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The Evangelical Quarterly

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THE BIRTH-ORACLE TO REBEKAH (GEN. XXV. 23)

A STUDY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY

It has often been pointed out that Isaac plays an inconspicuous role in the patriarchal history as compared with Abraham and Jacob. The awful scene on the Mount of sacrifice (Gen. xxii) and the beautiful account of the providing of a wife for Isaac (chap. xxiv) belong properly to the life story of Abraham, although both concerned Isaac so nearly. Isaac's own history is told in less than three chapters. It is not far from the truth to say that Isaac's special significance lies in the fact that he is the connecting link between Abraham and Jacob. Isaac is the father of twins. The great problem of his life is the birthright. Is Esau or Jacob to inherit the blessing of Abraham?

This problem owes its peculiar significance to the divine revelation made to Rebekah before the twins were born. Naturally and necessarily we must judge of Isaac's conduct in the light of that disclosure. Why did Isaac try to bless Esau? If we say that Isaac did not know,¹ or that he deliberately defied² the oracle, we remove the difficulty as far as the oracle itself is concerned. But either answer leaves us with a perplexing problem. In the one case Rebekah is the problem. What valid reason can we give for her withholding her good news

¹ Poole (1669) so interprets xxvii. 4, referring to Munster as his authority. It is interesting to note that Josephus makes Isaac not Rebekah the recipient of the birth-oracle (*Antiq.* I, xviii, 1). While probably due to a slip of memory, this statement of Josephus's may be regarded as implying that the "ignorance theory" is not a very ancient one.

² In the article "Jacob" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, the view is taken (p. 1550) that Isaac and Esau "were minded to nullify the clearly revealed purpose of the oracle (xxv. 23) and the sanctions of a solemn oath (xxv. 33)". Similarly "C.H.M." describes Isaac as "about to act in direct opposition to the divine counsel" (*Genesis*, p. 261).

from Isaac ?¹ In the other case it is Isaac. How can we believe that the docile and obedient Isaac would act in this way ? The difficulty is well stated by Bush :

“As to his purpose of conferring the blessing upon Esau rather than upon Jacob, it is, perhaps, too much to affirm that in this he went *intentionally* counter to the divine counsels. We cannot be positively certain that he was acquainted with the oracle (Gen. xxv. 23), announcing that the elder should serve the younger, or that he knew of Esau's selling his birth-right ; still it is not easy to conceive of his having been ignorant of them; and just in proportion to the probability of his being informed on this head is the difficulty of accounting for his conduct. As the sacred narrative affords us no clue on the subject, we are, perhaps, shut up to a merely hypothetical solution, viz. that, his partiality for Esau, and the custom of the elder son being heir, led him to forget, misunderstand or disregard the previous intimation of the divine will.”²

Rejecting the extreme views—ignorance or defiance—Bush reduces the possibilities to three : Isaac forgot, misunderstood, or disregarded the oracle. While less extreme than defiance and ignorance, the explanation that Isaac disregarded or forgot the oracle likewise raises serious psychological problems. *Disregard* sounds very like a mere euphemism for “defy”. It says much the same thing only in less drastic fashion. *Forget* invites the question, How could he forget ? How could Isaac disregard or fail to remember the birth-oracle in that solemn and most momentous act of his whole life when it was his duty and privilege to bestow the Abrahamic blessing upon the son who should rightly receive it ? This act was no sudden impulse. It was one to which Isaac had looked forward as a duty for many years, perhaps ever since fatherhood was granted him.³

¹ It might be argued that Rebekah hesitated to tell Isaac because, as a confirmed believer in the right of primogeniture, he would be displeased with the oracle. But this seems improbable. Nor is it likely that the reference to “service”, as suggesting inferiority and perhaps coercion and strife, would greatly offend her. Such reasons, while not without some weight, are not sufficiently cogent to justify the assumption that Rebekah kept Isaac in ignorance of a divine revelation.

² George Bush, *Genesis*, Vol. II, p. 85. Matthew Henry states the possibilities as “not knowing, or not understanding, or not duly considering” the divine oracle.

³ It is of interest to note that the attempted source analysis of the “higher critics” contributes nothing to the solution of this problem. The birth-oracle is assigned to J. (Note the use of Jehovah in xxv. 21-23). Part at least of chapter xxvii must also be given to J (Jehovah is used in vv. 7, 20, 27). Consequently all that can be done is to treat chapter xxvii as composite. Evidence of a doublet is found by some critics in the “goodly garments of Esau” and the “skins of the kids of the goats”. The former motif is assigned to J, the latter to E. Jacob's blessing (vv. 27-29) is divided between these sources, part being given to E (vv. 28-29a) and the rest to J. The blessing of Esau (vv. 39-40) is similarly divided, v. 39 being given to E. This analysis is admittedly precarious; and Driver considered it “doubtful whether the grounds alleged are decisive”. When Skinner (*Genesis*, p. 368 f) speaks of the birth-oracle as an “independent legend” and yet admits, as he must, that it shows definite marks of J, it is clear that source analysis cannot solve this problem. Skinner (p. 368 f) remarks on the “indifference to moral considerations” shown in the account of the deceit practised on Isaac by Rebekah

“least” is perhaps a better rendering than “youngest”. The narrative does not state specifically that he had brothers. The same applies to Psalm cxix. 141. In Jeremiah xiv. 3 it seems to be used of inferiors. In Isaiah lx. 22 we read that “a small one shall become a great nation”. It is also used of the little horn of Daniel. viii. 9, cf. vii. 8. A still broader usage also occurs. In Micah v. 2 it is used of the town of Bethlehem, in 1 Samuel ix. 21 of the family of Saul, in Psalm lxxviii. 27 of the tribe of Benjamin, in Jeremiah xlix. 20, l. 45 it is used figuratively (“the little ones of the flock”) of the utter desolation of Edom and of Babylon, (cf. xlvi. 4, of Moab). It is used adverbially in Job xxxvi. 2, Isa. xxviii. 10, 13.

The conclusion to be drawn from the study of these two words seems clearly to be that neither word can be taken as requiring a personal reference. The word “great” decidedly favours the view that “people” is its antecedent: the word “little” clearly admits of such an interpretation. The rendering of A.V. is therefore probably too narrow as respects the Hebrew.¹ There is nothing in the last line that requires the view that after speaking of nations and peoples for three lines, in the fourth the prophecy should become individual and personal. Yet the tendency with commentators is to pass from the general to the particular, from the indefinite to the definite, at this point and to find in the words “elder” and “younger” a reference either to Esau and Jacob as individuals, or to the descendants of Esau and the descendants of Jacob. Thus, Dummelow paraphrases the last line of the oracle as follows, “the descendants of the elder son (the Edomites) would be subject to those of the younger (the Israelites)”.² But the third line does not say, “the people descended from the elder son shall be mightier

¹ The LXX reads by *μείζων* and *ὕλασσων*. The margin in A.V. at Romans ix. 12 indicates that the translators recognized that the words of the LXX as quoted by St. Paul are broader than “elder” and “younger” (cf. Luke xv. 12, 25), hence the marginal rendering “greater” and “lesser”. But they do not seem to have recognized that what is true of the Greek is equally true of the Hebrew. It is rather singular that the A.R.V. has ignored the A.V. margin at Romans ix. 12 and rendered by “elder” and “younger” in both places.

² *A One Volume Commentary*, Vol. I. *in loco*. Payne Smith (in the *Ellicott Com.*, Vol. I, *in loco*) makes the same mistake when he says: “The second line [he divides the oracle into four lines] shows that even in their earliest childhood her sons would be unlike in character and unfriendly in disposition; upon this follows their development into hostile nations; and the prediction that the son who started with the advantages of the birthright, the stronger physical nature, and superior strength in men and arms (chap. xxxii. 6), would, nevertheless, finally hold the inferior position.” This is obviously reading the fulfilment into the prophecy. The prophecy says nothing about “birth-right” or “stronger physical nature”. It is expressly indefinite where Payne Smith would make it definite.

than the people descended from the younger ". It says simply "and people more than people shall be mighty " leaving it quite uncertain which people is meant. If then the last line is interpreted in racial terms, it should be recognized that the indefiniteness of line 3 must carry over to line 4. We have no right, in view of the studied indefiniteness of line 3, to insist that line 4 is definite, that " great " refers to the descendants of Esau and " little " to the descendants of Jacob. It is quite conceivable that the descendants of the elder son might be more numerous and powerful than those of the younger ; but it is equally possible that they might be both in number and in vigor inferior (Isa. lx. 22). Hence, the last line must be regarded as indefinite and ambiguous.

Those who see in the last line a definite prophecy that Esau should serve Jacob, cannot avoid the admission that so interpreted the prophecy had its fulfilment not in the two sons of Isaac, but in their descendants. After securing the blessing by deceit Jacob was obliged to flee for his life and serve many years in the far country. On his return, his dread of Esau was almost abject. Though Esau was in the land of Seir he felt obliged to inform him of his return and in his dealings with his injured brother who came to meet him with 400 men, he adopted an attitude of extreme, even servile deference. He used the word " my lord " (אדוני) both in speaking to him (xxxii. 5, xxxiii. 8, 13, 14, 15) and of him (xxxii. 18) and referred to himself as Esau's " servant " (xxxii. 4, 18, 20, xxxiii. 5, 14). On meeting him he bowed himself to the ground seven times and when assured of Esau's favour he likened the seeing of Esau's face to seeing the face of God (xxxiii. 10). Certainly no one can find here any assumption of superiority on Jacob's part. On the contrary, after all possible allowance is made for oriental politeness, it is clear that far from raising the issue of the birthright, Jacob was prepared to go to almost any length in order to conciliate his " brother Esau ". And that this relationship was not merely temporary is indicated by the brief statement which marks the close of Isaac's life, " and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him ". Even on this important occasion, when the headship of the family would naturally be assumed by the duly recognised heir, we read, " Esau and Jacob ". Jacob may have comforted himself with the thought of ultimate superiority. But he clearly had no thought of asserting it against his

more powerful brother. As for Esau it is not strange that one, who despised his birthright should give no heed to his father's explanation of the blessing that Jacob secured by stealth, that he should "serve" Jacob. Rather he may have felt that already at the Jabbok the time had come when he should "break" Jacob's yoke from off his neck (xxvii. 40).¹

Consequently whether viewed exegetically or historically, the birth-oracle (racial import) is clearer than is the individual, and that even so interpreted is characterized by an element of obscurity that only the fulfilment and further revelation has completely removed. This obscurity is important and should not be overlooked when we are considering the attitude of Isaac and Rebekah toward this momentous prophecy.

2. THE AMBIGUITY OF THE VERBAL FORMS

In the A.V. rendering of this verse the three finite verbs are all rendered by "shall": "shall be separated", "shall be stronger", "shall serve". Since the declaration is a prophecy, it has apparently been held that all three determine the future. It should be remembered however that the Hebrew imperfect may express various shades of meaning: shall, will, may, can, etc. Thus it would be perfectly possible to render either or both of the last two verbs by "may". It is also to be noted that the "and" which joins these two clauses might be rendered by "but" or "while". We might render "and (one) people may (or, will) be stronger than (the other) people, yet (but, or while) the greater may serve the lesser". The fact that we are dealing with a word of the Lord does not necessarily imply that the language is definitely declarative. A familiar illustration of such a potential or permissive sense is Genesis ii. 16, "of every tree of the garden thou mayest indeed eat". The language is that of permission not of commandment.² So here the

¹ The fact that Esau took part in the burial of his father indicates that his residence in Seir (xxxii. 3, xxxiii. 16) had not at that time become permanent. But after his father's death it became so, the reason being given that, as in the case of Abraham and Lot, there was not room for both Esau and Jacob in the land (xxxvi. 7). There is no indication that there was strife between them. Esau through one of his wives was related to the rulers of Seir and apparently preferred that region. The statement that the Lord "gave unto Esau Mount Seir to possess it" (Joshua xxiv. 4) hardly implies a special revelation to Esau but rather providential control (cf. Deut. ii. 19). When Jacob goes down into Egypt, he is as far removed from the land promised to his fathers as is Esau and but for the promise of God he might entertain little hope of ever returning to it (Gen. xlvii. 3 f, cf. xv. 13). The language of Joshua xxiv. 4 "And I gave to Esau Mount Seir to possess it, while Jacob and his sons went down into Egypt" is striking and brings out the anomaly between the promises to Jacob and the circumstances under which he lived.

² Cf. Gesenius-Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar*, § 107, 5.

prophecy may be regarded as couched in terms of human potentiality, with a view to testing the characters of parents and twins, rather than in terms of divine sovereignty and predestination. The fact that Paul interprets it in the latter sense does not make it improper for us to recognize the other aspect of the prophecy. Paul gives us an inspired interpretation of the oracle, from the standpoint of the purpose of God. Isaac apparently had no such special divine guidance in the matter.

3. THE SYNTACTICAL AMBIGUITY

It seems to be the universally accepted view that the syntax of the last clause of the oracle is clear and unambiguous. The English rendering has the same order of words as the Hebrew ; and in the English sentence " the elder shall serve the younger ", " elder " is of course subject, " younger " object.¹ That this is, both historically and prophetically, the correct interpretation is unquestionable. It is also a very ancient interpretation. The LXX, the Targum of Onkelos, Josephus, the New Testament, all support it. We have no thought of challenging its correctness. But this does not prove that the statement itself is as clear and unambiguous in the Hebrew as in the English. No student of Hebrew will venture to dispute, that in the sentence,

" Great shall serve little."

The sequence may be either Subject-Verb-Object or Object-Verb-Subject.

The reason that this is possible in Hebrew is that the order of words in the sentence depends primarily upon the emphasis. The word which stands first is broadly speaking the emphatic word. Hence sentences divide themselves into two great classes : nominal and verbal. In the nominal sentence the subject stands first : the predicate follows and is *descriptive* of the subject : e.g. " The man (is) good." In the verbal sentence the finite verb is put first, because the emphasis is on the *action* ; then follow subject and object as the modifiers of the action : e.g. " and loved Isaac (S) Esau " (O).² These examples give

¹ A literal rendering of 2 Kings xxiii. 35 " And the *silver* and the *gold* gave Jehoiakim to Pharaoh " would be intelligible because the verb requires a personal subject, but it is confusing and un-English. Isaiah ix. 7 " a *word* sent the Lord " is better, but hardly good English.

² In the following discussion S, O and V, will be used for subject, object and verb, respectively.

what may be called the normal order.¹ But since the beginning of the sentence is the place of emphasis, special emphasis upon a word may be secured by placing it at the beginning. Thus in the nominal sentence, the predicate is emphasized by placing it before the subject: "*Good is the man.*"² Similarly in the verbal sentence, subject³ or object⁴ may be emphasized by placing it before the verb.⁵ E.g. Gen. xxi. 1. "Now the Lord visited Sarah" emphasizes the subject: it was the *Lord*, who had given the impossible promise, who visited Sarah, that He might fulfil it. 1 Samuel xvii. 36 "Both the lion (O) and the bear (O) smote thy servant (S)" emphasizes the object: it was by slaying these ferocious animals that David had shown his prowess. Broadly speaking, then, in the case before us the question whether the order is SVO or OVS will depend on the emphasis.

The reasons such syntactical ambiguity is permissible in Hebrew is due to the following considerations: (1) the tendency already mentioned to emphasize the important word, by putting it first; (2) the frequent difference in gender or number between subject and object; (3) the use of the sign of the accusative; (4) the meaning which makes of one order sense, of the other nonsense; and (5) the frequent use of inversion (*chiasmus*). The following examples under each of the above heads will serve to show that syntactically ambiguous sentences of the form SVO or OVS actually occur in Hebrew. They will also show that usually the meaning is clear despite the ambiguity of the syntax.

(1) EMPHATIC ARRANGEMENT

The following examples will suffice to illustrate the tendency to emphasize the subject or object by putting it first. Since the emphasis often cannot be brought out in the translation, one of the rewards to the student of Hebrew is the appreciation of the emphasis, which study of the original makes possible. E.g. Deut v. 3, 2 Sam. xii. 7-9; 1 Chron. xix. 13; Ps. lxxxiv. 12; Isa. l. 15 and Ezek. xviii. 1-20.

¹ In the context of the birth-oracle (Gen. xxv. 19-34), the subject, when a noun, follows the finite verb in 19 instances.

² Cf. Isaiah xl. 6, "All flesh is grass" with "surely grass is the people" (v. 7).

³ In the context of the oracle, the subject precedes only 4 times (v. 19, 23 *dis*, 34).

⁴ The object does not precede the verb in any verse in this context.

⁵ In the verbal sentence when the subject is put before the verb, the sentence may closely resemble the nominal sentence, i.e. be descriptive rather than narrative (Gesenius-Kautzsch, *Grammar* § 142*a*).

(a) *Subject put first*: Gen. iii. 13, "The *serpent* beguiled me" (It was not my doing, the *serpent* was the instigator); Judges viii. 23, ". . . the *Lord* shall rule over you"; Judges ix. 54, ". . . lest they say of me, a *woman* slew him." Cf. Gen. iv. 1, xiv. 18, xix. 24, xxii. 8, xxiv. 35, xxv. 19, xxviii. 3, xxxi. 7, 32 (end), 53, l. 20, 24; 1 Sam. xxv. 44; 2 Kings x. 9; Jer. ii. 8, cf. Mal. i. 4; Ps. xx. 9.

(b) *Object put first*: Gen. xxvii. 37, ". . . behold *lord* have I made him to thee, and all his *brethren* have I given him as servants, and *corn* and *new wine* have I provided him . . ." ; Isa. xxxix. 4, ". . . *all* that is in my house they have seen." Cf. also Gen. xvii. 14 (end), 20, 21, xix. 11, xxiii. 11, 15, xxiv. 8, xxxi. 39, xxxii. 17, 29, xxxiv. 21, 26f., xlii. 20, l. 8; 1 Sam. viii. 11-17; 2 Kings. viii. 12, xiv. 6, xxv. 11f.; Isa. xliii. 22; Mal. i. 3.

(2) ORDER DETERMINED BY DIFFERENCE IN GENDER OR NUMBER

(a) *Subject-Verb-Object*: 1 Kings. v. 26, "And the *Lord* gave wisdom to Solomon." Cf. Gen. xliii. 14; Deut. xxxii. 42, xxxiii. 28 (end); 1 Sam. xiv. 47; 1 Kings xi. 1, xxii. 49; 2 Kings. ix. 24; Ps. xi. 2, xvii. 2, xxxiii. 10, lxix. 21, cvii. 42; Prov. ii. 6, xxii. 3, xxvii. 12; Isa. xiv. 32, xv. 9, xxii. 6 (beg), xl. 31; Jer. v. 25, xxii. 10, xxxvi. 32; Ezek. vii. 23, 27; Joel iv. 15; Zech. iv. 9, viii. 12; Mal. ii. 7.

(b) *Object-Verb-Subject*: Gen. xxx. 40. "The lambs separated Jacob." In Ezek. xxxiv. 2f., ". . . (is it) not the flock (O) should shepherd the shepherds (S)?" is followed by a series of 9 brief sentences, in all of which the object is put first for emphasis, and ending with the words "but with might have ye ruled them and with violence". Cf. Gen. xxii. 23, xxxi. 8; Judges vii. 24; 1 Sam. ii. 19, xxvii. 11; 1 Kings. ix. 26, 26 (?), xiv. 11, xvi. 4, xxi. 24; 2 Kings. xxiii. 35; Ps. xxxiii. 5, cxxxix. 16; Prov. v. 12, xiii. 6, 21, xxi. 22; Isa. i. 14, vii. 22, xxvi. 9 (end); Jer. ii. 13, vii. 11; Dan. ix. 26; Nah. ii. 14; Zech. ii. 8.

(3) ORDER INDICATED BY THE SIGN OF THE ACCUSATIVE

The Hebrew has a particle 'eth (אֵת) which is used to designate the object. Thus in the first example given below this particle precedes the word Isaac. It is untranslatable since

our English idiom uses no word to govern the direct object. Were it always used the ambiguity we are considering would not be present in Hebrew. But it occurs only rarely in poetry and in prose it is largely confined to cases where the object is a definite noun.¹

(a) *Subject-Verb-Object*: Gen. xxv. 19, "Abraham begat Isaac," Cf. Gen. xxii. 1, xxiv. 35, xxv. 3, xxxvii. 3, 11, xli. 16; Judges vi. 34; 1 Sam. v. 1, ix. 14, 17, xxviii. 3; 2 Sam. xvii. 24; 1 Kings. xii. 10, xx. 1; 2 Kings. vii. 17, xiii. 22; Esther iv. 1.

(b) *Object-Verb-Subject*: Gen. xxxi. 43, "My affliction and the toil of my hands has seen God." Cf. Gen. ix. 5, 13, xiv. 15, xvii. 21, xix. 11, xlii. 4; Joshua v. 5, vi. 5, x. 28, 42; 1 Sam. xxv. 43, xxviii. 19; 2 Sam. xvii. 25; 1 Kings. iii. 20, vii. 1, xviii. 35; 2 Kings xiv. 13.

(4) ORDER INDICATED ONLY BY THE MEANING

Since the sign of the accusative is largely restricted to prose we will naturally expect that it will be especially in the elevated style of poetry and prophecy that the ambiguity we are discussing will occur. But it is also found in simple prose.

(a) *Subject-Verb-Object*: Isa. xxiv. 6, "Therefore curse has devoured land"; 1 Sam. ii. 5, "until a barren (one) bore seven". Cf. Gen. xlix. 16; Deut. xviii. 15; Judges vi. 29; Ps. xi. 4, lxviii. 12, ciii. 19, civ. 19; Prov. xiii. 6 (but cf. LXX and Vulg.), xix. 15, xxvii. 7; Isa. xxii. 6 (end), xxxii. 6, xxxvii. 32, xlviii. 13; Jer. ii. 11, v. 25, xiv. 3, Ezek. v. 10; Joel ii. 11; Amos v. 3; Zech. viii. 5 (?); Mal. i. 6.

(b) *Object-Verb-Subject*: 1 Kings. xix. 17, ". . . the one delivered from the sword of Hazael shall slay Jehu (S) and the one delivered from the sword of Jehu shall slay Elisha (S)";² Joel i. 4, "The residue of the palmerworm has eaten the locust, and the residue of the locust has eaten the cankerworm, and the residue of the cankerworm has eaten the caterpillar"; Isa. ix. 7, "a word sent the Lord"; Isa. xl. 19, "the graven

¹ The use of the "sign of the accusative" is by no means restricted to cases where the differentia which are listed under the preceding section are absent. It may be used where the subject and object differ both as to gender and number (e.g. Gen. xxxvi. 2; Joshua vi. 25; 2 Kings ix. 10; Isa. vi. 5) as well as in cases where no such distinguishing characteristics are present. Here examples are limited to the latter class.

² This passage is especially striking because in the familiar language of the A.V. it is quite unambiguous. Yet it is only the sense of the passage and its fulfilment which makes it clear that the order is OVS and not SVO. Cf. 1 Kings xiv. 11, xvi. 4, xxi. 24; 2 Kings ix. 10, mentioned above, where the order of words is the same but the difference in number or the sign of the accusative makes the syntax clear.

image has cast the workman". Cf. Gen. xv. 13 "a sojourner shall be thy seed"; 1 Kings. xii. 1; 2 Kings. xxiii. 34 (?); Job xiv. 19; Ps. v. 7 "A man of blood and deceit abhors the Lord", lxxviii. 25, cx. 2; Isa. lxxv. 22 (end), cf. Dan. ix. 27; Mic. vii. 1.

(5) INVERTED PARALLELISM (CHIASMUS).

Balance or parallelism, both in form and content, is a marked feature of Hebrew poetry. If the parallelism in thought is very close, we call it synonymous. But antithetic parallelism is quite common. Somewhat akin to antithetic parallelism in thought is inverted parallelism in arrangement or *Chiasmus*. Thus, if the first member has the order SVO, the second may have the order OVS. This has the rather striking effect of placing two of the corresponding words of each member as closely together or as far apart as possible. E.g. SVO, OVS, or OVS, SVO. Examples of such inversion are found in prose (e.g. Gen. xii. 12; Joshua ix. 14) but are naturally more frequent in poetry.

Ps. xix. 2, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the work of his hand showeth the firmament"; xlv. 25, "Wherefore thy face dost thou hide, dost thou forget our affliction and our oppression"; xlv. 10, ". . . bow he breaks and he cutteth asunder spear, chariot he burneth in the fire"; xlix. 8, "a brother not will at all deliver a man, not will he give to God his ransom"; lxxviii. 24, "And he rained upon them manna to eat, and corn of heaven he gave to them"; lxxviii. 50, ". . . not withheld he from death their soul, but their life to the pestilence he delivered over"; lxxii. 3, "Judge ye poor and fatherless afflicted and needy justify." Cf. Ps. ii. 5, 9, 10, vii. 17, viii. 6, l. 13, li. 11, 14, lxxviii. 23, lxxii. 11, 13, lxxiv. 17, lxxvii. 20, lxxviii. 20, 72, lxxix. 7, lxxxix. 2, cvii. 4, cxl. 1, cxliii. 5; Prov. vi. 23a, xiii. 5, xv. 25, xviii. 23, "entreaties speaketh the poor, but the rich answereth harsh things; xxiv. 16, xxii. 1, "Preferable is (a good) name to great riches; more than silver and gold favour is good," v. 12, i. 31, ii. 5, 10, 20, iii. 5, 10, 11, 16, xii. 19; Isa. i. 11, 18-20, (cf. ix. 9), xxxi. 1, xl. 27, xliii. 18, xlv. 12; Ezek. vii. 6, "End has come, has come the end . . ."; Mal. ii. 7.

It is to be noted further that the alternative renderings given in the margin of the Revised Versions include a number of instances where the ambiguity is due to the possibility of

taking the same word either as subject or object (direct or adverbial) of the verb. The following examples give first the rendering of A.V. text and then the R.V. margin (or text), separated from it by a colon. R.V. margin (or text), separated from it by a colon. Gen. x. 11, “. . . went forth Asshur” : “. . . he went forth into Assyria”. Gen. xlix. 10, “. . . until Shiloh come” : “. . . till he come to Shiloh”. 1 Kings. xxii. 38, “and they washed his armour” : “now the harlots washed themselves there”.

2 Kings. vi. 6, “and the iron did swim” : “and he made the iron to swim”.

Job. xii. 6, “into whose hand God bringeth *abundantly*” : “that bring their god in their hand”.

Job xv. 5, “for thy mouth uttereth (teacheth) thine iniquity “for thine iniquity teacheth thy mouth”.

Job xx. 10, “His children shall seek to please the poor” : “the poor shall oppress his children”.

Job xxxiii. 17, “that he may withdraw man *from his* purpose” : “that man may put away *his* purpose”.

Psalm xi. 7, “his countenance doth behold the upright” : “the upright shall behold his face”.

Psalm civ. 8, “They go up by the mountains” : “the mountains rose”.

Proverbs x. 6, “. . . but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked” : “the mouth of the wicked covereth violence”.

Proverbs xvii. 11, “An evil man seeketh only rebellion” : “a rebellious man seeketh only evil”.

Proverbs xxix. 23, “But honour shall uphold the humble in spirit” : “but he that is of a lowly spirit shall obtain honour”.

Isaiah xvi. 8, “. . . the lords of the heathen have broken down the principal plants thereof” : “. . . its choice plants did break down the lords of nations”.

Isaiah liii. 10, “. . . when thou shalt make his soul an offering” : “. . . when his soul shall make an offering”.

Jeremiah xlix. 20, “. . . Surely the least of the flock shall draw them out” : “. . . surely they shall drag them away, *even* the little ones of the flock”.

Micah vi. 9, “*the man of* wisdom shall see thy name” : “thy name shall see that which is wisdom”.

Nahum i. 8, “And darkness shall pursue his enemies” : “and he will pursue his enemies into darkness”.

Zephaniah iii. 10, “. . . my suppliants . . . shall bring mine offering” : “. . . shall they bring my suppliants . . . for an offering”.

Zechariah vii. 2, “When they had sent unto the house of God Sharezer and Regem-melech . . .” : “now *they of* Bethel [house of God] had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech” : “now *they of* Bethel, even Sharezer and Regem-melech, had sent”.

II

In the light of the above data it becomes apparent that we are not justified in regarding “the elder (Esau) shall serve the younger (Jacob)” as the clearly revealed meaning of the birth-oracle. For this word of prophecy is both obscure and ambiguous. It apparently refers primarily not to Esau and Jacob but rather to their descendants ; and the last line may have the opposite meaning from what is usually supposed. This is of prime importance for the understanding of the part which this oracle plays in the life of Isaac and Rebekah, of Esau and Jacob. If the birth-oracle is ambiguous, if it *can* be interpreted in the interest of either of the twins, the domestic drama appears in a different light from that which is necessitated by the assumption that its meaning is unmistakable. This does not mean, that in the oracle to Rebekah the usual rendering should be reversed and we should render it “the little shall serve the great.” The Biblical record and the course of history have both alike placed their seal of approval on the other as the divinely intended meaning. But it does mean that the divine word, *as uttered* to Rebekah, *permits* of such a rendering and consequently might be interpreted by the parents in the interest of either of the twins. That the rendering, “the little shall serve the great”, is *possible* is all that is contended for here ; and this *possibility* will not be *denied* by any one who has examined carefully the passages cited above. It is in this ambiguity of the prophecy that we have in part at least the solution of the conduct of Isaac. At the risk of prolixity let us review the story in the light of the fact that the birth-oracle is sufficiently obscure to permit of contradictory interpretations.

Assuming, as we have every warrant for doing, that Rebekah at once told the birth-oracle to Isaac, we may be sure that both parents pondered it carefully and were probably agreed

that it predicted the superiority of the younger twin and his descendants over the elder twin and his.

The first light to be thrown upon the meaning of the oracle was the circumstance that at birth the hand of the younger twin grasped the heel of the elder. This remarkable phenomenon probably confirmed the parents in their interpretation of the oracle; and the younger twin was called Jacob ("he will supplant").

But while at the outset the attitude of the parents toward the prediction was probably one of unhesitating acceptance of the usual interpretation, it seems clear that it did not continue so indefinitely. As the children grew the personal equation came to figure more and more prominently: "Isaac loved Esau"; "Rebekah loved Jacob." Isaac's love for Esau led him to want Esau to have all that ordinarily would be the inheritance of the first-born, while Rebekah's love for Jacob made her desire it for her younger son. Impelled by love, we may think of both parents as reviewing and reconsidering the events which had transpired. The obscurity and ambiguity of the birth-oracle would then acquire significance. It would lead to many arguments between the parents. Isaac would discover and incline more and more to the rendering which favoured Esau. Rebekah would cling tenaciously to the one which supported Jacob. Each would seek support for the interpretation adopted. The circumstances of the birth would be recalled. Rebekah insists that Jacob's grasp on Esau's heel favours her view of the matter. Isaac reminds her that Esau was actually born first: Jacob tried to supplant him but failed. "That," he points out, "is something which is not to be overlooked." "Yes," replies Rebekah. "But the name 'Jacob' means 'he *shall* supplant' and I am sure we were divinely guided in giving him that name." "True," responds Isaac, "but don't forget that 'Jacob' may mean merely 'he *may* supplant'. Perhaps it is a warning, not a promise." Special pleaders are full of ideas.

The statement of the parental preferences is followed at once by the story of the selling of the birthright by Esau. When it took place we are not told, perhaps when he was comparatively young. Its mention so early in the narrative would favour this. We may infer with a considerable degree of probability that Esau concealed this unworthy deed from his father. And it is

at least equally probable that Jacob told it to his mother. Whether it eventually reached the ears of Isaac we cannot say. If so, it apparently had no serious or lasting effect upon his preference for Esau and his determination to secure to him his rights. Isaac may have regarded Jacob's act as so heartless and unscrupulous that it may have prejudiced him all the more in favour of his elder son.

The selling of the birthright must be considered in connection with the birth-oracle. If the meaning of the latter was perfectly clear, why was Jacob so concerned to buy what by divine decree was already assured to him? Ignorance of the oracle is a more natural explanation of his conduct than of his father's. But it hardly seems a likely one. More probable is it that like Hazael Jacob believed the oracle sufficiently to use unworthy means to secure its fulfilment but not sufficiently to trust its Author to bring it about. Jacob probably knew of the high hopes cherished regarding him by his mother. He was crafty and ambitious; and may have thought that in buying the birthright he was taking a step which would further the fulfilment of the promise. Still his conduct is far easier to understand when the obscurity of the oracle is recognized. If Jacob knew that the meaning of the oracle was a moot point between his parents, he would now be seeking to do for himself what later his mother incited him to do, secure the fulfilment in his favour by every available means. This might also explain the readiness with which Esau sold his birthright. The words which he uses are significant, "Behold I am going to die, and *what* to me is birthright?" He does not say *my* birthright. This may mean that he recognized that his claim to it was doubtful.

Years passed by. At the age of 40 Esau married two Hittite women. If Isaac made any effort to keep his favourite son from a step which his father Abraham had been at such pains to prevent in Isaac's own case, the record is silent concerning it. But we are told that both parents keenly deplored this act of their first-born. To Isaac it must certainly have been a cause of serious misgivings. Could the birthright pass to a man whose children were half-Hittite? Ought it to do so? As for Rebekah, this act probably "finished" Esau, as far as the inheritance was concerned. Any doubt she may still have entertained as to the meaning of the oracle, any scruple she may have felt about opposing Isaac, was now finally removed: by

marrying "daughters of the land", Esau had eliminated himself from the succession.

More years, nearly two-score, pass by before the decisive moment arrives. Isaac is "old", apparently about 135 years of age; he is feeling very old, is getting blind and thinks death is upon him.¹ Yet he still has two score years of life ahead of him. Esau has been married about 35 years and probably has several sons. Jacob is still unmarried. For years—half a century or more—Esau has been bringing gifts of venison and thereby endearing himself more and more to his father. Now the time has arrived to reward him: Isaac calls Esau and tells him to prepare "savory meat, such as I love, . . . that my soul may bless thee before I die". Isaac clearly thinks of himself as standing on the threshold of the great Beyond. But he wants one more dish of venison before he is gathered to his fathers.²

Without being unduly severe on Isaac we cannot but contrast this scene with the memorable one recorded in a preceding chapter (xxiv). Isaac is now about the same age as was his father Abraham when Sarah died. Perhaps he is thinking of this. Abraham, apparently, was then in a state of health which made his life tenure uncertain. The language of the narrative (v. 3-9) suggests that Abraham thought and that his servant shared the belief that he might not be alive when Eliezer returned from Padan-Aram. Abraham, like Isaac at this later period, had in

¹ Since Joseph was about 39 years old (Gen. xli. 46, 53, xlv. 11) when Jacob came into Egypt at the age of 130 (xlvii. 9), he was born when his father was nearly 90. This was apparently at the end of the second period of 7 years of service for Rachel. Consequently Jacob was about 75 years old and Isaac about 135 when the incident here recorded took place. The difficulties with this chronology are well known; and the attempt has been made to extend the period of Jacob's sojourn with Laban by treating the "20 years" of xxxi. 38 and the "20 years" of v. 41 as distinct periods and holding that Jacob spent 40 years with Laban (cf. e.g. *The Speaker's Commentary* and Payne Smith in *Ellicott's Commentary*). But such a distinction is arbitrary and strained and it seems better to hold to the usual chronology.

² Commentators differ widely in their attitude toward this request of the aged patriarch. Josephus apparently gives the venison "sacrificial" significance (*Antiq.* I, xviii. 5); Isaac proposes to offer sacrifice in connection with the solemn, religious act of pronouncing the blessing on his son. But there is no hint of this in the narrative. Among the explanations cited by Poole is the interesting one that Isaac wished to ascertain through the success or failure of Esau's hunt for venison, whether God would have him bestow on him the blessing. In support of this view appeal is made to the occasion of Esau's sale of the birthright, the fact that, as indicated by his famished condition, his hunting had on that occasion been without success. Such attempts to save the face of Isaac seem decidedly far-fetched. The opposite extreme is represented by "C.H.M." who speaking of Isaac as "occupied about 'savory meat'" says: "If Esau had sold his birthright for a mess of pottage, Isaac was about to give away the blessing for a mess of venison. How very humiliating!" The severity of this characterization of Isaac's conduct is due in large measure to the fact that "C.H.M." regards the birth-oracle as unambiguous and describes Isaac as "about to act in direct opposition to the divine counsel"—a position which, as has been shown, is contradicted by the ambiguous nature of the oracle.

fact many years to live, though both seem to have felt that death was near at hand. Yet how different are the two scenes. Abraham is supremely concerned to keep his son, Isaac, from an unworthy marriage. Of the circumstances we know nothing. Whether the patriarch has recently dined or is hungry is not stated. The solemnity of the scene impresses us. Abraham may be very feeble. But faith and constancy of purpose appear in every word he utters. Isaac needs "savoury meat" to strengthen him for the duty which lies before him; and the fact that his son Esau has sold his birthright and married two Hittite wives does not deter him from bestowing on him the blessing. It is quite clear that Isaac is not the equal of his father.

Still the simplest explanation of Isaac's conduct is that he thought he was doing right. The blessing he proposed to bestow was the birthright blessing and he intended it for Esau. He had not forgotten the birth-oracle. He had no thought of deliberately defying it. He was not too mentally sluggish and confused to know what he was doing. No, he had long ago persuaded himself that the oracle might be interpreted in favour of his favourite son. Even in the womb Jacob tried to supplant him. Later Jacob stole his birthright. Rebekah had never liked him but had always favoured the wily Jacob. All the same: "the *elder* (and his descendants) shall the little one (and his descendants) serve." *That*, he tells himself over and over again, is what the prophecy means. Rebekah has misunderstood it. He has often told her so, but without result. He will right Esau's wrongs before he dies. He will avoid a "scene". He will not give Rebekah an opportunity to make trouble. He will bless Esau and when Rebekah hears about it, all will be over. Rebekah will be angry but she will have to submit. This was his intention; but it was not the purpose of God. The blessing which Isaac intended for Esau was bestowed upon Jacob. He blessed Jacob and he could not recall it. The discovery that he had actually blessed Jacob, despite his precautions, was a terrible blow to him, as great as it was to Esau or greater: "And he trembled a trembling great exceedingly." But like a flash of light it made clear to him the purpose of God. He had pronounced the blessing in the name of God and could not recall it, "I blessed him, also blessed shall he be". The meaning of the birth-oracle is at last clear to him. Its natural meaning, "the elder shall serve the younger", is the true one.

He has tried to avoid admitting this. He has been sincere in believing that it might be understood differently. But he is wrong. All the blessing he can now give Esau is the second best ; and when he says " thou shalt serve thy brother " he is clearing up once and for all the obscurity of the birth-oracle. It has been a moot point between him and Rebekah. It has been an occasion of strife between the sons. But now he sees clearly that it is of God that Jacob should supplant his beloved Esau.

It should not be overlooked in this connection that Isaac's action in blessing Jacob is described in Hebrews xi. 20 as an act of faith : " By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come." While the conception of faith which is illustrated by this catalogue of heroes and heroic deeds must be quite broadly conceived, it is impossible to believe that an act of deliberate defiance could be so described. Much the same may be said of an act of neglect or forgetfulness. But it is quite easy to see that a well-intended but mistaken act, which was overruled by God for the accomplishment of His purposes, might be called an act of faith.

If the above is the true interpretation of the course of events which is briefly but graphically described in the Book of Genesis, the reason for the ambiguity of the prophecy is made plain. It is this very ambiguity which makes it possible to explain the rivalry between Jacob and Esau and between Isaac and Rebekah without assuming that any one of the actors in this domestic drama deliberately attempted to defy and frustrate the clearly revealed purpose of God. It is consequently important to recognize that the ambiguity was intentional. It would have been very easy to make the meaning of the last clause perfectly plain. Insert the sign of the accusative before " little " and the major difficulty is removed : " great " is then subject, " little " is object : use the word " first-born " instead of " great " and the reference to Esau becomes practically unmistakable. A simple matter ! But if this is done the whole character of the prophecy is changed. It is no longer possible for Isaac and Rebekah to maintain different opinions as to the meaning of the oracle and each interpret it in the interest of a favourite child. It becomes merely a question of obedience. Isaac is wilfully disobeying the divine oracle ; Rebekah is forced to the use of unworthy means to secure its fulfilment. It is by its very ambiguity that the prophecy acquired the character of a moral

test. Its ambiguity was a snare to Esau whose readiness to sell his birthright was due to failure to appreciate its value, but also perhaps to uncertainty as to whether it was really to be his. It tested Isaac. Isaac wanted Esau to have the blessing ; but his motives as far as known were of the flesh, not of the spirit. His love of Esau's venison is the only explanation that is given of his strong preference for Esau, a preference which Esau's Hittite wives failed to overcome. It tested Jacob and Rebekah. They were supremely concerned about the birthright. But they were so uncertain of the promise that they were ready to use dishonest means to secure it. All four of them could find in the ambiguity of the oracle a certain amount of justification or, rather, excuse for their conduct.

But in studying the conduct of Isaac it is important for us to remember that Isaac's problem was not merely concerned with the interpretation of an obscurely worded Hebrew sentence. While we have a right to stress the ambiguity of the language of the birth-oracle as explaining at least in part the determination of Isaac to bless Esau, we must also recognize that Isaac was not, and was not intended to be, wholly dependent upon the language of the oracle for a guide in his conduct. Isaac had a commentary upon that prophecy in the events of the many years which had elapsed since the oracle was uttered. We have the same commentary but we have far greater difficulty in understanding it, because so little of it is preserved for us. Isaac had lived through it. If the prophecy was obscure, it was all the more important that he should study carefully God's providential dealings in the hope of finding a clue to its solution. Did he do so? The answer seems to be clear. He did not. Had he done so he must have realized that to pass on the blessing of his father Abraham to a son with two Hittite wives and sons who were half-Hittite would be an act of disloyalty, a grievous sin. Abraham had taken pains that Isaac's wife should be a kinswoman. Why did not Isaac take similar pains for his son Esau? If he did, and Esau refused to be guided by his father, should not that have sufficed to convince him that Esau should not and must not receive the blessing? Isaac may have succeeded in convincing himself that his interpretation of the oracle was a valid one. But how could he have persuaded himself that Abraham his father to whom the blessing was given would approve the transmitting of that blessing to

Esau ? It is easier to absolve Isaac of wilful disobedience to the oracle given long ago to Rebekah than it is to excuse him of grievous disloyalty to the example and wishes of his father Abraham. Esau's Hittite wives should, it would seem, have given Isaac the key in providence to the obscurity in prophecy. But he tried to bless Esau !

It is significant that the story of the struggle for the blessing makes no mention of any attempt on the part of Isaac or Rebekah to obtain light upon their problem from the Lord. They may have done so. But if they did, we might expect the narrative to mention it. The record deals exclusively with personal and family reasons, with human and unworthy motives and expedients. The Lord had given Rebekah a word of prophecy at a time when she was in distress. Why did she play an unworthy trick upon Isaac instead of seeking help from God to secure what she believed to be its proper fulfilment ? The Lord had appeared to Isaac and had counselled him and blessed him. Why did Isaac try to perform the most important and solemn duty an aged father could perform, secretly, concealing his intention from the wife of his bosom, from the mother of his children ? Why did he ask for venison for his belly rather than for heavenly guidance for his mind ?

If the prophecies of God are at times vague and ambiguous, it is not because they speak of a dim and mysterious future. The future belongs to God. He and He alone can reveal it. If they are at times obscure and mysterious, it is because they are the words of Him " who knows our frame, and knows as well what is fit to be withheld as what to be imparted " that his people may walk by faith and, being constantly reminded that " God is his own interpreter ", may ever seek His guidance and help in all the experiences and emergencies of life. The more attentively Biblical prophecy is studied the more will the student be impressed with what Principal Fairbairn aptly called that " wonderful combination of light and shadow which it contains ". Prophecy is given to us that it may be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, not that we may walk alone, but that we may walk with God and do His will.

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