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Genesis 27

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Abstract Genesis 27 is a story that depicts a series of ancient ritual performances. The narrative recounts the time when Jacob, the son of Isaac, received his father's blessing by means of an act of deception. As an account that contains explicit examples of performances designed to set the activities apart from other less sacred occurrences, the blessing story in Genesis 27 contains features of what scholars refer to as "ritualization" in narrative. Ritualization can be defined as actions designed to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more commonplace, activities. Ritualization can assist those of a lesser status in accomplishing their objectives that stand in opposition to the desires of the powerful. When read as ritualization in narrative, Genesis 27 can be interpreted as an account that portrays the use of ancient temple and sacrificial imagery in order to secure a sacred blessing.

FROM THE HAND OF JACOB: A RITUAL ANALYSIS OF GENESIS 27

David E. Bokovoy

Introduction

The curious account of Isaac's blessing and Jacob's deception featured in the book of Genesis can often raise considerable interest. In sum, the story presented in Genesis 27 contains an etiology explaining the commencement of divine favor granted Jacob's posterity. As a result of his misleading actions, Jacob received his father's pronouncement:

May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, Abundance of new grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, And nations bow to you; Be master over your brothers, And let your mother's sons bow to you. Cursed be they who curse you, Blessed they who bless you. (Genesis 27:28–29)¹

Though the story of Jacob's blessing and deception has elicited significant scholarly attention, at least one issue pertaining to the narrative has remained unexplored until now.² It is that Genesis 27

1. Unless otherwise noted, biblical translations reflect the Jewish Publication Society translation.

2. See, for example, K. Luke, "Isaac's Blessing: Gen 27," *Scripture* 20 (1968): 33–41; Isaac Mendelsohn, "On the Preferential Status of the Oldest Son," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 156 (1959): 38–40; Ephraim A. Speiser, "I Know Not the Day of My Death," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955): 252–56; Stanley Gevirtz, "Patterns of the Early Poetry of Israel. III: Isaac's Blessing over Jacob," *Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization* 32 (1963): 35–47; S. H. Smith, "Heel and Thigh: The Concept of Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau Narratives," *Vetus Testamentum* 40/4 (1990): 464–73; S. Ackerman,

presents a classic illustration of the prominence of ritualization in biblical narrative. David P. Wright has demonstrated the importance of identifying ritual elements in a literary analysis of ancient texts,³ and this study benefits from his reading of the story of Aqhat in interpreting Genesis 27 as a ritual narrative.

With the advancement of ritual studies, defining the actual concept of ritual has, in recent years, proved somewhat problematic.⁴ In her important summary to classify the term *ritual*, Catherine Bell opts for the expression *ritualization* in preference to *ritual*. Bell offers the following useful definition:

Ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane,” and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.⁵

As an account that features explicit examples of intentional performances with culturally specific strategies designed to set the activities apart from other less sacred occurrences, the tradition of Jacob’s deception in Genesis 27 contains distinct marks of ritualization. The account features a story of a meal offering presented as a ritual performance in order to secure a sacred blessing. As such, Genesis 27 pro-

“The Deception of Isaac, Jacob’s Dream at Bethel, and Incubation on an Animal Skin,” in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1991): 92–120; Meir Malul, “‘Āqēb ‘Heel’ and ‘āqab ‘To Supplant’ and the Concept of Succession in the Jacob-Esau Narratives,” *Vetus Testamentum* 46/2 (1996): 190–212.

3. David P. Wright, *Ritual in Narrative: The Dynamics of Feasting, Mourning, and Retaliation Rites in the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001).

4. For a consideration of the challenges in defining ritual, see Jack Goody, “Against Ritual: Loosely Structured Thoughts on a Loosely Defined Topic,” in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), 27; Frits Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual,” *Numen* 26 (1979): 2–22.

5. Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74.

vides an analogy with ritual offerings in the Hebrew Bible that feature a culturally specific strategy for securing divine favor. In addition to addressing the importance of ritualization in this biblical narrative, the following analysis demonstrates that ritual may assist those of a lesser status to accomplish their objectives that stand in opposition to the desires of the powerful.

Offerings in the Biblical Sphere

A theoretical consideration of biblical offerings as ritual would benefit from a larger comparative study of similar performances in the ancient Near East. In previous studies, scholars have noted a near universal distinction between the general category of *offering* and the more specific category of *sacrifice*.⁶ While the act of sacrifice places emphasis upon the ritual slaying and/or death of the victim, offerings in the general sense focus primarily upon the *presentative* aspect of ritual gift giving. Scholars have long noted that in Mesopotamian rituals, worshippers directed their primary focus toward the food presented to the gods as a meal, rather than the actual rite of slaying. These sacred performances held considerable meaning, for within the cult, Mesopotamian practitioners held the crucial responsibility of feeding their gods.

One of the most significant Mesopotamian illustrations of the ritual care and feeding presented to deities includes a description of the daily sacrifices offered to the gods of the city of Uruk during the Seleucid period.⁷ According to the text, the Mesopotamian deities received four daily services referred to as *naptanu*, the Akkadian word for an ordinary meal.⁸ Caregiving, including meal presentation

6. See, for example, Wilfred G. Lambert, "Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jan Quaegebeur (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 191–201; David M. Clemens, "A Study of the Sacrificial Terminology at Ugarit: A Collection and Analysis of the Ugaritic and Akkadian Textual Data" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1999), 1–16.

7. For a translation of the text, see A. Sachs, trans., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 343–45.

8. The Akkadian word *naptanu* appears primarily as a reference for a meal or the time of evening meal; see *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University*

in the form one might offer to a human superior, constituted an important performance in the religious life of ancient Mesopotamia. Conceptually, this Mesopotamian perspective regarding the purpose of offerings provides a helpful backdrop for interpreting one of the roles associated with meal presentations in ancient Israel.

The Hebrew Bible contains evidence that the notion of offering food to deity as a means of securing divine favor operated in ancient Israel. As noted by Gary A. Anderson, “countless texts from every period describe YHWH’s sacrifices as food.”⁹ The resolution to the flood story in J specifically presents Yahweh *smelling* the pleasing odor emitted by the עֹלָה (“burnt offering”), an act that secured deity’s sympathy (see Genesis 8:20–21). A comparable notion appears in 1 Samuel 26:19, where David encourages Saul with the statement “if the Lord has incited you against me, let Him be appeased by an offering” (1 Samuel 26:19). In this passage, the verbal phrase *let him be appeased* is a translation of the *hiphil* third person masculine singular jussive of the root *rwh*, meaning “to smell.”¹⁰ Hence, David’s suggestion that YHWH will *appease* his anger via the presentation of a burnt offering (עֹלָה) reflects the biblical connection between the act of smelling food and securing divine favor. This same motif reappears in the Priestly Torah, which defines a large category of offerings as gifts that produce “an odor pleasing to the Lord” (Leviticus 1:9, 13; 2:2, 9; 3:5, 16). Moreover, a variety of passages from both the Priestly Torah and the Holiness School specifically refer to offerings as לֶחֶם (“food”) for the deity (see Leviticus 3:11; 21:6, 17, 21, 22; Numbers 28:2). As a reflection of the food presented to God, items that provided the staples of the human diet—namely, meats, breads (with oil), wine, and even salt—appear as an integral part of altar offerings. In this context, the designation שֻׁלְחָן (“table”) for the open-air altar of Yahweh secures the overall conceptual continuity of the perception of feeding deity as a means of securing divine favor (see Ezekiel 44:16 and Malachi 1:7, 12). This biblical and Near Eastern view concerning the

of Chicago, ed. John A. Brinkman et al. (Chicago: Oriental Institute of Chicago, 1980), 11:319.

9. Gary A. Anderson, “Sacrifices (OT),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:872.

10. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 3:1196.

presentation of sacred meal offerings clearly reflects the general pattern for gift giving in human relationships.

Anthropologists have demonstrated that theological constructs frequently derive from “anthropo-metaphorical” contexts. In other words, humans naturally define components of the spiritual realm in terms of temporal performances and institutions. By analogy, religious offerings in the ancient Near East appear to reflect the presentation of food gifts given to a human occupying a superior social status. In a similar manner, “a number of features or aspects of the practice of sacrifice and offerings indicate Israel’s understanding of the presentation of sacrifice as a *gift* to the deity.”¹¹ This thematic understanding provides the conceptual background for God’s comments concerning sacrifice in the book of Malachi:

When you present a blind animal for sacrifice—it doesn’t matter! When you present a lame or sick one—it doesn’t matter! Just offer it to your governor: Will he accept you? Will he show you favor? (Malachi 1:8)

Thus, the concept of *offering* or gift giving in biblical Israel reflects the notion that one could actually influence the will of deity in the same way one might obtain the favor of a human superior. Clearly, Israelite traditions such as that preserved in the story of Hannah, where deity grants a petition made in response to a promise of child sacrifice, derive from the same theological perspective witnessed in the so-called motivations for divine assistance witnessed in the psalms of individual lament.¹² Offerings in biblical Israel provided a means for obtaining divine favor in the same way that gifts in the temporal realm secured the approval of social superiors.

11. Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 129, emphasis added.

12. For a survey of this genre, including an analysis of the motivation for divine assistance, see John H. Hayes, “The Songs of Israel,” in *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 153–71.

The Symbolic Value of Hand Placement

Since offerings served as a means for obtaining divine favor, the act of hand placement as a token gesture associated with ritual offerings appears to have provided an important cultic symbol. The Hebrew Bible contains two basic forms of hand placement: (1) two-hand placement that designated the recipient as the focus of the ritual performance, and (2) one-hand placement that identified the gift as an offering *belonging* to the presenter. Wright has shown that examples of the single-hand placement served an attributive function in the Priestly writings. “The attribution is such that no matter who works with the sacrifice, the animal and sacrificial acts performed with it will always be considered as ritually pertaining to the offerer who imposed the hand.”¹³ Evidence for the attributive value of the single-hand placement appears in the Priestly discussion of food offerings: “When any of you presents an offering of cattle to the Lord . . . he shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, that it may be *acceptable in his behalf*, in expiation for him” (Leviticus 1:1, 4). Clearly the phrase *וּנְרִצָּה לוֹ* (“acceptable for him”) suggests the actual purpose of the ritual as an attributive gesture.

Wright’s interpretation of the attributive function of hand placement provides an explanation for the lack of this gesture with smaller offerings, such as birds and cereal offerings, since the offerer could simply carry these gifts in his hand (cf. Leviticus 1:14–17; 2; 5:7–10, 11–13). “The presentation of the small offerings in the hand of the offerer,” maintains Wright, “is enough to designate the offering as pertaining to that person.”¹⁴ The relative simplicity of determining the beneficiary of these smaller offerings stands in stark contrast to the complexity of presenting larger quadrupeds where several persons may have been required to move an animal through the temple court. Ritual hand placement, therefore, avoided the possibility of “confusion as to who was actually bringing the animal.”¹⁵ Hence references to hand placement in the con-

13. David P. Wright, “The Gesture of Hand Placement in the Hebrew Bible and in Hittite Literature,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106/3 (1986): 439.

14. Wright, “Gesture of Hand Placement,” 439.

15. Wright, “Gesture of Hand Placement,” 439.

text of ritual offerings appear to have served an attributive function, identifying the presenter as the would-be recipient of divine favor.

Presentation in Genesis 27

Having observed the purpose of offerings and hand placement in the context of divine blessings, the reader can now witness the ritual use of these motifs in the Isaac and Jacob narrative contained in Genesis 27. The story of Isaac's blessing and Jacob's deceit contains ritualization in narrative that parallels the scheme of offerings in the cultic sphere. Genesis 27 begins with a statement spoken by Isaac to his son Esau, linking gift giving with blessing: "Hunt me some game then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die" (vv. 3–4). From a Near Eastern perspective, this link between feast and blessing witnessed in Isaac's instructions to Esau immediately places the event in the context of sacred meal imagery.¹⁶ In light of the cultic understanding that offerings influenced divine favor, Isaac's instructions to *first* provide a gift of food prior to the blessing illustrates the account's reliance upon the themes connected with biblical accounts of ritualization.

In a similar statement, the Deuteronomist instructed Israel to "eat your fill and then bless Yahweh your God for the good land that he has given you" (Deuteronomy 8:10).¹⁷ The importance of the ritual sequence of offering and blessing in Genesis 27 appears through the literary force of repetition:¹⁸

Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, *so that*
I may bless you, before the Lord, before I die. (v. 7)

I have done as you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, *so that*
that you may give me your innermost blessing. (v. 19)

16. For a recent study of this theme, see Daniel Belnap, *Fillets of Fatling and Goblets of Gold: The Use of Meal Events in the Ritual Imagery in the Ugaritic Mythological and Epic Texts* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008).

17. As translated by the author; for a discussion and bibliography of early Jewish texts concerning the practice of following a meal with a recitation of blessings, see Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot: The Commandments and Their Rationale* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 385–87.

18. As translated by the author.

Serve me and let me eat of my son's game *so that* I may give you my innermost blessing. (v. 25)

Understanding the function of the *waw* in these passages as a conjunctive-sequential marker allows for the two independent clauses to function in terms of volitional statements: "eat in order that the blessing may occur."¹⁹

In the context of the account's ritualization, Rebekah's rehearsal of Isaac's speech presented in verse 7 includes a significant addition: "Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, so that I may bless you, *before the Lord*, before I die."²⁰ By placing the blessing and meal offering into a setting that occurs before deity, Rebekah's statement provides an important clue of an intentional effort to invoke a cultic theme directly into the narrative.²¹

Throughout the Hebrew Bible the most frequent attestation of the prepositional phrase יהוה לפני ("before the Lord") appears in cultic/temple contexts.²² Indeed, technically, the prepositional phrase denotes the spatial locale where "the majority of cultic acts take place."²³ As Menahem Haran has observed,

19. See the discussion provided by Bruce K. Waltke and Michael P. O'Connor in *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 650.

20. As translated by the author. In a compelling statement, Robert Alter explains the distinction between Isaac's original speech and Rebekah's rehearsal of the address as an act "heightening the sense of the sacred and irrevocable character of the blessing she wants Jacob to steal." *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 138.

21. See Hermann Gunkel, for example, who suggests that the phrase *before the Lord* signifies that "a sacrificial meal seems originally to have been involved here at which the deity is cited," in Mark E. Biddle, trans., *Genesis* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 302. In contrast see Westermann, who suggests that the phrase יהוה לפני is a later addition intended as a balance between the narrative and the pronouncements. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 438.

22. For an analysis of the term יהוה לפני, see Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into the Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 26; M. D. Fowler, "The Meaning of *lipne* YHWH in the OT," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99 (1987): 384–90.

23. Heinz-Josef Simian-Yofre, "פניו," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 11:609.

Any cultic activity to which the biblical text applies the formula “before the Lord” can be considered an indication of the existence of a temple at the site, since this expression stems from the basic conception of the temple as a divine dwelling-place and actually belongs to the temple’s technical terminology.²⁴

Though the account does not specify that the blessing ritual took place at a literal temple, the attestation of the phrase *before the Lord* suggests that the act of hunting and meal presentation draws upon temple ideology associated with sacrificial meals. This connection between sacred ritual and the act of hunting reflects the biblical description of Nimrod as a mighty hunter “before the Lord” (Genesis 10:9). Combining the two stories in Genesis strengthens the theme of cultic ritualization underlying Rebekah’s statement.

In a recent analysis of the Nimrod tradition, Yigal Levin has illustrated that the geographic context for Genesis 10:8–12 derives from Mesopotamia.²⁵ Levin argues that the biblical Nimrod appears modeled after combined traditions concerning Sargon of Akkad and his grandson, Naram-Sin.²⁶ If correct, Levin’s theory would provide an intriguing Mesopotamian connection between Esau and Nimrod, the mighty hunters “before the Lord.” The biblical identification of Nimrod as a mighty hunter who performed his slayings with deity’s approval parallels the Mesopotamian view concerning kings as hunters performing a sacral act. “The gods Ninurta and Nergal, who love my priesthood,” proclaimed the Neo-Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, “gave to me the wild beasts and commanded me to hunt.”²⁷ Hence, the ritualization in Genesis 27, which presents Isaac as the one who commands Esau to hunt and then provide him with a feast prior to receiving a blessing,

24. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel*, 26.

25. Yigal Levin, “Nimrod the Mighty, King of Kish, King of Sumer and Akkad,” *Vetus Testamentum* 52 (2002): 350–66.

26. In contrast to this suggestion, see Ignazio M. Ceccherelli, “Nimrod, primo re ‘universale’ della storia,” *Bibbia e Oriente* 36 (1994): 25–39. Ceccherelli argues that Nimrod’s connection with hunting may reflect a remembrance of the role of primitive rulers, as well as a fear of powerful kings destroying their enemies.

27. Annals: Aššur Clay Tablets (2.113B: iv 40–44), as translated by K. Lawson Jr. in William W. Hallo, *The Context of Scripture: Volume 2 Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 265.

may reflect not only the general Near Eastern perspective concerning meal offerings, but at a basic, historical level, the Mesopotamian view of the hunting kings performing sacral acts commissioned by the gods.

In addition to the actual meal imagery in Genesis 27, the story of Jacob's blessing presents supplementary allusions to elements associated with a ritual offering presented to deity. In the blessing account, the author states that Isaac "smelled [Jacob's] clothes and he blessed him, saying, 'Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the Lord has blessed'" (v. 27). Though the reference to the pleasing smell emitted by the clothes worn by Jacob carries a very practical purpose in terms of the account, the language in verse 27 provides an additional link with sacrificial imagery. The text employs the use of the cognate accusative whereby the third person masculine singular *hiphil* verb and the direct object share the same trilateral root, *rwḥ*; hence, וירח את-ריח ("he smelled the smell").

In the Bible, the closest grammatical parallel to this phrase appears in Genesis 8:21, which describes the pleasing smell of the sacrificial meal presented by Noah to God, an act which like the *smelling* in Genesis 27 precedes the bestowal of a blessing: וירח יהוה את-ריח ("The Lord smelled the smell").²⁸ The direct relationship between food and blessing in Genesis 27 parallels the Jacob and Esau episode featured in Genesis 25. As a sign of the coherent juxtaposition of these two narratives, the term בכרה ("rights of the firstborn") in Genesis 25 appears as an anagram of ברכה meaning "blessing" in Genesis 27.²⁹ When Esau in chapter 25 requested food from his younger sibling, Jacob responded, "first sell me your birthright" (בכרה; v. 31). The account concludes by stating that "Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright" (בכרה; v. 34). Like Genesis 27, the story portrayed in Genesis 25 presents a lucid example of an individual feeding a human superior in an effort to acquire a sacred

28. See also Leviticus 26:31 KJV: "And I will make your cities waste, and bring your sanctuaries unto desolation, and I will not smell the savour of your sweet odours," emphasis added.

29. For a discussion of בכרה as an anagram, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1994), 178.

gift. Therefore, the common denominator in both episodes presenting Jacob as the usurper of favor is the presentation of food.

The Ritual Exchange of Clothing

Prior to the blessing, the narrative presents an example of a physical gesture that held considerable meaning in biblical accounts featuring ritualization: “Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were in her house, and put them on her younger son Jacob” (Genesis 27:15).³⁰ This statement presupposes that dressing for the occasion was “appropriate to the act of blessing and expected by the father, and is an important attestation that specifically defined events in the life of the family [were] festal celebrations.”³¹ Though the term כִּימָר (“garment”) in verse 15 typically refers to general clothing, the word can appear as a designation for sacred attire used specifically in the context of temple-related performances (see, for example, Exodus 28:2).³²

In the story of Jacob’s blessing, clothing seems to serve a symbolic purpose. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, an individual’s persona often appears as an extension of his clothing.³³ Thus Jacob’s act of assuming Esau’s position by wearing his raiment is not unlike the episode recorded in 1 Samuel 18 where David assumes the persona of the political heir through a similar ritual exchange:

Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. (1 Samuel 18:3–4)³⁴

Since the narrative commences with a statement about Isaac’s blindness, Jacob’s act of vesting himself in Esau’s apparel seems to have served a purely ritual function (Genesis 27:1). This act stands in stark contrast with Jacob’s subsequent performance of donning

30. As translated by the author.

31. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 439.

32. See Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1:108.

33. Important examples include, but are not limited to, Genesis 3:21; Exodus 28; and Ezekiel 16:8.

34. As translated by the author.

animal skin, a gesture that served an obvious practical function in verse 23, wherein the author notes, “[Isaac] did not recognize [Jacob] because his hands were hairy like those of his brother.” The symbolic use of clothing in Genesis 27 corresponds with the observation that ritual is largely, if not exclusively, concerned with actions performed by and upon the body.³⁵

The Blessing Ritual

The formal blessing ritual begins in verse 24 with identification of the supplicant. Isaac begins the process with the question “Are you really my son Esau?” to which Jacob responds, “I am.” Question-and-answer successions frequently appear in ritual settings. For example, in the obvious cultic *Sitz im Leben* preserved in Psalm 24, the inquiry is made, “who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place,” to which an unnamed speaker responds, “He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken a false oath by My life or sworn *deceitfully* [למרמה] he shall carry away a *blessing* [ברכה] from the Lord” (Psalm 24:3–5).³⁶ However, in direct contrast to this question-and-answer session presented in the biblical psalm, the ritual action taken by Jacob presents an alternative possibility: “[Isaac] said ‘Your brother came *deceitfully* [במרמה] and he took your blessing [ברכתך] away’” (Genesis 27:35).³⁷ Hence, the account illustrates that ritual, even when performed *במרמה* (“in deceit”), carries efficacy, or the ability to secure a *ברכה* (“blessing”).

Following the initial act of identifying the supplicant, the ritual continues in Genesis 27 with the presentation of food: “[Isaac] said, ‘Serve me and let me eat of my son’s game that I may give you my innermost blessing.’ So he served him and he ate, and he brought him wine and he drank” (v. 25). The meal is then followed by an act of physical contact between the participants (vv. 26–27a). The kiss, which serves in this context as a gesture of approach, constitutes a preliminary per-

35. See Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 31.

36. For an analysis of the cultic background generally associated with this psalm, see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 310–16.

37. As translated by the author.

formance prior to the actual blessing presented in verses 28–29. At the commencement of Isaac’s blessing, the author introduces the ritual performance with a repetition of the statement first expressed in verse 23, ויברכהו (“he blessed him”).

This literary example of *inclusio* provides a resumption that effectively frames the account’s preparatory rituals prior to the actual blessing. As Claus Westermann notes, “Whereas the ויברכהו at the end of verse 23 introduces the blessing ritual as a whole, [in verse 27] it introduces the blessing pronouncement, hence ויברכהו ויאמר [he blessed him then he said].”³⁸ As illustrated through this reading, ritualization provides the literary means whereby Jacob could assume the rights and privileges associated with the important issue of birthright in the biblical traditions.

Hand Placement in Genesis 27

In view of the underlying ritualization featured so prominently throughout Genesis 27, the issue of hand placement witnessed in the Jacob narratives provides an additional attestation of the ritual performances associated with the cultic sphere. Though Jacob’s mother, Rebekah, actually prepared the offering for her husband, she insured that the benefits of presentation would be given solely to Jacob through an attributive gesture with clear ritual undertones: “She placed the dish and the bread that she had prepared *in the hand* [ביד] of Jacob her son” (v. 17). By presenting the offering *in his hand*, Jacob performed an act similar to gestures specifically attested in the biblical cult: “When any of you presents an offering . . . he shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, that it may be acceptable *in his behalf*” (Leviticus 1:1, 4). Evidence that the author of Genesis 27 recognized the cultic undertones of this gesture appears later in the Jacob cycle through the description of the Patriarch’s attempt to placate Esau through a bestowal of a *minḥāh* “gift/offering”:

Now I pray you: if you would do this favor, accept *my gift*
[מנחת] *from my hand* [בידי] for to see your face is like seeing

38. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 440.

the face of God, and you have received me favorably. Please accept my present, which has been brought to you, for God has favored me and I have plenty. (Genesis 33:10–11)

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the technical term *מִנְחָה* (*minḥāh*) carries both the connotation of tribute and religious offering.³⁹ In ritual contexts, *minḥāh* frequently appears as a technical designation for a food offering. Heinz-Josef Fabry states that “the *minḥā* constitutes the high point of the sacrificial ritual, since it insures that God is able to smell the pleasing fragrance of the offering.”⁴⁰ As a theological concept, the expression seems to derive from an anthropometaphorical context. Baruch Levine suggests:

Like many names given to sacrifices, the term *minḥāh* was appropriated by Priestly writers from the administrative vocabulary because it effectively expressed the subservient relationship of the worshiper toward God. At the same time, it conveyed the duty of the worshiper to present gifts to God, often in the form of sacrifices.⁴¹

In the same way that Israelites in the cultic sphere could appease deity through the act of gift giving *from their hands*, Jacob first obtained Isaac’s blessing and then Esau’s forgiveness via a similar act.

Recognizing the ritualization of hand placement in Genesis 27 increases the narrative drama in verse 22 when Isaac with some degree of apparent recognition declares: “The voice is Jacob’s but the *hands* are the *hands* of Esau.” Significantly, the author returns to the attributive value of hand placement at the conclusion of the episode: “But [Isaac] did not recognize [Jacob], for his *hands* were hairy like the *hands* of Esau his brother, so he blessed him” (v. 23). This passage provides strong textual evidence for the ritual link between the attributive value of hand placement and the bestowal of blessing, a suggestion that is not unlike that expressed by M. Malul in his legalistic analy-

39. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2:601–2.

40. Heinz-Josef Fabry, “מִנְחָה,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 8:417.

41. Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 9.

sis of עֶקֶב (“heel”) throughout the Jacob story. Through comparative analysis with Mesopotamian rituals, Malul has suggested that in the Jacob narratives עֶקֶב (“heel”) as both a noun and a verb “echoes the known picturesque idiom or legal symbolic act of planting one’s foot as a symbol of assuming a certain status and thereby acquiring a piece of property.”⁴² In a comparable way, hand placement held ritual overtones in the story of Jacob’s succession. By ritually presenting an offering *from his hand*, Jacob received the patriarchal blessing.

Theoretical Consideration of Ritual

As noted in the commencement of this study, ritual may assist those of a lesser status to accomplish their objectives that appear in opposition to the desires of the powerful. The story of Jacob’s deception in Genesis 27 presents an elaborate variant of the biblical birthright tradition.⁴³ Jacob himself appears later in Genesis using descriptive terminology that emphasizes the special status of the firstborn: “Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the first fruit of my vigor, exceeding in rank and exceeding in honor” (Genesis 49:3). The later Deuteronomic legal material provides evidence that at some point in Israelite society, firstborn males received a double share of inheritance:

If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, but the first-born is the son of the unloved one when he will his property to his sons, he may not treat as first-born the son of the loved one in disregard of the son of the unloved one who is older. Instead, he must accept the first-born, the son of the unloved one, and allot to him a double portion of all he possesses; since he is the first fruit of his vigor, the birthright is his due. (Deuteronomy 21:15–17)

42. Malul, “‘Āqēb ‘Heel’ and ‘āqab ‘To Supplant,’” 203.

43. For a recent analysis of this theme in the Hebrew Bible, see Gary N. Knoppers, “The Preferential Status of the Eldest Son Revoked?” in *Rethinking the Foundations: Historiography in the Ancient World and in the Bible, Essays in Honour of John Van Seters*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie, Thomas Römer, and Hans H. Schmid (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 115–26.

In Genesis 27, Jacob's deceptive statement "I am . . . your firstborn" clearly underscores the issue of inheritance that provides the narrative framework for the account (v. 19). As such, Jacob's narrative "stands out as clearly different from those in the Abraham cycle: the tension is not the result of a natural phenomenon (like famine or a wife's barrenness) but of the action of a person who intervenes in an established course of events."⁴⁴ With its reference to the presentation of food and hand placement, the story of Jacob's blessing demonstrates one of the basic motifs attested in accounts featuring ritualization. Ritual often provides a means whereby an individual of an inferior status may accomplish his objectives that are incongruent with the desires of more influential individuals.

Conclusion

Ritualization in narrative provides an important tool for the interpreter of ancient texts. As a method for identifying culturally specific actions that conveyed important meaning, the study of ritual in the Hebrew Bible demonstrates that traditions such as Jacob's blessing often contain significant ritual gestures. Through an analogy with their own cultic experience, an ancient Israelite audience would have presumably recognized, even if only at a subconscious level, the value of Jacob's performances as an effort to accomplish his own agenda by presenting a gift from his hand to a socially superior individual. This reading of the text is possible through an awareness of ritual values in the narrative and cultic traditions of biblical Israel.

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44. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 434–35.