

The Narrative of Jacob's Birthright: a Lie or a Fulfillment?

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ABSTRACT

The story of Jacob acquiring birthright is one of the most popular stories in the Old Testament. This story became important and popular even more so because it was from there that the forerunner of Jacob was chosen as one of the patriarchs from whom the nation of Israel was born. This story became popular also because the right and blessing was obtained Jacob in a fraudulent way. With this writing, the author wants to dig deeper into what the real intention behind the lies Jacob committed with Rebekah his mother. Is it really a lie or is there some other purpose? So what about God's role in the story? To find the thing in question, the author used two methods in the preparation of this article. The two methods are the qualitative method and the scripture interpretation method with the narrative method. From the results of the study, the author concludes that apart from the motive of lies, it turns out that the blessings and birthrights obtained by Jacob are also one of the fulfillment of the word that God conveyed to Rebekah.

ABSTRAK

Kisah Hak Kelahiran Yakub: Kebohongan atau Penggenapan? Kisah Yakub memperoleh hak kesulungan merupakan salah satu kisah yang populer dalam Perjanjian Lama. Kisah ini menjadi penting dan populer lebih-lebih karena dari sanalah cikal bakal Yakub terpilih sebagai salah satu bapa bangsa yang dari padanya lahir bangsa Israel. Kisah ini menjadi populer juga karena hak dan berkat itu diperoleh Yakub dengan cara yang curang. Dengan tulisan ini, penulis hendak menggali lebih dalam apa maksud sebenarnya di balik kebohongan yang dilakukan Yakub bersama Ribka ibunya. Apakah hal itu benar-benar sebuah kebohongan semata atau adakah tujuan lain? Lalu bagaimana dengan peran Allah dalam kisah itu? Untuk menemukan hal yang dimaksud, penulis menggunakan dua metode dalam penyusunan artikel ini. Kedua metode itu adalah metode kualitatif dan metode tafsir kitab suci dengan metode naratif. Dari hasil penelitian, penulis menyimpulkan bahwa selain dari motif kebohongan, ternyata berkat dan kesulungan yang diperoleh Yakub juga merupakan salah satu penggenapan firman yang disampaikan Allah kepada Ribka.

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Introduction

A nation is formed because there is a cause and effect, it can be traced from where the nation came from. As is the case with the nation of Israel, this nation located in the Middle East cannot be separated from a great figure name Jacob (Hensel, 2021). For people outside Israel, Jacob is not a special figure. But for the Israelites themselves, Jacob was one of the three patriarchs who had a very important role in the history of the formation of the people of Israel. He had a less than stellar life story, but became a chosen and great nation in the history of salvation. This shows that God's way or will, enables anything to happen. All things are possible, if God is willing.

The formation of the nation of Israel has a very close connection with Jacob starting from the story where he obtained the birthright from Isaac. The birthright that he obtained was actually not in accordance with the tradition where he lived. He could have this right because of the great role of his mother, Rebekah. It was Rebekah who organized all the plans, so that Jacob could obtain the birthright from his brother Esau. It is this concept that influences the views and thoughts of many people about the story of the blessing and birthright obtained by Jacob is a lie (Bloomendal, 2019).

The urgency of this research lies in its attempt to address a crucial tension within the theological and narrative understanding of the early history of Israel. The story of Jacob's birthright challenges readers to interpret whether divine providence works through human deceit, or whether what appears as deception actually reveals a deeper fulfillment of God's sovereign will. In an era where biblical narratives are often seen merely as moralistic tales or historical records, re-examining the complexities of Jacob's story becomes critical for a fuller grasp of the theological dimensions of covenant, election, and divine promise. Furthermore, understanding this story has broader implications for how faith communities today interpret issues of justice, legitimacy, and divine purpose amid human imperfection. Hence, there is a pressing need for nuanced research that does not oversimplify but rather seeks to unravel the theological depth behind the narrative of Jacob's birthright.

Several previous studies have explored aspects of this topic, though each with a distinct focus. First, Bloomendal (2019) offers a critical-literary analysis emphasizing the deceptive elements in Jacob's acquisition of the blessing, interpreting it largely as a human manipulation of divine will. Bloomendal argues that human agency, particularly through Rebekah's initiative, plays a predominant role, with divine endorsement appearing almost as an afterthought. Second, Hamilton (1995) in his commentary on Genesis presents a more theological reading, suggesting that while the methods were questionable, the outcome was consistent with divine election and promise. For Hamilton, God's sovereignty is the framework through which the story must be understood, and human deception is ultimately woven into divine purposes. Third, Fretheim (2008) brings a relational theology perspective, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between God and the characters. He proposes that God's seeming approval of Jacob's actions points to a divine willingness to work within the flawed realities of human decisions rather than endorsing deceit itself. Compared to Bloomendal and Hamilton, Fretheim focuses more on the ongoing relational development between God and humanity rather than on strict moral judgment.

Thus, while Bloomendal emphasizes human manipulation, Hamilton stresses divine sovereignty, and Fretheim highlights relational engagement, this article seeks to synthesize these insights. It aims to investigate whether the narrative of Jacob's birthright should ultimately be read not merely as a human lie or as mechanical divine predestination, but rather as the mysterious fulfillment of God's promise through unexpected and broken human means.

Through this article, the author attempts to discover the underlying reason behind Jacob and Rebekah's mother's lies in the narrative of Jacob's blessing and birthright. Is the story of the blessing and birthright in the Book of Genesis, especially in chapter 27 and its related chapters, only based on the deception of Jacob and Rebekah or is there another purpose. Why, then, did God also seem to

approve of the lie, and in the end of the story, Jacob received God's blessing, so that a great nation was born from Jacob instead of Esau who, according to tradition, was entitled to it.

Method

The method used in this article is qualitative textual analysis, specifically using narrative interpretation. Qualitative research in biblical studies focuses on interpreting descriptive data from written texts, aiming to uncover theological and literary meanings within the text. Data are collected from the Bible, as well as from secondary sources such as books, journals, and articles. The data are analyzed inductively, allowing insights to emerge from the close reading of the narrative rather than imposing external theories. Narrative analysis is employed to interpret the story of Jacob's birthright in its final form, paying attention to the structure, characters, plot development, and theological motifs as they appear in the present canonical text.

Results and Discussion

The meaning and function of the firstborn in Jewish tradition. Some traditions around the world have nicknames for fathers and mothers who have children. The nickname is based on the name of the first child. For example, if the name of the first child in a family is Eko, people will automatically call their parents as Mr. and Mrs. Eko. This custom is certainly not new in the community because it has been going on for generations. This is actually related to birth order. The well-known terms related to birth order are *sulung* (firstborn) and *bungsu* (youngest). In the KBBI, *sulung* means the first, the very first, or the oldest (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2016). Meanwhile, *youngest* means the last, the youngest. *Sulung* and *bungsu* literally refer to the terms older brother (first) and younger brother (last). The difference in birth order determines the term of call or designation for someone in the family. The purpose of the designation is not only for convenience, but also contains elements of level, hierarchy, or differences between one person and another.

The use of the word firstborn is found in the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The usage has its own meaning depending on the context in which the word is used. In Hebrew, the word for firstborn is *Bekhor* which means to come quickly (Alkitab Sabda, 2015). The word quick to come is defined as someone who comes first or early. The use of this word in the Old Testament Scriptures is interpreted as the beginning of might (the firstborn on the father's side) (cf. Gen. 49:3; Deut. 21:17). The firstborn son has the second highest rank after his father. In Israelite tradition, the firstborn son inherited twice as much as his younger siblings (Souvay, 2023). It is no wonder that the firstborn has a special place and the most important role in Jewish tradition. There is only one firstborn in a family even if the father is polygamous and has children from other wives. The recognized firstborn is the one born first to the first wife. This tradition applies not only to ordinary people but also to royalty. The eldest son in the kingdom is his father's successor in the field of government. The position of the firstborn is very strategic in its history, even today, the firstborn is seen as the heir to the property of the parent (Lembong et al., 2023).

The use of the term firstborn and its meanings are numerous in the Old Testament. The firstborn privilege itself applies not only to humans but also to animals that must be sacrificed as offerings (Flynn, 2018). This commandment is clearly seen in Exodus 13:2 which reads "Sanctify for Me all the firstborn, all those born first from the womb in Israel, both in man and in animals; I am their owner". Firstborn has a special meaning and its use on humans or animals is nuanced. The animal that is to be sacrificed is the firstborn, meaning that it is truly delicious, ripe, best, and of undoubted quality. The distinctive nature of the firstborn makes it so special and sets it apart from others.

Firstborn sons receive many privileges that are undeniably true. The existence of the firstborn itself in the Old Testament tradition is inseparable from the birthright as found in Gen 25:29-39 which is reaffirmed in Gen 27:1-40. In the structure of Israelite life, the child who obtained the birthright was

entitled to receive double inheritance and ascend the throne. The law of heirship was highly emphasized by the ancient Israelites (Sylva, 2018). They all agreed that the birthright priority should be given to the eldest son. When examined closely, Esau was legally more entitled to his father's blessing than Jacob (Gen 27:36). The firstborn son had a direct right to inheritance. All firstborns, whether animal or human, were believed to be God's property which, if not offered, had to be redeemed. Esau had despised the birthright, in contrast to Jacob who considered the birthright important (cf. Gen 25:31-34). This may indicate the beginning of Jacob's special position before God (Schwart, 2019).

Birthright comes from the Hebrew *Bekhorah*, which means the right that belongs to the firstborn. It consists of leadership in worship and family, a double share in inheritance, and the right to the covenant blessings that God promised to Abraham (cf. Genesis 15) (Agino, 2023). More broadly, when it comes to the New Testament, the firstborn refers to Jesus Christ, who is the firstborn of all creation, and the firstborn who rose from the grave, as the apostle Paul said, "But the truth is, that Christ was raised from the dead as the firstborn of those who have died" (1 Cor 15:20). This verse has the same nuance as Colossians 1:18 "I am the head of the body, which is the church. He is the firstborn, the first to rise from the dead, so that he may have the preeminence in all things". Let the birthright found in the story of Esau and Jacob not be confused or contrasted with the notion of birthright in the New Testament. The birthright in the Old Testament is given a new meaning in the New Testament. There is continuity and discontinuity regarding the notion of the firstborn in the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament defines the firstborn as someone who was born first (not referring to a particular character). Whereas in the New Testament, the word firstborn is used only for Jesus as the messenger and Son of the Father (Teplinsky, 2013).

The story of Jacob's Birthright. Man's journey in this world always leads to God. From being born, growing and developing, to returning to God is part of the human journey. Since birth, humans have longed to be with God. This desire is evident from daily experiences. Consciously or unconsciously, humans involve God in every activity they do. Certain events, when realized, can be interpreted as part of the experience of God's presence and blessing (Martasudjita, 2003). Sad or happy experiences are part of human reflection on God who is always present.

Every person has their own story in their family life. Whether the story of being the eldest child, or the youngest child. In that story too, it is undeniable that there must be many ups and downs in the process of living and going through it. It was the same with what Jacob experienced. Jacob's position in the family was actually as the youngest child. While the firstborn was Esau. Because of Esau's position as the firstborn, the birthright should have automatically fallen to Esau. But because of a strong desire to seize the birthright, Jacob began to devise a plan so that Esau's birthright would fall to him. Indeed, his plan and cunning tactics went well without any obstacles. Jacob used the right opportunity, when Esau was starving. Esau himself, did not mind at all when he gave up his birthright just because of the momentary pleasure offered to him (Sinaga et al., 2022). Jacob struggled to get the birthright, because indeed the birthright was very meaningful at that time. Jacob got the birthright by lying or deceiving his father. His brother's birthright was taken away in a bad way. This attitude reminds us of the human tendency to do anything to get what he wants. Everything is done to achieve the goal, even with bad actions, such as lying, stealing, and even killing.

The birthright for the people of Israel has a very important position because, in addition to the right that a person will get double the inheritance from his father, he also gets high respect and appreciation. But if his attitude and behavior did not reflect his birthright, then the right could at any time be revoked or invalidated. Such was the case with Esau, he did not value his birthright. Esau easily surrendered his birthright to Jacob just for fun. For the sake of getting a bowl of red bean porridge, he gave up the most precious possession in his life forever and gave it to Jacob (Balang dan Babuno, 2021). Although in the end this situation brought grudges and big problems between the two, this event could not be separated from the intervention of Rebekah her mother. It was Rebekah who devised the plan

until Isaac laid his hands on her and gave Jacob the blessing. All this could happen because of the conspiracy between Jacob and Rebekah his mother. But this general view only goes as far as the lie without delving deeper into what was really behind the lie. Was it then really just a lie or a fulfillment that wanted to be realized. Interestingly, the conspiracy bore sweet fruit for Jacob, becoming a great nation (Pardosi, 2021).

Jacob was labeled as a deceiver for deceiving his father and brother Esau. As a result, he fell into sin. In addition, he was known as a cunning man for using Esau's hunger to gain the birthright, as well as using the opportunity of his father Isaac's old age and blindness to gain blessings. Through the efforts and tricks of Jacob and Rebekah his mother, their best-laid plans were realized and indeed Jacob got his blessing. But it should be noted that the actions taken by Rebekah and Jacob were not merely out of lust and thirst for the position of the birthright. Rebekah was driven to realize the words she received from God when she was pregnant (Layuk, 2024). She tried to realize those words in her own way. As a result of her actions, she did not receive a good and quiet life, but a life filled with suffering, fear and guilt. There was remorse from Jacob and also from Rebekah. They regretted what they had done.

Jacob, realizing that Esau and Isaac knew what he had done, fled from his family for fear of being killed by Esau (cf. Gen 27:42). Armed with only one stick, he had to travel hundreds of miles across a land inhabited by cruel and savage tribes. In remorse and fear, he tried to avoid people so that his angry brother would not find him. He was afraid that he would lose the blessing that God had intended for him forever (Boediman, 2019). He fled from the land he was living in and went to the house of his uncle Laban, the brother of his mother Rebekah. Jacob was a servant for 14 years in his uncle's house (Gen 29:18,27). With this long period of time, Jacob had a life of his own, as did Esau. Nonetheless, the guilt within Jacob had not gone away. The situation that Jacob faced while not yet reconciled with Esau, became an atmosphere that gripped his life for years (Sinaga et al., 2022).

God's Role and Presence in the Story of Jacob and Esau. The role and presence of Yahweh or God is one of the special and special points that is often highlighted in many stories in the Old Testament, especially related to salvation history. The image of Yahweh or God in the Old Testament is a God who is still open to humans in "space and time"; humans still have the ability to relate directly to Yahweh, even though they are no longer face to face as before the fall of man in sin (Baker, 2006). Yahweh relates to humans through communication that can be captured by human senses and two of them are "direct" communication through dreams and words or words or Propotional Revelation (*Pengantar Perjanjian Lama I*, 1999). The "direct" word or words here can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, that God or Yahweh actually speaks directly to a person or group of people without any intermediary, and secondly that He speaks or speaks to a person or group of people through an intermediary, namely His chosen messenger or person. The former is the model most commonly found in the Old Testament specifically in the time or period of creation and the patriarchs while the latter is more commonly found in the period of the prophets, where God only speaks through their intermediaries (Onyinah, 2022).

God's presence in human life, especially in the context of the Old Testament, is also evident when God takes the initiative to reveal Himself. One of the signs or proofs of God's presence is when He speaks or speaks, and there are humans who receive the word or word from Him. This is also what can be found in the story of Jacob and Esau and especially in the story of Jacob obtaining the birthright. In this interesting narrative, Yahweh's presence is less frequent when compared to the flow of the other two patriarchs of Israel, especially Abraham (Kohn, 2015). In Jacob's story, God is present for the first time when He speaks to Rebekah, who asks for guidance on the pain of her pregnancy in chapter 25 (cf. Gen 25:22-23). Yahweh's presence brings not only the answer to Rebekah's pain that she is pregnant with twins, but also implies a very important message that Rebekah may also be aware of, implicitly about the fate or future of the two children she is carrying. In the following verses, specifically in chapter

26, God's presence is still mentioned. But His presence is not closely related to the narrative of either Jacob or the story of his birthright, but rather to Isaac and the king of the Philistines and how he acquired land near the land of the Philistines.

Chapter 27 is the heart of the story of Jacob's blessing and how he gained the birthright that was traditionally reserved for his brother Esau. It is interesting that in this part of the story, which is considered the most crucial, the reader only finds four characters, namely Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob, and does not find the presence and role of God. In fact, in this part, as revealed in the text, there is a kind of crime in the form of lies committed by Rebekah and Jacob in order to obtain the birthright for Jacob. Aware of the irregularities that arise in this story, some questions may arise in the mind of the reader such as; where was God's role at that time? Shouldn't He have acted or at least spoken when Rebekah and Jacob cheated Esau and Isaac? Or was there an ulterior motive for God's absence? God, then, reappears in the next chapter, chapter 28, where God's presence is described as He speaks through a dream to Jacob. The interesting thing to note in this section is that God seems to have approved of the blessing that Jacob had received through his mother's deception, and in his presence. God repeats to Jacob the same promise that he made to Abraham and Isaac. (cf. Gen 15:5-6; 26:24; 28:13-15). This was the origin of Jacob's title as one of the fathers of the nation of Israel.

In many Old Testament stories, God or Yahweh often acted directly and punished people who were closely related to Him when they did wrong, evil or deviated from Him. The most famous example is the story of Cain. Cain was punished by Yahweh after he killed his brother Abel and also cheated Yahweh by lying to him (see Gen 4). In line with this, focusing on Cain's lie, we can ask in relation to the story of Jacob; why didn't God or Yahweh also act immediately after the cheating and lying in the story, and even more so that Isaac after knowing the lie of both of them, still let it happen?

In a rather pessimistic, we can say that God's absence in the narrative of Jacob's story shows that He does not care about the events that took place. God also seems not to want to interfere with the affairs of human blessings and birthright. For God, it was Isaac's business and freedom to give whom the birthright belonged to and moreover it was impossible for Jacob to withdraw or cancel the blessing as he says in Gen. 27:37 (Hutahaean, 2021). For this reason, the answer to the question of why God did not act immediately can simply be answered. But if this is the case, it seems as if we are limiting God's role and omnipotence over human life and at the same time doubting God's greatest plan through Jacob later on. Can we then conclude that God is actually doing something bigger through the events in the story of Jacob's blessing? I think this is the right choice to explain the reason for God's absence. God is indeed absent as stated in the text, but He is still working and playing a big role, it's just that how His role and intervention in Jacob's narrative is not apparent. He works in his absence; in ways that are beyond human expectation and in ways in which his will prevails (Walton, 1998) He is also a God who works through people or characters with whom he has a relationship, in this case we agree that the character is Rebekah. The provisional view we offer is that Rebekah, not in her role to judge, became God's "right hand" to carry out God's plan for Jacob, only for it to be done in an unjust way of cheating and lying, and that God allowed it to happen.

Lie or Fulfillment. The story of Jacob winning the birthright is a difficult puzzle to solve. There is an impression that the blessing given to Jacob was due to his complicity in the ruse hatched by his mother, Rebekah, to give Jacob the birthright. While this may seem like it, it does not mean that God was being deceived by this act. Many people wonder how God was involved in this. Why would God allow/justify this deception? It is worth noting that the Bible itself states that God wanted Jacob, the youngest, to lead Esau, the firstborn. But how the prophecy came to pass is not explained in the Bible. This caused many problems, and even in this situation, people tried to find the root of the problem, making various hypotheses and trying to find answers.

A widely used hypothesis to solve the above problem is that what Rebekah and Jacob did was a lie. On the one hand, we might be able to justify this. But on the other hand, which is a bigger portion,

the author tries to see from the other side, namely by providing a hypothesis that Jacob obtained the birthright in accordance with the prophecy over him. The prophecy can be found in God's own words to Rebekah: "Two nations shall be in your womb, and two tribes shall spring up out of your womb; the one shall be stronger than the other, and the older son shall be a servant to the younger" (Gen 25:23). It is important to emphasize here that the last phrase of God's words is between "the old will be a servant to the young". It is clear that this phrase refers to the future of Esau and Jacob, namely that the older son, Esau, would become a servant to the younger son, Jacob. Jacob had been appointed by God to be the leader over his own brother. But does this phrase also mean that Esau's birthright should be taken over by Jacob? In this context we would have to agree that by being appointed as the "leader" over his brother, Jacob was entitled to the birthright. But what is much higher is not about the birthright but God's plan that has been determined upon Jacob, namely to be the leader and patriarch of Israel in the future. So, the hypothesis that the author offers on this issue is that the blessing and birthright that Jacob received on the larger side was a fulfillment.

If we agree that the issue in Jacob's narrative is a fulfillment, then we are faced with the question: why did the fulfillment have to happen through deceitful means? Answering this question, the author proposes two reasons why it could happen: Rebekah's impatience and Jacob's strong desire. Rebekah, in Jacob's birthright narrative, can be positioned as the central character because, firstly, she is the "agent" who designed the narrative. Without her help, it would have been impossible for Jacob to get what he wanted. Secondly, it was only to Rebekah that God spoke the words that contained the prophetic message about Jacob. It was this second reason that became the impetus for Rebekah, especially since Jacob was the son she loved more, to fulfill the prophecy immediately, she could not wait for God's fulfillment. The strong desire of Jacob himself to get the birthright, so there was a conspiracy between Jacob and his mother, so that he would get the blessing and firstborn rights from his father. It was not only Rebekah who wanted the birthright to go to Jacob, but Jacob himself also had a strong desire for it. This desire arose because it was possible that Rebekah had told her beloved son about the word of God that she had received. It was just a problem for Jacob to get it the easy way from Esau. Therefore, to obtain the birthright, Jacob used a cunning method as mentioned in the second title "The story of Jacob obtaining the birthright" by waiting for a time when Esau was careless. Not only that, he also tried to obtain the blessing from his father that should have belonged to Esau by conspiring with his mother.

Conclusion

The story or narrative of the birthright and blessings that Jacob received from Esau and Isaac so far only echoes the nuance that they were the fruit of a lie between Jacob and Rebekah. On the one hand this can be justified, but on the other hand the author finds that what is more important is not a lie but a fulfillment of the word that God spoke to Rebekah. Rebekah wanted to realize these words, but it was difficult because she had to go against the patriarchal traditions that were strong at that time. On the other hand, the bigger issue concerns the absence and lack of God's role in this very important narrative. This is understandable because God has provided the blessings and rights for Jacob, who was chosen from the womb of his mother. And that is why God seemed to be silent and approving of the act. As for how the word could be realized, it was entirely out of God's control. On the one hand God does have power over man, but on the other hand He also gives man the freedom to act and choose his own path. It was this freedom that Rebekah used to devise a deceitful plan for Jacob to obtain Isaac's blessing, and which Jacob also used to cheat Esau for the birthright. This research offers a new perspective by shifting the focus from the conventional interpretation that centers on deceit, toward a deeper theological reading of the narrative as a fulfillment of divine promise. Unlike many earlier studies that highlight Jacob and Rebekah's actions as primarily unethical or problematic, this study proposes that their actions must be understood in light of God's earlier oracle to Rebekah. By doing so,

the research brings to the surface the complex interplay between divine sovereignty and human freedom. It challenges the binary opposition between "lie" and "truth" and introduces a third possibility: that human actions, though flawed, can participate in the realization of divine purposes. Moreover, it addresses the often-overlooked divine silence in Genesis 27, interpreting it not as divine absence but as a deliberate space that honors human agency within the framework of God's unchanging will. The contribution of this research lies in enriching theological and biblical studies by offering a fresh lens to interpret the Jacob narrative. It advances the understanding of how divine providence operates amid human imperfection, providing a more nuanced model that moves beyond simplistic moral judgments.

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