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Ghiberti's *Story of Jacob and Esau* traces Rebekah's important role in the rivalry between her twin sons to gain her husband Isaac's blessing.

Lorenzo Ghiberti (1370-1455), STORY OF JACOB AND ESAU FROM THE EAST DOORS OF THE BAPTISTERY, FLORENCE (1426-1452). Gilt bronze, 31 1/4". Museo dell' Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Scala/ Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Rebekah's Scheme

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Rebekah, Sarah, Leah, and Rachel are the matriarchs of the people of Israel. Rebekah is the only matriarch who speaks directly with God—about the future of her twin sons, Esau and Jacob, and why she has such pain in bearing them. The twins are struggling in her womb, God explains, and eventually “the elder shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23). This gives Rebekah the information and confidence she needs to concoct a scheme with her younger son, Jacob, to gain the blessing that her husband Isaac intends for their firstborn, Esau.¹

Lorenzo Ghiberti sculpted two of the three sets of bronze doors on the Baptistery in Florence. The door titled *Story of Jacob and Esau* traces Rebekah's important role in her sons' rivalry. With precise linear perspective (based on the system devised by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435), Ghiberti employs many planes within the image to guide viewers through the complex events recorded in Genesis 25 and 27.

In the upper right corner, Rebecca is speaking to God (25:22-23). In the back left, she gives birth to her sons (25:24-25)—Esau, the firstborn and the favorite of his father Isaac, and Jacob, who Rebekah favors. In the center back panel, Jacob cooks a stew and trades it to his famished brother Esau for his birthright (25:29-34). In the front middle, Isaac, now elderly and poor sighted, asks Esau to hunt and prepare savory food for him (27:1-4). Esau is going off to hunt in the back panel on the right. Rebekah, overhearing Isaac's request of Esau, prepares a stew and convinces Jacob to pose as his brother Esau and take the food to Isaac (25:5-17); this part of the story is suggested in the right middle panel. Jacob receives Isaac's blessing in the right foreground with Rebekah looking on (27:18-29). God later blesses Jacob with the name “Israel,” which means the one who strives with God (32:27-28).

Rebekah employs clever means to subvert the intentions of her husband, who had greater authority over the family inheritance.² She gets what she wants for Jacob and fulfills God's mysterious plan even though she is not at the center of power. Rebekah was highly revered in the early church. Tradition holds that she is buried with Isaac in the Tombs of Patriarchs in Hebron, Israel.

NOTES

1 Cynthia Astle, “Women of the Torah Were Co-Founders of Israel,” *About.com Ancient/Classical History*, accessed March 17, 2013, <http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/Biblical-history-by-Astle/a/030511-CW-Women-of-the-Torah.htm>.

2 Ibid.