - as well as the blessing from God: (1 Kgs 8:14.55; Ps 16:7); for the Sabbath (Gen 2:3; kel 20:11); for man's daily work (UI 2:7; Job 1:10); blessings for the house (UI 28:3. 12; 33:11; 2 Sam 6:11; Job 1:10); cities (Ps 147:13); houses of worship (2 Sam 7:29; 1 Chron 17:27); land and nature or the whole universe-cosmos (UI 33:13; Jer 31:23; Ps 65:10; 67:7); blessings come from Zion (Ps 120-134); for the king (Ps 45:2; 72:15) including in the king's duty to declare war (Num 22). In some instances, gifts can also be interpreted as blessings, and hence the word "berachah" can mean "gift" (cf. 1 Sam 10:4; 25:27; 30:26; 2 Kings 5:15; Josh 15:19; Judg 1:15).

Although there are many Old Testament testimonies about the constellation of blessings, what is decisive is who is the giver and who is the recipient; in what situation it is delivered; with what words it is said or through what actions, behavior, deeds it is given; why (reason) and for what (purpose) it is provided and what is the content of the blessing. The answers to these questions varied significantly depending on the time, place, and source or

giver for both ancient Israel and the surrounding society. The differences in constellations also indicate a transformation in the understanding of blessing and the theology of blessing. Nevertheless, the general description of the theme of blessing can be classified into two categories: universal blessings (in creation theology and greetings) and special blessings (in family and worship).

Blessings in Jacob's Narrative Cycle

Scenario I: Gen 25:27-34

What does this passage have to do with the Jacob-Esau narrative? This question has generated debate among scholars. Some scholars view the text as a cultural myth, such as Westermann, or an etiology of the history of nations, especially Edom, as Blum proposes.³⁵ The point of departure for the second opinion is verse 30, which mentions Edom. On the other hand, the first opinion, which began in the era of Hermann Gunkel, sees aetiology as an addition or reworking of.³⁶ The argument supporting the myth-culture theory is based on anthropological and sociological analyses that view two cultures in horizontal conflict, namely those of shepherds (Jacob) and hunters (Esau). The passage does not yet explain what happened between the two brothers, but it directly links it to Chapter 27, the story of the "deception of blessing."

The passage only tells us of Isaac's love for Esau and Rebekah's love for Jacob while also exposing Esau's lenient attitude towards his birthright.³⁷ The tension that occurred started with Esau's appetite for Jacob's cooking. For the sake of food, Esau was willing to give up his birthright to his younger brother.³⁸

However, it was not as easy as talking. Before Jacob gave the food, he demanded that Esau swear by the food that he would relinquish his birthright. Esau promised to give up his birthright. Although the dish was only red bean soup, by law, the birthright that had been given was irrevocable and valid (see: "*Misphat habechorah*" Deuteronomy 21:15-17). From the narrator's perspective,

³⁵ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Pub. House, 1984), 97.

³⁶ Herman Gunkel, *The Stories of Genesis* (Vallejo, CA: BIBAL Press, 1994), 66.

³⁷ Karel Deurloo and Martin Kessler, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginning* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 144-145.

³⁸ Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1994), 177.

Westermann comments simply that the birthright, albeit deceptively, had legally passed from Esau to Jacob.³⁹ What is quite interesting is that all the episodes of the story flow without the presence of their parents.

Scenario II: Gen. 27:1-45

This passage has seen some development in the history of research. In the heyday of research, Julius Wellhausen and Hermann Gunkel, who tried to reconstruct the chapter, concluded that chapter 27 consists of two sources. However, since the advent of new research by Martin Noth, Gerhard von Rad⁴⁰, and Claus Westermann⁴¹, this earlier opinion has been discredited. Modern research has rejected the existence of source theory. Although Gunkel's opinion on the text's function as a history of nations is followed by Blum, they differ on its place within the narrative. For Blum, the function of the text is primary, but for Gunkel, it is secondary.⁴² The main emphasis of Blum's reasoning lies in the episode of the red bean story in verses 27-34, which is directly linked to the meaning of Edom.⁴³ This argument has already been rejected by von Rad and reinforced by Noth, who explains that Esau is not related to the Edomites at all; however, this parallel is rooted only in chapter 25.⁴⁴ They argue that although Chapter 25 (as well as Chapter 33) refers to the land of East Jordan, it is not a reference to the origin or ancestry of the Edomites but rather describes the type of hunter-gatherer society that Jacob's people encountered in the region and later experienced tensions or rivalries. Furthermore, they maintain that there was no such thing as the House of Jacob at that time.⁴⁵ Herein lies the inaccurate distinction of Blum's interpretation, as he does not explicitly distinguish between historical tradition and history in the passage. The narrative in this second scenario can be explained as follows:

In the first part of verses 1-5, it is explained that Isaac is old and dying, so he calls his eldest son, Esau, to come near and give a parting blessing. The text thus places Esau as

the primary heir. Isaac sends Esau on a hunt to find his father's favorite food. In other words, it was through and by the feeding that the blessing would be delivered.⁴⁶ From this ceremony, it can be inferred that the blessing given was, on the one hand, a magical-physical act, unlike the blessing in the theology of the Priest's writings (P).⁴⁷ On the other hand, that Esau was a hunter and his father Isaac liked game had already been told in 25:27. Therefore, Genesis 27:3 can be seen as a supposition of 25:27. In the narrative, the term for a hunter is *tsor tsir*, which is figura etymological, found twice in verse 3 and verse 5. In Chapter 27, this form of figura etymologica is found six times (vv. 3, 5, 27, 33, 34, and 34).

Based on this analysis, it is suspected that the author of the narrative deliberately used this form in chapter 27. The second part, verses 6-17, contains two scenes. Verses 6-13: Rebekah's conversation with Jacob; verses 14-17: the fraudulent preparation for the blessing.⁴⁸ The first scene informs us about Jacob's physical condition, which differs from Esau's, who is hairy, and reveals that what Isaac told Esau has been relayed to Rebekah. It was the realization of this information that Rebekah wanted to precede so that her beloved son Jacob would be blessed. Out of love for her son, Rebekah planned everything, saying, "Listen, go, take it" (cf. 25:28). This story emphasizes that in one family, there is only one heir of the blessing. In the second scene, immediately after Rebekah's command, three narratives appear: Jacob went, he took, and he brought.

The third section, verses 18-29, tells of Jacob's attempt to do Rebekah's bidding. Isaac was shocked because Jacob's arrival, which Esau expected, was too fast. He asked, "How did you get it so quickly?" Jacob gave a very theological answer: "Jehovah, your God—not Esau's God and not my God — has helped me achieve my goal." Isaac didn't just believe this answer; he asked his son to come closer and touch his body, but all of Isaac's suspicions were overcome by the strategy that Rebekah

³⁹ Westermann, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 98.

⁴⁰ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 115.

⁴¹ Westermann, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 133.

⁴² Erhard Blum, "The Jacob Tradition," in *The Book of Genesis* (Leiden: BRILL, 2012), 181–211, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004226579_009, 82.

⁴³ Blum, 183.

⁴⁴ Rad, *Genesis*, 117.

⁴⁵ Blum, "The Jacob Tradition."

⁴⁶ Deurloo and Kessler, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginning*, 149–150.

⁴⁷ Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16–50*, 203.

⁴⁸ Wenham, 202.

had carefully prepared.⁴⁹ Jacob successfully passed Isaac's two-time identification process. In this section, the tension of the story is very high. It is important to note that Isaac's three tests (including when Jacob smells Ishak - the word smells here refers to the odor of Jacob's body) cannot be used as a reason to distinguish the three sources that make up the narrative but rather serve as the culmination of the narrative that shows that the blessing given to Jacob is not normal.⁵⁰ The initial suspicion is identified through the voice (in verse 22, Isaac says: "If the voice, Jacob's voice; if the hand, Esau's hand). Until Isaac blesses Jacob, the suspicion remains that the child he is blessing is not his firstborn. Yet the narrative continues in high tension.

At this point, several key elements are worth noting in the blessing ceremony. Firstly, in families, the blessing is given to the eldest son before death. Secondly, the blessing is given over a meal. Thirdly, the person who is to receive the blessing enters the father's place and kisses him. Fourthly, the words of blessing are spoken. What form does the blessing take? Chapter 27 explains that the blessing to the son is not wealth but *nephesh* ("my life, vitality": 4, 7, 10, 19, 25, 31). In verse 4, Isaac tells Esau to prepare food before delivering the blessing. The LAI translation "that I may bless you before I die" is incorrect; it should be translated as "that my *nephesh* (my life) may bless you...". When Rebekah heard the command and for her reasons, she told Jacob to present Isaac's request to Esau immediately.

Rebekah quoted Isaac's words freely and then passed them on to Jacob: "And I will eat and bless you before the Lord before I die" (verse 7). A similar phrase is repeated in verse 10... "that he may bless you before he dies." Hearing his mother's command, Jacob objected, not because of the trick of deception designed by Rebekah but because he was afraid that if Isaac knew that he was not Esau, then instead of the blessing, a curse would come upon him.⁵¹ Rebekah's plan worked; Jacob served his father his favorite food and said, "Eat of my game, that your soul may bless me" (verse 19). The feeding before the blessing in this context is not to be understood as a condition but as a part of the ceremony.

As Isaac commanded Esau, so Jacob

succeeded in obtaining the blessing (verse 25). What is quite striking in these words of blessing is that the formulation of the blessing in Jahwe's speech is not mentioned at all. The words of blessing are (Gen 27:27-29) as follows:

²⁷And he came near, and kissed him: and he smelled the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said, See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed:

²⁸Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine:

²⁹Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee.

The aspects of this blessing include the fertility of the land and the abundance of crops in agriculture (verse 27). In 26:12, it is explained more fully, namely the production of the land, the ownership of animals or livestock, the ownership of people or servants, and finally, wealth and leadership (verse 29) as with the blessing given to Abraham in Genesis 12, here, too, an unconditional blessing appears. Jehovah alone gives the content of the blessing. The link between Jacob or Israel and Esau or Edom can also be seen, especially on the theme of leadership. Another point that deserves attention is the series of words of blessing with curses that parallel Abraham's blessing. The process of blessing can also be understood as a transfer of magical power. Specifically, the trans-personal life force, known as Isaac's "nephesh-life" with all its "blessings," to Jacob (cf. chapter 32).

Verse 29 ends the scene of the blessing. Esau returned from the hunt and served Isaac his favorite food, just as Jacob had done before, and asked for a blessing. Isaac was surprised to find that he had given a blessing to someone else and asked, "Who is he who hunted the beast and brought it to me?". What is quite interesting about the narrator's explanation is that he does not tell us the time situation. The reader may ask, did the two brothers not meet at the door when Esau returned from hunting? This is where the storyteller's skill is evident. The scene from verses 30-40 is just a dialogue between Isaac and Esau. It was then that Esau

⁴⁹ Peter Williams, *From Eden to Egypt : Exploring the Genesis Themes* (Epsom: DayOne, 2001), 152-153.

⁵⁰ Leslie H Woodson, *The Beginning: A Study of Genesis* (Illinois: Victor Books, 1974), 101.

⁵¹ Deurloo and Kessler, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginning*, 150.

realized that he had been deceived twice by Jacob.⁵² From this experience, Jacob's name is interpreted as a deceiver (from the root verb 'aqov). The first deception concerned birthright (*bechorah*), and the second concerned blessing (*berachah*).

The wording of verse 36 confirms that Esau could accept the fact that the blessing was no longer his. That's why he doesn't question how the situation came about.⁵³ Thus, in Hebrew, the relationship between birthright and blessing is formulated through and with rhyme. But he did not relent in his desire for a blessing; he asked Isaac, "Bless me also, O father!" Since Isaac had nothing else to bless Esau with, he said the opposite of the blessing that had been given to Jacob (verses 27-29). In verses 39-40, it says:

"And Isaac his father answered and said unto him, Behold, thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above; And by thy sword shalt thou live, and shalt serve thy brother; And it shall come to pass when thou shalt have the dominion, that thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck."

In the last scene, verses 41-45, the narrator returns to the characters between Rebekah and Jacob. In verse 41, we are told about Esau's grudge against Jacob, just as the beginning of Genesis tells us about the characters of Cain and Abel.⁵⁴ Like Cain, Esau also planned Jacob's death after the mourning period for Isaac's death had passed. The Hebrew custom was for the mourning period to last for 7 days (Gen. 50:10). In verse 42, the narrator again places Rebekah in a vital position, namely as the provider of information about Esau's plan to kill Jacob. This time, however, Rebekah only advises her favorite son to flee. The reason for the plan is mentioned in verse 45b, that she didn't want to lose both her sons in one day. The destination of Jacob's escape was his brother Laban's place in Haran, as long as Esau's anger had not subsided. However, what was planned did not go smoothly because they (Rebekah and Jacob) never saw each other again.

Although Jacob received Isaac's blessing through deception (verse 35), the

blessing remained; he remained the blessed one (verse 33). Perhaps in this sense lies the magical power of blessing. However, the author of the narrative deliberately shifts the concept of magic so that the word "blessing" no longer plays a significant role.⁵⁵ In place of the magical content, the author describes the role of God (verse 28). Interestingly, there is only one blessing in the family, as seen in the story of the blessing through Jacob in Genesis 48, given to Ephraim and Manasseh. Genesis 48 also describes a variety of blessings, where the same motif is again brought up (albeit with only the laying on of the right and left hands being exchanged). According to tradition, what Jacob did was unusual. In addition, the text also implies that just as a father knows what he is doing for his children before his death, so too do the children understand what happens after their father's death, i.e., they do not stand alone. Still, God is beside them as Jacob's blessing in Genesis 48:15-16 reads:

¹⁵ And he blessed Joseph, and said, God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed me all my life long unto this day,

¹⁶ The Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude amid the earth.

The final question regarding the narrative is: How can this deception be explained theologically? Based on the literary analysis, it can be seen that the narrative has been developed through the reworking of the author P in the frames 26:34 and 27:45-28:9, with special emphasis on highlighting the situation in the post-exilic period. The problem is closely tied to Israel's family, national, and religious identity. The correction that comes at the end (verses 41-45) is the reality that Israel is no longer the leader of the nations. This is the horizon of blessing in the patriarchal narrative, which Leuenberger's analysis refers to as secondary *Religionserfahrungen*. Returning to the question of theological significance, the struggle between Jacob and Esau over the blessing of their dying father serves as an introduction to the divine plan that will

⁵² E. A Speiser, *Genesis: The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1964), 211.

⁵³ Deurloo and Kessler, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginning*, 152.

⁵⁴ Angel Barahona, "From Cain and Abel to Esau and Jacob," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and*

Culture 8, no. 1 (March 2001): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctn.2001.0008>, 2.

⁵⁵ Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*, 211.

continue the narrative. That was Jacob's experience as the patriarch of the Israelite nation.

Conclusion

As stated at the outset, this study aims to fill a gap in the study of the narrative of Jacob and Esau by highlighting the relationship between birthright (*bechorah*) and blessing (*berachah*) within the framework of the patriarchal system and the role of women therein. Until now, many studies have discussed the themes of blessing and birthright separately or from a purely narrative-theological perspective, but few have explicitly linked them to the dynamics of power, social structure, and women's agency within the ancient patriarchal family of Israel.

Through a historical-critical approach and a social-theological reading, this study finds that rights and blessings are not only related to legal provisions or divine will, but are also determined by internal family dynamics and patriarchal structures. In this case, the character of Rebekah plays an important role as an active agent who, despite being constrained by social norms, is able to influence the direction of inheritance. Rebekah's actions open up an interpretation that women are not only domestic actors but also capable of transforming power structures through strategy and wisdom. This story reflects the tension between legal rights and social authority, between established traditions and interventions that transcend their boundaries.

The implications of these findings are highly relevant in today's context, which is still overshadowed by gender inequality, unequal power relations, and value inheritance systems that are often exclusive. The narrative of Jacob and Esau mirrors contemporary questions: Who is considered worthy of inheriting "blessings" today? Is it because of social status, structural position, or the ability to read the signs of the times and act beyond norms? In modern societies that still maintain a covert patriarchal system, this story challenges us to reimagine more inclusive, fair, and transformative forms of inheritance.

This story encourages a critical and contextual reading of Scripture for the church and faith communities. Biblical texts are not merely documents of past faith, but also a field

of encounter between love, justice, and social struggle.⁵⁶ Blessings should not be limited by bloodlines or formal structures, but can come through anyone whom God uses to bring about change. In this light, the classic narrative of Jacob and Esau continues to speak to the present, as a story of blessings, conflict, strategy, and hope in humanity's struggle with social and divine order. Thus, this story is not merely a tale of familial conflict but a theological testimony: that God's purposes often unfold through subversive wisdom, even from the margins of social norms. The story invites believers today to discern God's justice not only in sacred institutions but also in the unexpected voices that challenge and reconfigure the structures of blessing in our time.

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⁵⁶ Djoko Sukono, "Alkitab: Pernyataan Allah Yang Diilhamkan," *PASCA: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan*

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