

Sale of the Birthright – Artwork



Selling the Birthright
Matthias Stom



Mess of Pottage
Circle of Matthias Stom

Sale of the Birthright in Art

Introduction

The stories of Yaakov and Esav rivet the reader as they explore sibling rivalry, love, and rejection. The two oil paintings shown here, "Selling the Birthright" (1640) by Matthias Stom,^[1] and "Esau Sold Jacob his Birthright and the Mess of Pottage", by an unknown member of Stom's artistic circle, both depict the sale of the birthright from Bereshit 25. At first glance, the two images seem very similar. In both, the brothers are positioned around a table, with one seated and the other standing, and they handle the transaction in a darkened room, shrouded in secrecy. On a closer look, though, the two paintings differ in several important details including the cast of characters included in the scene, the age and likeness of the brothers, and the props that accompany them. These differences relate to a number of unanswered questions in the Biblical text.

Contrasting Images

Stom

Stom, a master of chiaroscuro,^[2] effectively plays with lighting, lending the painting an aura of intrigue while illuminating the main characters. A plump Yaakov sits at the table, facing his more slender, bearded, brother. Esav is standing, with one hand grasping his freshly caught rabbit and the other touching the bowl of lentil stew. In between the two, a somewhat masculine looking woman, presumably Rivka, looks on. Though her body is turned toward Esav, she is glancing at Yaakov, her hand gestures mirroring his, as if silently helping to guide the proceedings.

Stom's Circle

"Mess of Pottage" similarly uses the lighting to spotlight the characters, but it focuses exclusively on Yaakov and Esav. The brothers look almost identical and Esav is identifiable only by the slightly reddish tint of his hair and the hunting dog on his right. Here too, Yaakov sits while his twin stands, but Esav is hunched over and there is no game in his hand. The two brothers shake hands to seal the deal while the dish of lentils sits on the table below.

Relationship to the Biblical Text

The artists' choices reflect certain ambiguities in the Biblical text and different possible interpretive stances:

Dying of Hunger?

Stom paints Esav with a dead rabbit in his hand, while the second image portrays Esav standing empty-handed.^[3] Did Esav have other readily available food,^[4] or was his eating from the lentil stew a matter of life

and death? Although Esav tells Yaakov "הֲנִי הוֹלֵךְ לָמוּת", this could mean either that he was literally about to die of hunger,^[5] or that due to his dangerous lifestyle he would likely die before benefitting from his inheritance.^[6] These possibilities lead to very different evaluations of both Yaakov and Esav. Is Yaakov a manipulative schemer taking advantage of his dying brother's dire situation? Or, is Esav simply so impulsive that he is ready to sign away his birthright for a fleeting indulgence? See [Sale of the Birthright](#) for more.

Cast of Characters

Many readers of the text, like the unknown artist in the second picture, assume that the sale took place with just the two brothers present. Stom, however, adds a third character, presumably Rivka. This rendering raises the important issue of whether anyone else besides Yaakov and Esav knew about the deal? Is it possible that Rivka, given her favoring of Yaakov, even played a role in the transaction? This question is particularly relevant in light of the events of Chapter 27. When Rivka plots to transfer the blessing to Yaakov, was she influenced by her knowledge that Yaakov had purchased the birthright and thus deserved the blessing? And what about Yitzchak? When he attempts to bestow his blessing upon Esav, was he aware that Esav had sold the birthright? For more on the relationship between the two episodes, see [Birthright and Blessings](#).

Age of the Brothers

In "Mess of Pottage" the twins are portrayed as young lads, whereas in Stom's painting they appear somewhat older, perhaps in their twenties. Was the sale due to the impetuosity of youth or were the brothers old enough to fully understand the implications of their actions? How many years passed between this incident and the giving of the blessings in chapter 27? The Torah leaves the chronology ambiguous. Immediately before this story it states "וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים", while at the end of the next chapter (26) we read that Esav married at 40. This leaves a large window of time in which the story might have transpired. See [Chronology of Bereshit 25-27](#).

Sealing the Deal

In "Mess of Pottage" the brothers seal their deal with a handshake, the artist's contemporary equivalent of Tanakh's oath. The lentils are still untouched on the table, suggesting, as the simple reading of the text may imply, that the deal was made before the food was provided. In Stom's painting, in contrast, Esav holds a near empty plate, possibly having finished the stew before the negotiations took place. Is there any textual basis for such a possibility?

In fact, the past perfect form of the phrase, "וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֵשָׂו לְחֶם וּנְזִיד עֵדֻשִׁים" may signify that the food was provided before the sale – see [Past Perfect](#).^[7] If so, both the discussion and the price set for the birthright were unconnected to the stew that Yaakov was cooking.^[8] This, of course, has great implications for the way in which one views both Yaakov's and Esav's actions, by allowing for the possibility that a much fairer price was offered. See [Sale of the Birthright](#) for more.

How Red is "אָדָם"?

- "הָאָדָם הָאָדָם הָזֶה" – It is difficult to make out the lentil soup in Stom's image, but in "Mess of Pottage" it is prominently displayed on the table, and is not at all red. In truth, although most assume that "אָדָם" means red, it is possible that in Biblical Hebrew the word might instead refer to a brownish hue. See [אָדָם](#) for elaboration.
- Esav in Stom's painting is dark haired, while in "Mess of Pottage" he is a redhead. This question depends on how one interprets "וַיֵּצֵא הָרֶאשׁוֹן אֶדְמוֹנִי גִלּוֹ". The word "אֶדְמוֹנִי" could refer to red hair or it could connote a ruddiness of skin. And, as above, even if it describes Esav's hair, it might still refer to a shade of brown rather than red.

Look Alike Twins?

While Stom paints the brothers looking nothing alike, the second artist presents them as almost identical. According to the Biblical text, it is clear that Esav was hairy while Yaakov was smooth-skinned, but we are told nothing of their other characteristics such as their build or height. Even the degree to which their voices differed is unclear. In Chapter 27, even though Yitzchak says, "הֲקִל קוֹל יַעֲקֹב", the difference in the sound of their voices is still insufficient for him to conclusively determine that the son before him is indeed Yaakov.

[1] Matthias Stom was a 17th century Dutch painter heavily influenced by the Italian artist Amerighi da Caravaggio.

[2] The term refers to an artistic style which is marked by stark contrasts of light and dark. It comes from the Italian words "chiaro" meaning clear or light and "oscuro" meaning obscure or dark.

[3] In the second painting, the hunting motif is reflected instead through the hunting dog accompanying Esav.

[4] See also below for the possibility that in Stom's rendering, Esav had already partaken from the stew.

[5] This may also depend on how Esav's words "כִּי עָיֵף אָנֹכִי" are interpreted. "עָיֵף" is commonly understood to mean weary, but it can also connote extreme thirst or hunger. Compare [Rashi](#) and [Ibn Ezra](#). Other verses where the word "עָיֵף" seems to mean thirst include [Yeshayahu 29:8](#), [Tehillim 63:2](#), and [Iyyov 22:7](#). See [עָיֵף](#) for a full discussion.

[6] See [Rashbam](#) and [Ibn Ezra](#), and compare with the explanation of [R. Yosef Bekhor Shor](#).

[7] See [HaKetav VeHaKabbalah](#) who adopts this position.

[8] Compare to the approach of [Rashbam](#) who proposes that the birthright was sold for money, and that the meal was merely a ceremony to seal the deal.

Sale of the Birthright in Art Sources

BIBLICAL TEXTS

בראשית כ"ה: כ"ז-ל"ד

(כז) וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֲשׂוֹ אִישׁ יָדַע צִיד אִישׁ שָׂדֵה וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ יָשֵׁב אֲהָלִים. (כח) וַיֵּאָהֵב יַצְחָק אֶת עֲשׂוֹ כִּי צִיד בְּפִיו וְרַבָּקָה אֲהָבָת אֶת יַעֲקֹב. (כט) וַיִּזְדּוּ יַעֲקֹב נָזִיד וַיָּבֵא עֲשׂוֹ מִן הַשָּׂדֵה וְהוּא עֵינִי. (ל) וַיֹּאמֶר עֲשׂוֹ אֶל יַעֲקֹב הַלְעִיטְנִי נָא מִן הָאָדָם הָאָדָם הַזֶּה כִּי עֵינִי אֲנֹכִי עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמוֹ אֶדּוֹם. (לא) וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב מִכָּרָה כִּיֹּס אֶת בְּכֹרְתָךְ לִי. (לב) וַיֹּאמֶר עֲשׂוֹ הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לָמוֹת וְלָמָּה זֶה לִי בְּכֹרָה. (לג) וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב הַשְּׂבָעָה לִי כִּיֹּס וַיִּשְׂבַּע לוֹ וַיִּמְכֹּר אֶת בְּכֹרְתוֹ לְיַעֲקֹב. (לד) וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֲשׂוֹ לֶחֶם וַיִּזְיַד עֲדָשִׁים וַיֹּאכַל וַיִּשְׂתֶּה וַיִּקֶּם וַיִּלְךָ וַיָּבֹז עֲשׂוֹ אֶת הַבְּכֹרָה.

ישעיהו כ"ט: ח'

וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר יַחֲלֵם הָרָעֵב וְהִנֵּה אוֹכֵל וְהַקִּיץ וְרִיקָה נִפְשׁוֹ וְכַאֲשֶׁר יַחֲלֵם הַצָּמָא וְהִנֵּה שֹׁתֵה וְהַקִּיץ וְהִנֵּה עֵינֵי וְנִפְשׁוֹ שׁוֹקֵקָה כִּן יִהְיֶה הַמּוֹן כָּל הַגּוֹיִם הַצְּבָאִים עַל הַר צִיּוֹן.

תהלים ס"ג: ב'

אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵי אֲתָה אֲשַׁחֲרֶךָ צָמְאָה לָךְ נִפְשִׁי כִּמָּה לָךְ בְּשָׂרִי בְּאָרֶץ צִיָּה וְעֵינִי בְּלֵי מַיִם.

איוב כ"ב: ז'

לֹא מַיִם עֵינִי תִשְׁקָה וּמִרְעֵב תִּמְנַע לֶחֶם.

CLASSICAL TEXTS

MEDIEVAL TEXTS

רש"י בראשית כ"ה: כ"ט

והוא עיף – ברציחה, כמה דתימא (ירמיה ד לא) כי עיפה נפשי להורגים.

רשב"ם בראשית כ"ה: ל"ב

הנה אנכי הולך למות – בכל יום אני הולך לצוד חיות ביערים המצויים שם דובים ואריות וחיות רעות ואני

מסוכן למות למה זה [לי] להמתין חלק בכורה לאחר מיתת אבינו. כך פירש אבי הרב רבי מאיר מ"כ. [וזהו] ויבז עשו את הבכורה.

רשב"ם בראשית כ"ה: ל"ג

וימכור את בכורתו – בדמים. ואחר כן ויעקב נתן לעשו וגוי' כמנהג בני אדם לקיום דבר.

אבן עזרא בראשית כ"ה: כ"ט

והוא עיף כטעם, בארץ עיפה (ישעי' ל"ב ב'), רעב וצמא.

אבן עזרא בראשית כ"ה: ל"ב

וטעם הנה אנכי הולך למות שבכל יום ויום הוא מסתכן בעצמו כאשר יצא לצוד שמא יהרגוהו החיות, ויתכן שימות קודם אביו.

ר' יוסף בכור שור בראשית כ"ה: כ"ט-ל'

(כ"ט) והוא עיף – דרך הציידים להיות עייפים ורודפים אחרי החיות ופעמים טועים ביער שלשה וארבעה ימים ויגיע להם רעב וצמא, וכן היה לעשו עד שהגיע לשערי מות ולא היה [בו כת] להשיב ידו אל פיו, כמו שהוא אומר. (ל) הלעיטני נא – כלומר שפוך לתוך פי ואני אוכל, שאיני יכול אפילו לתת לתוך פי ולא ללכת אל בית אבי, אך מצא את יעקב אחרי הצאן במרעה, רחוק מן העיר, ואם היה האוכל מתמהמה לו היה מיד מת.

MODERN TEXTS

הכתב והקבלה בראשית כ"ה: ל"ד

ויעקב נתן – יש בלשונינו שני מילי פעל עבר, עבר מסודר והוא פעל עתיד המהופך לעבר ע"י וא"ו פתוחה בתחילתו, ואז השם אחר הפעל, ועבר מוקדם והוא פעל הנהוג על משמרתו ואז השם קודם הפעל... על פי הכלל המאומת הזה, ממה שלא אמר הכתוב ויתן יעקב לעשו להורות על שמירת סדר הענין, כי אז היה משמעו שאחר שבועת עשו על קיום המכירה נתן לו יעקב הלחם ונזיד העדשים, כי אמנם להורות על היפוכו אמר ויעקב נתן, הקדים שם יעקב ויבא בפעל הנהוג, מזה ידענו בבירור כי פעל נתן פה הוא עבר מוקדם, ויורה כי לא נשתהה יעקב מאומה מלמלא משאלת עשו רק מיד שביקש עשו ממנו להלעיטני וגוי' נתן לו יעקב כאות נפשו לאכול ולשתות...