

ABSTRACT

Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and YHWH's Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in the Jacob Cycle

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The book of Genesis portrays the character Jacob as a brazen trickster who deceives members of his own family: his father Isaac, brother Esau, and uncle Laban. At the same time, Genesis depicts Jacob as YHWH's chosen from whom the entire people Israel derive. These two notices produce a latent tension in the text: Jacob is concurrently an unabashed trickster and YHWH's preference. How is one to reconcile this tension?

This dissertation investigates the phenomenon of divine deception in the Jacob cycle (Gen 25-35). The primary thesis is that YHWH both uses and engages in deception for the perpetuation of the ancestral promise (Gen 12:1-3), giving rise to what I have dubbed a theology of deception. Through a literary hermeneutic, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between both *how* the text means and *what* the text means, with theological aims, this study examines the various manifestations of YHWH as Trickster in the Jacob cycle. Attention is given to how the multiple deceptions evoke, advance, and at times fulfill the ancestral promise.

In Gen 25-28 YHWH engages in deception to insure Jacob receives the ancestral promise. Here Jacob is seen cutting his deceptive teeth by extorting the right of the firstborn from Esau and the paternal blessing from Isaac. YHWH, however, also plays the role of Trickster through an utterly ambiguous oracle to Rebekah in Gen 25:23, which drives the human deceptions. At Bethel (Gen 28:10-22) Jacob receives the ancestral promise from YHWH, in effect corroborating the earlier deceptions. In Gen 29-31 YHWH uses the many deceptions perpetrated between Jacob and Laban to advance the ancestral promise in the areas of progeny, blessing to the nations, and land. Lastly, in Gen 32-35 YHWH participates in Jacob's final deception of Esau (Gen 33:1-17) through two encounters Jacob has, first with the "messengers of God" and second with God. Jacob's tricking of Esau during their reconciliation results in Jacob's return to the promised land. Attention is given to the theological implications of this divine portrait, along with prospects for further study.

Jacob and the Divine Trickster:
A Theology of Deception and YHWH's Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise
in the Jacob Cycle

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לאבן בכרי

To Evan, my firstborn.

You are truly a blessing from God.

“And Jacob erected a pillar on the place where He spoke to him,
a pillar of *stone*,
and he poured upon it a drink offering, and he poured upon it oil.
And Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.”

Gen 35:14-15

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Jacob cycle (Gen 25:19-35:29) exists as one of the most engaging yet troubling texts in all of the Hebrew Bible. Jacob is brazenly and unequivocally depicted as a character who has no qualms about deceiving another. Indeed, the three objects of his deceptions are his own family: his brother Esau, father Isaac, and uncle Laban. Deception in the Jacob narratives also extends well beyond the character of Jacob himself; his mother, Rebekah, and favored wife, Rachel, also actively deceive. Scholarship has responded to these deceptive tendencies within Jacob's character—and those around him—in a variety of ways.

One position is to regard Jacob as a character in transformation, in a way 'earning' his stripes as patriarch and thus making him a worthy recipient for the promise (Gen 12:1-3; 26:2-5; 28:13-15) that accompanies such a title. The Jacob that emerges from the wrestling match at Peniel in Gen 32 is, this view argues, utterly distinct from the wily and deceptive Jacob of Gen 25 and 27; his change in character is evidenced by his change in name. A second position views the human actors negatively, for example, citing the unrelenting struggle that epitomizes Jacob's life after the deception of his father. Another view seeks to exonerate Jacob from complicity in any wrongdoing, often by transferring the blame for his deceptions to other actors in the text. Each of these views, however, in addition to having its own difficulties, fails to address the implications that arise from the readings, primarily, what role God then plays in relation to the deceptions that pervade the Jacob cycle. What has not been investigated is how God may

factor in to such deceptive activity. How is one to reconcile Jacob as trickster with Jacob as elect patriarch (25:23), recipient of the ancestral promise (28:13-15), namesake for the people Israel (32:28; 35:10), chosen, accompanied, and protected *by God*? It is this gap that the present study seeks to fill.

This study contends that God is intimately involved in and at times complicit in Jacob's deceptions, a notice which gives rise to an issue that is theological in nature. What does this notice reveal about God? In what follows our analysis will seek to understand the way in which divine deception in Genesis contributes both to a richer and under-appreciated theological portrait of God and the Genesis narratives. In the Jacob cycle God is not *deus absconditus*;¹ rather, God's presence is often associated with or is literarily proximate to scenes of deception.² These moments of theophany appear within the Jacob cycle at crucial junctures. The prenatal divine oracle in Gen 25:23 governs the entire cycle, yet it also anticipates the deception of Isaac in Gen 27. The appearance at Bethel in Gen 28 functions both as a corroboration of the previous deceptions and to set the stage for the deceptions that ensue in Gen 29-31. Jacob's prolonged stay with Laban and subsequent dream theophany in 31:9-16 provides the justification for his escape with Laban's daughters and property, an event which Laban clearly interprets as a deception (31:27). Likewise, the numinous שמא of Gen 32 presages the further deception of Esau in

¹ Amelia Devin Freedman, *God as an Absent Character in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Literary-Theoretical Study* (Studies in Biblical Literature 82; New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 1-3, argues that while God is the central character of the Hebrew Bible, God is absent from many stories and at times involved only "indirectly." She contends, however, that regardless of God's seeming absence from much of the biblical text, various 'stand-ins' are often used for God. Moreover, she maintains that a number of literary methodologies—narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, intertextuality, and feminist literary criticism—can assist readers in better understanding the character of God in the Hebrew Bible.

² Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 32, notices a similar pattern in relation to the wife-sister stories in Gen 12, 20, and 26, where the narrative tempers deception by prefacing the act with a reference to the promise of descendants.

Gen 33, and at the outset of Gen 35 God again appears, this time on the heels of a deadly act of deception in Gen 34.

This recognition of divine culpability, however, need not necessitate a negative evaluation of God's character. As will become clear in what follows, matters of ethics and morality are not at the fore here in the original utterance of these texts. Similarly, the operative issue is not so easy as to appeal to contemporary sensibilities that automatically equate deception with something negative. Within Genesis, deception appears to function in a much different way, for when read in the proper context of promise and blessing that typifies the ancestral narratives broadly and Jacob's existence more specifically, God's purpose in engaging in trickery appears intimately tethered to God's concern for the perpetuation of the ancestral promise (Gen 12:1-3). This reading does not intend to communicate a timeless moral or ethical truth but rather to look at the issue of divine deception theologically. Such is a necessary precursor to making any absolute statements regarding God and/or deception. Read within this context, divine deception attests to God's faithfulness to the ancestral promise. I have dubbed this phenomenon of God's role and complicity in Jacob's shenanigans a *theology of deception*.

It will be helpful to begin our investigation with a survey of the secondary scholarly literature on the topic of deception in Genesis and divine deception more broadly. These discussions will serve as a useful orientation for the reader who may be unacquainted with the subject. These discussions will also inform the perspective offered in the subsequent chapters, as well as situate it in the wider context of extant scholarship. What follows will summarize and analyze the diverse approaches to and understandings of divine deception in the Jacob cycle, organized according to the following categories:

traditional views on God and deception in the Jacob Cycle; divine deception in Genesis: implicit references; divine deception in Genesis: explicit references; and divine deception elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

Divine Deception in Genesis: A Scholarly Gap

Traditional Views on God and Deception in the Jacob Cycle

Scholarship has clearly noted the ubiquity of deception in the Jacob cycle. What the secondary literature lacks, however, is a sustained treatment of the role of YHWH in the deceptions. To be sure, there are those who seek to negotiate the delicate relationship between YHWH and trickery, yet these readings largely depict God as either set over and against such activity or as entirely absent from the narrative scene during a deception. Two extended examples will serve as sound representatives.

Laurence A. Turner's *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* provides a fine example of the former. Turner argues that human meddling in areas of divine jurisprudence can and do lead only to trouble. Within the Jacob cycle, Turner analyzes three "Announcements" that turn out to be unreliable indicators of how the plot will unfold: YHWH's oracle to Rebekah (25:23), Isaac's blessing the disguised Jacob (27:27b-29), and Isaac's blessing Esau (27:39b-40).³ Jacob and Rebekah's impatience and presumption in bringing about the fulfillment of 25:23 through deception directly results in the non-fulfillment of both the oracle and Isaac's blessing of Jacob; Jacob becomes servant (עבד) and Esau lord (33:1-15), and Jacob later reflects upon his life as all-too-

³ Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (JSOTSup 96; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 119-120.

short and difficult (47:9).⁴ It is YHWH alone who will bring about the fulfillment of these “Announcements,” but YHWH is also free to rescind or modify any part thereof, which he has done with Jacob and Esau.⁵ For Turner there exists a causal relationship between Jacob’s activity in regards to the Announcements and his life as one typified by service.⁶ Turner sums up his reading: “human attempts to frustrate the Announcements tend to fulfil them; human attempts to fulfil the Announcements tend to frustrate them.”⁷

Turner has produced a thoughtful and provoking argument, yet it has several difficulties. The primary difficulty lies in his conclusion that YHWH responds punitively to Jacob’s (and Rebekah’s) deceptions only here. Jacob by no means ceases to deceive after these events, and elsewhere when he deceives he reaps great benefit, as is evident in his prolonged stay with Laban in Gen 29-31. Why would YHWH not respond in a similar castigatory manner in this instance? Strikingly, YHWH does appear to play a role during Jacob’s time in Haran, but it is a role that insures Jacob’s wealth and protection after several deceptions, as chapter three will show. What differentiates these deceptions from those carried out by Jacob and Rebekah from the divine perspective? Very little, it

⁴ Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 179. See also Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 397-398, who argues that scenes such as Laban’s giving of Leah before Rachel and Jacob’s assessment of his life here reflect a narratorial condemnation of Jacob’s chicanery. John G. Gammie, “Theological Interpretation By Way of Literary and Tradition Analysis: Genesis 25-36” in *Encounter with the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Martin J. Buss; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 128, 132, sees Jacob’s providential success as offset by the theme of retribution, an assumption this study will challenge. Most recently, Robert R. Gonzales, Jr., *Where Sin Abounds: The Spread of Sin and the Curse in Genesis with Special Focus on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 163-192, sees the Jacob cycle (indeed, the entirety of Genesis) as continuing the theme of human sin and divine curse that originates in the Fall. As we will see in the course of this study, partitioning out deception and God into separate categories is a misreading of the text. I also wonder if the language of “sin” as Gonzales uses it is anachronistic and overly informed by New Testament conceptions.

⁵ Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 181-182.

⁶ Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 179. Turner writes: “it is precisely *because* of Jacob’s efforts to secure his destiny as lord that he actually becomes the servant” [emphasis original].

⁷ Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 179.

seems. Rather, it is precisely through Jacob's "service" (עֲבָדָה) to Laban that Jacob acquires great wealth as well as multiple children, evincing a movement toward the promise of a "great nation" recounted in Gen 12:2.⁸

A second difficulty exists in the fact that despite Jacob's analysis that his life has been long and hard, he is and remains the child of the promise. YHWH never threatens to withdraw his allegiance to Jacob. In fact, as Jacob is journeying with his family to Egypt—in the scene immediately before Jacob shares the words Turner notes with Pharaoh—YHWH affirms for a third time that he is the bearer of the ancestral promise (46:3-4). Whether Jacob is servant to Esau or not is ultimately of little consequence for understanding the Jacob/God dynamic. Turner interestingly treats the Abrahamic Announcement (Gen 12:1-3) separately from the other three Announcements specific to the Jacob cycle. And even Turner must admit there is movement in the Jacob cycle toward the eventual fulfillment of the Announcement/promise.⁹ It is almost as if the success of the Abrahamic Announcement/promise is not contingent upon the success or failure of the three Announcements in the Jacob cycle. Therefore, despite the outcome of

⁸ Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 126, 135-137, notes this very point, but he emphasizes that Jacob's acquisition of this wealth occurs only *after* God has opened the "hated" wife Leah's womb and closed the loved wife Rachel's womb. God, however, remembers Rachel and she too conceives (30:22) and bears Joseph, yet this scene occurs *before*, not after, Jacob receives great wealth with the help of YHWH. To see Rachel's barrenness as both a punishment for Jacob's attempt to realize the oracle through deception and a prerequisite for his attaining wealth with YHWH as his benefactor is without textual merit. Similarly, Turner's claim that the Announcement in 27:39b-40 concerning Esau leads the reader to expect Jacob will meet an "impoverished individual" rests solely on Turner's reading of Esau's Announcement as a curse. As I will argue in Chapter Two, such an understanding is unnecessary; Esau too receives a blessing from his father which differs in one vital component: God is not mentioned in Esau's blessing.

⁹ Turner sees this fulfillment specifically concerning the promise of nationhood. He is incorrect that the promise of land experiences little in the way of even partial fulfillment in the cycle, and he maintains that the strained relationships between Jacob's family and the nations preclude the possibility of this family serving as a source of blessing for the nations. I will challenge Turner's reading in greater detail in chapter three.

Jacob and his mother's earlier deceptions, Jacob's life from beginning to end is one intimately bound up with and blessed by God, deceptions and all.

More recently, W. Lee Humphreys' *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* has presented a case for the latter position mentioned above, accentuating not God's complicity but human duplicity in reference to Jacob's deceptions. Humphreys is interested in the literary characterization of God in Genesis. For Humphreys, God is not to be found in the narrative at these crucial junctures.¹⁰ God plays no part in Jacob's acquisition of the right of the firstborn (25:29-34), and God is inconspicuous in the deception of Isaac (27:1-45).¹¹ In this second scene, Humphreys asserts that God is present only in the speech of deceivers, Rebekah and Jacob (vv. 7, 20), and the deceived, Isaac (v. 28). None of their testimony can be taken as a trustworthy representation of the characterization of God, argues Humphreys, because it involves speech from others about God rather than God's own speech or the narrator's explicit comment.¹² Therefore, what Jacob, Rebekah, and Isaac say *about* God is given little credence and contributes nothing to Humphreys' characterization of God. He contends

¹⁰ On this point see also Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*; trans. D. M. G. Stalker; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 171, who claims that "the reader completely loses sight of God and his action in the jungle of unedifying manifestations of human nature."

¹¹ W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 158, 163. See also Kevin Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown: The Presence and Absence of God in the Jacob Narrative* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 1-2, 217-224, who sees the Jacob cycle as typified by a paradox between distinctive moments of divine presence and absence. Walton groups the narratives into two large blocks: those communicating "points of divine disclosure" and those which emphasize "the human story of Jacob." See also Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Towards a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), who regards the motif of divine presence as primary and covenant as secondary; these motifs span both Testaments.

¹² Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 163. Central to Humphreys' methodology is his scale of textual indicators for characterization, a distillation of Robert Alter's six points (see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 1981], 114-130) into three pairs: 1) external descriptions and what other characters say; 2) actions and speech; 3) inner thoughts and the narrator's evaluation. At the beginning of this short spectrum the information is far less trustworthy, and as one moves along it one begins to encounter material that can be taken with far greater confidence.

that at Bethel, God seems entirely disinterested in Jacob's life thus far.¹³ God has uttered a divine word prior to the twins' birth and has now withdrawn, allowing his will to come about however it may be, even at the cost of dissolution of this family. Similarly, God is absent during the extended stay with Laban, replete with its deceptions (Gen 29-31), and Jacob's reported dream theophany in Gen 31 associating YHWH with the trickery of the previous chapter is unattested elsewhere. Absent any narratorial comment speaking to its authenticity, Jacob's speech here cannot be afforded a great level of reliability.

One difficulty with Humphreys' analysis is the *a priori* assumption built in to his methodology that a character's speech about her/himself is automatically more trustworthy than any other character's speech. One may just as legitimately ask whether the narrator can and should be trusted. Must the narrator be a disinterested party? To privilege the narrator's speech seems to prejudice a particular reading of God's character. Such a practice is especially problematic when Humphreys does not identify the narrator. Is it ancient Israel or a particular group within Israel? Such distinctions matter. Would ancient Israel truly depict God's relationship with her namesake Jacob in such an unflattering light? What ultimately emerges in Humphreys' characterization of God in the Jacob cycle is a portrait tending toward deism.

Divine Deception in Genesis: Implicit References

There are those who have conversely argued that the Jacob cycle is highly theological and thus God occupies a much more prominent role vis-à-vis the other characters. Yet even these treatments do not connect God with Jacob's deceptions explicitly. In many instances, though, the connection is implicit and, regrettably,

¹³ Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 168, 172.

undeveloped (or unrecognized?) by the author. This section will survey the work of five scholars: J.P. Fokkelman, Allen Ross, Gerhard von Rad, David Carr, and Victor Matthews and Frances Mims.

J. P. Fokkelman's *Narrative Art in Genesis* reads the entire Jacob cycle through the lens of "Providence," which he sees as evident in the prenatal oracle in 25:23.¹⁴ By employing such language, Fokkelman implies a divine hand at work guiding matters to their proper conclusion. He later goes so far as to call this "a rare specimen of predestination."¹⁵ As a result, he holds that Jacob's and Rebekah's actions are amoral; they are unwitting pawns accomplishing YHWH's desire, their capacity to choose between proper and improper behavior removed.¹⁶ Fokkelman then awkwardly transitions to challenge this reading he has just presented. He now claims that Jacob and Rebekah act of their own volition and are thus morally culpable and "independent in their sins."¹⁷ The reason for this sudden transition is not entirely clear, yet one plausible rationale becomes all the more potent when Fokkelman states: "Their independence consists in their high-handedness."¹⁸ Fokkelman's final analysis has the feel of an apologetic attempt to exonerate God from any role in deception. This discussion undermines his treatment of the Jacob cycle. What makes this transition even more

¹⁴ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 94.

¹⁵ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 116.

¹⁶ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 117. Fokkelman writes: "Once his [God's] main characters are in the service of predestination, they are puppets, dummies. They have been deprived of their responsibilities, thus of their dignity and their credibility. Jacob and Rebekah do what they cannot help doing. They perform God's will and so they act in a morally right way – or rather, they do not; as unfree vehicles of predestination their actions are neither right nor wrong for the tension between right and wrong, thus morality itself, has been extinguished, taken away."

¹⁷ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 120.

¹⁸ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 120.

puzzling is that Fokkelman continues to discuss the remainder of the Jacob cycle through the lens of Providence, going so far as to admit that God, not Jacob, is the one who deceives Laban in Gen 30-31.¹⁹ Despite Fokkelman's equivocation, his treatment of the Jacob cycle highlights the possibility of seeing divine deception in Genesis.

Similarly, Allen Ross in his *Creation & Blessing* makes the general statement that while YHWH may use human deception to further YHWH's own purposes, YHWH in no way agrees with this behavior.²⁰ Such a view, however, at the very least implicates YHWH, giving Jacob's actions the sheen of divine approval. More germane to the topic at hand, Ross advances the argument that YHWH orchestrates Laban's deceptive giving of Leah prior to Rachel to demonstrate to Jacob that deception is unpalatable to God.²¹ Such an argument is counter-intuitive for a variety of reasons, not least of which being that YHWH is said to use something he despises, deception, to show that the very thing he despises is worthy of being despised! Ross, however, limits YHWH's role in deception to but a few instances, not advancing a thoroughgoing analysis of the deceptions in the Jacob cycle, and this study will challenge his view that YHWH uses deception only punitively. Might Ross' claim, though, not belie at least the possibility that YHWH's role in trickery may have some altruistic motivation? This possibility will serve as the object for further exploration below. For now, however, Ross' notice further supports the possibility of viewing YHWH as trickster in Genesis.

¹⁹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 160-161.

²⁰ Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 451, 478. See also R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Disselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah* (Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 100, who appears to dismiss a particular reading of the oracle in 25:23 at least in part because such a reading runs the risk of implicating God in Jacob's acquiring the right of the firstborn and blessing from his blind father.

²¹ Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 497.

What remains latent in Ross' discussion is given potent voice in the final analysis of Gerhard von Rad. Von Rad muses over the question of whether in Gen 27:1-45 the narrator purposefully communicates the idea that human deception fulfills God's intended plans.²² To this question von Rad responds with a resounding yet troubling yes. The narrator, he argues, exhibits no moral concerns or pronouncements of guilt because of God's decree (25:23). Rather, the narrator desires to inculcate in his readers a "sympathetic suffering for those who are caught up mysteriously in such a monstrous act of God and are almost destroyed in it."²³ By "monstrous act" von Rad appears to mean not only the oracle delivered to Rebekah, announcing a preference for Jacob over Esau, but also God's employment of *human* deception in Gen 27 to advance God's own purposes. Von Rad never explicitly deems God culpable in these matters of deception, nor does he ever accuse God of acting deceptively. He simply notes the mystery and enigma of the scene and its positive results.

This thoroughly honest treatment, however, is tempered by von Rad's emphasis on Pentateuchal source criticism. To continue our illustration using Gen 27:1-45, von Rad designates this narrative an artistic interweaving of the traditionally defined J and E sources and comprising a single, sustained episode.²⁴ The narrative that follows in Gen 27:46-28:9 he attributes to P and considers a separate and unique understanding of the story of Jacob and Esau.²⁵ According to von Rad, P has here "purified" the earlier tradition in 27:1-45 by expunging any and all problematic elements, evidencing a later

²² Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL; rev. ed.; trans. J. H. Marks; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 280.

²³ von Rad, *Genesis*, 281.

²⁴ von Rad, *Genesis*, 276.

²⁵ von Rad, *Genesis*, 281-282.

time in ancient Israel in which such depictions of the ancestors—and presumably God, though von Rad makes no mention of God here—became more disconcerting than before.²⁶ Therefore, von Rad seems to presuppose an evolutionary view of Israelite society, so foundational to the Documentary Hypothesis, by which the disturbing possibility of God’s mysterious role in deception may be remedied by appealing to a later, different, and ‘moralizing’ source.

The Documentary Hypothesis as assumed by von Rad is no longer a convincing way to speak of Pentateuchal composition.²⁷ Such an approach deals with the final form of the text, but does so in an artificial way. It is still a diachronic analysis, segmenting the text into independent literary units, and not an attempt to make sense of the text as a cogent literary whole with its own narrative integrity. Rather, in one tradition certain issues he identifies are troubling, while in another, later tradition, the attempt has been made to eradicate these difficulties. What remains unexpressed here, however, is that the final form of the text preserves both of these ‘sources’ one alongside the other, thus also creating a tension in the text that a synchronic approach needs to address. Von Rad’s understanding of 27:1-45 is very fine indeed, and he raises many of the questions this

²⁶ von Rad, *Genesis*, 282.

²⁷ In this brief space I cannot hope to articulate a full dismissal of the documentary hypothesis. One may wish, however, to consult the thoughtful and convincing treatments of Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch* (JSOTSup 89; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), whose volume deftly demonstrates the incompatibility between tradition history and source criticism, and R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study* (JSOTSup 53; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), who offers the most systematic denunciation of the documentary hypothesis to date. Admittedly, by the time his Genesis commentary appears, von Rad had already begun to move away from traditionally defined source criticism, yet his volume is replete with such language, employing the designations JEDP. See his “The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch” in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken; London: SCM Press, 1984), 1-78. His analysis assumes much of that assumed by documentarians and still seems implicated in the tethering of tradition history and source criticism challenged by Rendtorff.

study will address. He does not, however, struggle with the implications of this reading in the text as we have it.

More recently, David Carr's *Reading the Fractures of Genesis* takes a similar approach, yet succeeds in underscoring the inherent difficulty latent in diachronic analyses. Carr employs both diachronic and synchronic methodologies with the aim of isolating the various fractures (doublets, contradictions) or seams between narrative units.²⁸ Unlike von Rad, Carr believes one can speak confidently only about two sources: P and non-P. In the development of Genesis P stands as a later source based upon and attempting to stand over against and replace non-P.²⁹ The final form of the text, fractures and all, results from the work of a redactor who merges P and non-P in the interest of preservation. Concerning the Jacob cycle more specifically, Carr conjectures that Jacob's deceptions have undergone a reinterpretation based upon this convergence of dissonant sources.³⁰ One may notice already a strong affinity with von Rad's view of a later textual stratum recasting an earlier one. Carr, however, appears more restrained in postulating that recognition of these various layers eliminates the problem entirely. He writes:

The trickster has not been completely tamed. As a result, the reader is left with the task of making sense out of a subversive Jacob, on the one hand, and Jacob the divinely supported and morally justified ancestor of Israel, on the other.³¹

What emerges in the final form of the text is a tension, not a resolution. Carr demonstrates both the way in which von Rad's explanation remains incomplete and the

²⁸ David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), vii, 3-4.

²⁹ Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis*, 47.

³⁰ Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis*, 299.

³¹ Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis*, 300.

importance of readers in adjudicating a text's meaning. In many ways, the agenda of the present study is to propose a way to understand this tension in the final form of the text.

Lastly, Victor Matthews and Frances Mims' article "Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation," identifies an older trickster motif undergirding the theological nature of the Jacob cycle.³² For Matthews and Mims, Jacob is a patriarch-in-the-making, whose experiences with Esau, Laban, and God refine his character into one worthy to receive the covenant.³³ Jacob's interactions with God are thus seminal to his transformation. Unfortunately, this overarching metanarrative Matthews and Mims see as operative here cannot be sustained against a close scrutiny of the text.³⁴ Their emphasis, however, on a theological reading of trickery is an important insight which the chapters that follow will develop.

Divine Deception in Genesis: Explicit References

The question of divine deception in Genesis has only been raised very recently in any meaningful way, yet investigation of it remains inchoate. Works by three scholars warrant more thorough mention: Hermann Gunkel, Walter Brueggemann, and Michael James Williams.

Perhaps the earliest explicit scholarly treatment on the topic is that of Hermann Gunkel in his classic 1901 Genesis commentary. Gunkel takes special notice of God's apparent role in Jacob's deceptions, deeming God's complicity at various points in the

³² Victor H. Matthews and Frances Mims, "Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation," *PRSt* 12 (1985): 186.

³³ Matthews and Mims, "Jacob the Trickster," 187, 193.

³⁴ See my "Jacob, Laban, and a Divine Trickster? The Covenantal Framework of God's Deception in the Theology of the Jacob Cycle," *PRSt* 36 (2009): 9-10, and the introduction to chapter four below.

narrative as “especially offensive.”³⁵ He further notes that Jacob’s deceptions neither cease nor recede; instead, Jacob continues to perfect his craft with the help of God.³⁶ A proper comprehension of these matters emerges only if one addresses them historically. Two points are foundational here for Gunkel: 1) these texts belong to a period in ancient Israel’s history during which religion and morality had not yet been linked; 2) the “god” referenced is not YHWH but rather “a much more primitive figure” with no misgivings about using deception.³⁷ Moreover, Gunkel avers that it is feasible to speak of the “religious element” as a secondary addition to these texts of deception.³⁸ While Gunkel is correct that God has a part in Jacob’s deceptions, he is incorrect in his assessment that one should thereby interpret God’s role negatively. Gunkel’s emphasis placed on reconstructed history also is done only to the detriment of the final literary form of the text, which sees a continuity between the God of the ancestors and YHWH.³⁹ At bottom, Gunkel fails to interpret the text we have, which by his reading connects YHWH deeply with Jacob’s deceptions, and instead attempts to remedy a literary problem with historical

³⁵ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 301.

³⁶ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 300. While Gunkel regards Jacob’s deceptions as intentionally humorous episodes that possess no moral concerns in their original form as old legends, he also sees the necessity of allowing contemporary readers to react as they may to these texts. It is in this context that Gunkel couches his statements about God’s complicity. He concludes: “The exegete should not allow his moral sensibilities to be confused by these narratives. On the other hand, however, he should also have enough respect for antiquity not to paint over these old legends with modern colors.”

³⁷ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 301.

³⁸ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 301-302.

³⁹ In the revelation of the divine name in Exod 3:1-22, YHWH identifies himself as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (vv. 6, 15). Similarly, in Exod 6:2-9 God declares that he appeared to the ancestors yet did not make known to them the divine name. Further complicating Gunkel’s view that the deity is not YHWH are the multiple occurrences of the divine name throughout Genesis, including the scenes of deception in the Jacob cycle.

speculation. The question of how his literary reading functions in the final form of the text remains an unexplored area of inquiry.

Walter Brueggemann in his *Genesis* commentary treats the Jacob cycle under the heading “The Conflicted Call of God.” Brueggemann argues that the text is concerned primarily with the God of Jacob.⁴⁰ God inaugurates a life of conflict for Jacob as the son of the promise. The character God is thus not a neat and tidy one. Brueggemann writes: “Jacob is a scandalous challenge to his world because the God who calls him is also scandalous. . . . At many points the narrative presents the inscrutable, dark side of God.”⁴¹ Contributing further to Brueggemann’s portrayal of God as scandalous is the recognition that God’s purposes are advanced through the “self-serving cleverness of human desire.”⁴² One may recall the previous discussions of Ross and von Rad, both of whom implied God felt free to avail himself of human trickery to further the divine purpose. Brueggemann agrees, but his view is different in that the impetus behind human trickery lies in God’s enigmatic call of Jacob. This call tethers God and Jacob together in a deeply intimate way. God is and will remain a formidable presence and assurance throughout Jacob’s life.⁴³

Brueggemann is rightly non-apologetic in regards to the characterization of God in the Jacob cycle. His consistent and trenchant claims that the divine plan is being fulfilled through measures such as trickery, coupled with the intimate relationship

⁴⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 204, 209.

⁴¹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 209.

⁴² Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 212.

⁴³ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 205, speaks of the “commitment” God has made to Jacob, a commitment that both introduces conflict yet at the same time insures a resolution of the conflicts “in [Jacob’s] favor.”

between God and Jacob he sees, buttresses the present study in a most meaningful way. What Brueggemann leaves unspoken, however, is a clear articulation of *how* the God who wrought a life of conflict and deception for Jacob actually figures into the scenes of deception. The biblical narrative allows for the possibility of a greater precision in describing God's role and purposes beyond the numinous adjectives such as "inscrutable" and "hidden" Brueggemann prefers. This study will attempt to give voice to the *how* of divine deception in the Jacob cycle.

The most sustained engagement of deception in Genesis of which I am aware is Michael James Williams' *Deception in Genesis: An Investigation into the Morality of a Unique Biblical Phenomenon*. Williams offers a catalogue of deceptive events in Genesis, outlining the perpetrator, victim, type of deception, motive, specific vocabulary, Pentateuchal source, and narrative evaluation in the hopes of systematizing the deceptions in Genesis. At no point does Williams identify God as either perpetrator or victim in Genesis' deceptions. Upon further analysis, Williams concludes that the Genesis narratives evaluate deception positively when the perpetrator has previously been a victim; this retaliation, he holds, restores the status quo or what he calls "*shalom*."⁴⁴ Conversely, a negative evaluation is given when a deception causes a breach in *shalom*.

Outside Genesis, however, matters are quite different. Williams notes that God is said to deceive elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible for various reasons. He further claims that the narrative provides no ready evaluations of God's deceptive activity, but the mere fact that God is the perpetrator means one should evaluate these scenes positively.⁴⁵ This

⁴⁴ Michael James Williams, *Deception in Genesis: An Investigation into the Morality of a Unique Biblical Phenomenon* (Studies in Biblical Literature 32; New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 56, 221.

⁴⁵ Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 73.

avowal leads Williams to posit the fascinating hypothesis that among the primary differences between deceptions in and outside Genesis is the fact that God has no part in the Genesis deceptions. Accordingly, outside Genesis God's purposes in deception serve to "keep Israel within the covenant relationship he has established with them."⁴⁶

Williams' study is careful and judicious, but this study will register disagreement with him on several crucial items: 1) that God plays no role in Genesis' deceptions; 2) that the narrative evaluations are so decisive and consistent; 3) that deceptions in Genesis are of an entirely different kind than those outside Genesis. The first and second of these points will be addressed throughout this study. Regarding the third, one could make a case that deception both within and outside Genesis may plausibly serve a quite similar function: the protection and perpetuation of the ancestral promise. Such a comparative investigation, though, lies beyond the bounds of the present study.

Some scholarly treatments have taken the form of a brief sentence or two, made almost in passing and remaining frustratingly undeveloped. For example, Matthews and Mims label YHWH as Rachel's "fellow trickster" in her stealing of Laban's household gods.⁴⁷ They do not expound upon the potential implications, which are numerous, of such a label for YHWH. Similarly, Susan Niditch states that the traditional trickster figure as it exists in both the Bible and other literature is sometimes aided by a divine benefactor.⁴⁸ She unfortunately offers no further elaboration as to the implications of this

⁴⁶ Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 75.

⁴⁷ Matthews and Mims, "Jacob the Trickster," 189.

⁴⁸ Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2000), 45.

divine assistance. And most recently, Joel Kaminsky has contributed a tantalizingly brief statement reading Jacob's election against the backdrop of his deceptions. He writes:

The notion that human action may be required to bring the chosen one's election to consummation is here further reflected upon as well as morally complicated. It appears that at times even deceitful actions can be employed in bringing God's purposes to pass. While such deceit may lead to family strife and may result in the deceiver himself being deceived in hurtful ways, in this instance, the elect status of Jacob is further reinforced through his morally questionable behavior.⁴⁹

These cursory statements signify the viability of speaking of YHWH as trickster in Genesis. They also, however, highlight a seeming uneasiness as to what one is to do with the association of YHWH with trickery/deception. It is not adequate to leave this connection unexplored.

Divine Deception Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible

Despite the relative dearth of scholarship on divine deception in Genesis, scholars have more readily acknowledged the presence of divine deception elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Our discussion here will offer a brief survey of these instances as scholarship has noted their occurrence in the Pentateuch, the Deuteronomistic History, and the Prophets. This section will also include succinct treatment of the potential functions of divine deception as limned by extant scholarship.

The Pentateuch. Within the Pentateuch, scholars have seen divine deception as most clearly evident in the book of Exodus. The most common example cited occurs in Exod 3:16-22, God's initial instructions to Moses regarding the divine plan of the

⁴⁹ Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 57.

exodus.⁵⁰ God clearly outlines to Moses that he is to tell Pharaoh the duration of the journey is a mere “three days” and the purpose is sacrifice (v. 18). Immediately prior in v. 17, however, God had promised deliverance from Egypt and arrival in “the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.” Divine deception is clear. Moses follows God’s plan perfectly, repeating to Pharaoh the request intimated to him by God (5:3). Williams notes Pharaoh receives no indication of God’s true intent.⁵¹ W. H. Propp sees the scene as “an enjoyable story” attesting to a tradition in which the Israelites “and their god” deceive, attributable to the allure of “Trickster tales” within ancient Israel.⁵² And Ken Esau’s thorough analysis argues the scene is one of deception in which Moses is “backed by divine command.”⁵³ Esau further elaborates, advancing the notion that divine deception here should be read as a requisite aspect of wartime during which even God is free to ignore traditional ethics.⁵⁴ Williams also cites God’s instruction to Moses in Exod 14:1-4 to have the Israelites feign confusion in the wilderness so Pharaoh will believe they are lost or disoriented as an example of divine deception.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Most recently, see the treatment of Dean Andrew Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited: Deception as a Motif in the Pentateuch* (Studies in Biblical Literature 117; New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 63-68, who argues the entire exodus event is one laden with deception. He concludes: “The clear contradiction between the plan to deliver the people from Egypt and the instructions to ask for a mere three-day journey is not an editorial slip or an opening gambit. Rather, it is essential to a deceptive plot that would eventually release Israel, giving them the wealth of Egypt and destroying the enemy in the process.”

⁵¹ Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 62.

⁵² William Henry Propp, *Exodus 1-18* (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 207.

⁵³ Ken Esau, “Divine Deception in the Exodus Event?,” *Directions* 35 (2006): 8. Esau provides helpful summaries of previous scholarly attempts to make sense of this scene, among them the claim that the Israelites never stated they would return or that the three days request was meant to serve as the first stage in a series of negotiations between Moses/God and Pharaoh.

⁵⁴ Esau, “Divine Deception in the Exodus Event?,” 15.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 62.

The Deuteronomistic History. Divine deception in the Deuteronomistic History occurs most frequently in the context of battle. Richard D. Patterson labels this phenomenon “*ruse de guerre*.”⁵⁶ He elucidates four specific passages that show God active in deception during battle: 2 Sam 17:14; 1 Kgs 22:19-23, 2 Kgs 6:15-20; 7:6-7.⁵⁷ Among these four, 1 Kgs 22:19-23 has received the most attention.⁵⁸ Here King Ahab asks the prophet Micaiah’s advice about the prospects for success were the king to attack Ramoth-gilead. After his favorable report is met with a challenge by Ahab, Micaiah relates a heavenly dialogue in which YHWH asks for a volunteer to “deceive” (פִּתּוּי) the king into attacking Ramoth-gilead, which, the reader learns, will result in Ahab’s death. Both Robert Chisholm and J. J. M. Roberts respectively point out that the “lying spirit” placed in the mouth of Ahab’s prophets has its origin with YHWH, the perpetrator of this deadly deception.⁵⁹ Both of these scholars also deem YHWH’s resorting to deception as being in line with YHWH’s justice. For Roberts, God is trustworthy so long as the believer is obedient, and for Chisholm divine deception is used solely to punish sinners.⁶⁰

A final example within the Deuteronomistic History is noted by Williams. He recognizes a deception in YHWH’s instruction to a concerned Samuel in 1 Sam 16:1-5

⁵⁶ Richard D. Patterson, “The Old Testament Use of an Archetype: The Trickster,” *JETS* 42 (1999): 387.

⁵⁷ Patterson, “The Old Testament Use of an Archetype,” 393.

⁵⁸ See Evangelia G. Dafni, “RWH SQR und falsche Prophetie in I Reg 22,” *ZAW* 112 (2000): 365-385.

⁵⁹ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Does God Deceive?,” *BibSac* 155 (1998): 14, 16; J. J. M. Roberts, “Does God Lie? Divine Deceit as a Theological Problem in Israelite Prophetic Literature” in *Congress Volume: Jerusalem, 1986* (ed. J. A. Emerton; VTSup 40; Leiden: Brill, 1988), 216-217.

⁶⁰ Roberts, “Does God Lie?,” 219-220; Chisholm, “Does God Deceive?,” 28.

that the purpose of the journey is to offer a sacrifice when in reality it is to anoint a new king from among Jesse's sons.⁶¹ Saul is the victim of this divine deception.

The Prophets. In the prophets one encounters perhaps the most palpable instances of divine deception. These occur largely in the context of false prophecy, much akin to 1 Kgs 22 discussed above. Jeremiah gives voice to many examples. Roberts cites the prophet's accusatory speech in Jer 4:10 that YHWH had "utterly deceived" (השגה השגה) the people and Jerusalem into a false sense of security when in fact destruction was looming.⁶² Chisholm highlights the intensifying evident in the infinitive absolute construction and deems this instance yet another example of YHWH using deception to attain his own objectives.⁶³ Jer 15:18 sees the prophet comparing YHWH to a "deceitful brook, like waters that fail."⁶⁴ And James Crenshaw has argued that Jer 20:7 portrays the prophet again accusing God of deception.⁶⁵ While William Holladay is correct to caution against the assumption that Jeremiah's accusations are statements of fact that YHWH did indeed deceive the prophet, the prevalence of material concerning divine deception in Jeremiah attests to the veracity of seeing it as a possible theme in the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁶

Most recently, Israel Knohl has sought to expand upon Roberts' earlier study on whether God lies. Knohl looks specifically at the *seraphim* vision in Isa 6 and the

⁶¹ Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 62.

⁶² Roberts, "Does God Lie?," 217.

⁶³ Chisholm, "Does God Deceive?," 18.

⁶⁴ Roberts, "Does God Lie?," 218.

⁶⁵ James L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 41, and his *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 90.

⁶⁶ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 552.

topheth (“burning place”) vision in 30:26-33, maintaining that the theme of “consuming divine fire” predominates in the book.⁶⁷ He draws a connection between these two scenes and 1 Kgs 22, concluding:

Just as Ahab is led to his end by the false enticement of the spirit of the Lord, in the seraphim vision, the prophet leads Israel to its doom by means of deceptive promises that stay their return to the Lord. In the Topheth vision, the spirit of the Lord acts in similar fashion as it guides the nations with the deceiving bridle to perdition.⁶⁸

YHWH, argues Knohl, deceptively orchestrates the people’s inability to repent in Isa 6, and does the same for the nations in 30:26-33.

One example is worthy of more sustained treatment: Nancy Bowen’s 1994 dissertation *The Role of Yahweh as Deceiver in True and False Prophecy*. Bowen examines three passages in which YHWH is the subject of the verb *htp* “to deceive” (1 Kgs 22:1-38; Jer 20:7-13; Ezek 14:1-11). Our investigation has already addressed the first two texts. In Ezek 14:1-11, YHWH has revoked from the people the possibility for prophetic intermediation because of the people’s breaking of the covenant. The victim of the divine deception, notes Bowen, is the prophet who presumes to utter the divine word. This instance of divine deception shows YHWH ultimately concerned with being known, evident in the presence of the identification formula “then you shall know that I am YHWH” in v. 8. It is through deception of the prophet that YHWH makes his name known, argues Bowen.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Israel Knohl, “Does God Deceive? An Examination of the Dark Side of Isaiah’s Prophecy” in *Mishneh Todah: Studies in Deuteronomy and Its Cultural Environment in Honor of Jeffrey H. Tigay* (ed. N. S. Fox, D. A. Glatt-Gilad, and M. J. Williams; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 291.

⁶⁸ Knohl, “Does God Deceive?,” 291.

⁶⁹ Nancy R. Bowen, *The Role of Yahweh as Deceiver in True and False Prophecy* (Ph.D. Dissertation: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1994), 113, 117.

By way of conclusion, Bowen maintains that each of these three texts depicts YHWH's deception in unique theological terms. In 1 Kgs 22, YHWH is the sovereign king-breaker who responds fittingly to disobedience. Jer 20:7 challenges the reliability of YHWH and YHWH's promises. And Ezek 14:1-11 highlights deception as a means by which YHWH is made known.⁷⁰ She proposes that YHWH as deceiver functions in each of these texts as an agent of social change, pushing against the *status quo*.⁷¹ This function parallels one among many characteristics of the trickster Bowen isolates that are known from other literature. Bowen elaborates, noting that YHWH's portrayal in these texts exemplifies several other characteristics of the trickster—ambiguity and anomaly, working inversion, creativity, and moral ambiguity—and belies ancient Israel's borrowing of the divine trickster motif from elsewhere in the ancient Near East.⁷²

Summary: Divine Deception in Retrospect

The foregoing analysis underscores the phenomenon of divine deception as it is both latent and patent in extant biblical scholarship. This overview focused upon four specific areas. First, we looked at traditional views on God and deception in the Jacob cycle, particularly those positions which seek to exonerate God either by removing him from the narrative scene during a deception or presenting him as punishing the deceivers. These readings were seen to be deficient in that they cannot withstand a close scrutiny of the ensuing narrative and that a resultant implication is tacit acceptance of a theological statement about God's near utter transcendence that is at least equally problematic.

⁷⁰ Bowen, *The Role of Yahweh as Deceiver*, 123-124.

⁷¹ Bowen, *The Role of Yahweh as Deceiver*, 133-134.

⁷² Bowen, *The Role of Yahweh as Deceiver*, 131-135.

Second and third, our analysis scrutinized various scholarly treatments which contain implicit and explicit references to God's role in deception in the Jacob cycle. The views of those discussed emphasized the viability of speaking of divine deception in regards to Genesis, though a thoroughgoing investigation into this phenomenon has not yet been undertaken. And lastly, we surveyed references to God as deceiver elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, paying specific attention to the Pentateuch, Deuteronomistic History, and the Prophets. A common theme that emerged in this section was a concern for the connection between God's justice and God's deception. One also, however, becomes keenly aware that deception in these instances bears some relation to YHWH's unique covenantal concern for Israel, a notice that figures prominently in this study.

With this history of research in mind, the lack of a sustained scholarly treatment of divine deception in Genesis becomes palpable. Scholarship has adequately addressed the viability of such a topic; what remains inchoate is a specific focus in Genesis from a theological trajectory. Before moving forward, however, it will prove helpful to broaden our horizons beyond the biblical text—only briefly—and look at the presence of divine deception within the wider cultural context of ancient Israel and within anthropological literature. This survey will corroborate the history of scholarship offered here from an historical perspective, showing that divine deception was indeed a fixture in the literature of the wider ancient Near East in which ancient Israel found itself.

Precursors to Divine Deception: The Ancient Near East and Anthropological Evidence

This theme of divine deception is not endemic only to the Hebrew Bible. Within the wider ancient Near Eastern context divine deception appears to have been a prominent motif. Both gods and goddesses are complicit in deception and trickery. Their

deceptions also know no geographic boundaries; instances of divine deception occur in Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Hittite texts alike. More recently, modern anthropological literature has demonstrated evidence of the existence of trickster deities. What follows will discuss the various places where divine deception appears in texts from the ancient Near East as well as, briefly, in modern anthropological literature.

Ancient Near Eastern Examples of Divine Deception

Deceptive deities appear frequently in the literature of the wider ancient Near East, providing a context within which to interpret YHWH's role in deception in the biblical text. Perhaps the most thorough study to date on the divine deceiver is that of W. B. Kristensen in his 1928 Dutch article, "De goddelijke bedrieger."⁷³ Therein Kristensen identifies specifically Babylonian Ea (Enki) and Greek Hermes, along with a brief mention of Egyptian Seth as deceptive deities; the first and last of these will be discussed in what follows. Kristensen also draws a distinction between the classical trickster and the divine deceiver, the latter of which is a wholly inscrutable and ambiguous figure.⁷⁴ Subsequent scholarship has taken upon itself the task of expanding upon Kristensen's seminal contribution. A few examples should suffice, from Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Hittite texts.

⁷³ William Brede Kristensen, "De goddelijke bedrieger," *Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van wetenschappen*. Amsterdam, Afdeling Letterkunde. Deel. 66, Serie B no. 3 (1928): 63-88.

⁷⁴ More recently, and in an entirely different vein, Michael Dolzani, "The Ashes of the Stars: Northrop Frye and the Trickster-God," *Semeia* 89 (2002): 59-73, traces the idea and development of a "trickster-God" in the thought and writings of Canadian literary theorist Northrop Frye. This discussion goes beyond the bounds of the present study as it involves analysis of much of Frye's own works, along with the works of seminal authors like William Blake who very much influenced Frye. Dolzani, though, interestingly notes a development in Frye's thought on the topic of the trickster God across all his works, moving from a view that this understanding of the deity as "ambiguous" and typified by the book of Job may give way to seeing a "positive trickster-God" that is a liberating force in people's lives (59).

Mesopotamian. Within Mesopotamian texts, Ea (Enki), god of great wisdom and cunning, often plays the role of trickster. Thorkild Jacobsen describes him as follows:

It is not his nature to overwhelm; rather, he persuades, tricks or evades to gain his ends. He is the cleverest of the gods, the one who can plan and organize and think of ways out when no one else can. He is the counselor and adviser, the expert and the troubleshooter, or manipulator of the ruler; not the ruler himself.⁷⁵

Ea is a crafty and clever deity whose trickery comes to the fore most often in his dealings with humanity.

In *Atrahasis*, an Akkadian myth of human origins dating between 1850-1500 B.C.E., Enki shows his mettle as a trickster largely in the context of circumventing Enlil's attempts to reduce the noisy and disturbing human population.⁷⁶ Enlil seeks to diminish the human population on four separate occasions. First, he plans to send a plague, but Enki advises the human, Atrahasis, to placate the plague god with worship and offerings. Second, a drought, is unsuccessful for much the same reason. Third, in response to a famine Enki, given the text is fragmentary at this point, presumably communicates with Atrahasis in a dream, resulting somehow in an abundance of fish. Fourth and finally, Enlil becomes aware of Enki's shenanigans and requires that all the deities—Enki included—swear by an oath not to reveal Enlil's master plan: a flood. Enki cleverly outwits Enlil again, pretending to speak to a reed wall within earshot of Atrahasis and instructing him to build a boat (III, i. 11-35).⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Thorkild Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 116.

⁷⁶ See Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. (3d ed.; Bethesda: CDL Press, 2006), 227-280, for the text of *Atrahasis* used here.

⁷⁷ The god Ea does precisely the same thing in the parallel account in the *Gilgamesh Epic*.

Ea is depicted as a trickster in another text involving a flood: the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In the pertinent scene (XI. 36-47), Utnapishtim the boatman relates to Gilgamesh how it is that he survived the flood in a scene with several echoes to *Atrahasis*. Upon receiving the instructions from Ea to build a boat, Utnapishtim asks the deity how he should explain his hasty departure to his neighbors. Ea responds by commanding Utnapishtim to inform them that he is leaving the city because of Enlil's displeasure with him when in reality it is to escape the flood.⁷⁸ This divine deception is all the more troubling given Ea's encouragement that Utnapishtim assure the populace by stating that Ea will "rain down abundance" of birds, fish, bread, and harvest when in reality it is the rain that will obliterate the population.

A final example of Ea/Enki's role in deception is warranted: *Adapa*. In *Adapa*, the main character of the same name is summoned before Anu to explain why he would fracture the wing of the south wind.⁷⁹ Ea, who appears to have a special relationship with Adapa, offers advice to help prepare Adapa for the meeting and to insure success. He suggests Adapa do two things specifically. First, Adapa is to clothe himself in the attire of a mourner, claiming he is mourning over the disappearance of two gods—Tammuz and Gizzida—when in fact these are the two deities he will encounter at Anu's door; as a result, Ea claims they will speak a favorable word on Adapa's behalf to Ea. Second, Ea advises against Adapa accepting from Anu the bread and water *of death* if offered. Nearly everything happens as Ea describes, save for the curious fact that Anu offers Adapa food and water *of life*, not death. Adapa adheres to Ea's command, declining the

⁷⁸ Most recently, Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited*, 117-118, has interpreted Ea's deception in the *Gilgamesh Epic* as a "humorous example," despite its murderous results. Cf. Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 159, who describes the results of this deception as "catastrophic."

⁷⁹ See Foster, *Before the Muses*, 525-530 for the translation of *Adapa* used here.

offer. The text breaks off at this point, but another version preserved on a fragment sees Anu laughing uncontrollably at Ea's plan, asking "Who else, of all the gods of heaven and netherworld, could d[o] something like this?" (frg. D. 6-7). Anu's laughter appears to betray the fact that Ea is here acting as the trickster, yet this point has been debated. Giorgio Buccellati, however, provides a helpful survey of the possible interpretations of this episode, noting that the common denominator in nearly all of them is that Ea intends through his words to trick Adapa.⁸⁰ The divine deception, then, entails Ea convincing Adapa to forego the chance for eternal life by leading him to believe the bread and water of life Anu will offer will in fact result in death.

Ea/Enki is the prototypical trickster within the ancient Near East. The texts surveyed here are but a few of the instances in which this deity employs deception, often for the benefit of a certain individual, but with Adapa perhaps also to the detriment of a given individual.⁸¹ Within the wider ancient Near East, Ea seems to be the trickster *par excellence*.⁸² He is not, however, the only trickster.

Carole Fontaine has presented compelling arguments that goddesses may also deceive, such as Inanna in the Sumerian myth *The Transfer of the Arts of Civilization*.⁸³ The story runs as follows: the goddess Inanna visits her grandfather Enki in Eridu.

⁸⁰ Giorgio Buccellati, "Adapa, Genesis, and the Notion of Faith," *UF* 5 (1973): 62-63.

⁸¹ I must admit that it does remain unclear who serves as the object of Ea's deception in *Adapa*. Is it Adapa himself, or the god Anu? Given that Ea seldom if ever tricks to harm humanity, coupled with the recurrent theme of him as a trickster of other gods, one may make a compelling case, perhaps, that Ea intends Anu as the object of his deception.

⁸² For additional examples of Ea as trickster, see the recent article by Keith Dickson, "Enki and Ninhursag: The Trickster in Paradise," *JNES* 66 (2007): 1-32, esp. pp. 7, 9, 22, 27, and 32, who argues that Enki is a character undergoing a transformation "into a suffering male trickster" identified by "exuberant sexual and culinary hunger, . . . his violence, his deception, his knowledge, his bellyache, his ridiculous and magical pregnancy, his status as simultaneously sacred and cursed" (32). For additional examples of Sumerian trickster deities, see Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 155-156, 160-161.

⁸³ "Inanna and Enki." translated by Gertrud Farber (*COS* 1.161: 522-526).

Shortly after her arrival the two begin drinking beer together, and a drinking challenge ensues. An intoxicated Enki offers a series of toasts to the goddess; after each toast he gives her groups of the *me*, divine ordinances governing such things as the high priesthood and godship to judgment-giving and decision making. After fourteen such exchanges Enki orders that Inanna be given free and safe passage to Uruk. Taking the *me* with her she embarks for Uruk. Meanwhile, Enki at last sobers up and inquires fourteen times as to the *me*'s whereabouts. He dispatches Isimud and various creatures to retrieve the *me*, but they are ultimately unsuccessful. Upon reaching Uruk, Inanna discovers that there are more *me* on the boat than she had originally received from Enki. He eventually admits defeat and the two reconcile. The *me* are allowed to remain in Uruk.

The divine deception in this story, argues Jacobsen, is evident in Inanna's seizing of an opportunity when Enki, a master trickster himself as the aforementioned texts make clear, appears most susceptible.⁸⁴ Fontaine advances another possibility, holding that Inanna demonstrates not only her "craft" but also her "courage" in challenging the traditional boundaries placed upon the female, goddesses included.⁸⁵

Egyptian. Within Egyptian literature four deities engage in deception: Re, Isis, Horus, and Seth. In *The Destruction of Mankind* Re, the sun-god, formulates a plan to placate the goddess Hathor and in effect put a stop to her murderous destruction which, ironically, Re had instigated.⁸⁶ A surviving papyrus extols Isis' aptitude for deception:

⁸⁴ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 114-115.

⁸⁵ Carole Fontaine, "The Deceptive Goddess in Ancient Near Eastern Myth: Inanna and Inaraš," *Semeia* 42 (1988): 92-93.

⁸⁶ "The Destruction of Mankind." translated by Miriam Lichtheim (*COS* 1.24: 36-37).

Now, Isis was a wise woman. Her heart was more devious than millions among men; she was more selective than millions among the gods; she was more exacting than millions among the blessed dead.⁸⁷

This praising of her deceptive abilities, Williams notes, immediately precedes and likely legitimates the goddess' creation of a snake which bites Re, leading Isis to claim she alone can heal him in exchange for Re sharing his secret "name of power."⁸⁸ Williams provides a fine summary of Isis' and Horus' respective deceptions, each of which involve "disguises": Isis concealing her identity in order to trick "Seth into validating the claim of her son, Horus," and Horus deceiving Seth in a boat building competition by covering over his own pine boat with gypsum to give it the look of stone, resulting in Seth losing the contest when his own concrete boat sinks.⁸⁹

Seth does not, however, always play the fool. Within Egyptian literature, H. te Velde argues Seth also functions as a trickster. Te Velde cites five specific ways in which Seth's activities parallel what is known of the trickster from other primitive cultures. First, Seth presents a challenge to *maat*, "ethical and cosmic order," in that in Egyptian the word meaning "confusion" (*khenenu*) is determined in hieroglyphics with the symbol for the Seth-animal.⁹⁰ More fittingly, the Egyptian verb "to deceive" may also be written with the symbol for the Seth-animal.⁹¹ Second, Seth is described as a *shed-kheru*, which means essentially "to make mischief" or "stir up strife," a hallmark of

⁸⁷ "The Legend of Isis and the Name of Re." translated by Robert K. Ritner (*COS* 1.22: 33-34).

⁸⁸ Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 167.

⁸⁹ Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 167.

⁹⁰ H. te Velde, "The Egyptian God Seth as a Trickster," *JARCE* 7 (1968): 37.

⁹¹ te Velde, "The Egyptian God Seth as a Trickster," 37. See also his *Seth, God of Confusion: A Study of his Role in Egyptian Mythology and Religion* (Probleme der Ägyptologie 6; trans. Mrs. G. E. van Baaren-Pape; Leiden: Brill, 1977), 25, where the determinative for the Seth-animal is discussed in relation to the "divine joker."

the trickster.⁹² Third, Seth's trickery leads to the murder of the netherworld god Osiris when he promises a chest—which is in reality a coffin—to whomever fits into it. Each deity takes a turn, and when Osiris discovers he is a fit, “Seth unexpectedly runs up, closes the chest, and throws it into the water without any funeral ceremonies,” resulting in Osiris' death by drowning.⁹³ Seth, says te Velde, had offered through the coffin eternal life, as an Egyptian mind would see a coffin insuring life after death, but through deception gave only death.⁹⁴ Fourth, Seth's engagement in homosexual activity with his nephew Horus evidences a crossing of sexual boundaries that often identifies the trickster.⁹⁵ And fifth, Seth is a “slayer-of-the-monster,” serving as an intimidating presence through natural phenomena such as thunder, who keeps chaos at bay.⁹⁶

Hittite. One Hittite text preserves an instance in which a goddess deceives with the aid of a human. In *The Myth of Illuyankaš*,⁹⁷ the goddess Inaraš kills the Illuyankaš dragon through trickery with the help of the human Hupašiyaš. Similar to the story of Inanna and Enki in *The Transfer of the Arts of Civilization* mentioned above, the goddess Inaraš gets the dragon intoxicated and takes advantage of the situation. She hides

⁹² te Velde, “The Egyptian God Seth as a Trickster,” 38.

⁹³ te Velde, “The Egyptian God Seth as a Trickster,” 38. Te Velde further states that this episode was viewed by the Egyptians as especially heinous, and therefore “it is never depicted, and the Egyptian texts only refer to Seth's deed in veiled terms.” On this point see also te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, 82-84, where te Velde labels Seth “a divine murderer and deceiver” in the murdering of Osiris (83).

⁹⁴ te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, 83.

⁹⁵ te Velde, “The Egyptian God Seth as a Trickster,” 39.

⁹⁶ te Velde, “The Egyptian God Seth as a Trickster,” 39.

⁹⁷ “The Storm-God and the Serpent (Illuyanka).” translated by Gary Beckman (*COS* 1.56: 150-151).

Hupašiyaš, who suddenly appears and binds the drunken dragon. The Storm-god then emerges and slays the dragon.

Summary. This survey of divine deception within texts from the ancient Near East is in no way meant to be exhaustive; it is, rather, representative. It also supports the present study by noting the ubiquity of divine deception within ancient Israel's wider cultural context. These textual traditions had a great staying-power in the ancient Near East, surviving over the course of several centuries. They constitute part of the milieu of the ancient Near East, and it is quite likely ancient Israel would have been aware of such a prevalent theme.⁹⁸ To make this connection all the more explicit, Fontaine argues the image of the deceptive goddess treated above provides an apt parallel to biblical women deceivers such as Rebekah and Tamar.⁹⁹ She calls the deceptive goddess "the divine sister" of the female trickster and rightly notes that these mythic texts emerged and developed "in the same thought world" as the biblical text.¹⁰⁰ One should not then be surprised to discover this very same motif of divine deception—which scholars have noted already to be prevalent primarily within the Pentateuch, Deuteronomistic History, and the Prophets—within the Hebrew Bible, Genesis included. Divine deception thus appears to have been a prominent motif within the wider ancient Near Eastern context with which ancient Israel would likely have been acquainted.

⁹⁸ It is, however, not the intention nor interest of the present study to conjecture as to the relationship between ancient Near Eastern divine deception and biblical portrayals of God as deceptive. My purpose here is solely to point out its presence within the ancient Near Eastern context of which ancient Israel was a part, and thus to lend support to the idea of seeing divine deception in the Hebrew Bible. Such an investigation on the relationship between the two bodies of literature—biblical and ancient Near Eastern—lies beyond the bounds of the present study, but it is a worthwhile question to ponder for the future as the study of divine deception continues to mature.

⁹⁹ Fontaine, "The Deceptive Goddess," 85, 95.

¹⁰⁰ Fontaine, "The Deceptive Goddess," 85, 87.

Modern Anthropological Examples of Trickster Deities

Modern anthropological literature also evidences the existence of trickster deities. This section will be admittedly quite cursory for a variety of reasons. First, in terms of methodology the present study is not concerned with cross-cultural parallels or readings of the biblical text but rather, as will be made clear in what follows, with a literary-theological approach to the biblical text. Second, contemporary anthropological literature can help to inform the biblical text in a variety of ways, yet on the issue of divine tricksters there is nothing one can say about an Israelite awareness of or influence by the presence of trickster deities in other cultures. Where this discussion is helpful, though, pertains again to the importance of underscoring the existence and subsistence of such a phenomenon. Here, therefore, we will only note a few among many examples of trickster deities within anthropological literature.

Within Native American mythology one encounters semi-divine tricksters. The key figures are Hare, Spider, or Coyote. Paul Radin writes of the Winnebago Hare cycle and its cognates that the Trickster is simultaneously creator of the world and establisher of culture,¹⁰¹ a dual nature leading Radin to muse over Trickster's relationship to deity:

This, of course, raises an old question, namely, whether Trickster was originally a deity. Are we dealing here with a disintegration of his creative activities or with a merging of two entirely distinct figures, one a deity, the other a hero, represented either as human or animal? Has a hero here been elevated to the rank of a god, or was Trickster originally a deity with two sides to his nature, one constructive, one destructive, one spiritual, the other material? Or, again, does Trickster antedate the divine, the animal and the human?¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 124-125.

¹⁰² Radin, *The Trickster*, 125.

In response to this question, Radin posits that “Trickster’s divinity is always secondary,” yet several tribes still equate Trickster with the divine due to a view of Trickster’s great antiquity.¹⁰³ Native American tricksters are at times explicitly connected with divinity as well. For example, an Oglala myth records Spider saying, “I am a god and the son of a god. . . . I have done much good and should be treated as a god.”¹⁰⁴

Contemporary African mythology also witnesses to trickster deities. The study by Robert Pelton stands as perhaps the most thorough on the topic. Pelton isolates his discussion to West Africa, focusing upon Ananse (the Spider) of the Ashanti, Ogo-Yurugu of the Dogon, Legba of the Fon, and Eshu and Legba of the Yoruba.¹⁰⁵ John Pemberton looks specifically on the last of these deities, pointing out that Eshu has the power both to create and to destroy, very similar to the dual nature discussed above in regards to Native American semi-divine tricksters.¹⁰⁶

Toward a Theology of Deception

To return to our initial question—God’s role in Jacob’s deceptions—the previous survey of scholarship has made it clear that this issue has been neglected in the secondary literature. Scholarship has recognized the presence of divine deception elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, but no sustained treatment beyond a few cursory mentions has been advanced for the Jacob cycle, which is saturated with episodes of deception. The ancient

¹⁰³ Radin, *The Trickster*, 164.

¹⁰⁴ Radin, *The Trickster*, 165.

¹⁰⁵ R. D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 25-222.

¹⁰⁶ John Pemberton, “The Yoruba Trickster God,” *African Arts* 9 (1975): 22, 70.

Near Eastern and anthropological literature surveyed further attests to the viability of speaking of divine deception.

With this background in place, an investigation into divine deception in the Jacob cycle is merited. Jacob's deceptions, as articulated above, are deeply tethered to the moments of theophany that appear throughout the cycle. How might this connection between Jacob's activity and God's appearances contribute to the image of YHWH as a divine deceiver? Moreover, how does the ancestral promise (Gen 12:1-3) figure into this relationship? At the outset of this study, we introduced the thesis that God appears deeply involved in Jacob's deceptions, all with the intent of carrying forward the ancestral promise. The chapters that follow will make explicit what scholarship largely has left implicit: the association between promise, deception, and God. We may thus begin to speak of a *theology of deception*.

Assumptions and Methodology

With historical-critical methodologies still very much at the fore in Pentateuchal studies, this investigation takes a different, synchronic route, emphasizing the final form of the book of Genesis as the primary locus of meaning and the appropriate base for theological inquiry. While the biblical text as we have it surely arose by means of a process of growth and development from different sources and traditions, one must also reckon with the fact that this same text has canonized these very tensions and inconsistencies. Their presence bespeaks that they were seen as meaningful and authoritative for a particular community. This study eschews purely historical questions, not because they are unimportant but rather because they are in abundance in regards to

this material.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, I have grown increasingly hesitant in seeing Old Testament theology as an inherently historical and excavative discipline.¹⁰⁸ This study sets out to redress an imbalance between historical and literary approaches within Genesis scholarship, demonstrating that a close reading of the text with an eye toward its literary artistry opens up new avenues of investigation that are worthy of further mining.. This study also advocates a return to theology proper, seeking literally a “word about God.” Therefore, our investigation employs a unique synthesis of a close literary reading of the biblical text with theological aims. One must discern this meaning from the text we have.

There are two mutually informing poles that will be operative in this study. First, rather than attempting to explain the numinous origins of the text or its formation, we will emphasize *what the text says*. Readers play a role in discerning a text’s meaning, and that meaning arises in the dynamic relationship between text and reader. While no reading can be entirely disinterested, the text itself serves as a ‘control’ on one’s interpretation, and it is against the text that the authenticity of any interpretation must be judged. Walter Brueggemann gives adequate voice to the underpinnings of this aspect of my method:

¹⁰⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 118, takes a similar approach, claiming that one has very few exegetical “tools” to uncover sound history. Brueggemann also writes that issues of history “must be held in abeyance, pending the credibility and persuasiveness of Israel’s testimony, on which everything depends.”

¹⁰⁸ I am in agreement with Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 4-5, where he identifies the most prevalent unsolved problem as whether one is doing Old Testament theology, a history of Israel’s religion, or both. Childs is correct in my view that the rightful object of theological reflection and work should be the received canonical text, replete with all its shaping, and that this canonical text has not only preserved earlier historical traditions within ancient Israel’s life of faith but also reshaped them into a (cogent) whole (11).

One should also here note the seminal contribution of Leo Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), who chronicles a move away from the hegemony of historical-critical methodologies in doing theology. For Perdue, we live in a world of plurality, and the task of doing Old Testament theology is similarly a pluralistic exercise with great and worthwhile variety (5). Part of the goal of Old Testament theology, says Perdue, is to articulate a theology that is relevant to contemporary life and faith, rather than a theology indelibly tethered to the history behind the text. History retains a place in theological inquiry, yet it no longer exists as the only, or even best, way to do theology.

I shall insist, as consistently as I can, that the God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with, and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text, and nowhere else and in no other way. This rhetorical enterprise operates with ontological assumptions, but these assumptions are open to dispute and revision in the ongoing rhetorical enterprise of Israel.¹⁰⁹

God is not a static, predictable character but rather one that emerges and takes shape from the reading process. Therefore, this study will offer a close reading of the text and glean from there what is said about God's character.¹¹⁰ The process of reading engages the text and its characters in manifold ways, pressing the reader constantly to reevaluate and challenge earlier conclusions. God, therefore, through the narrative's portrayal of him as a character, is in a constant process of becoming.¹¹¹

Second, our analysis will attempt to emphasize also *how the text means*. Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* is a seminal contribution on this point. Alter has demonstrated convincingly the veracity of a literary approach to the biblical text. His work has also been generative for a great many other literary critics.¹¹² These works will contribute to and inform the subsequent chapters on matters of ambiguity/gaps, type-scenes, narration and dialogue, story patterning, among other literary features germane to

¹⁰⁹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 66.

¹¹⁰ My reading is not colored by *a priori* ontological assumptions about God's character deriving from classical systematic theology. The primary operative assumption undergirding this study is that the God of the biblical text is the God with whom one must struggle. Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 20, offers a helpful discussion of this posture of reading that illuminates the present study: "I will seek to set aside from now both claims by historians of religion about the God(s) of ancient Israel and early Judaism and particular and fundamental claims about God from theologians and members of religious communities who assert an identity between God in Genesis and the God who commands their worship and allegiance. This too is, I recognize, a condition I can but approach, but again the effort will prove of interest."

¹¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 2-5, argues that God in the Hebrew Bible is an unsettled, 'flesh and bones' character who is personal and relational, two traits which are indelibly tied up with the biblical notion of covenant.

¹¹² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup 70; Sheffield: Almond, 1989); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983).

matters of meaning. This trajectory of how the text means is often absent in scholarly discussions on the Jacob cycle yet contributes much to the exegetical task. Such insights serve as a vital vector of meaning and will highlight new interpretive possibilities.

Adele Berlin in her *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* describes this dual hermeneutical posture in terms of poetics (how a text means) and interpretation (what a text means). The two exist, she maintains, in “a symbiotic relationship” with one another.¹¹³ Poetics may inform interpretation, but interpretation may likewise inform poetics. Used independently of one another, they become “useless”; they cannot be practiced in isolation from one another.¹¹⁴ She advocates a posture of approaching poetics that grounds itself in a close literary reading of the biblical text, with special attention paid to patterns, recurrent and unusual literary devices, and linguistic structures.¹¹⁵ Emphasis for her lay not on the meaning of the various literary devices one discerns but instead on their “function” in contributing to and elucidating textual meaning.¹¹⁶ Berlin’s methodological assumptions outlined here provide a helpful orientation to the task undertaken in the following chapters and are shared by this study.

As an honest theological engagement with Israel’s scriptures, two additional points become important for our study. First, it is necessary that one also regards the Jacob cycle as highly theological. *Contra* von Rad, who deems it far too difficult to glean any theological insight or profundity from the ancestral narratives,¹¹⁷ we have

¹¹³ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 16.

¹¹⁴ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 16-17.

¹¹⁵ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 19.

¹¹⁶ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 19.

¹¹⁷ von Rad, *The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions*, 171

already seen that the Jacob cycle is just as much a text about God as about Jacob. God's purposes and activity cannot be limited to the moments of theophany, which are quite revelatory in their own right and without fail disclose God's activity behind the scenes, but must also be discerned within the actions and interactions of the text's human characters. This point will become clearer as the study ensues. Second, such an honest engagement cannot resort to apologetics or attempt to eliminate such problematic images, such as God as deceptive, from discussion.

A brief example will help illustrate the point. Eric Seibert's recent contribution, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, contends one must distinguish between the "textual God" and the "actual God."¹¹⁸ He proposes a Christocentric hermeneutic to adjudicate between the two, in essence arguing that Old Testament images of God conforming to the God revealed in Jesus represent reliable images of the divine character.¹¹⁹ Seibert's hermeneutic is unconvincing for many reasons, not least of which is that it empties these portraits of God of any theological meaning or significance, relegating them merely to the status of antiquated musings of Israel. They are rendered problematic and dismissed for that reason.¹²⁰ The claim Seibert makes that "*some* Old Testament portrayals of God do not accurately reflect God's character" is further misleading.¹²¹ It highlights the *a priori* assumption that we know who God is and who God is not. The approach taken here,

¹¹⁸ Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 170-171.

¹¹⁹ Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 185.

¹²⁰ I hesitate to label Seibert's reading neo-Marcionite, though to be fair this is a critique he faces head-on. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 211-212, avows that Marcion advocated a wholesale rejection of the Old Testament, while he himself has "proposed an interpretive approach that can help us evaluate the appropriateness of various portrayals of God in the Old Testament." I understand the distinction he attempts to draw, though I continue to be unconvinced that this hermeneutic is the most honest or fruitful way of handling the matter.

¹²¹ Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 211. (italics original)

conversely, remains that the God of the text is the God we must engage first and foremost. To jettison a particular image simply because it appears unsavory fails to take seriously the full and multi-faceted witness of the biblical text.

One final caution is also especially pertinent at the outset of our investigation. In its original context, the Jacob cycle is *not* a narrative ultimately concerned with matters of ethics.¹²² One should thus be cautious against importing contemporary sensibilities pertaining to ethics and morality, presuming these ancient texts must conform to our own way of adjudicating what is and is not moral.¹²³ The ubiquity of deception within Genesis, the ancient Near East, and the Hebrew Bible reveals it was a prevalent motif within that cultural milieu and was often not to be regarded negatively.¹²⁴ Additionally, deception was an ability that was often highly prized and even within the biblical text

¹²² I do not intend to imply these texts have nothing to contribute to such discussions but only that there does not appear to be any moral commentary running throughout them. Gleaning ethical or moral truths from the Jacob cycle is not the goal of this dissertation. See Harry Lesser, "'It's Difficult to Understand': Dealing with Morally Difficult Passages in the Hebrew Bible" in *Jewish Ways of Reading the Bible* (ed. George J. Brooke; JSSSup 11; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 292-302, and most recently Richard S. Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 17-44, 193-212, for a discussion of the *ethical* dynamics of interaction between text and reader. While I disagree with the sentiment that a contemporary reader should deem these texts unethical, Lesser and Briggs bring up an aspect of the reading process that may prove helpful for some.

¹²³ Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader*, 203, rightly situates this difficulty with the *reader*, not with the text: "Furthermore, most biblical texts speak for some person and against others, and often the social/political/ecclesial location of the reader is one key to whether a text is experienced as having a life-giving role or as profoundly challenging and unsettling."

¹²⁴ *Contra* Sarna, *Genesis*, 397-398. Buttressing this point, Hartmut Gese, "Jakob, der Betrüger" in *Meilenstein: Festgabe für Herbert Donner zum 16. Februar 1995* (ed. M. Weippert and S. Timm; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995), 43, traces out the narrative traditions of Jacob the deceiver as they have been received elsewhere in the canon. He cites Hos 12, Jer 9, and Mal 3 as containing no reference to Jacob's deception but rather to only his struggle for the right of the firstborn and blessing. Only Isa 43:27, with its notion of all Israel standing in line behind a sinful ancestor, may one discern an implicit condemnation. Gese concludes that the already theologically loaded 'Jacob as deceiver' has undergone a theological deepening (*theologischer Vertiefung*) in the prophetic corpus and the easy equation of "Jacob" with "deceiver" is itself alien to the rest of the Hebrew Bible. On this point, see also Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, 212-221, where he maintains the wider canon shows little concern for the immorality of the ancestors and instead tethers them to God's faithfulness to the promise.

does not always receive a negative evaluation.¹²⁵ One must first analyze biblical divine deception, then, with an eye toward its historical anchoring and take seriously how the *narrative* reports it.

The Ancestral Promise in Genesis

Given that the ancestral promise is a key component to this study's overall argument in that it serves as the motivation for YHWH's role in Jacob's deceptions, it will be necessary and helpful to provide here a brief overview of how one should understand the ancestral promise in Genesis.

The central theme and organizing principle throughout the ancestral narratives is the protection and passing on of the promise given to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3.¹²⁶ There, YHWH delivers a three-fold promise to Abraham: land, descendants, and blessing for all the nations of the earth. As the narrative progresses, one can easily discern the promise's trajectory: first it is given to Abraham in 12:1-3, then to Isaac in 26:2-5, and then to Jacob in 28:13-15.¹²⁷ Each time the promise is handed on to the next generation the same tripartite formula—land, descendants, blessing to the nations—gets reiterated. It is also imperative that one recognize in each instance the promise gets passed on it is always at God's own behest and initiative.

¹²⁵ Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 221, defines those events within Genesis to which he believes the narrator has ascribed a positive evaluation and those to which the narrator has given a negative evaluation. While I would quibble with some of his classifications, his point that biblical deception is not unequivocally negative stands. Matthews and Mims, "Jacob the Trickster," 195, discuss how Jacob's deceptions specifically would appeal to an ancient Israelite audience.

¹²⁶ The promise is so pervasive that David J. A. Clines identifies its partial (non-)fulfillment as the theme uniting the Pentateuch into a cogent literary whole. See his *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOTSup 10; 2nd ed; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), esp. pp. 30-65.

¹²⁷ George G. Nicol, "Story Patterning in Genesis" in *Text as Pretext: Essays in Honour of Robert Davidson* (ed. Robert P. Carroll; JSOTSup 138; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 219-222, deems the promise and its various repetitions a mode of establishing textual continuity.

With the patriarch Jacob, however, the usual pattern of one descendant alone receiving the promise breaks down. Prior to Jacob, as Christopher Heard aptly puts it, there has been a narrowing of the family tree in accord with God's purposes: Lot, Ishmael, and Esau respectively have become the "diselect," cut off from YHWH's covenant with Abraham's family.¹²⁸ But now YHWH grants Jacob not one child of the promise but ultimately twelve children of the promise, none of whom are "diselect." The significance of this shift is that God now begins to set the stage for the actualizing of the ancestral promise. From Jacob's children arise the entire people Israel. God's prior particularity with the patriarchs alone begins to expand to include all nations. With Jacob's children one observes in Gen 49:28 the democratization of the original blessing to Abraham.¹²⁹ Jacob, who becomes the namesake for the entire people Israel in Gen 32:28 (and 35:10!), passes on the promise of the blessing to all his children, who in turn would do the same until all the Israelites were bearers of the promise.

Two aspects of the ancestral promise are especially relevant to the topic at hand. First, the promise is at nearly every turn of the narrative in danger of being unfulfilled. Sarah's barrenness (11:30; 16:1), the wife-sister stories (12; 20; 26), which child is to serve as the appropriate heir (21; 25; 27), Rebekah and Rachel's barrenness (25:21; 30:1-2), Jacob's internment with Laban in Haran (29-31), the conflict between Joseph and his brothers leading to the family settling in Egypt, among a host of other events threaten the vitality of the promise. In each instance, however, God overcomes the threat,

¹²⁸ Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 184.

¹²⁹ Josef Schreiner, "Segen für Völker in der Verheißung an die Väter," *BZ* 6 (1962): 4.

demonstrating his fealty to and unwavering concern for the promise's future.¹³⁰ It is within this context that one must interpret the God-Jacob relationship.

Second, the function of the promise, specifically the notion of “blessing” to the other nations of the world in v. 3, highlights the cosmic implications of ancient Israel's task.¹³¹ For Keith Grüneberg, the ancestral promise and its various iterations elsewhere in Genesis (22:18; 26:4; 28:14) climax with this recognition of blessing to the nations.¹³² In Gen 12:3 YHWH states, “and in you all families of the earth will be blessed.” This blessing, though, is conditional. Immediately prior YHWH says, “I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse.” Whether a given person or nation receives blessing or cursing is contingent upon whether they are a blessing or curse to Abraham's family.¹³³ In a similar vein, R. W. L. Moberly has argued quite recently that the customary Christian appropriation of Gen 12:3 in support of universal salvation is wanting.¹³⁴ The understanding of the conditional nature of Israel's blessing the families

¹³⁰ One should remain mindful that God's behavior in some of these episodes is inexplicable, if not a bit unsettling. For example, in the wife-sister stories both Abraham and Isaac deceive in the unsuccessful attempt to pass off their wives as sisters. Once the deception is uncovered, God intervenes in a way that seems to reward the deception, inflicting plagues on Pharaoh in Gen 12 or, more strikingly, insuring that Abraham leaves Gerar with great wealth at the expense of Abimelech in Gen 20. Similarly, Joseph's words at the close of Genesis (50:20) communicate the idea of retrospective providence, highlighting God's orchestrating everything from Joseph's slavery to his family's settling in Egypt.

¹³¹ On the topic of election and non-election from Christian and Jewish viewpoints, see most recently Joel N. Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation* (Siphut 2; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), who argues that the unchosen still occupy a place in the economy of God's larger desires and intentions for the world.

¹³² Keith N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in its Narrative Context* (BZAW 332; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 84. See also Paul R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel, and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and its Covenantal Development in Genesis* (JSOTSup 315; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

¹³³ On this point, see my “Jacob, Laban, and a Divine Trickster,” 13 n. 39; Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations*, 171-185, 242-243.

¹³⁴ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Old Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 142-148.

of the earth just articulated presents an initial challenge to the traditional viewpoint. Nations will receive in accordance with their treatment of Israel. Moberly, though, presents another understanding of the ancestral promise with which this study is in favor: instead of reading the promise from the perspective of those receiving the blessing from Israel, one should imagine the promise also from the perspective of Abraham and his family. Read as such, the ancestral promise stands as a benefit to Abraham and his family, providing reassurance and hope for this particular people, whom YHWH will bless and by whom others have the opportunity of being blessed.¹³⁵ Israel is not merely a prop through which YHWH blesses the entire world; supporting our first point above, Israel herself is the object of divine blessing. The ancestral promise is both cosmic and selective. God, as will be evident in the treatment in the chapters that follow, steadfastly accompanies and protects Jacob (Israel), the child of the promise, at every turn. At the same time, Brueggemann rightly cautions against an elitist reading of Gen 12-36 that relegates Ishmael and Esau to the margins; here the specialness of Israel is set alongside those outside the bounds of the *ancestral* promise.¹³⁶ These characters, however, are afforded a certain level of narrative space in relation to the elected child. As symbolic of the nations Ammon, Moab, and Edom, they are concurrently “incidental” to Israel’s life of promise and an inescapable part of its destiny.¹³⁷ In short, the universality of Israel—here evident in the election of Abraham’s family as bearers of the promise—lies exclusively in Jewish particularity.

¹³⁵ Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, 148-150.

¹³⁶ Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God*, 105.

¹³⁷ Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God*, 106, notes the paradox: the nations are an “*impediment* to be eliminated, according to YHWH’s will” and “to be *blessed* and enhanced, according to YHWH’s mandate.”

Definitions

There exists a wealth of scholarly treatments on “the trickster” in anthropological, folkloric, and historical literature. One may attribute the introduction of the term itself within scholarship to Daniel Brinton, who seems to have been the first to use it in the mid-nineteenth century in reference to North American Indian mythology.¹³⁸ Since Brinton, the term appears to have taken on a life of its own, being variously interpreted by scholars who have failed to wrestle with the trickster’s inherent ambiguity.¹³⁹ Attempts have been made at universal understandings of the trickster. The definition provided by Cristiano Grottanelli serves as a good example:

Tricksters are breakers of rules, but, though they are often tragic in their own specific way, their breaking of rules is always comical. This funny irregularity is the central quality of the trickster; and what makes the anomie comical is the trickster’s lowliness. When he is an animal, the trickster is a crafty, rather than a powerful, beast . . . when a human being, he never ranks high, and his power lies in his witty brain or in some strange gift of nature. So a working definition of the trickster could be: ‘a breaker of rules who is funny because he is lowly.’¹⁴⁰

This definition images the trickster as a wholly static figure from one culture to another. Such a view, however, is laden with problems.

Naomi Steinberg, in looking at various cross-cultural representations of the trickster in comparison with biblical tricksters, challenges the notion that the “trickster” is a monolithic entity. She argues that scholarship has begun a transition away from noting the similarities amongst tricksters toward emphasizing what is unique about tricksters

¹³⁸ Daniel Brinton, *The Myths of the New World* (Philadelphia: David McKay Co., 1868), 161-162. For a fine history of research on the term, see Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa*, 5-10, or more recently Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited*, 8-16, esp. pp. 13-15.

¹³⁹ Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa*, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Cristiano Grottanelli, “Tricksters, Scapegoats, Champions, Saviors,” *History of Religion* 23 (1983): 120.

from diverse cultures.¹⁴¹ As a result, such universal definitions are ultimately not only unhelpful but also misleading; the trickster figure is, fitting to its name, sundry and elusive.¹⁴² One thus cannot assume the trickster is portrayed in the same way within diverse cultures and texts. This study, therefore, will not focus upon cross-cultural parallels with the biblical text. Rather, heeding Steinberg's admonition, this study will base its investigation solely on the biblical text so as to produce a truly biblical—more specifically, Genesis—understanding of the divine trickster.

With this difficulty in mind, Susan Niditch offers a helpful introductory definition of the term “trickster.” Niditch's analysis of the term is informed by folkloric parallels but also, most importantly, by the biblical text. The breadth and depth of her study presents a sound definition from which I will work. She defines “trickster” as, at bottom, one who “brings about a change in a situation via trickery.”¹⁴³ I have chosen to operate under this very basic—albeit well-attested—definition of the trickster as a way to begin to enter into the study of this thorny question. This definition in its utter simplicity also jettisons any claims at universal or absolute authority. Niditch's definition is broad enough for this *prolegomena*, yet specific enough—in conjunction with the definition of “trickery” or “deception” offered below—in that it dictates certain parameters for what

¹⁴¹ Naomi Steinberg, “Israelite Tricksters, Their Analogues and Cross-Cultural Study,” *Semeia* 42 (1988): 4.

¹⁴² Steinberg, “Israelite Tricksters,” 4, 6, 10. Steinberg advocates “abandoning not only ‘trickster’ as a technical term but also broad questions of cross-cultural functions of this character” (10).

¹⁴³ Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore*, xv. Niditch further clarifies the trickster's character as that of “deceiver, creator, acculturator, unmasked liar, survivor” (45), yet I hesitate—in line with Steinberg—to claim any sort of universality for this definition. Rather, it may be helpful to realize that given that Niditch's approach takes folklore into account, it is in a way quite similar methodologically to Gunkel's form criticism (which she notes), and one would thus be incorrect to aver that every aspect of the definition of a trickster must be manifest in every situation..

constitutes the “trickster.” Subsequent studies may indeed reveal a specific listing of criteria for what is here identified as the divine trickster.

One may rightfully then wonder what is meant by “trickery” or “deception.” Given that it is such a loaded word that carries for many contemporary readers much negative baggage, it will be important also to define it here. “Trickery” or “deception” (which will be used synonymously throughout, as is the scholarly convention) is that which the trickster employs through any variety of distorting, withholding, or manipulation of information so as to serve or advance the trickster’s own purposes and goals.¹⁴⁴ A vital component of this definition lies in the motive for the deception being tied up with the trickster’s ultimate goals. In this way one can begin to see how YHWH’s role in Jacob’s deceptions deals with the unfailing divine concern for the perpetuation of the ancestral promise.

A Brief Overview of the Study

Our foray into divine deception in the Jacob cycle will consist of five chapters. Chapter 1, this introduction, has served as an overall orientation to and necessary background for the central question of divine deception in the Jacob cycle. Chapter 2, “A Trickster Oracle: Reading Jacob and Esau between *Beten* and Bethel” treats Gen 25-28. Special emphasis will be placed on how the divine oracle in 25:23—described as a

¹⁴⁴ My definition is a streamlined version of that which Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 3, presents. Williams’ definition reads: “Deception takes place when an agent intentionally distorts, withholds, or otherwise manipulates information reaching some person(s) in order to stimulate in the person(s) a belief that the agent does not believe in order to serve the agent’s purposes.” I have intentionally omitted the requirement that the trickster need not believe what he or she is presenting as fact. This issue of what is and is not true reality is a complicated matter, especially in Gen 25-27 (for instance, is Jacob technically the firstborn by the very fact that he obtains the right of the firstborn in 25:29-34, and thus becomes the rightful recipient of the blessing in chapter 27?). It appears quite clear that Rebekah (and Jacob?) believe very deeply that God has ordained Jacob as the true firstborn and recipient of the blessing. Moreover, matters of belief run the risk of delving too deeply into a psychologizing of the biblical characters and goes well beyond the bounds of what the biblical narrative often makes known.

“trickster oracle”—impacts how one reads the chapters that follow, both bringing about and informing the subsequent scenes of deception (25:27-34; 27:1-45). This novel reading gives new import to the Bethel scene in Gen 28, seeing it as divine corroboration of the prior deceptions. In Chapter 3, “Divine Deception and the Incipient Fulfillment of the Ancestral Promise,” attention will be paid to Jacob’s prolonged stay with Laban in Gen 29-31. Here we will address not only the incipient fulfillment of the ancestral promise evident in the birth of twelve children (29:31-30:24) and Laban’s recognition that YHWH has blessed him through Jacob’s presence (30:27), but also how this fulfillment is being carried out by means of deception. Emphasis will also be placed on perhaps the most potent divine deception in the Jacob cycle in Gen 30-31 and its relation to the promise.

Chapter 4, “Replaying the Fool: Esau vs. YHWH and Jacob” considers Gen 32-35, focusing upon how Jacob continues in his deceptive ways, even in the reconciliation scene with Esau. Jacob’s encounter with his besmirched brother will be read in parallel with 25:27-34. Esau again plays the fool on a variety of levels: his acceptance of Jacob’s ambiguous offer of the blessing (33:11, cf. 32:29) and his separation from Jacob by means of the latter’s trickery (33:15-20). God again is deeply connected with these deceptions, both in the wrestling match with Jacob in Gen 32 and in the appearance in Gen 35, on the heels of a deadly act of deception. Chapter 5 will serve as a conclusion to the entire work. The majority of this section will address the theological implications deriving from this reading and will conclude with prospects for future study.

CHAPTER TWO

A Trickster Oracle: Reading Jacob and Esau Between *Beten* and Bethel (Gen 25-28)

Introductory Remarks

The traditional interpretation of this opening block of Jacob and Esau stories sees the human actors in a less-than-flattering light. Jacob cons his brother Esau out of the right of the firstborn, and he and Rebekah cruelly deceive the aged, blind Isaac out of his paternal blessing. S. R. Driver offers the following moral commentary: “That the action of Rebekah and Jacob was utterly discreditable and indefensible is of course obvious.”¹ Such a reading is highly *anthrocentric*, focusing solely on the human characters and their engagements with one another.² The deceptions are human deceptions, the conflict is human conflict. These characters are self-motivated, self-interested, and above all disreputable given their less than sterling motives and activities. Most striking perhaps is the implication that God has no involvement in and bears no responsibility for these unscrupulous acts. In chapter one we surveyed several scholars who hold such views. Moreover, traditional interpretations seldom discuss the ancestral promise. YHWH’s oracle in Gen 25:23 receives little attention beyond forecasting what will happen. And, correspondingly, there is no mention of God beyond the utterance of this oracle.

More recently, commentators have begun to wonder at the tension that appears latent in the text: does deception fulfill the divine oracle in 25:23? Gordon Wenham has

¹ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (Westminster Commentaries; London: Methuen, 1915), 255.

² Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions* (vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*; trans. D. M. G. Stalker; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 171, describes these texts as “much less spiritual” than the earlier Abraham narratives.

raised this question, only not to answer it head-on. He writes that these narratives do in fact say something about God, but it is God's unfailing mercy that receives notice and not how a history governed by God can unproblematically include deceptions as a method of fulfilling the divine plan.³ Additionally, Wenham's statement comes in a very short paragraph at the end of his section on Gen 26:34-28:9. One searches almost in vain to find any mention of God elsewhere in this discussion. Despite asking the question, the commentary remains relegated to a focus on the human characters. The near dearth of space devoted to discussing God here is most salient.

These views ignore the potential for a *theocentric* reading of these opening chapters, indeed of the entire Jacob cycle. Upon further investigation, Gen 25-28 addresses a much larger complex of ideas and themes that pervade Genesis, primarily the ancestral promise and a vested divine concern for creation. God has broken into history yet again, choosing this particular family to serve as a blessing to all humanity.⁴ Rebekah's troubling pregnancy, coupled with the emergent conflict that comes to typify the chosen family's relationships, serves as a threat to the vitality and viability of attaining this goal. The ancestral promise, therefore, retains a preeminent place in the story of Jacob and his family. Moreover, this first block of the narrative is bookended by theophanies, occurring in Gen 25:23 and 28:10-22 respectively. In Gen 25:23, God offers his pronouncement on the fate of Rebekah and Isaac's still unborn twins, and in

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 216.

⁴ I am in agreement with Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL; rev.ed.; trans. J. H. Marks; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 153-155, that Gen 12:1-3 serves as the mitigation for the Tower of Babel scene in Gen 11, which seems to end on a note of judgment. I am less confident than von Rad, though, in ascribing authorship of these three verses to J. This equivocation, however, is of little ultimate consequence, for in the final form of the text Gen 12:1-3 serves as a hinge connecting the Primeval and Ancestral History. On the relationship between the two from the perspective of promise, see Carol M. Kaminski, *From Noah to Israel: Realization of the Primeval Blessing After the Flood* (JSOTSup 413; London: T&T Clark, 2004), esp. pp. 92-123.

Gen 28:10-22 that pronouncement comes to fruition with Jacob receiving—at God’s behest—the ancestral promise. These two theophanies enclose and thus may inform one’s reading of the intervening events. God is not a disinterested bystander or one who withdraws and spasmodically appears when it is convenient for his characterization (i.e., when there are no deceptions occurring) but is a figure deeply woven into the fabric of the story. The question then naturally presents itself: what characterization of God emerges when read *in tandem* with these scenes of deception? What if these very deceptions from which conventional readings of Gen 25-28 have apologetically sought to distance themselves not only fulfill but also are brought about by the divine purpose?

The divine oracle in Gen 25:23, announcing God’s preference for Jacob over Esau, serves as the hermeneutical key to comprehending the larger Jacob cycle. The traditional rendering of this oracle, however—the final line most specifically—as “the elder will serve the younger” presumes a greater level of lucid transparency than a close scrutiny of the text will allow. Upon further analysis, one should instead render the line as “the greater will serve the lesser,” attempting to preserve though still not capturing entirely the ambiguity evident in the Hebrew text. Through the oracle’s ambiguity on matters of syntax, meaning, and identity of the characters, most importantly the greater (רַב) and lesser (צָעִיר), YHWH withholds the vital information necessary to realize his desire that the firstborn Esau’s preeminence will not be the case but rather the secondborn Jacob will become the “greater” (רַב). At the narrative level, the oracle needs interpreting. This oracle, therefore, may be read as an example of YHWH as trickster; accordingly, this initial divine word in Jacob’s life may be described as a “trickster oracle.”

The trickster oracle also results in subsequent deceptions. It impels the narrative's human actors to set in motion the deceptive means by which the divine wish comes to fruition. One sees this corollary in Jacob's shrewd manipulation of Esau so as to gain the right of the firstborn (25:27-34) and Jacob's deceptive obtaining with Rebekah's (and God's) help his father's blessing (27:1-45). God is therefore involved in Jacob and Rebekah's deceptions of Esau and Isaac from the very beginning. And it is only at Bethel (28:13-15) that the narrative makes it clear that Rebekah has interpreted the oracle correctly in favor of Jacob. In bringing about this change through deception, God ultimately advances the divine purpose—concern for the perpetuation of the ancestral promise (12:1-3)—that becomes manifest in the character and family of Jacob.

The reason this reading has been so often missed lies in the failure to read the oracle in conjunction with the Bethel episode, Gen 28:13-15 more specifically. These two divine speeches, to Rebekah and at Bethel respectively, form an *inclusio* around the first block of Jacob/Esau material, and YHWH's giving of the ancestral promise to Jacob at Bethel can be read as corroborating the successful outcome of the preceding events in chapters 25-27. God does not appear at Bethel and cast moral judgment on Jacob and Rebekah's shenanigans; God rather confers the ancestral promise on this most wily, and deserving, of patriarchs! When one reads these opening narratives between these two poles—between *beten* and Bethel—God's complicity in the deception comes to the fore, all with the divine intent to carry forward the ancestral promise.

Our analysis of Gen 25-28 will commence in three parts. First, the bulk of this investigation will be devoted to treating Gen 25:19-34, placing particular emphasis on the trickster oracle in 25:23, as a way of demonstrating the centrality of the oracle for the

entire Jacob cycle and how the oracle's ambiguity informs the deceptions that follow. Here the infamous birthright episode, Gen 25:27-34, will also be discussed with the intent of showing how its interpretation is informed by the trickster oracle. Second, this chapter will examine two specific aspects of Gen 27—the breakdown of the family and God in the deception—in the hopes of highlighting both the effects of the trickster oracle as well as the emerging relationship between two tricksters, Jacob and YHWH. And lastly, our analysis will explore the connection between chapters 27 and 28 as evidencing divine corroboration of the foregoing deceptions.

A Trickster's Oracle (Gen 25:19-34)

Vital to understanding any narrative is a thorough analysis of its beginning. There the reader often encounters key ideas or themes that will help to orient and shape the subsequent reading process. The opening verses of the Jacob cycle are no different. Here the reader is introduced to the dual thrust of the narrative: an involved deity and the centrality of and concern for the perpetuation of the ancestral promise. The story of the birth of Jacob and his acquiring the right of the firstborn from Esau foreshadows from the outset what will be a life intimately bound up with God. Indeed, Gen 25:19-34 functions as the interpretive framework against which one must understand later episodes in Jacob's life. If the later deceptions are understood apart from these introductory verses, what results is an unremarkable Jacob who remains the problematic trickster with whom scholarship has struggled so long. Yet understood within the context of this opening pericope, the remainder of the Jacob cycle becomes a narrative of strife and deception, but also of promise and blessing at God's behest. The narrative contains two scenes.

Setting the Stage – God and the Ancestral Promise (Gen 25:19-26)

This introductory scene prefigures the theological emphasis on divine promise that will pervade the Jacob cycle. In v. 19 the reader is introduced to the Isaac תולדת, yet almost immediately it becomes clear that what follows will not focus upon Isaac. The first occurrence of his name is followed by his being called “son of Abraham” (בן-אברהם), which itself is followed by “Abraham bore Isaac” (אברהם הוליד את-יִצְחָק). By mentioning Abraham’s name twice in uninterrupted succession the narrative points to the original recipient of the ancestral promise and thereby foreshadows the continuity with the promises to Abraham that will be so central to the story of Jacob. Similarly, this double mention of Abraham also functions in a unique way in that Isaac’s mother Sarah is not named; it is Abraham alone who is said to have borne Isaac.⁵ Kenneth Mathews asserts correctly that this construction has the preceding Abraham narratives in mind and is thus concerned less with Isaac as a distinct character and more with Isaac as the one through whom the promise is both fulfilled and allowed to continue (Gen 21:12).⁶ Lieve Teugels also labels Isaac as a passive character, especially in light of the active presentation of Rebekah, and sees his apparent purpose as being solely to transfer the promise to the subsequent generation.⁷ So within the very first verse of the Jacob cycle, one can already see that the ancestral promise will play a pivotal role in what follows.

⁵ Cf. Gen 25:26 where Rebekah is said to bear the twins, Jacob and Esau. Such a notice contributes to the marginalization of Isaac as a character from the outset, despite these stories relating his *toledot*.

⁶ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26* (NAC 1B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 384.

⁷ Lieve Teugels, “A Matriarchal Cycle? The Portrayal of Isaac in Genesis in the Light of the Presentation of Rebekah,” *Bijdragen, tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 56 (1995): 61-72, esp. 62-63, 68, 70.

Recalling the Abraham story serves another purpose. The mention of Rebekah's barrenness (עקרה) hearkens back earlier to Sarah's barrenness in 11:30 and attests to God's desire that the promise continue. Obviously with the barrenness of his wife, this promise to Abraham is seriously jeopardized. Only through God's direct intervention and opening of the womb does one become aware of God's fidelity to his promises and of the developing kinship between God, Abraham, and his descendants. Again in 25:21 the original promise to Abraham is in danger of not being realized. Isaac as the son of the promise turns to God, much like his father in chapter 15, in the hopes that the promise will continue through him. If the line ends at Isaac then the promise has been nullified; no "great nation" will arise in the genealogy of Abraham. Therefore, God's answering of Isaac's prayer is more than a response to Rebekah's barrenness. It is an assurance that the promise must continue and will continue in the lineage of one of the two sons.⁸

These opening verses also succeed in introducing the deep divine concern for the ancestral promise that will typify the Jacob cycle. Verse 21 recounts Isaac's supplication on behalf of Rebekah's barrenness, and immediately the text reports that YHWH not only hears but responds to and remedies the situation. Within a mere one verse is barrenness, prayer, response, and conception! Fokkelman helpfully draws a comparison with the nearly unremitting tension of the promised child's birth in the Abraham narratives, citing that the Jacob cycle "spends as little time, narrative time" as possible on the toll these

⁸ *Contra* John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC 1; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), 358-359, who maintains that "no miraculous intervention is suggested and our only regret is that this glimpse of everyday family piety is so tantalizingly meagre." To suppose that Isaac's supplication to God achieves nothing miraculous, let alone that it has no direct correspondence to the fact that Rebekah ends up pregnant, does not take into account the haste with which v. 21 is narrated.

twenty years (vv. 20, 26) would have exerted on Isaac.⁹ That YHWH grants Isaac's prayer so quickly shows that barrenness is not to be the central issue in this generation.

Instead, it is Rebekah's pregnancy itself that is problematic. The twins "crushed one another" (יִתְרֹצְצוּ) within her (25:22). Compared with previous ancestral birth narratives, the keen reader is aware that something unique and special is occurring with the births of Jacob and Esau aside from the fact that they will be the first twins born. For example, in 11:26 the birth of Abram is depicted almost in passing. He is merely one of three brothers born to Terah, and does not assume a central role until the following chapter, where it is still puzzling why he has been chosen. In the case of Isaac, Ron Hendel astutely notices that "the birth story . . . proceeds at its own leisurely pace, interspersed with other stories and mixed with other themes."¹⁰ By the time Isaac is born in 21:1-3 ten chapters have elapsed, yet there is nothing difficult or remarkable in the birth itself aside from YHWH's giving Sarah a son of her own. The birth of Jacob and Esau, however, is different. Their intra-uterine struggle presages the life of conflict into which they will enter, and also into which their parents will be unwittingly thrust.¹¹ And similar to Isaac's prayer discussed above, that Rebekah is the only woman in the Hebrew Bible to seek and *find* God with presumably little to no difficulty (the text records in succession that she sought and YHWH answered) highlights all the more the closeness of this family to God and anticipates his activity in the history of the warring twins.

⁹ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 87, only mentions Isaac, though one should not so easily forget or underestimate the impact this period would also have on the mother of the children, Rebekah!

¹⁰ Ron Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel* (HSM 42; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 41.

¹¹ Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 94-96, sees Jacob and Esau's "unusual birth" as part of the hero pattern (unusual birth, family conflict over status, journeying, marriage and success elsewhere, resolution). See pp. 71-79.

What the Jacob cycle affirms at the very outset, then, is the continued fidelity of YHWH to the ancestral promise and the expectation that YHWH will attend to the promise's vitality in the face of any threat. Terence Fretheim, discussing the promise in the traditionally defined "J" material in Genesis, gives potent voice to this reality:

Time and time again the fate of the promise hangs in the balance, due either to the uncertain response of the Patriarchs themselves or to obstacles thrown up by outsiders. But the primary witness is always to [YHWH] himself and *the extreme lengths to which he will go to work out his promise within the historical process.*¹²

The sheer fact of God's intervention is not to be questioned; precisely *how* God will intervene, though, remains to be seen.

A Trickster Oracle and YHWH's Preference for a Trickster: Gen 25:23 in Context

God's response in v. 23 shatters any notion that the promise would not be an object of contention in this generation. Cast in poetry, the oracle repeats the word "two" (שני) twice, once in relation to "nations" and once "peoples," evoking the well-established pattern in Genesis where the promise is contested between two sons. The question then naturally becomes: which son does God want to carry the promise forward?

Unfortunately, the divine oracle itself is unreservedly ambiguous in regards to which son is the divine choice. Scholarship has indeed discussed the nature of this oracle, though to my knowledge not in any sustained way. Fokkelman describes the oracle as "unambiguous."¹³ Conversely, Johannes Taschner calls the oracle ambiguous (*zweideutigen*), yet unfortunately neither Fokkelman nor Taschner expound upon why or

¹² Terence E. Fretheim, "The Jacob Traditions: Theology and Hermeneutic," *Int* 26 (1972): 422. (italics mine).

¹³ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 89.

how this is the case.¹⁴ Taschner is correct that the oracle is ambiguous, but he draws attention to different reasons. Its poetic movement is not one toward further clarity but conversely one that ends in ambiguity. Brueggemann describes the oracle as one in which “God does not explain or justify. God simply announces.”¹⁵ Yet what he announces does not lend itself easily to comprehension. Before turning to the oracle itself, it will be helpful first to clarify what it is that is meant by ambiguity, what dictates its presence, and how it contributes to literary meaning.

Narrative Reticence, Type Scenes, and Biblical Ambiguity

The most comprehensive treatment of ambiguity in the biblical text belongs to Meir Sternberg in his monumental volume, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. Sternberg’s discussion is highly detailed, and I cannot hope to capture all its complexity here, though I will emphasize matters germane and informative to the present discussion.

Sternberg writes of “gaps,” which he defines as “a lack of information about the world—an event, motive, causal link, character trait, plot structure, law of probability—contrived by a temporal displacement.”¹⁶ One may notice already a close resonance with the definition of deception offered in the previous chapter. Sternberg continues: “The storyteller’s withholding of information opens gaps, gaps produce discontinuity, and

¹⁴ Johannes Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung in der Jakoberzählung (Gen 25,19-33,17): Eine Analyse ihres Spannungsbogens* (Herders Biblische Studien 27; Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 79.

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 215. I must note, however, that Brueggemann does not view the oracle as ambiguous in the same way I do here. He is concerned rather with the bold fact that God does not find it necessary to clarify or legitimate his rationale for the subversion.

¹⁶ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 235.

discontinuity breeds ambiguity.”¹⁷ In the case of 25:23 we will see it is God who withholds this information. Vital to Sternberg’s understanding of ambiguity is his recognition of both temporary and permanent gaps, the former of which are eventually resolved by the narrative and the latter of which are not.¹⁸ As should become clear in the discussion that ensues, the ambiguity in the trickster oracle is temporary; the narrative maintains the tension but slowly unpacks the oracle, culminating in the ultimate clarification with a second divine utterance at Bethel in 28:13-15.

Sternberg’s typology of gapping serves as a helpful foundation upon which to build our inquiry, but his discussion is deficient in one particular aspect, namely his insistence that “temporal displacement” is required in order for a gap to be present. To clarify, Sternberg sweepingly and boldly avers that “all [gaps] result from a chronological twisting whereby the order of presentation does not conform to the order of occurrence.”¹⁹ Gapping thus becomes contingent upon the narrator’s predilection for partitioning out narrative time and order for events. In cases where there may be no discernible order of events against which to judge later narrative developments but rather a simple utterance, as with the oracle in 25:23, Sternberg’s definition creates unintended difficulties. Furthermore, it seems more convincing that ambiguity can arise as a literary tool employed by the biblical authors that functions to create and build suspense. To be fair, Sternberg does recognize just such a potential function, but it appears hardly to be in the foreground of his understanding, and is still predicated upon temporal displacement.²⁰

¹⁷ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 236.

¹⁸ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 237-240.

¹⁹ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 235.

²⁰ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 259.

The first half of Sternberg's definition is of tremendous value in illuminating biblical ambiguity, especially in line with the view of deception articulated in chapter one. It is Sternberg's contention about what creates a gap that is too rigid.

Robert Alter helps, no pun intended, to fill this gap. Alter approaches ambiguity from the perspective of a literary scholar, and he treats it *in tandem* with characterization. He describes biblical narrative as "selectively silent in a purposeful way," allowing the biblical authors a certain free range of play in how various characters are portrayed.²¹ The narrator, says Alter, is omniscient, but as such is also free to share or withhold information for literary affect. God too is prone to such intentional character shaping. Alter writes: "[The narrator] may on occasion choose to privilege us with the knowledge of what God thinks of a particular character or action."²² While Alter is here speaking of God's opinion as informing the characterization of another, one may similarly apply this statement to God, who is just as much a character in these texts as are Jacob, Esau, or Rebekah.²³ It appears as though the omniscient narrator is, from this perspective, wholly in control of even the divine word. The narrator presumably knows what God thinks or what God means; it is how the narrator opts to present that information that can contribute to ambiguity. Implicit in Alter's statement above is that the narrator may also choose *not* to privilege readers with God's thoughts about a given matter. Or, to extend this idea even further, God's speech can often *purposely* conceal rather than reveal. This chapter will demonstrate precisely this point in regards to the trickster oracle in 25:23.

²¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 115.

²² Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 126.

²³ See W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 17, 20.

In sum, Sternberg's definition of ambiguity/gaps as a lack of information provides a sound initial definition, but his overgeneralization that all ambiguity arises from temporal discontinuity is problematic. Rather, ambiguity possesses a literary-aesthetic quality—namely serving a particular purpose or narrative goal—that is captured much more fully in Alter's articulation. The analysis that follows hopes to bring both of these ideas together.

A final component contributing further to ambiguity is the biblical type-scene. While Alter discusses ambiguity in a chapter entirely separate from his treatment of type-scenes, the two are indeed quite complementary and mutually illuminating. Alter has persuasively argued that type-scenes arise in the life of biblical heroes, and contrary to form criticism's focus on similarities in a given pattern, type-scenes emphasize "what is done in each individual application of the schema to give it a sudden tilt of innovation or even to refashion it radically for the imaginative purposes at hand."²⁴ The type-scene would create a certain expectation in readers (and hearers, given that Alter sees type-scenes as requisite to oral composition) of how events would be described, and any deviation from or refashioning of such convention would be significant. How the scene is recorded thus becomes a vital vector for interpretation. An anticipated element may be entirely absent, or in the case of Gen 25:23, articulated differently than one may expect based upon other examples of the type-scene. Therein lies meaning. Alter also notes that such divergences seem to be character specific; whether the narrative does or does not adhere to convention serves the needs of the relevant character.²⁵ It is interesting to reflect upon this possibility in relation to my overarching argument: if Jacob is a trickster

²⁴ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 47, 52.

²⁵ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 58.

par excellence, would one not then perhaps expect the announcement of his birth similarly to contain some element of trickery? Alter leaves this point tantalizingly undeveloped, yet if he is correct on this particular point it would serve only to substantiate the present study even further. In sum, ambiguity and type-scenes can work *in tandem*, contributing to or resulting in ambiguity by virtue of how the narrative has opted to render a given episode.

Alter isolates a number of recurring type-scenes, one of which is relevant for our purposes: “the annunciation . . . of the birth of the hero to his barren mother.”²⁶ In Genesis this announcement oftentimes serves as a clarification for which son will be the divinely chosen child of the promise. Accordingly, scholarship has seen the oracle in 25:23 as part of an overarching pattern within Genesis where God favors the secondborn over the firstborn.²⁷ Alter resolutely writes: “The firstborn very often seem to be losers in Genesis by the very condition of their birth.”²⁸ Indeed, one may easily compile an impressive list of instances showing God’s favoritism for the younger child within Genesis: Abel, Isaac, Jacob, Leah, and Joseph to name but a few.²⁹ While I do not wish

²⁶ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 51.

²⁷ Roger Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives* (JSOTSup 133; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 9-13, 66-79; Victor Matthews and Frances Mims, “Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation,” *PRSt* 12 (1985): 186; Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (Old Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 2000), 83-84, 90-91; Sharon Pace Jeansonne, “Genesis 25:23—The Use of Poetry in the Rebekah Narratives” in *The Psalms and Other Studies on the Old Testament: Presented to Joseph I. Hunt* (ed. Jack C. Knight and Lawrence A. Sinclair; Nashotah: Nashotah House Seminary, 1990), 148; Thomas L. Thompson, “Conflict Themes in the Jacob Narratives,” *Semeia* 15 (1979): 15.

²⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6.

²⁹ On Leah, see God’s clear response in 29:31 and Jacob’s retort to Rachel in 30:2 that it is God who has withheld children from her. Other examples exist, though the requirement of divine preference is not as ostensible in these, for instance in 48:13-20 where Jacob’s blessing places the younger Ephraim before the elder Manasseh.

to challenge this idea that Gen 25:23 is part of this larger pattern, I do want to emphasize the uniqueness and innovation evident at the narrative level in this divine annunciation.

Toward this end, it will be helpful to look closely at one specific example of this type-scene at the outset so as to have a context in place for comparison with the ambiguous portrayal in Gen 25:23. The story of Isaac and Ishmael serves as an excellent, straight-forward foil for comparison. In Gen 17:16, God announces that he will grant a son to Abraham through Sarah; it is important to note at this stage in the narrative that Ishmael has already been born (16:15-16). One therefore finds a similar problem in the story of Isaac and Ishmael and the story of Jacob and Esau: two children exist, both of whom arguably have an equal claim as heir to the promise. The difference, however, is that in 21:12-13 God unambiguously relays the message that Isaac, not Ishmael, is to be the child of the promise. The divine word is entirely lucid. God explicitly names Isaac as the one through whom Abraham's seed would continue, and God clearly references Ishmael by calling him "the son of the maidservant." There is no equivocation or uncertainty as to God's choice. Such can not be said for the divine oracle in 25:23.

The differences in type-scenes between Isaac and Jacob's birth announcements become even more pronounced and significant if one recognizes the potential parallels that exist between the lives of these two characters. Turner points out a number of similarities: both narratives address the issue of barrenness (25:21, cf. 11:30; 16:1), two competing sons (25:22-23, cf. 17:18-19), and mention two nations (25:22-23, cf. 16:12).³⁰ Elaborating upon the connections even further, Turner notes that the deception of Isaac in Gen 27 is as decisive a scene in the overall narrative as is the Akedah in Gen

³⁰ Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Readings; 2d ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 105.

22.³¹ And seemingly in line with Alter's view of biblical convention, Turner notes a key difference between the character's dialogue in the two scenes. In 22:7 the text says, "... his father, and he said, 'My father,' and he said, 'Here I am *my father*,'" whereas in 27:18 one reads, "... his father, and he said, 'My father,' and he said, 'Here I am, *who are you my son?*'" The lines are exactly the same save for the difference between indicative in Gen 22 and interrogative in Gen 27, which Turner claims serves to highlight all the more the prevalence of deception in the latter episode.³² These parallels between the Isaac/Ishmael story and the Jacob/Esau narratives lend even further credence not only to the viability of reading them in relationship to one another, but more germane for the purpose at hand, to ascribing great import and meaning to the places where they differ.

What follows will address and read the oracle in 25:23 within the context of Genesis. Special attention will be paid to the final line of the oracle for several reasons. First, it is not because the earlier lines are unimportant but rather that the oracle, in good Hebrew poetic fashion, is a fine example of synonymous parallelism. Therefore, in a way, a thorough discussion of the final line addresses a similar train of thought evident in earlier lines.³³ Second, scholarship has most often made its interpretation of Jacob and Esau as mere eponyms for Israel and Edom contingent upon these initial lines of the oracle. While the oracle in 25:23 may very likely speak of a political or national entity

³¹ Turner, *Genesis*, 114-115, detects a number of parallels. In each scene, 1) a father and son are alone; 2) one of the two characters does not disclose the whole truth; 3) Isaac is victim in both; 4) the phrases "my son" and "here I am" occur frequently and only in these two episodes in Genesis within the same verse; 5) the son is threatened in both instances; 6) Abraham "went" (הלך) and "took" (לקח) the ram, just as Jacob "went" (הלך) and "took" (לקח) from the flocks; 7) the killing of an animal appears tied to something that appears inevitable: Isaac's death and Esau's blessing, neither of which occurs.

³² Turner, *Genesis*, 117.

³³ See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 89, who describes the oracle as incrementally growing in four steps, with each subsequent line going further than the one prior.

by using words such as “nations” (גוֹיִם) and “peoples” (לְאֻמִּים), a point the subsequent renaming of the brothers as “Edom” (25:30, cf. 36:1) and “Israel” (32:29 and 35:10) respectively corroborates, the propensity within scholarship to reduce these dynamic texts solely to political allegory for the interactions between these two nations is unfounded. Turner provides a helpful and adequate statement that informs this study: “I shall argue that these key passages are not to be read *exclusively* as relating to the political relationship between Israel and Edom, as though they had no reference to the fortunes of the main protagonists in the plot of the Jacob story.”³⁴ Third, even a cursory reading of the narrative reveals that the mention of “nations” and “peoples” lacks any accompanying clarity from God about who will comprise them, let alone how they relate to Rebekah’s immediate question about her yet unborn child(ren). And fourth, it is the final line of the oracle that has proven most prone to misunderstanding and mistranslation.

Here, in line with the aforementioned definition of ambiguity and understanding of the convention of biblical type-scenes, our analysis will emphasize the innovation and ambiguity of how the narrative portrays the divine oracle in three ways: diction and meaning, matters of syntax, and contextual difficulties.

Diction and meaning. The key interpretive phrase and the object of greatest contention in the oracle is the final line. Within extant scholarship the normative translation has run “the elder will serve the younger” (וְרֵב יַעֲבֹד צְעִיר). In fact, this translation seems to have achieved a sort of unspoken orthodoxy. Chris Heard lists no less than sixteen scholars who prefer such a translation, in addition to several notable English translations of the Bible that also hold to this reading, among them ASV, KJV,

³⁴ Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (JSOTSup 96; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 116. (*italics original*).

NIV, NJB, and NRSV.³⁵ The hegemony of this reading rests upon the assumption, as was previously noted, that here one sees yet another instance in Genesis of divine preference for the “younger” over the “elder.” What is lacking is a careful and nuanced analysis of how this divine word differs from the convention. In an attempt to capture the ambiguity, the line is better rendered it as “the greater will serve the lesser,” though even this translation cannot attend to all the ambiguity latent in the Hebrew. To my knowledge, only two scholars have accepted such a translation. The earlier, R. A. Kraft, translates the line similarly in his brief text-critical notes on Gen 25:23.³⁶ Unfortunately, Kraft offers nothing in the way of explanation for his translation or its implications. More recently, Laurence Turner correctly recognizes that the Hebrew words properly denoting “elder” and “younger” do not in fact occur here; instead the text records “the more general” terms “greater” and “lesser.”³⁷ Based upon context, however, Turner concludes that the reader is to equate greater/lesser with elder/younger, essentially giving way to the traditional translation.³⁸ In his more recent commentary, Turner seems to have changed his position, now translating the line as “the elder shall serve the younger.”³⁹ Humphreys’ translation “and greater shall serve younger” is a hybrid, though still assumes age and birth order to be the central elements under discussion.⁴⁰ As will become clear in

³⁵ R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah* (Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 98-99.

³⁶ R. A. Kraft, “A Note on the Oracle of Rebecca (Gen xxv. 23),” *JTS* 13 (1962): 318.

³⁷ Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 119, 121. He renders the oracle’s final line as I do: “the greater will serve the lesser.”

³⁸ Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 121.

³⁹ Turner, *Genesis*, 106.

⁴⁰ Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 157.

what follows, the traditional rendering assumes the use of stereotypical language that is by no means present in Gen 25:23.

Within Genesis the narrative uses נָדָב (נָדָב) to label a given child the “elder.” In 10:21 Shem is called the “elder” (הַנְּדָב) brother of Japheth, 29:16 calls Leah the “elder” (הַנְּדָבָה) daughter of Laban, and 44:12 notes that Joseph begins his search for the hidden cup in the sack of the “eldest” (נָדָב) of Jacob’s sons.⁴¹ Even within the Jacob/Esau narratives themselves the text uses נָדָב three times in regards to Esau as the “elder” son (27:1, 15, 42).⁴² Conversely, רַב occurs nowhere else in Genesis or the entire Hebrew Bible for that matter as a designation for “elder,” greatly calling into question the assumption it means that here.⁴³ It does, however, appear frequently in Genesis with the sense of “great.”⁴⁴ Two of these occurrences are associated with Jacob. Once it occurs in Isaac’s blessing of Jacob in 27:28, and once in Jacob’s blessing of Joseph’s sons in 48:16.

The final word in 25:23, “lesser” (צָעִיר), creates further ambiguity. One might rather expect קָטָן (“small, insignificant”), which the narrative uses of Jacob in 27:15, 42, two of the same verses that use נָדָב in reference to Esau’s age. In 29:16 this word pair occurs similarly in the feminine, נְדָבָה and קְטָנָה, in reference to Leah and Rachel’s birth

⁴¹ BDB lists “elder/eldest” as a viable meaning for נָדָב in the texts I enumerate here, and also in Ezek 16:46.

⁴² That נָדָב in chapter 27 may mean “great(er)” seems unwarranted given that in two of the three instances (vv. 15 and 42) “her son” (בְּנֵהּ) precedes נָדָב; as the narrative makes clear (and I will also below), if Rebekah were to regard either of her children as “great” it would surely be Jacob, not Esau.

⁴³ BDB 913 lists the plural רַבִּים in Job 32:9 as the only other example, likely because of its parallelism with זְקִינִים “old/elderly ones.” To my eye this instance is equivocal, and רַבִּים here could satisfy the parallelism just as well if it meant “great ones.” The ASV, JPS, and KJV all attest to this latter translation. See also Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 25, who claims that רַב is seldom used in the Hebrew Bible in reference to the firstborn, leading to the possibility that Jacob is the “greater” from the outset.

⁴⁴ See Gen 6:5; 7:11; 13:6; 16:10; 26:14; 27:28; 36:7; 48:16.

order. This word pair, then, appears to address issues of *age*, with קטן designating the “younger” and זקן the “elder.” To substantiate this point further, the Joseph cycle (Gen 37-50) contains several uses of קטן for the younger as opposed to זקן.⁴⁵

Compounding this ambiguity is the fact that within Genesis זקן occurs with “firstborn” (בכר) on all but two other occasions, those being 19:35, 38, where its occurrence alongside בכר is presupposed.⁴⁶ In Gen 19:31, 34 this word pair appears in reference to Lot’s daughters, while in 29:26 the pair is used by Laban in reference to his daughters. Similarly, in 43:33 the words describe the seating arrangement of Jacob’s children when they come before Joseph, and in 48:14 an aged Jacob blesses the younger (זקן) Ephraim over the firstborn (בכר) Manasseh. This word pair, therefore, serves as another way to communicate matters pertaining to age.

That the final line of Gen 25:23 does not employ this more traditional and expected word pair, זקן and בכר, thus becomes all the more striking. Were בכר used there would be no ambiguity that Esau was the child under consideration, yet replacing בכר with זקן erases such clarity. The reader’s expectation is interrupted. Speiser points to what he deems an exact parallel for the word pair זקן and בכר in v. 23 within Akkadian

⁴⁵ See Gen 42:13, 15, 20, 32, 34; 43:29; 44:2, 12, 20, 23, 26 (x2). One may object to this comparison given the dissimilarity scholarship has often seen between the two cycles. Recent scholarship, however, has begun reading the two stories as more integrated, still paying attention to their differences, but keeping a keen eye also on how they are similar. On this point, see Carleen Mandolfo, “‘You Meant Evil Against Me’: Dialogic Truth and the Character of Jacob in Joseph’s Story,” *JSOT* 28 (2004): 449-465; Peter D. Miscall, “The Jacob and Joseph Stories as Analogies,” *JSOT* 6 (1978): 28-40; Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 70-125. One should also remain mindful that Jacob continues as a character—a very active one in several scenes—well into the Joseph cycle.

⁴⁶ According to Deut 21:17, the firstborn son was granted a double-portion of all his father’s possessions. On the biblical law of the firstborn, see especially Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 55-60. See also Kevin Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown: The Presence and Absence of God in the Jacob Narrative* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 21-24; Skinner, *Genesis*, 362; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 418; and Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 32, for a helpful synopsis of the right of the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible.

family law with the meaning “elder” and “younger.”⁴⁷ Turner, though, correctly cautions against any certainty “that terms based on common Semitic roots necessarily carry identical connotations in different cultures.”⁴⁸ Given that the text records רב and צעיר, the contrast with what one would rather expect based upon other instances of the type scene, בכר and צעיר, enhances the ambiguity of the oracle’s final line.

Based upon this analysis, one can make several initial observations. The final line of Gen 25:23 makes a statement about the divine perspective regarding the status of the twins in an ambiguous way. The conventional indicators for age in Genesis, קטן and גדל, do not appear, and the use of רב and צעיר creates dissonance in regards to whether issues of age are even operative concerns here. Our more ambiguous translation of “greater” and “lesser” respectively raises the question of whether this pairing may invoke questions of status rather than, or perhaps alongside, expected issues of age, thus contributing all the more to the ambiguity. What seems clear, however, is that God’s speech employs two terms that are more vague in nature than one would expect based upon examples found elsewhere in Genesis. Who is to be the “greater” and who the “lesser”? God has provided no names, no precision.⁴⁹ Moreover, God’s (intentional?) reticence to name either child “firstborn” is patent in the narrative; only Jacob and Esau ever use the title of themselves.⁵⁰ In line with the understanding of biblical type-scenes discussed above, the

⁴⁷ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 1; New York: Doubleday, 1964), 95.

⁴⁸ Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 121.

⁴⁹ Frank Anthony Spina, “The ‘Face of God’: Esau in Canonical Context” in *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 6; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 413.

⁵⁰ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 48, characterizes this silence as the narrator’s way of passing judgment on both Jacob and Esau by distancing himself from any responsibility in naming the

absence of the expected term בכר contributes something to how the text means. By substituting רב the narrative makes a statement, removing any certainty as to the proper character antecedents for these modifiers. Were בכר employed there would be no equivocation that Jacob was indeed the lesser, the צעיר, but as the text stands God has interrupted the convention by introducing ambiguity through the use of a word pair that is unconventional within Genesis.

Matters of syntax. God's oracle is not only lexically ambiguous but also syntactically ambiguous. The rules governing Hebrew syntax allow for two entirely opposite readings. Within the oracle itself one finds the word order following the pattern subject-verb-object which, while natural in English, is unnatural in Hebrew. According to Gesenius (GKC §142), Hebrew verbal syntax can occur with five differing word orders, yet in each of the potential syntactical arrangements he outlines, none replicate the order found in 25:23. A Hebrew sentence may be constructed according to the following syntax: (a) verb-subject-object; (b) object-verb-subject; (c) verb-object-subject; (d) subject-object-verb; (e) object-subject-verb.⁵¹ The only ordering Gesenius offers with a verb between two nouns is object-verb-subject, which would require the final line of the oracle to be translated "the lesser will serve the greater." Gesenius also, however, notes that the subject may precede the verb for emphasis. Such a construction, he maintains, describes a "*state*" or "*circumstance*."⁵² If רב is indeed the subject of the sentence,

characters too clearly. From my perspective, Taschner fails to recognize that the speech is not that of the narrator but God. Fokkelmann, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 107, argues to the contrary that the narrator sees the right of the firstborn as a non-issue; Gen 25:23 guarantees that Jacob is "destined" to be firstborn.

⁵¹ *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (ed. E. Kautzsch; trans. A. E. Cowley; 2d ed. Oxford, 1910), § 142.

⁵² *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, § 142.

Gesenius seems to imply that this ordering names a certain condition or, given a possibility raised in our lexical discussion in the previous section, perhaps a *status*. Could the Hebrew grammar itself contribute to an understanding of the two titles, רב and צעיר, as connoting the status of the twins in some ambiguous way? Grammatically, this line is an anomaly, diverging from conventional Hebrew word order; its unique syntax contributes to its ambiguity.

The difficulty is unfortunately not so easily resolved upon closer scrutiny of the text. Absent אף to distinguish between subject and object, both רב and צעיר are unmarked for case.⁵³ One may thus render the line as either “the greater will serve the lesser” or “the lesser will serve the greater.” Heard attempts to capture in English the ambiguity of the Hebrew with his translation “the older the younger will serve.”⁵⁴ Joel Kaminsky, while noting the value in recognizing the ambiguity, responds as follows:

[the proposal] does not work well with the larger pattern found in Israelite society or in the Bible. The oracle makes much more sense if it is announcing that the normal societal expectation that favored the elder child was being challenged. Inasmuch as what has often been called the ‘underdog motif’ is pervasive throughout Genesis’s stories of brotherly struggle, it would be strange to find an oracle announcing the preeminence of an elder child.⁵⁵

Kaminsky’s point that a pattern underlying much of Genesis seems to highlight the necessity of reading the oracle as a vital component of that very pattern makes sense. The difficulty with his view here, though, is threefold. First, as has been shown above, it is not at all clear that רב and צעיר connote age in a way customary of Genesis. Second,

⁵³ Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 99.

⁵⁴ Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 99. On this point see also Richard E. Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1995), 112.

⁵⁵ Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 44.

although it may be clear to the reader who knows well the story that Jacob will ultimately come out on top, within the narrative of the oracle itself and the lives of its characters (Rebekah specifically as the sole recipient of the oracle) the result is by no means unequivocal. In fact, God's withholding of information in the oracle creates the necessity for Rebekah to interpret for herself which child would be the **רַב** and which the **צַעִיר**. As will become clear below, that interpretation leads to her and Jacob's deception of Isaac in chapter 27. Assuming the posture of a first-time reader, we know as little as does Rebekah. And third, simply because a given text "makes much more sense" when viewed from one perspective need not necessitate the understanding that that perspective is *de facto* correct. This point is especially potent when dealing with patterns, or type-scenes as we have called them. To reiterate, what is necessary is a recognition of how the narration of this scene deviates from convention, not a smoothing out or erasure of difficulties in the interest of clarity, as seems to be the case with Kaminsky's argument. Taking Alter's position, the *a priori* subsuming of the oracle under a larger pattern for sake of convenience and 'making sense' is problematic. What is most important is how a given manifestation of the pattern *differs* from one's expectation; therein lies the key to unlocking meaning, even if that meaning is ambiguous.

The oracle gains another layer of ambiguity, then, by virtue of its unclear syntax. Who is to serve whom? Does the greater serve the lesser, or the lesser serve the greater? Adding to the problem is that even if one feels competent to resolve the syntactical ambiguity, the lexical ambiguity persists. Given the nature of Hebrew poetic parallelism, this final line is most convincingly translated in the same order the Hebrew occurs: the greater will serve the lesser. In each of the preceding lines, what appears to be the

subject comes first in the sentence. One must remain mindful, however, of the syntactical possibility for both readings. Also, one should take caution against attempting to smooth out the tangled syntax too readily. In the process, meaning may be lost.

Contextual difficulties. A final potential point of interest involves the way in which the oracle does not cohere entirely with the remainder of the Jacob cycle. The account of the twins' birth following *immediately* upon the oracle does not provide any further precision in identifying who is the רב and who the צעיר. Verse 25 describes Esau as the "first" (הראשון) to emerge from the womb, but nothing in the narrative hints at or even requires that הראשון have רב as its antecedent. Esau's description at birth further contributes to the ambiguity. Commentators generally accept the fact that he is born "red" (אדמוני) and covered in a mantle of "hair" (שער) as an attempt to cast him as a type of wild, uncivilized man, much akin to Enkidu in the *Gilgamesh Epic*.⁵⁶ Yet some commentators conversely read the description *in tandem* with the only other biblical occurrence of אדמוני in 1 Sam 16:12 where it appears as part of a description of David's handsomeness.⁵⁷

What results, then, is that Esau's very characterization at this point is also ambiguous; the narrative does not make it clear whether his appearance is to be commended or ridiculed. Adele Berlin argues that biblical narrative seldom offers character descriptions pertaining to appearance or dress, yet when these details are

⁵⁶ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 414; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 43; Speiser, *Genesis*, 196; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 176; Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch*, 117; Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 180

⁵⁷ Heard, *Dynamics of Dissection*, 101; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 414; Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 388.

provided it is a matter of great significance typically for plot advancement.⁵⁸ Thus, only as the narrative continues do these ostensibly innocuous details lend themselves to a negative portrayal of Esau. His “red” (אדמוני) appearance anticipates the bowl of “red stuff” (אדם) he will wolf down at the cost of his right of the firstborn, and his hairiness (שער) presages Jacob’s disguise in chapter 27.⁵⁹ For Berlin, character description may also shed light on the type of person a given character is; Esau provides a fine example in that readers will come to see that his physical description matches with his brutish, short-sighted demeanor.⁶⁰

One may also discern, though, a narrative clue as to how things will progress at this early stage in the story. Esau’s hairiness (שער) produces a striking homophony with the final word in the oracle, lesser (צעיר). Such wordplay highlights the literary artistry of the passage and shows an early equation at the narrative level of the hirsute Esau with the lesser of the trickster oracle.⁶¹

The situation is similar with Jacob’s birth. His grasping onto Esau’s heel gives no indication as to whether this activity would qualify him to be the רב or the צעיר. Not until 27:36, after Jacob and Rebekah’s successful co-deception (with God) of Isaac, in which Esau reinterprets Jacob’s name to mean deceiver (עקב) does one realize that Jacob is a

⁵⁸ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 34. See also Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup 70; Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 48.

⁵⁹ For a detailed and thorough treatment of how this opening scene of the Jacob cycle looks forward to what will occur, see Michael Fishbane, “Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25:19-35:22),” *JJS* 26 (1975): 22-23.

⁶⁰ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 36, 39. *Contra* Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 48, who writes that character descriptions have no relation to a character’s personality.

⁶¹ *Contra* Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 177, who sees this word play as evidence of the irony that the “younger” Jacob will prevail over the man called Seir.

deceiver from the very outset.⁶² Taschner understands Jacob's activity at birth as signifying an initial movement toward fulfillment of the oracle.⁶³ Hamilton astutely notices that Esau is named for his appearance at birth whereas Jacob is named for his actions.⁶⁴ While some may presume this notice serves as a sure indicator of God's preference for the active Jacob, ambiguity still reigns; Jacob may be the active child, but he is also the secondborn twin, a fact he cannot escape. Would YHWH's preference for the younger son continue? And moreover, the oracle still gives no transparency as to YHWH's true desires. Already in the seemingly innocuous naming of Jacob is foreshadowed a life of deception guided by God.⁶⁵

At the narrative level, the second block of Jacob/Esau narratives (Gen 32-33) also underscores the oracle's ambiguity. Turner contends that what typifies the Jacob cycle is the "non-fulfillment" of the oracle—along with Isaac's blessings of his two sons (27:27b-29, 39b-40)—in various nuances.⁶⁶ One cannot and should not trust the oracle as a realistic indicator of the plot that will ensue.⁶⁷ Primary among Turner's examples is that Esau never serves (עבד) Jacob; quite the contrary, for in the reconciliation scene Jacob

⁶² Simone Paganini, "Wir haben Wasser gefunden: Beobachtungen zur Erzählanalyse von Gen 25,19-26,36," ZAW 117 (2005): 30.

⁶³ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 25.

⁶⁴ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 178.

⁶⁵ One should be mindful of the three different etymologies ascribed to Jacob's name. In 25:26 he is the "heel," and in 27:36 Esau interprets his name to mean "deceiver." Another etymology that is seldom commented upon is that Jacob is a shortened form of Jacob-El, meaning "may God protect." See my "Jacob, Laban, and a Divine Trickster," 3 n. 1.

⁶⁶ Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 119. Conversely, Albert de Pury, *Promesse Divine et Légende Cultuelle dans le Cycle de Jacob: Genèse 28 et les traditions patriarcales*. 2 Vols. (Études Bibliques; Paris: Gabalda, 1975), 103, sees what follows as the realization of the promise (*realization de la bénédiction*).

⁶⁷ Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 181.

constantly refers to himself as Esau's "servant" (עבֹדךָ) and addresses Esau as "my lord" (אֲדֹנָי). One of the main problems with Turner's thesis is that while he here translates the oracle correctly as "the greater will serve the lesser," he still reads the oracle as though it refers solely to age, making Esau the "greater" even at the very end of the Jacob cycle. Given that Esau disappears from the narrative at the end of chapter 27 and only makes two brief cameos after that in a narrative that certainly centers on Jacob, it would be odd for Esau still to be the "greater" after all Jacob has endured. Turner's notice of a discontinuity between what the oracle apparently proclaims and what results is important, yet it is not so much that the oracle cannot be trusted in comparison with what truly happens but more that the oracle is indistinct when uttered and thus does not define clearly its actors or what is to happen.

Summary. In light of the above presentation on matters of diction and meaning, syntax, and context, God's oracular speech appears to be ambiguous lexically, syntactically, and contextually, resulting in an obfuscation of the divine prerogative. Moreover, it is not clear that God even addresses the question Rebekah poses.⁶⁸ God instead speaks of the future realities that will typify the lives of each child. But what is the payoff in God's word remaining so convoluted and unclear when first spoken? Or, to ask a question very few have of the oracle: what does 25:23 reveal not only about the lives of Jacob and Esau but also, and perhaps more importantly, *about God*?

Given that ambiguity pervades the oracle, one may view the divine word as the word of a divine trickster. God is unnecessarily evasive in response to Rebekah's legitimate question. Rather than offering her an unambiguous word of reassurance and

⁶⁸ See Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 157.

clarity as was evident in the Ishmael/Isaac narrative (21:12-13, cf. 17-18), God speaks in oracular poetry, casting the divine word as one that conceals rather than reveals.

Assuming Rebekah's facility with Hebrew to be quite good, the oracle still retains a numinous quality about it at all levels, and Rebekah's understanding of the oracle forecasting Jacob as the divinely chosen son is by no means the only possible reading.

Rebekah's question is ultimately met with a non-answer,⁶⁹ and as such only creates more questions that Rebekah must address on her own, which arguably leads to her strong sense of duty in Gen 27.

This evasive quality of God's speech also fits well with the definition of deception provided in chapter one. God clearly withholds the relevant information Rebekah requests or at the very least needs in order to live. Divine reticence, divine ambiguity, ultimately becomes divine trickery. But for what purpose? What does such obfuscation accomplish in the story of Jacob? No other divine annunciation in Genesis is even remotely as ambiguous as 25:23. These opening verses of the Jacob cycle introduce readers to a God who cares deeply for the success of the ancestral promise, but also to a God who at times engages in trickery for the purposes of that promise.⁷⁰ God's speech, therefore, seems to mirror God's presence.⁷¹ God will not be bound by convention and

⁶⁹ Cf. God's response to Job in Job 38-40, where I similarly believe God gives a non-answer.

⁷⁰ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 29, holds that 25:21-28 are an intentional construct based upon the entirety of the Jacob cycle and mindfully placed here as an introduction to the whole.

⁷¹ Robert L. Cohn, "Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis," *JSOT* 25 (1983): 9, sees God's presence in the Jacob cycle to be "more numinous . . . more eerie, more exceptional" than in the Abraham cycle. I disagree with Cohn that these qualities typifying divine appearance in the Jacob cycle require one to ascribe greater responsibility to human characters in the events that ensue. But Cohn's statement is helpful in seeing a potential connection between God's manner of appearing and manner of speaking in the Jacob cycle.

type-scenes. Indeed, Brueggemann seems to move in this direction, albeit for different reasons and with different emphases. He writes:

This oracle expresses a scandalous decision on the part of God. . . . The oracle discloses something crucial about God. It affirms that by the power of his promise, God is free to work his will in the face of every human convention and every definition of propriety. Jacob is ordained as a man of conflict because the God who wrought him is a God in conflict as well.⁷²

Brueggemann's statement is particularly apt at this point in the narrative as it draws attention not only to God as a veritable trickster but also to the one who was to be the greater, the divine choice to be the child of the promise, Jacob, who is equally as 'scandalous' as the God of the promise. And it is to the human characters that the narrative now turns, yet always with an eye to the trickster oracle and trickster God.

First Signs of a Trickster – Extorting the Right of the Firstborn (Gen 25:27-34)

Two notices open this second scene and are pivotal in comprehending and interpreting what follows: the 'nature' of each child, and each parent's corresponding preference for one child over the other. The narrative describes Esau as "a man knowing game, a man of the field" (אִישׁ יָדַע צִיד אִישׁ שָׂדֶה, v. 27). The reason the narrative gives for Isaac's love of Esau is, literally, because "he (Isaac) had game in his mouth" (כִּי-צִיד בְּפִיו). It is striking and worth noting that both father and son share a love of cuisine, a love that will in part result in each one's respective undoing. Esau will fall victim to Jacob's simple bowl of lentils in 25:29-34, and Isaac wrongly believes he is eating wild game in 27:1-45 when in reality it is domesticated goats from the family's flocks. Both men's palettes and appetites become a means the tricksters exploit in realizing God's purposes.

⁷² Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 216.

Jacob, on the other hand, is said to be **איש חם**, an outwardly simple phrase that has given rise to countless scholarly attempts to construe a meaning that resonates with how the narrative will depict Jacob as a character. The usual translation is either “mild man” or “quiet man.”⁷³ Spina reads the designation as an ironic statement in that Jacob is “simultaneously morally bankrupt and morally upright.”⁷⁴ Ellen Davis puzzlingly understands the phrase to indicate that Jacob “is well-adapted to the *mores*, if not the morals, of society,” yet she notes that “if indeed *tam* denotes ethical integrity, then Jacob is not an obvious candidate for that accolade.”⁷⁵ Brueggemann views the term through the appropriate lens of covenant, maintaining it describes one who unites “neighborliness” with “the rigorous discipline of presence with God.”⁷⁶ Fokkelman translates the phrase as “bent on one purpose,” which represents one of the better attempts to make sense of the phrase in the context of perpetual deception.⁷⁷ And Alter sees the phrase as one that is intentionally jarring, requiring that the reader wrestle with its meaning and implications as the Jacob cycle unfolds.⁷⁸

In reference to humans, the word **חם** appears in Gen 6:9 and 17:1 in regards to Noah and Abraham respectively, yet again there is no reason to assume morality to be the

⁷³ Sarna, *Genesis*, 180; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 177; Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 391; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 411; Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch*, 112; Skinner, *Genesis*, 361; Speiser, *Genesis*, 195.

⁷⁴ Spina, “Esau in Canonical Context,” 8.

⁷⁵ Ellen F. Davis, “Job and Jacob: The Integrity of Faith” in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Danna Nolan Fewell; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 211.

⁷⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 34-35. Brueggemann understands the term as describing that which is integral to Israel’s obedience to its dialogical partner, God.

⁷⁷ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 91.

⁷⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 42-46.

operative issue. Interestingly, within the entire Hebrew Bible only Jacob and Job (1:8; 2:3) are described as *אִישׁ תָּם*. Yet within the Hebrew Bible, the word *תָּם* (יָם) also occurs frequently in Leviticus in reference to an unblemished animal that is worthy of being sacrificed to YHWH.⁷⁹ The assumption then that this word *must* elicit moral uprightness is unfounded. The concern is not whether the animal is a moral exemplar but rather whether it is appropriate for sacrifice to YHWH. Similarly with Noah, Abraham, and Job, the pertinent qualifier seems to be less the character's moral convictions and more how he is sound enough to be pleasing to YHWH.⁸⁰ With Jacob, one must remain mindful that the narrative never explicitly censures him for the way he goes about matters.⁸¹ One is enjoined also to recall from chapter one the discussion of morality in relation to these texts; the relationship historically is, if anything, tenuous. Given the evidence, this description of Jacob likely says something about his status in relationship to God. Something about Jacob makes him worthy and pleasing for YHWH. Yet our study has shown that Jacob is a trickster from the beginning by virtue of his heel-grabbing birth, but also in that it is a trickster God who chooses him.

Thus, the epithet must take Jacob's deceptive character into account. Perhaps mirroring this inherent complexity in defining Jacob's character conclusively, the narrative tersely states that Rebekah loved Jacob. Unlike Isaac's love for Esau, no reason

⁷⁹ See Lev 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23; 5:15, 18, 25; 22:19, 21; 23:12; also Num 6:14. For this definition, see *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (ed. R. L. Harris and G. L. Archer, Jr.; 2 vols., Chicago, 1980), 2522e, where the word is described as "the divine standard for [humanity's] attainment."

⁸⁰ Moral uprightness appears problematic as an explanation for yet another reason. Abraham is by no means blameless, as the wife-sister stories in Gen 12 and 20 show. Similarly, Abraham's ambivalence toward Hagar does not cast him in a positive light. And Noah's family again quickly slides in to sin as the post-diluvian world repopulates.

⁸¹ C. D. Evans, "The Patriarch Jacob—An Innocent Man," *BRev* 2 (1986): 32-37; Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 186.

is given for Rebekah's love of Jacob. Interpreters will sometimes take Jacob as **איש חם** to mean that he is a domesticated man and thus Rebekah as the domesticated housewife would naturally have an affinity for him. Such a view is laden with several difficulties, not least of which is that the narrative presents Rebekah as much more than a simple housewife. In fact, in 27:1-17 it is she who is active and purposeful in insuring Jacob's obtaining of the blessing. Sharon Pace Jeanson hence argues that Rebekah's love for Jacob is not governed by any similar characteristics the two may share but rather by Rebekah's own sense of the oracle in 25:23 that Jacob would be the "greater."⁸² One may wonder, though, whether Jacob cuts his deceptive teeth on being in the presence of his mother, who we see is clearly capable of hatching a near-foolproof plan. Yet viewed from this perspective of the utter discontinuity of the twins, God's oracle begins to work itself out already in the lives of this family.

The first post-uterine interaction between the two brothers revolves around the right of the firstborn, and it is here that for the first time one begins to see glimpses that the cunning Jacob may indeed be the **רב**. In these verses (29-34) the narrative depicts Esau's character as diametrically opposite Jacob's character. While Esau is short-sighted and overly dramatic, Jacob is cold, calculating, and "businesslike."⁸³

The difference between the two characters is made most manifest in the way each communicates with the other. Alter calls this literary technique "contrastive dialogue."⁸⁴ Esau comes in from the field famished and weak, claiming he is about to die (vv. 29, 32).

⁸² Sharon Pace Jeanson, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 63.

⁸³ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 45.

⁸⁴ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 72.

It is difficult to assume Esau is here near death as a result of a simple hunting expedition, most notably due to the description in v. 27 that he is an adept hunter. Esau implores Jacob to let him “gulp down from the red—this red!” The verb used here is the hiphil *הלעיטני* (from *לעט*), the only time this verb ever occurs in the Hebrew Bible. Heard points out that the word does appear in postbiblical Hebrew as a description of the eating practices of animals, yet he contends that this attestation should not inform its usage here in Genesis and thereby not impose upon the reader a negative evaluation of Esau’s character.⁸⁵ Similarly, Joseph Prouser understands Esau’s request as much more carefully crafted and polite, opting for the following translation: “Please may I have just a taste of that lovely red soup, weary as I am.”⁸⁶ It seems odd, however, that the narrative does not use the standard word for “eat” *אכל* but instead uses this hapax, which seems to intend an eating different than that of most humans.⁸⁷ In context, the specific choice of *לעט* makes great sense given its animalistic associations, which fit with Esau’s life as an outdoorsman and in which he surely would have interactions with animals and their eating habits. Esau may also ironically have used food as bait, much like Jacob does here to entrap his dimwitted brother. Just as Esau the skilled hunter would await an opportunity to attack his prey, perhaps when it was eating, so too the conniving Jacob seizes his opportunity when Esau is about to eat. What is more, Esau appears unable to

⁸⁵ Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 103-104.

⁸⁶ Joseph H. Prouser, “Seeing Red: On Translating Esau’s Request for Soup,” *Conservative Judaism* 56 (2004): 18. I do not find Prouser’s semantic analysis convincing, and he makes unfounded leaps at several places to gussy up the translation. For example, he argues Esau’s double-use of the word for red (*אדום*) may just as likely mean “dark red stew,” which is fine; he then takes poetic license and states in the very next sentence that “lovely red soup” may be more accurate!

⁸⁷ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 44, translates the verb as “let me cram my maw.” Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 129, further notes the possibility that the hiphil form be read as carrying the sense of a plea for Jacob physically to feed Esau. For more on this verb see Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 33.

conjure up even the name of the dish Jacob is preparing, testifying to his boorish demeanor, merely calling it twice by its color . . . “red” (אדם).

God is not outside these events. Not only does the narrative present the trickster oracle as both tricking and impelling further trickery, the narrative also provides textual hints at a divine hand at work. Continuing to emphasize the characters’ speech, Esau’s exasperated and difficult to translate statement in v. 32 (הנה אנכי הולך למות ולמה־זה לי בכרה) mirrors a similar and equally difficult to translate expression used by his mother Rebekah in v. 22 (אם־כן למה זה אנכי). In both cases their statements speak to a situation of peril that they perceive themselves to have entered. The difference, though, is that Rebekah’s words are met with a word from God, leading to her favoritism of Jacob and actions on his behalf in Gen 27. Esau’s words, however, are met with nothing, no divine response or clarification. God’s silence at Esau’s cry of distress hints even further that the divine trickster has sided with the trickster Jacob. In fact, Esau is the only character in this narrative never to receive a word from God.⁸⁸ The narrative unmistakably portrays Esau not only as unfit to carry the promise forward but also as unfit to hear a divine word.

In contrast to Esau, Jacob speaks with both a plan and a purpose. Even though the narrative does not say so explicitly, it remains difficult and odd to assume Rebekah would not have made the oracle—and her interpretation of it—known to Jacob. Only against this backdrop do vv. 29-34 make sense as the partial fulfillment of the trickster oracle, and only in this way does Rebekah’s risky advocacy of Jacob in chapter 27 make sense. Jacob’s words are methodical, his sentences terse and to the point. Otherwise he is ominously silent. Between the two occasions on which he addresses Esau here, he

⁸⁸ Turner, *Genesis*, 123-124.

speaks only a mere eight words, but that is all he needs to succeed in acquiring the right of the firstborn from his brother. Additionally, the narrative begins to push Esau out. One can see the transferal of roles taking place here by the presence of Jacob's name amid the absence of Esau's in the narrative. Esau is merely the assumed subject of the verbs *יָשַׁבַּע* and *יָמַכָּר* (v. 33), as well as a string of four successive verbs (v. 34). Verse 34 begins with Jacob's name (*יַעֲקֹב*), which emphasizes Jacob by straying from the usual verb-subject-object order of Hebrew syntax. This structure, though, also parallels the final line of the oracle in v. 23 where *רַב* emphatically opens the verse. The scene closes with Esau's despising (*בִּזָּה*) not *בְּכָרְתִּי* “his birthright” but the now other *בְּכָרָה* “birthright”; the shift from the possessive to the definite here helps articulate that the transaction is complete. All that remains on the stage is Jacob, possessor of the right of the firstborn.

A heretofore unrecognized comparison may be drawn between Jacob's speech here and YHWH's speech in 25:23. Both Jacob and YHWH are tantalizingly and deceptively silent as to the reality of each respective situation. For God the trickster, the details of who is/will be the *רַב* and who the *צַעִיר* are withheld, just as Jacob withholds from Esau the details regarding the true contents of the red pottage (*נִידָה*). Not until the final verse in the scene (v. 34), after Jacob has already acquired the right of the firstborn, does the narrative reveal that the pottage on which Esau stakes his life and birthright is a simple dish of lentils (*עֲדָשִׁים*).⁸⁹ Many commentators have been reticent to label this episode one of deception,⁹⁰ yet I cannot escape reading Jacob's demeanor and calculating

⁸⁹ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 34. Paganini, “Wir haben Wasser gefunden,” 29, makes a similar point that Esau sold his right of the firstborn without knowing what he was getting for it.

⁹⁰ von Rad, *Genesis*, 266; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 230.

silence as evidence of the trickster at work.⁹¹ Indeed, Esau himself regards this episode as one of deception in 27:36! Furthermore, Hugh White points to a fascinating pun that references deception centered on the verb יָרָה (“cooking”) in v. 29. The hiphil form here occurs nowhere else in biblical Hebrew with this meaning; it does occur, however, with the meaning “to act presumptuously, or with willful forethought” in Exod 21:14; Deut 1:43; 18:20.⁹² A contemporary and parallel colloquialism is “to cook up,” meaning “to scheme.”⁹³ This episode is therefore not a matter of mere happenstance; Jacob had planned for this moment and had a plan already devised. By noticing this clever word play, the deceptive undertones of the scene become that much more potent. The scene has been set for the next act of deception in Gen 27.

“Fulfilling” the Trickster Oracle (Gen 27:1-45)

Extant scholarship has dealt well with the complexity and intricacies that accompany any discussion of Gen 27. Here we will not recapitulate the entire breadth of research on this seminal scene but rather discuss in more detail two specific areas on which the trickster oracle seems to have a bearing: the oracle’s introduction of strife and conflict into the family relationship; God’s place in the deception of Isaac. As to the former, Brueggemann writes, “it is clear that the oracle of 25:23 governs even here.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ See Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 101, who deems this episode one of “extortion by a clever con artist” with the purpose of “provid[ing] an initial and incomplete working out of the trickster pattern fully articulated in chapter 27.”

⁹² Hugh C. White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 211.

⁹³ White, *Narration and Discourse*, 211.

⁹⁴ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 226.

And as to the latter, the way in which not only the oracle but also, by extension, God, figures into this episode rife with deception will receive special attention.

The Trickster Oracle and Family Dissonance

We have already seen that the oracle introduces dissonance into the family as early as 25:27-34, and that very dissonance swells to irreparable proportions here in chapter 27. That separation and conflict YHWH spoke of in the prenatal oracle carries over and involves the parents in deeply intimate ways. The family is ostensibly split into two, with Rebekah and Jacob on one side and Esau and Isaac on the other. But with the trickster oracle in play, God becomes an actor behind the scenes as well, insuring that his purposes, whatever they may be, come to fruition.

That the family dynamic has already experienced considerable rupture is evidenced from the very beginning of the chapter. Isaac summons Esau so that he may bless him before his death; no attempt or mention is made that Jacob would also receive a blessing (which is surprising in itself given that Isaac is in the end able to bless both Jacob and Esau, vv. 28-29, 39-40).⁹⁵ Wenham sees in Isaac's ostensible desire to bless *only* Esau and *not* Jacob a breach with convention (type-scene) in that elsewhere in Genesis—specifically Gen 49; 50:24-25—all male family members expected to receive some type of blessing from a dying relative.⁹⁶ This deviation from convention highlights the family rupture all the more. Going further, Craig Smith offers a provocative reading that Isaac in fact falls quite short as a patriarch according to YHWH's standards by his

⁹⁵ See Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (trans. Keith Crim; Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 1-62, for a thorough discussion of blessing in the Hebrew Bible. See especially pp. 54-56 on Genesis 27.

⁹⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 205, 215.

failure to pass on the full ancestral promise in Gen 27:26-29 coupled with his passivity in allowing Esau to marry such odious Hittite women.⁹⁷ The payoff in Smith's reading is that the fault for disjunction in the family lay solely with Isaac and his inability to function as a proper patriarch should. Smith's study, however, suffers from several difficulties, not least of which is the fact that Isaac does commend Jacob to receive the full ancestral promise in 28:1-5, a section Smith consigns to the status of "additional material concerning Isaac and his activities as a patriarch."⁹⁸ Additionally, the Genesis narrative makes it quite clear that YHWH alone, not a human patriarch, bestows the ancestral promise on its rightful recipient (12:1-3; 26:2-5; 28:13-15). Brueggemann summarizes the matter nicely:

The father gives the blessing he wants to give. But he gives it to the son whom he does not want to have it. *Surely there is more working against Isaac than the cunning of Rebekah. There is also the power of God at work for Jacob.* From the beginning, Isaac cannot resist it.⁹⁹

Isaac is not in control of the situation; God, however, is very much in control.

Another indicator of the brokenness of the family lies in the fact that Rebekah has to eavesdrop so as to get this information. This blessing is not to be a festive family affair. Rather she has long thought Jacob to be the רב, and now she has the opportunity to act on this thought. Rebekah is a whirlpool of activity, instructing Jacob precisely through near verbatim repetitions of Isaac's words to Esau. To be sure, Jacob's assent to Rebekah's plans further evinces a rift in the family. Westermann correctly notices that

⁹⁷ Craig A. Smith, "Reinstating Isaac: The Centrality of Abraham's Son in the 'Jacob-Esau' Narrative of Genesis 27," *BTB* 31 (2001): 130-134.

⁹⁸ Smith, "Reinstating Isaac," 133.

⁹⁹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 231-232. (italics mine)

Jacob does not object to the plan but only to its “feasibility.”¹⁰⁰ He is more than ready to go along with her plan and only questions *how*, not *whether* they should pull off the trick. Rebekah is not the sole trickster; Jacob has already shown his savvy in the birthright episode. Among Jacob’s main concerns now is that his own smoothness will reveal him as a “trickster” (מתעבט, v. 12) to his father.¹⁰¹ Rebekah prepares the deception, but the successful completion of the task is left to Jacob.

Again, the narrative here portrays Jacob in a way consonant with the divine trickster oracle in 25:23. Jacob, having just come before his father, nearly outs himself by getting a bit too garrulous (vv. 19, 20); perhaps suspecting his slip-up, he shortens his response to a mere one word when asked whether he was Esau or not: אֵי. In this way Jacob again—just as in 25:27-34—remains deceptively silent about the details of his situation. Comparatively, the divine speech in 25:23 similarly withholds pertinent information from Rebekah, albeit conversely in more verbose speech. The narrative further connects the two scenes through the realization that Rebekah and Jacob are, in fact, here acting deceptively based upon their own understanding of the trickster oracle.

The most concrete evidence of a family divide attributed to the oracle exists in how the chapter continually references each child in relation to each parent. At the outset the narrative reports that Isaac summons “*his* elder son” (בְּנוֹ הַגֶּדֶל), an inoffensive enough point until v. 5, when the narrative further reports that Rebekah overhears Isaac speaking to “*his* son” (בְּנוֹ). It is striking that the narrative does not instead call Esau “her son” or

¹⁰⁰ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 438. On this point see also Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 103 and Spina, “Esau in Canonical Context,” 9.

¹⁰¹ Spina, “Esau in Canonical Context,” 10, notes the “*double entendre*” present in Jacob’s smoothness, which the narrative underscores all the more in Jacob’s own recognition of himself as a trickster (v. 12). See also Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch*, 128-129.

even “their son.” This pattern continues when in v. 6 Rebekah addresses “*her* son Jacob” (יעקב בנה) and refers to Esau only as “*your* brother” (אחיך). Such differentiation persists throughout the entire chapter. Jacob is called “her son” (בנה) four times (vv. 6, 15, 17, 42) by the narrator, and Rebekah always calls Jacob “my son” (בני, vv. 8, 13, 43). Isaac too calls Jacob “my son,” but only because he believes Esau is before him (vv. 18, 20, 21 x2, 24, 25, 26, 27).¹⁰² The absolute irony in Isaac’s near incessant use of “my son” for the disguised Jacob makes the distinction within the family that much more undeniable. Indeed, the oracle results not only in the separation of the twins, as promised, but also in an ever-widening divide of the entire family unit.¹⁰³

God in the Deception of Isaac

Some scholarly attempts have sought to soften the fact that a divine purpose attains fulfillment by deception, and it will behoove our analysis to mention two briefly. Joseph Rackman challenges the validity and feasibility of a genuine blessing gained by deception. In an attempt to make sense of the text, Rackman avers that it was Isaac’s intention all along to bless Jacob rather than Esau.¹⁰⁴ As evidence he adduces the fact that the blessing given to Jacob disguised as Esau is concerned with material things while in 28:3-4, when Isaac knows Jacob is before him, he passes on the ancestral blessing.¹⁰⁵ But Rackman’s textual analysis is nothing short of psychologizing the biblical

¹⁰² Jeansonne, “The Use of Poetry,” 149; Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis*, 66; Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 86.

¹⁰³ See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 100-112, for a discussion of the breakdown of the family dynamic in this chapter from a strictly literary-aesthetic perspective.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Rackman, “Was Isaac Deceived?” *Judaism* 43 (1993): 38.

¹⁰⁵ Rackman, “Was Isaac Deceived?” 38.

characters.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, Mignon Jacobs wonders whether Isaac may actually know Jacob is before him, in a way testing to see what lengths Jacob will go to in order to garner the blessing.¹⁰⁷ Certainly some psychologizing may be endemic to the art of biblical interpretation, yet one must remain grounded in and rely upon the text as the arbiter of what can and cannot be legitimated. Both Rackman and Jacobs frame their arguments as possibilities; they appear to do little in the way of addressing the probability of their readings. Moreover, each of these readings succumbs to a number of problems. First, the portrayal of Isaac offered by Rackman and Jacobs is inconsistent with the biblical portrayal.¹⁰⁸ Isaac's great trembling in 27:33 attests to his absolute surprise in being tricked. If Isaac is in fact acting deceptively here, he is doing so quite out of character, and quite convincingly! Second, Isaac's continued testing by means of all of his senses to discover who is truly before him, not to mention his persistent hesitancy in actually delivering the blessing, makes little sense if Isaac meant all along to bless Jacob. And third, again, it is God alone who passes on the ancestral blessing; all Isaac does in 28:3-4 is commend Jacob to God. The line of argumentation advanced by Rackman and Jacobs does not appear convincing or viable based upon a close scrutiny of the text.

While God does not appear as an explicit character in chapter 27, one should not conclude that silence bespeaks absence. Niditch writes of Gen 27 that "God is in the

¹⁰⁶ Rackman, "Was Isaac Deceived?" 40-41, suggests Rebekah went about her deceptive plan because she failed to understand that the blessings could be separated. He further psychologizes as to Isaac's mental health following the events of Gen 22; Isaac did not want to have to make the same choice between sons that his father had done. As one may expect, Rackman's exegesis is quite midrashic.

¹⁰⁷ Mignon Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 115-118.

¹⁰⁸ J. Cheryl Exum and J. Williams Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions" in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism* (ed. Paul R. House; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 277-286, contend that Isaac is a pathetically comical figure. See esp. pp. 284-285 on Gen 27.

wings as helper and determinator.”¹⁰⁹ And given that the oracle in 25:23 governs the entire Jacob cycle, one cannot help but see God as operative behind the scenes by means of that very oracle. Brueggemann, therefore, correctly underscores the highly theological nature of Gen 27. For him the text is ultimately about God’s desires; Rebekah’s role, while no doubt active, is one she herself does not choose but rather God imposes and makes necessary with the oracle. He writes:

Given the oracle of 25:23 and its undoubted continuing importance for the Jacob tradition, we may dare to conclude that the real issue here is not primarily about Isaac and Esau, nor about Rebekah and Jacob. It is, rather, about the *power of the blessing in the service of God’s purpose of inversion*. . . . For this narrator, Rebekah plays a role she does not know about and did not choose. . . . We know only from 25:19-34 about the larger mystery at work here. . . . The bargaining for the birthright (25:29-34) and the scheme for the blessing (27:1-45) *implement the oracle* in ways unrecognized by every participant. God has evoked the conflict. The conflict causes pain or shame to every player. But God does not shrink from the conflict, *for a holy purpose is underway*.¹¹⁰

While Brueggemann is correct in noticing the purposes of God, he is incorrect in implying that Rebekah and Jacob appear merely as unwitting pawns in a divine game of chess. Rebekah especially acts with great volition. Simply because Rebekah and Jacob do not achieve success on their own does not mean they have not made the choice to act in this way. Indeed, given the ambiguity of the trickster oracle, they are likely unaware of the true divine intention and are only trying to bring about one possible understanding of it. Their sense of purpose is strong. They also likely assume God is at work, as the following treatment will show; what remains shrouded from them is whether God is working for them or against them. God plays a part to be sure, and a vital one at that, albeit one that will not come to the fore until Bethel.

¹⁰⁹ Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 100.

¹¹⁰ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 235. (italics mine).

Gen 27 does, however, adduce God in three instances that buttress his underlying role. The first such mention occurs in v. 7, where Rebekah repeats to Jacob nearly verbatim what she overhears between Isaac and Esau. She cleverly adds that Isaac wishes to bless Esau “before YHWH” (לפני יהוה). Scholarship has struggled with how to handle this addition. Both Dillman and Skinner understand the phrase to connote a blessing in YHWH’s presence.¹¹¹ For Wenham it serves to convince Jacob that now is the moment to act.¹¹² Speiser and Sarna go one step further, maintaining it means “with [YHWH’s] approval.”¹¹³ While this supplement is clearly a lie—Isaac says no such thing—the line evokes the oracle in which Rebekah understands Jacob to be preeminent. It is by means of this blessing given by God (vv. 28-29) that Rebekah perceives Jacob will become the רב. And as will become clear at Bethel, YHWH does approve!

The second time YHWH appears is on the lips of Jacob. In v. 20 he responds to Isaac’s query about the speed with which he was able to find the wild game by stating “because YHWH your God caused it to happen (הקרה) for me.” Commentators have excoriated Jacob here for perverting the divine name and employing it in a blatant deception. Hamilton calls this the “low point” of the narrative.¹¹⁴ Mignon Jacobs argues Jacob here implicates God in the deception so as to insure his success, which “demonstrates a reckless abandon in achieving his goal.”¹¹⁵ Friedmann Golka says Jacob’s answer reverberates with theological insolence (*theologischen*

¹¹¹ August Dillman, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Expounded* (vol. 2; Edinburgh: Clark, 1897), 214; Skinner, *Genesis*, 370.

¹¹² Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 206.

¹¹³ Speiser, *Genesis*, 209; Sarna, *Genesis*, 190.

¹¹⁴ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 220.

¹¹⁵ Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 113.

Unverschämtheit).¹¹⁶ Mathews accuses Jacob of blasphemy.¹¹⁷ But what if Jacob is in a way here speaking the truth? Turner muses over this question, noting that Jacob's words here use the same idiom employed in the speech of Abraham's servant in 24:12 when sent to fetch Isaac a wife; has God truly orchestrated success in both ventures?¹¹⁸ Yes, though the narrative does not define precisely how this is the case. Hamilton likewise argues that the use of קרה here and in 24:12 dictates that these events are not mere coincidence but rather are governed by divine providence.¹¹⁹ Despite not appearing on stage, God is mysteriously at work in the deception of Isaac.

The third and final mention of God in Gen 27 appears in Isaac's blessing of a disguised Jacob. Verse 28 begins "may God give you . . ." which accentuates that Jacob's blessing actually comes from God.¹²⁰ What is most vital to recognize, however, is that once the deception is uncovered Isaac affirms and upholds Jacob's blessed status (v. 33). Esau too receives a blessing (vv. 39-40) that is remarkably similar to Jacob's. Two glaring differences stand out. First, Esau's blessing reverses the first two lines of Jacob's blessing, leading many scholars incorrectly to regard it is a curse or anti-blessing.¹²¹ Second, and most importantly, God appears nowhere in the blessing of

¹¹⁶ Friedmann Golka, "Bechorah und Berachah: Erstgeburtsrecht und Segen" in *Recht und Ethos im Alten Testament: Gestalt und Wirkung: Festschrift für Horst Seebass zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. S. Beyerle, G. Mayer, and H. Strauss; Neukirchen-Vluyn; Neukirchener, 1999), 140.

¹¹⁷ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 430.

¹¹⁸ Turner, *Genesis*, 118.

¹¹⁹ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 218.

¹²⁰ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 110; Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 45.

¹²¹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 104; von Rad, *Genesis*, 279; Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 99; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 306; Skinner, *Genesis*, 378. The crux of this interpretation revolves around how one should construe the ׀ in each blessing. Is it partitive or privative? I argue rather, as is evident above, that the key interpretive issue is not how one translates the particle ׀ but that any mention of God is

Esau. Taken *in tandem*, this incongruity is not a denigration of any hope for Esau's future but rather is simply concerned to show that *the ancestral promise* will go to Jacob, not Esau. And that is precisely what happens as the text continues.

Divine Corroboration at Bethel: Gen 28 and Deception

The plan does not work out as tidily as the tricksters might have hoped. While Jacob receives the blessing, the deception puts his life in mortal danger as Rebekah learns of Esau's plot to murder his brother (vv. 41-42). Rebekah thus hatches another deception with Isaac as the deceived, this time withholding Esau's machinations as the impetus for her desire to send Jacob away and instead couching the rationale for doing so in their shared desire that Jacob find a proper wife (vv. 43-46). What emerges from this further deception, though, is quite remarkable. Chapter 28 begins with "and Isaac called to Jacob" (ויקרא יצחק אל-יעקב), which hearkens back to the start of chapter 27 where Isaac "called to Esau" (ויקרא את-עשו). A change has surely taken place! Moreover, without any blatant reason given, Isaac again blesses Jacob, this time commending Jacob to God as the viable recipient of the ancestral promise (28:3-4). One must remain mindful that Isaac does not here confer the promise itself on Jacob; he requests that YHWH do it.¹²² Presumably YHWH could withhold the promise from Jacob, showing distaste for the unpalatable way the birthright and blessing were obtained. On the run, Jacob's life is now one laden with questions, not answers. Perhaps he fears how God will respond to

entirely absent from Esau's blessing. One cannot call it a curse, for in Gen 33 he most certainly appears to have a great deal of wealth.

¹²² On this point see especially Terence E. Fretheim, "Which Blessing Does Isaac Give Jacob?" in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (SBL Symposium Series 8; ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 289-290.

such duplicity. How striking and revelatory it is, then, that *YHWH does give* Jacob the ancestral promise in 28:13-15, on the very heels of a family-shattering act of deception!

The proximity of Isaac's blessing in 28:3-4 and YHWH's granting Jacob the ancestral promise in 28:13-15 tethers chapters 27 and 28 together.¹²³ When read in this way, God's appearance to Jacob in the dream theophany at Bethel acts as a confirmation of all that has come before. De Pury astutely reads the Bethel scene as a confirmation of not just the promise but the promise gained by fraud.¹²⁴

The Genesis narrative itself also communicates just such a divine authentication and corroboration of the events in chapters 25 and 27. Diana Lipton's *Revisions of the Night* is a careful and judicious study on the various dreams in the ancestral narratives. Lipton isolates six recurrent themes in each of these dream scenes, one theme of which is most pertinent to our purposes here. She writes: "Each dream recasts recent events to reveal divine involvement in what had previously appeared as an exclusively human affair."¹²⁵ One can already see the relevance of Lipton's thesis for the present study. Proponents of removing God from the narrative scene in these episodes have not yet adequately attended to the function of Bethel in the overall experience of Jacob's life. Truly, Lipton asserts that if God does not approve then we as readers are hard-pressed to

¹²³ Susan Ackerman, "The Deception of Isaac, Jacob's Dream at Bethel, and Incubation on an Animal Skin" in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* (JSOTSup 125; ed. Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 119, further sees Gen 27 and 28 as "two acts in one play." Gen 27 results in the necessity for Jacob to flee, which ultimately brings him to Bethel, where he receives the ancestral promise.

¹²⁴ de Pury, *Promesse Divine*, 101. He writes: "Après avoir obtenu la bénédiction paternelle par la fraude (Gen 27), bénédiction qui, il est vrai, lui avait été confirmée par Dieu à Béthel (28:13-15)."

¹²⁵ Diana Lipton, *Revisions of the Night: Politics and Promise in the Patriarchal Dreams of Genesis* (JSOTSup 288; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 33. The five other unifying themes are as follows: 1) the dream occurs at a time of anxiety or danger; 2) descendants and threat to one's progeny are in sight; 3) the dream signifies the dreamer's change in status; 4) the dream treats in some way the relationship between Israelites and non-Israelites; 5) exile from the land is a motif.

explain Jacob's extraordinary vision of a staircase with God perched atop it.¹²⁶ Going further, if God did not approve why would he grant the ancestral promise to Jacob? God has shown in 25:23 he feels free to act as he prefers; why would now be any different?

Lipton uncovers several ways in which the Bethel narrative communicates YHWH's approval of Jacob, his activity, and the results. God's first words explicitly to Jacob in v. 13, "I am YHWH, God of *Abraham your father*, and God of Isaac," show a "divine displeasure" with Isaac's preference for Esau by identifying Jacob as Abraham's son.¹²⁷ Hamilton on the other hand deems this introductory phrase an example of YHWH's "indirect censure" of Jacob in that YHWH identifies himself as the "God of Isaac," or put another way, the God of the father you deceived.¹²⁸ Hamilton's assertion is unconvincing. First, Hamilton is incorrect that YHWH reveals himself as "God of his [Jacob's] grandfather and the God of his father."¹²⁹ Isaac is nowhere here called Jacob's father; Abraham receives that accolade. "*Abraham your father*" is far too jarring and significant a phrase, especially based upon the beginning of the Jacob cycle (see below), and the phrase "God of Isaac" is said almost in passing. It is also a wonder that if God intends to reprimand Jacob the chosen mode of punishment is not divine rebuke but a litany of unconditional promises!

One may also see this return focus on Abraham as hearkening back to the emphasis placed on Abraham in the opening verses of the Isaac *toledot* (25:19-22). There we discussed how the themes of barrenness, promise, and the fatherhood of

¹²⁶ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 68.

¹²⁷ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 69-70.

¹²⁸ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 241.

¹²⁹ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 241.

Abraham connected the two narratives together and relegated Isaac to the margins. Remember also that it is Rebekah, not Isaac, who receives the trickster oracle. Reading Abraham's paternity of Jacob in 28:13 as a judgment on Isaac allows for the possibility of reading the marginalization of Isaac and focus on Abraham's paternity of Isaac in 25:19-20 as an early sign of God's discontentment with this most passive of patriarchs. One may also read this return to Abraham as another sign of assurance that the promise rightly belongs to Jacob.

Two further rationales underscore God's ratification of Jacob and the blessing. First, there exists for Lipton several parallels in wording between part of God's promise to Jacob in 28:14 and God's affirming the land promise to Abraham in 13:14-15. That these connections skip over Isaac further reinforces YHWH's annoyance at Isaac's initial preference to bless Esau.¹³⁰ Second, Bethel (Gen 28) is typologically related to Babel (Gen 11); both share elements of a structure stretching between heaven and earth, divine presence, scattering, and etiological naming of a place.¹³¹ In the latter, humanity is scattered for acting outside the bounds of divine approval, and God comes down to observe a structure the people have built; in the former Jacob's vision mentions scattering in a positive light, as the fulfillment of the ancestral promise, and God shows a structure to Jacob that is actually able to reach the heavens.¹³² The compound effect of these narrative cues demonstrates that God views Jacob and his duplicitous actions positively.

A final question, however, remains to be asked: what is one to make of Jacob's response to God in 28:20-22? The ancestral promise bestowed upon Jacob in 28:13-15 is

¹³⁰ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 70.

¹³¹ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 103.

¹³² Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 103. On this point see also Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 240.

clearly unconditional: land, descendants, and blessing, not to mention the two additional elements of presence and protection granted in v. 15. Several commentators argue Jacob responds by placing stipulations on his acceptance of YHWH as his God. Humphreys maintains that Jacob alleviates any responsibility placed upon him by the promise and rephrases it so that YHWH bears sole responsibility for insuring the particulars of the promise come to fruition.¹³³ Jeffrey Geoghegan presses the issue further, arguing that Jacob's duplicitous words to his father, "YHWH *your God*," in 27:20 shows that Jacob is glad to avail himself of God to advance his own purposes, but he has no other interest outside of his own self-interest.¹³⁴ According to this line of interpretation, Jacob's "if-then" statement sets conditions on a relationship that has yet to be forged. For Geoghegan, Jacob requests three things: protection, provision, and peaceful return, and the rest of the cycle works toward the fulfillment of each of these items.¹³⁵ The liability latent in this reading is that YHWH accepts Jacob, deceptions and all, but Jacob may not accept YHWH, an argument that seems out of place given all that Jacob has experienced prior to his chancing upon Bethel.¹³⁶

Adequate and convincing reasons exist to challenge this aforementioned reading of Jacob's (conditional?) vow. Primary among these, one cannot properly comprehend Jacob's vow apart from the promise in vv. 13-15. The three 'stipulations' Jacob

¹³³ Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 172.

¹³⁴ Jeffrey C. Geoghegan, "Jacob's Bargain with God (Gen 28:20-22) and its Implications for the Documentary Hypothesis" in *Milk and Honey: Essays on Ancient Israel and the Bible in Appreciation of the Judaic Studies Program at the University of California, San Diego* (ed. Sarah Malena and David Miano; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 25.

¹³⁵ Geoghegan, "Jacob's Bargain with God," 27.

¹³⁶ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 76, writes, "Jacob is hardly likely to have responded to the confirmation that God will accept him by implying that he may not accept God."

supposedly advances according to Geoghegan in fact correspond almost precisely to the expanded promise in v. 15. The following chart summarizes these affinities:

Table 1. Jacob's Vow and the Ancestral Promise

Jacob's Vow	Ancestral Promise
²⁰ "If YHWH God will be with me and protect me on this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and a garment to wear,	¹⁵ "And behold, I am with you, and I will protect you everywhere you go.
²¹ and I return in peace to the house of my father, YHWH will be God to me."	And I will bring you back to this land, for I will not forsake you until I have done what I say to you."

The only part of Jacob's vow lacking a direct counterpart in the promise is the request for food and clothing, but such basic necessities could easily fall under the purview of God's abiding protection. What sense can one make of Jacob's vow in light of this analysis?

Jacob's vow expresses the divine promise in terms that seek to clarify its particulars, not to challenge the feasibility of this new relationship. For Lipton, Jacob repeats and paraphrases the ancestral promise "to clarify precisely how it will be fulfilled."¹³⁷ His requests for protection, safe passage and return, as well as food and clothing are quite sensible for a man who has just fled and left everything behind.¹³⁸

Moreover, John Van Seters holds that in Gen 28:10-22 the expected pattern of supplication followed by promise sees a reversal, but this reversal makes perfect sense

¹³⁷ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 77. Lipton also translates the oracle differently than many, marking the transition from protasis to apodosis at the beginning of v. 22 ("then this stone . . .") rather than in the middle of v. 21 (75).

¹³⁸ Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown*, 53, sees Jacob as practical, asking only for "bare essentials."

given that Jacob would be unable to pray to a God he did not yet know.¹³⁹ This early ignorance on Jacob's part helps level a challenge to the view that Jacob places conditions on his acceptance of God. In 27:20 Jacob has already used the divine name in a statement that rings much truer than one may think at first glance. Van Seters avers that Jacob's use of "your God" in reference to YHWH in 27:20 conforms well to YHWH's self-revelation in 28:13: "I am the God of Abraham your father, and God of Isaac." In the vow, then, Jacob continues the line, affirming that YHWH will now be his God.¹⁴⁰

One may still, however, see in Jacob's acceptance of the ancestral promise resonances of the trickster at work. Jacob's words may also be laden with ambiguity, shrouding the whole truth. Indeed, where the protasis ends and the apodosis begins is quite unclear. This ambiguity suggests that Jacob has insured he has some maneuverability should YHWH not uphold his end of the bargain. One should not make the leap to assuming that if Jacob's words may still be those of a trickster that he does not accept the divine offer. For now, Jacob accepts, but the ambiguous and numinous speech of the trickster allows Jacob a potential 'out' of this new relationship should he need it.¹⁴¹

Placed within this context, Bethel serves a dual purpose. It presses the Jacob cycle forward as a story about God's presence with and protection of Jacob. It also shows God's acceptance of and role in the previous deceptions of Esau and Isaac by means of God's choice of Jacob. In the trickster oracle, YHWH ambiguously announces

¹³⁹ John Van Seters, "Divine Encounter at Bethel (Gen 28.10-22) in Recent Literary-Critical Study of Genesis," *ZAW* 110 (1998): 508.

¹⁴⁰ Van Seters, "Divine Encounter at Bethel," 509.

¹⁴¹ Unfortunately, space precludes a more sustained treatment of this possibility, yet the constant debate within scholarship over how one should understand Jacob in this instance may well attest to the viability of reading Jacob's acceptance of the promise not as imposing conditions upon God but still leaving room to renegotiate should the terms need to change.

that “the greater will serve the lesser.” Jacob and Rebekah work toward fulfilling a particular understanding of the oracle that regards Jacob as the בן, and through several deceptions Jacob achieves the right of the firstborn and the paternal blessing, entitling him also to the ancestral promise. At Bethel God reveals that Rebekah has interpreted correctly. Jacob the trickster is the divine choice to carry the promise forward.

Conclusion: A Trickster Oracle and YHWH’s Preference for a Trickster

The foregoing analysis has read Gen 25:23, YHWH’s oracle to Rebekah, as an example of a trickster oracle. First, the opening verses of the Jacob cycle were seen to underscore both the importance of the ancestral promise and the highly theological nature of the cycle. Second, focus upon the oracle itself in 25:23 demonstrated that one cannot read it under the *a priori* assumption that it coheres with other narratives of inversion in Genesis. Rather, in light of Alter’s understanding of the biblical type-scene, what is seminal in understanding the oracle is how it differs from the convention of annunciation of birth elsewhere in Genesis. What emerges from this examination is a recognition of the oracle’s ambiguity, which in line with the definition of “deception” as the withholding or manipulating of information, supports reading the oracle as a trickster oracle. Through it God shows himself to be a trickster by means of the oracle’s blatant ambiguity in matters of diction and meaning, syntax, and context. Additionally, God’s very reticence to name the “greater” and the “lesser” impels the narrative’s human characters—Rebekah and Jacob—to bring about their own interpretation of the divine will, which they succeed in doing by means of several deceptions.

With this point in mind, two scenes of deception—Jacob’s extorting the right of the firstborn from Esau (Gen 25:27-34) and the deception of Isaac leading to the theft

also of the blessing (Gen 27:1-45)—were interpreted in light of the oracle. One discerns that God’s purposes are operative throughout, and the trickster oracle has had a lasting effect on this family. This function of the oracle, in all its vagueness, as an introduction of sorts to the entire Jacob cycle thus intimately involves God in the various deceptions and, ultimately, God is deemed complicit. We have argued, however, that the “mitigating factor” (if one can call it such a thing) amidst all this deception occurs in the second theophany in the cycle, in which Jacob receives the ancestral promise solely at YHWH’s behest. YHWH’s bestowal of the ancestral promise on the trickster Jacob succeeds in affirming the deceptive measures employed to get to this point and upholds Jacob as the rightful recipient of the promise. And it is the perpetuation of this very promise, at times by deceptive measures, that is the principle concern of YHWH in Genesis.

In the end, the oracle does not appear ever to have been concerned with Jacob *becoming* the greater. Instead, he *is* the greater from the very outset, a status substantiated through his cunning and shrewd characterization as opposed to the dimwitted and overly-dramatic Esau. Why then, has God chosen such an individual as bearer of the ancestral promise, and why is it he who becomes Israel? The interpretation offered here provides a plausible response: God the Trickster selects Jacob because it is he, not Esau, who is a trickster from the very start.

CHAPTER THREE

Divine Deception and Incipient Fulfillment of the Ancestral Promise (Gen 29-31)

Introductory Remarks

Commentators often regard Jacob's sojourn in Haran as an extended period of trial and toil in his life. Episodes such as Laban's deception of Jacob, Jacob's obtaining a wife he does not love (Leah), and Laban's incessant manipulations to insure a prolonging of Jacob's services serve as the prism through which these negative experiences are refracted. For instance, Victor Hamilton describes Jacob's stay with Laban as a period "filled with heartaches" and one that is "far from ideal."¹ Nahum Sarna argues that Jacob's kissing of Rachel (29:11) and Laban's kissing of Jacob (29:13) echo Isaac's kissing of a disguised Jacob in 27:26-27, communicating that what follows serves as "retributive justice" for Jacob's wrong-doing.² Yet in emphasizing the prevalence of Jacob's negative experiences here, one quickly loses sight of the concomitant theme of fulfillment that begins to emerge by and through the narrative's many deceptions.

A new chapter in the unfolding of the ancestral promise occurs with Gen 29-31. Up until now Jacob has done all he can simply to obtain the promise, deceiving both his father and his brother in the process. Now, with the promise unequivocally his, one's attention turns to matters of fulfillment. The narrative, however, presents other attendant difficulties that have the capacity to impede any fulfillment of the promise. As a result of his deceptions, Jacob has been forced to flee what was once the security of his family and

¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 252.

² Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 203.

home in order to escape Esau's murderous machinations. He leaves behind a broken family for which he has hardly been a *blessing*. Jacob has not only left his family but also the *land* YHWH promised to Abraham in Gen 12:1. And lastly, while Jacob has set off in pursuit of an appropriate wife, no guarantee exists that Jacob will be met with acceptance in Laban's household, especially in light of the unceremonious way Jacob has left his own family. A threat thus also exists to the prospect of a *great nation*. What's more, the journey to Laban's stands before him as part of what appears to be a most uncertain future. As a man on the run, one wonders when such fulfillment will take place for Jacob. Notices such as these lead Turner to conclude that within the entire Jacob cycle no advancement of the ancestral promise beyond that of nationhood exists.³ This chapter will challenge Turner's claim.

One should remain mindful, however, that Jacob is not alone. At Bethel, God had bestowed upon him the ancestral promise, along with the additional promises of presence and protection. Humphreys, thus, rightly reminds the reader that despite the situation in which Jacob leaves his family, God makes it abundantly clear that the divine preference is with Jacob; indeed, God joins Jacob in his exile.⁴ The question then becomes not only *when* fulfillment will occur but also *how* it will occur. We have already seen in the previous chapter how the trickster oracle in 25:23 both employs and brings about further deceptions in the pursuit of its fulfillment. Now with the promise in place, will deception recede, or will it continue as a medium of fulfillment?

³ Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (JSOTSup 96; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 140.

⁴ W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 169.

Throughout Gen 29-31 one discerns movement toward and, in some respects, the incipient fulfillment of the three particulars of the ancestral promise: progeny, blessing, and land. Scholarship has readily noted the first of these, with increasingly less attention to the second and third. Moreover, what remains absent in any treatment of Gen 29-31 is the relationship fulfillment shares with the multiple deceptions that occur. Indeed, little seems to have changed; just as the trickster oracle attains fulfillment by means of deception, so too the ancestral promise advances amidst and through various deceptions.

A recurrent theme from the previous chapter also reemerges: the providence of a divine trickster. While again YHWH is remarkably silent for much of Jacob's internment with Laban, the text provides several narrative cues that God continues to be at work. First, as Michael Fishbane and Walter Brueggemann, among others, have noted, the trickster oracle continues to inform one's reading of the Jacob cycle.⁵ Second, theophany and deception again occur in close literary proximity to one another. Bethel thus possesses a double-function, both authenticating the deceptive events of Gen 25 and 27 and setting the stage for the deceptive interactions between Jacob and Laban. Even more salient is one instance in which theophany and deception actually coincide in Gen 30-31. This episode will receive sustained treatment in what follows. Third, reminiscent of Gen 27, the narrative mentions YHWH in several instances throughout that highlight divine involvement in the unfolding story of these characters.

This chapter will explore this connection between divine deception and movement toward fulfillment of the ancestral promise in four specific areas. First, the narrative of Jacob's arrival in Haran (29:1-14a) will be shown to introduce the ancestral promise and

⁵ Michael A. Fishbane, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25:19-35:22)," *JJS* 26 (1975): 21; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 257.

concerns for its fulfillment. Relatedly, Laban's subsequent deception of Jacob by giving Leah in marriage before Rachel (29:14b-30) will be examined for how it provides the circumstances under which fulfillment may begin to take place. This act of trickery will be seen to serve as an orientation to the larger complex of Jacob-Laban stories in Gen 29-31, quite similar to the trickster oracle in 25:23 treated in detail in the previous chapter, for how it sets the stage for subsequent deceptions and fulfillments. Second, the extended narrative recording the births of Jacob's children will underscore YHWH's commitment to and use of deception as a means of fulfilling the ancestral promise of a "great nation" (12:2). Third, the promise of blessing in Gen 12:2b-3 reaches a qualified fulfillment in Laban's recognition that Jacob has blessed him (30:27). This statement will be read against the backdrop of the prevailing deceptions and highlight how they contribute to and yet also temper fulfillment. And fourth, a great deal of attention will be devoted to analyzing perhaps the most potent instance of divine deception in the Jacob cycle, the numinous breeding of the flocks episode in Gen 30:37-43 and Jacob's subsequent clarification of the scene in 31:1-16. This analysis will have a twin focus upon what this activity reveals about God, as well as how it helps in advancing the promise of land.

The Trickster Tricked and YHWH's Role (Gen 29:1-30)

In the previous chapter we saw how the opening verses of the Jacob cycle introduced an emphasis on Abraham and YHWH's concern for the ancestral promise. Here, at the outset of this second block of material narrating the life of Jacob, a similar focus appears, only in this instance hearkening back specifically to the ancestral promise granted to Jacob at Bethel in Gen 28:13-15. The promise will again be central in the stories that follow, but it will be so in a different way. Whereas Gen 25:19-20 was seen

to conjure up past images of YHWH's desires for the promise, in Gen 29-31 the promise becomes a present reality, the outworking of which begins to take center stage. The focus does not rest solely upon the promise itself but also on the startling ways in which it begins to reach fulfillment.

Bethel and the Providence of a Divine Trickster (Gen 29:1-14a)

Jacob continues his journey from Bethel, arriving at an unnamed place. It is unclear initially why Jacob has opted to stop at this particular location. Does he merely see it as another junction on a much longer trip, or does he believe he has arrived at his destination? The latter of these possibilities appears quite tenuous in light of Jacob's question posed to the shepherds gathered at the well, asking where he now finds himself. In responding to this question, it is important to realize that the text does not provide a name for the place at which Jacob has arrived, calling it only "the land of the sons of the east" (אֶרֶץ בְּנֵי־קֶדֶם). Commentators often take this vague descriptor as an indicator of alienation or judgment.⁶ For instance, Mathews adduces a number of texts (Gen 2:8; 3:24; 4:14; 11:2) in support of his claim that the word "east" (קֶדֶם) in Genesis carries a double meaning, serving as a directional marker as well as connoting rejection.⁷ Mathews' assertion falters, however, on several fronts.

First, קֶדֶם does not in fact occur in 4:14, but it does in 4:16 in reference to YHWH's settling Cain in the land of Nod, "east of Eden." Certainly one may see

⁶ See Martin Ravndal Hauge, "The Struggles of the Blessed in Estrangement I," *ST* 29 (1975): 15, who holds the designation "east" stands as a place toward which the loser of a conflict is exiled. Jacob, however, coming off Gen 25-28 is hardly the loser; he will also leave Laban after a number of years as the winner of a conflict, again with God's assistance.

⁷ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26* (NAC 1B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 461. See also Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 252, for a similar, though abbreviated list. Hamilton advances that *movement toward* the east occurs in reference to judgment (4:16), vanity (11:2; 13:11) or alienation (25:6).

judgment as operative here given Cain's heinous crime, yet one should not undermine the fact that not only is YHWH the one settling Cain in the east, YHWH has also shown Cain mercy by placing a protective mark upon him. Second, close scrutiny of these texts shows in some cases that Mathews reads them in questionable ways. In 2:8 the text only declares that God places a garden in the eastern part of Eden, where God also puts the man. This scene is one depicting more the initial beauty and bounty of creation than judgment for an offense that has yet to happen. Likewise, 3:24 only states that YHWH places the cherubim and flaming sword at the "east of Eden" to protect the Tree of Life; nothing is said of where YHWH drives the man.⁸ In 11:2, the people come "*from the east*" (מִקְרָם) and settle in Shinar, only then beginning to cause trouble; Jacob, conversely, is traveling *to the east*.

At other places within Genesis, the word "east" occurs in connection with blessing and promise. In 10:30 Noah's descendants become so great that they spread to the hill country of the east, which may be read as a fulfillment of YHWH's post-diluvian command to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (9:1). In 12:8 the word occurs twice, referencing Abraham's obedient response to YHWH's call in 12:1-3 and his journeying toward the hill country "*east of Bethel*." The mention of Bethel here provides an even deeper connection to the promise in 29:1. In 25:6 Abraham does indeed send his children by concubines "*eastward, to the land of the east,*" but the text says he does so only to separate them from the child of the promise, Isaac. One need not, therefore, read this scene in a wholly negative manner. After all, Abraham does give these children gifts before sending them away. This separation, therefore, may just as well function to

⁸ The location of the Tree of Life in Gen 3:24 as situated in the eastern part of the garden of Eden also informs the occurrence of "east" in 2:8. There, YHWH places the man, not in a situation of judgment but in the exact same place as the Tree of Life.

protect the rightful heir to the promise from any potential threats. Lastly, Gen 13:11 narrates the separation of Abraham and Lot, the latter of whom chooses the whole land of the east. This scene, however, creates a threat to the promise; Lot could have chosen the promised land of Canaan. Cementing the connection to the ancestral promise, in 13:14 YHWH instructs Abraham to look in all directions, to the north, *east*, south, and west, again affirming that the entire land would belong to Abraham. The parallel with Bethel of four compass points and the final appearance of “east” in 28:14 is most striking.

From this perspective, the designation “land of the sons of the east” stands as an indicator that the ancestral promise is moving toward fulfillment. At Bethel, YHWH had promised Jacob that he would “spread out to the west and *to the east* (קִרְמָה) and to the north and to the south” (28:14), recalling the repeated promise to Abraham in Gen 13:14. That Jacob now arrives in an area described by one of these compass points serves as a cue to the attentive reader to expect what follows to bear some relation and import to the ancestral promise Jacob has just received from YHWH.

In fact, Jacob does not learn he has reached his destination until v. 4, when one of the shepherds tending his flock responds that Jacob is in Haran. The mention of Haran again evokes Abraham; Haran was his ancestral home prior to YHWH’s calling (12:4, 5). One should not, however, see here a sort of reversal of the promise, as though it were moving even further away from fulfillment given that Jacob has returned to the place of its original utterance. Quite the contrary, for Haran is precisely where Rebekah had instructed him to go to find a suitable wife (27:43). Jacob is exactly where he is meant to be, and more importantly, as will become clear, exactly where God intends him.

The mention of Haran also recalls Gen 24, the story of Abraham sending his servant to Haran to acquire a suitable wife for his son Isaac. Robert Alter describes this scene of betrothal at a well as another compelling instance of a biblical type-scene.⁹ One may recall from the previous chapter that a type-scene is a conventional or stock way a particular scene is articulated, including certain elements that an audience would expect, yet adapting—or even eliminating—some aspects in order to give the story its own particular nuance and meaning. If one compares these two examples of the type-scene in Gen 24 and 29, several significant differences emerge that may inform one’s reading of chapter 29.¹⁰ First, unlike Abraham’s servant, who arrived with an impressive arsenal of animals and riches (24:10, 22, 30, 53), Jacob arrives destitute. Turner sees Jacob’s status here as resultant from Jacob’s previous misdeeds, evidencing the fact that Jacob now “lacks everything his stolen blessing had supposedly conferred on him.”¹¹ Further, Turner argues that while Abraham’s servant has humbly beseeched God for guidance along the way (24:12-14), Jacob conversely has arrogantly sworn an oath at Bethel.¹² In chapter one we saw that this negative reading of Jacob’s vow is wanting. One also should not forget, as Turner seems to have done, that while Jacob does not come equipped with the same accoutrements as did Abraham’s servant, he will in the end acquire them with God’s assistance during his stay with Laban. Sharon Pace Jeansonne

⁹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 51. Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 254-255, enumerates the various parts of the scene: 1) character journeys to a far off land; 2) arrives at a well; 3) female(s) come to draw water; 4) the male draws water for the female, or vice-versa; 5) the female goes home and relates the encounter to father or brother; 6) the male is brought to the female’s house; 7) marriage.

¹⁰ For a full account of the differences and how they may contribute both to characterization and foreshadowing, see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 52-56.

¹¹ Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Readings; 2d ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 126.

¹² Turner, *Genesis*, 126.

argues that already one may discern a foreshadowing of Jacob's future prosperity in the repeated mention of Laban's flocks accompanying Rachel to the well (vv. 6, 9, 10).¹³ Jacob may not come with impressive wealth, but he also does not come entirely empty-handed; he comes with both the ancestral promise and with God.

Second, and perhaps most germane to the present discussion, whereas Abraham and his servant incessantly credit God with the success of the mission (24:7, 12, 27, 40, 42, 48), God appears nowhere in Gen 29. Esther Fuchs sees an overarching trajectory spanning the three betrothal type-scenes—Gen 24; 29:1-15; Exod 2:5-11—showing an increasing de-emphasis on the soon-to-be wife concomitant with an increasing emphasis on the soon-to-be husband.¹⁴ For Fuchs, repetition and attention to detail show that Gen 24 is “divinely sanctioned” while in Gen 29 it is Jacob who is a burst of activity.¹⁵ Jacob sees Rachel, rolls the stone away on his own, kisses Rachel, and then weeps. Latent in Fuchs' analysis is that while God is active in Gen 24 it is Jacob who is active in Gen 29. Jacob's activity, however, is quite telling of a divine hand at work in a way Fuchs has not noted. Humphreys points out that in both instances of the type-scene in Genesis the characters arrive without issue and almost immediately at the exact well where they will find those for whom they are looking.¹⁶ Humphreys correctly claims that when read alongside Gen 24 and YHWH's promise in Gen 28 one may discern God at work. In what follows we will focus more intently upon the stone and its connection to divine

¹³ Sharon Pace Jeanson, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 71.

¹⁴ Esther Fuchs, “Structure, Ideology and Politics in the Biblical Betrothal Type-Scene” in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 273.

¹⁵ Fuchs, “Structure, Ideology, and Politics,” 274, 276.

¹⁶ Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 174.

presence. Jacob's kissing Rachel serves as a sign that he has completed his journey on which YHWH has promised presence and protection. Similarly, Hamilton sees Jacob's uncharacteristic crying as a recognition of this same fact.¹⁷

Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher stresses the import of YHWH's guidance as a prerequisite for success in Gen 24, but also the way in which the two scenes may inform one another.¹⁸ In Gen 29, Jacob becomes a sort of 'stand-in' for Abraham's servant.¹⁹ Such does not, of course, automatically place the words of Abraham's servant on the lips of Jacob, but it does cause one to wonder how the latter scene employs the convention in its own unique way.

Despite Jacob's lack of repeatedly professing a divine hand at work, one need look only to Jacob's parting words at Bethel in response to a divine word of promise as the necessary evidence that God is with Jacob.²⁰ Indeed, another difference between Gen 24 and 29 is conspicuous if one views Bethel in conjunction with Jacob's arrival at Haran. Abraham's servant only speaks *about God*, though God never utters a word in Gen 24. Jacob, however, not only receives an unsolicited divine word in 28:10-22, he actually speaks *with God*. One may also postulate that the fact God does not respond to Jacob's vow (28:20-22) with words but instead shows his assent with successful action,

¹⁷ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 256.

¹⁸ Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "Genesis 24—Ein Mosaik aus Texten" in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction and History* (ed. A. Wénin; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), 527. See also her "Begegnungen am Brunnen," *BN* 75 (1994): 48-66.

¹⁹ Gillmayr-Bucher, "Genesis 24," 529-530.

²⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL; rev. ed.; trans. J. H. Marks; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 289, points out the next example of this type-scene in Exod 2:15-21, when Moses obtains a wife in the land of Midian. Here again there is no word from or mention of God; that will come immediately after the scene, in Exod 3 when Moses sees and hears the burning bush. One therefore may understand that absence or presence of the divine word does not appear to be the issue at all in this type-scene but rather when that speech comes, what it reveals, and how it is articulated.

leading Jacob safely to his destination (28:15; cf. 29:4-6), highlights all the more that God is behind what is occurring. Unlike Gen 24 and the Abraham cycle of stories, where God is a much more overt character, Gen 29 expresses the scene in a way that we have already seen is fitting with God's character in the Jacob cycle: often silent, but never absent.²¹ The question is not so much if God is at work in either instance but more so how he is at work. Jacob's arrival at the well, like that of his grandfather's servant, is hardly fortuitous.

Other signs are further evocative of the ancestral promise and function to connect Jacob's arrival in Haran with the promise given at Bethel. Perhaps the most prominent is the large stone covering the well (29:2, 3[x2], 10). This seemingly innocuous stone actually appears quite significant given that it receives four separate mentions in the span of but a few verses. Alter astutely recognizes that this stone and the prominence afforded it deviates from the conventional betrothal type-scene, further attesting to its import.²² What, then, is its significance?

Jacob's life is one intimately bound up with stones. At Bethel he uses a stone as a pillow and upon awakening erects a *massebah* to commemorate his dream theophany. He will again use stones when he and Laban enter into their covenant agreement (31:46-54) and when he returns to Bethel and builds there an altar (35:7) and a *massebah* (35:14). In terms of the overall flow of the narrative thus far, the only two instances in which Jacob has encountered a stone are at Bethel and now at the well. The stone

²¹ Robert L. Cohn, "Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis," *JSOT* 25 (1983): 8-9, describes this difference in God's character between the Abraham and Jacob cycle of stories. I disagree, however, with Cohn's assessment that a "lowering of the divine profile is matched by a correspondingly higher level of human responsibility for the course of events" in the Jacob cycle. Even Cohn ultimately admits that the blessing and promise come from God despite deception.

²² Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 55.

covering the well, then, functions to connect this scene with the previous one at Bethel. But what does this connection reveal? Sarna sees the prevalence given to the stone at the well as a “reminder” that the same God who promised to protect Jacob is now the same God imbuing the patriarch “with superhuman strength.”²³ Mathews avers that the stone shows that God has stood by his promise and is indeed present with Jacob.²⁴ Pressing the connection even more, Alter underscores the metaphorical function of stones as contributing to Jacob’s characterization as a man “contending with the hard unyielding nature of things.”²⁵ Fokkelman provides a helpful summation:

Lastly, at a more profound level the explanation for Jacob’s strength is, as we saw, Providence. The balance and harmony of this arrival and recognition have been achieved by virtue of the blessing. God is indeed with him, leads him to the circle of relatives and inside it he meets the woman who is to be his bride. Whenever Jacob acknowledges this and when he feels he is under God’s special protection, he makes it clear with stones.²⁶

But one can say more. The stone is redolent not only with images of the promise but also, through its recalling of Bethel, testifies to an impending fulfillment. Stones are not a recurring part of the betrothal type-scene, and the mentions of the stone draw the reader’s attention away from the expected arrival of a wife to this seemingly unimportant object. Given the unique appearance of the word (אבן) in this type-scene in Gen 29 and the narrative’s insistence that one take notice of it by appealing to it four times recalls the last stone in Jacob’s life, which serves as a marker of the land of the promise, Bethel.

While Jacob had used a stone at Bethel to commemorate receiving the ancestral promise,

²³ Sarna, *Genesis*, 202.

²⁴ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 462.

²⁵ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 55.

²⁶ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 125.

he now interacts with a stone at the place where the promise has almost immediately led him. It is not insignificant that he does so at the moment he first sees Rachel (v. 10).

Stephen Sherwood emphasizes another relevant aspect of the stone, namely the way in which it presages Laban's first deception of Jacob in 29:21-30. In v. 2 the stone is said to be "large" or "great" (גדולה), the exact same word used in v. 16 to distinguish the "lesser" (קטנה) Rachel with the "greater" (גדולה) Leah.²⁷ Both the stone and Leah serve as obstacles Jacob must overcome in order to earn Rachel's heart and hand. The imagery it connotes, therefore, is much more "complicated" than one may assume at first read.²⁸ Already in the opening scene of Jacob's time with Laban the text introduces the reader to a symbol, the stone, that reverberates with connections not only to the ancestral promise but also to deception.

One final element of the story both concretizes the providential nature of events thus far and foreshadows the next scene of deception. The text accentuates Jacob's arrival at the proper destination by means of repeated familial terminology. In v. 10, the phrase "Laban, brother of his mother" (לבן אחי אמו) occurs three separate times. Sternberg sees in this recurrence an example of "how a redundant family attribution implies motive."²⁹ That is to say, the text tightens the relational bond between Jacob and Laban through a three-fold appeal to Rebekah who, readers remember, loved Jacob most (25:28). This repetition furthermore echoes Rebekah's instruction in 27:43 that Jacob go to "Laban my brother" (לבן אחי), showing that Jacob has arrived at the proper place.

²⁷ Stephen K. Sherwood, *Had God Not Been on My Side: An Examination of the Narrative Technique of the Story of Jacob and Laban, Genesis 29:1-32:2* (Europäische Hochschulschriften Reihe Xxiii, Theologie; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990), 37.

²⁸ Sherwood, *Had God Not Been On My Side*, 57.

²⁹ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 538 n. 15.

Laban's response to Jacob is equally telling. Upon running to meet Jacob, embracing and kissing him, and hearing everything that has happened,³⁰ Laban responds to Jacob by saying, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" Fokkelman's view that וְאֵלֶּיךָ here is best translated "oh well," showing Laban's disappointment that Jacob does not come bearing great riches as did Abraham's servant, is problematic in that it stands in dissonance with the surrounding context.³¹ No mention is made of Jacob's poverty, and Laban has no doubt greeted Jacob in a most magnanimous way.³² Rather, Brueggemann offers a compelling case that this phrase serves as a "covenant formula" binding together the two in a relationship of mutual loyalty yet unequal status.³³ This covenant formula does not preclude recognition of a genetic relationship between the two, though as the narrative progresses such issues quickly fade away.³⁴ Brueggemann's notice that a covenant marks the beginning and ending of the Jacob/Laban relationship opens up the possibility that Laban's consequent deceptions of Jacob breach one covenant in working toward the fulfillment of another, the ancestral promise. Finally, Hamilton points out that Laban employs only four Hebrew words here, a remarkably terse response to "all these

³⁰ The phrase "all these things" (כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה) is, as one may expect of the trickster Jacob, ambiguous. Sarna, *Genesis*, 203, proffers that Jacob tells Laban about his parents sending him to find a suitable wife, along with his "misadventures" along the way. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, instead believes Jacob to be much more selective, relating only what had taken place at the well, which perhaps makes sense given what follows; if Laban had heard of Jacob's herculean strength in single-handedly moving the stone he may know he has a prospective worker before him.

³¹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 126.

³² I do not mean to suggest that Laban's haste in running to meet Jacob does not arise from his hope that Jacob, like Abraham's servant, comes bearing riches. The narrative, however, seems unconcerned to report such details, stating in rapid succession that Laban ran, greeted, embraced, kissed, and took Jacob into his home.

³³ Walter Brueggemann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone (Gn 2,23a)," *CBQ* 32 (1970): 537-538, examines the multiple occurrences of this phrase in the Hebrew Bible and sees in it a sort of covenant formula that presents the partners in unequal positions of power. Here specifically Laban retains power and Jacob a secondary role.

³⁴ Brueggemann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone," 537.

things” Jacob may have made known.³⁵ One may recall from the previous chapter our discussion of the brevity of Jacob’s speech in the deceptions of Esau (25:27-34) and Isaac (27:1-45) as an indicator of the trickster at work. Might Laban’s succinctness here in addressing Jacob signal to the reader that he too is a trickster, and might it foreshadow that deception will soon follow? In the next scene, this is precisely the case.

These opening verses of the Jacob/Laban narratives, therefore, call attention to the ancestral promise and conditions readers to maintain a keen eye on how YHWH will begin to bring about its fulfillment. Already, in guiding Jacob safely to Haran, YHWH has acted in accordance with the promise at Bethel that he would be present with, guide, and protect Jacob (28:15). Little reason exists at the narrative level for YHWH to abandon Jacob now. One thus expects to continue to see divine activity dictating and guiding events toward fulfillment. What remains unclear, and ultimately surprising, are the ways in which that fulfillment comes about.

Laban’s Deception of Jacob and the Ancestral Promise (Gen 29:14b-30)

With the ancestral promise again serving as the operative interpretive context, Laban’s deception of Jacob creates the necessary circumstances that ultimately begin to lead toward the promise’s fulfillment. Again God does not appear overtly on stage as a character, yet the previous analysis shows he has and continues to accompany Jacob in accordance with the promise uttered at Bethel. One may, therefore, wonder at the possibility that YHWH is not only behind Jacob’s deceptions of others but also behind others’ deceptions of Jacob.

³⁵ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 256.

The narrative is redolent with ambiguity and word plays that demonstrate the activity of the trickster at work. The second instance of Laban's speaking to Jacob in v.15 appears, upon first glance, quite straight-forward: "Are you not my brother, will you serve me for nothing?" (הכִּי־אָחִי אַתָּה וְעַבַדְתָּנִי חִנָּם). Further scrutiny, however, shows that the thrust of this line is not as clear-cut. Daube and Yaron have posited a quite different understanding of this verse. They contend, rather, that the first clause is better translated as a rhetorical question, "are you my brother?" which then follows with the second question, "will you serve me for nothing?"³⁶ This type of question, they advance, suggests a negative response: indeed, you are not my brother!³⁷

Based upon this view, Laban here demonstrates his abjuration of any familial ties with Jacob, perhaps, given Brueggemann's understanding of Laban's earlier "my bone and my flesh," opting to lean now entirely upon the unequal covenant relationship over which Laban has hegemony. Translating the clause in the traditional manner they cite, "are you not my brother," would require הֲלֹא rather than הֲכִי.³⁸ Hamilton presents an equally convincing alternative: "Because you are my brother . . ." which may fit better with Laban's initial exuberant response to Jacob (vv. 13-14).³⁹ Interestingly, one finds the only other occurrence of הֲכִי in Genesis in 27:36, prefacing Esau's cry of distress at learning of Jacob's deception. Recalling the previous chapter and its emphasis on the connection between ambiguity and trickery, here one may see the ambiguity evident in

³⁶ David Daube and Reuven Yaron, "Jacob's Reception by Laban," *JSS* 1 (1956): 61-62.

³⁷ Daube and Yaron, "Jacob's Reception by Laban," 62.

³⁸ Daube and Yaron, "Jacob's Reception by Laban," 61. R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah* (Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 149-150, challenges Daube and Yaron's interpretation, but similarly concludes their reading draws attention to the ambiguity latent in Laban's speech.

³⁹ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 258.

Laban's speech as indicative of the trickster plotting a future deception. The ensuing narrative makes this point explicit by introducing a number of cues that evoke in the reader's mind Jacob's deception of Esau.

The ambiguity continues, setting the stage for another deception. Upon pressing Jacob to name his own wage, the narrator introduces the reader to the fact that Laban actually has two daughters. Leah is named the "elder" (הַגְּדֹלָה) and Rachel the "younger" (הַקְּטָנָה), which clearly evokes Jacob and Rebekah's deception of Esau and Isaac. Another connection with an earlier deception also comes to the fore; the text says "Jacob loved Rachel" (v. 18), which recalls Rebekah's love for Jacob (25:28). Jacob unambiguously names his price, solidifying his choice of Rachel by identifying her as the "younger" (v. 18). Laban, however, does not respond with the same transparency. Instead he says, "Better that I give *her* (אֵתָהּ) to you than that I give *her* (אֵתָהּ) to another man" (v. 19). Conspicuously Laban fails to use Rachel's name, rather twice saying he will give "her" to Jacob. Granting Laban the benefit of the doubt, perhaps Wenham's musing is correct, that Laban "was keeping his options open" but hoped to marry off Leah before the end of Jacob's seven years of service.⁴⁰ More convincing, however, is that Laban's speech is ambiguous as to which daughter he plans on giving Jacob in exchange for his work.⁴¹ Jeansonne furthermore notes that Laban in no way provides his assent to Jacob's offer of seven years, instead plainly saying "stay with me," connoting an "indefinite period of time," foreshadowing what will become a quite lengthy stay for Jacob.⁴²

⁴⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 235.

⁴¹ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 259.

⁴² Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis*, 72.

These first seven years were for Jacob only “like a few days (כִּימִים אֲחֵרִים) because of his love for her [Rachel]” (v. 20). Ironically, Rebekah uses this same phrase when she suggests that Jacob stay only “a few days” (יָמִים אֲחֵרִים) with Laban (27:44). Turner perceptively notices that the second set of seven years does not receive the same mitigating comment (29:30b).⁴³ Now experiencing a deception himself, Jacob serves Laban for the wife he desires.

The deception itself is replete with echoes of the earlier deception of Isaac in Gen 27, a notice which has not been lost on scholars. Turner offers a thorough summary:

Just as back home there had been the elder (Esau), and the younger (Jacob), so here we have the elder (Leah), and the younger (Rachel). Leah and Esau are each the elder child, both in danger of being marginalized. . . . Jacob’s deception had been to disguise the younger as the older; Laban reverses this, substituting the older for the younger. The connection with Jacob’s previous schemes is made blatantly obvious by Laban’s response to Jacob’s protest, ‘This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn’ (29:26). . . . The reader can certainly see how Laban’s ploy subtly replicates Jacob’s earlier act. Leah’s eyes are described as *rak*, which could mean that they were either weak (cf. 33:13), or lovely (cf. 18:7). However, since a contrast between the sisters is implied in 29:17, the negative connotation seems more likely. The reader will recall that Isaac’s eyes were ‘dim’ (*khh*, 27:1). Previously the victim had poor eyesight, here it is the co-conspirator. Like his father, Jacob is also in the dark, unable to see. . . . Measure for measure: as Jacob had deceived Isaac with kid dressed as venison, so now he is deceived by mutton dressed as lamb. The turning of the tables on Jacob the trickster is amplified by Laban’s choice of words. Jacob had tricked the firstborn out of his birthright (*b^ekôrâ*, 27:31-34); Laban has now tricked him into receiving the firstborn (*b^ekîrâ*, 29:26).⁴⁴

⁴³ Turner, *Genesis*, 128.

⁴⁴ Turner, *Genesis*, 128. For other commentators who note (with varying degrees) the connections with Jacob’s earlier deceptions, see Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 319; E.A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 1; New York: Doubleday, 1964), 227; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 236-238; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 253; Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 262.

The similarities are too strong to insist they arise by accident. Alter writes that comparable scenes are often used to provide comment on one another in the biblical text.⁴⁵ What comment does this connection make?

Many scholars believe Laban's deception of Jacob exists as a sort of punishment for Jacob's earlier deception of his father.⁴⁶ In a sort of poetic reversal, Jacob falls prey to the wiles of his own previous scheming. This view presents several difficulties. First, Gen 29:21-30 is not the final narrative comment on Gen 27. As was mentioned in chapter one, the themes of blindness, blessing, and birthright will again appear in Gen 48:13-20, when the blind Jacob crosses his arms and puts his right hand on the head of the "younger" (הקטן) Ephraim, proclaiming that he will be "greater" (יגדל) than the "firstborn" (הבכר) Manasseh.⁴⁷ The recurrence of these words, along with an emphasis on peoplehood (עם) and the similarities between Jacob and Isaac's blindness provides a more fitting final, positive word on Gen 27 than does Laban's deception of Jacob. Second, if Laban's deception serves as a punishment for Jacob, it also then serves as an implicit judgment on the trickster oracle in Gen 25:23 that set that deception in motion. Recall from the previous chapter also our analysis of the way in which YHWH participates in Gen 27. Should one desire to see Jacob being censured here, one must also extend that censure to YHWH.

⁴⁵ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 7.

⁴⁶ See Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (Old Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 2000), 89, 92; Sarna, *Genesis*, 205, 397-398; Turner, *Genesis*, 129; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 236-237; Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996), 155, among others.

⁴⁷ It is significant also that Jacob resists Joseph's attempt at correction, responding solemnly with "I know, my son, I know" (48:19) and then proceeding with the blessing. Unlike his father Isaac, Jacob will not fall prey to his blindness; he will bless who he intends, and in doing so, continue to act as a trickster.

A third objection gives way to an important theological sentiment that the remainder of this chapter will explore: the matter of fulfillment. Gen 27 *fulfills* the trickster oracle. Bethel corroborates this deceptive fulfillment. Alter's notice that similar narratives comment on one another raises the question of what necessitates reading Gen 29:21-30 in a wholly negative light? By recalling Jacob's (and YHWH's) deception of his father, the narrative points not to a concern for punishment but rather, as was argued to be the case in Gen 27, to a concern for fulfillment. We have already emphasized just such a context in the opening verses of chapter 29.

Gen 29:21-30 and Gen 27 are tied closely together in a way absent from Turner's summary above. Gen 27 presents YHWH as mysteriously involved in the deception as the agent of Jacob's successful and stealthy 'hunt' (v. 20) as well as the agent of blessing through Isaac (vv. 7, 28). In Gen 29, YHWH appears equally obscured yet at work; vv. 1-14 make this point all the more plausible. But how did Laban pull off the switch undetected? J. A. Diamond cites an idea as old as Josephus (*Ant.* 1.19.6), that Jacob became inebriated at the "drinking feast" (מִשְׁחָה) Laban throws and thus is unable to tell the two sisters apart.⁴⁸ Even if Laban's success were to be chalked up to Jacob's alleged drunkenness, the narrative gives no indication that alcohol was the primary beverage of choice, nor does it say that Jacob partook to excess or even that he was intoxicated. The narrative remains silent on these matters, creating an aura of mystery surrounding the deception of Jacob. The question of precisely how Laban achieves success in insuring Jacob does not detect the switch lends support to the enigma of the scene and allows for the possibility that YHWH is as mysteriously engaged now as he was in Gen 27. Von

⁴⁸ J. A. Diamond, "The Deception of Jacob: A New Perspective on an Ancient Solution to the Problem," *VT* 34 (1984): 211-213.

Rad holds a similar view, arguing for a “darker mystery” concealed in Laban’s deception with far-reaching implications for Israelite history, namely that had Jacob not married Leah then Reuben, Levi, and Judah would not have been born and, consequently, neither would Moses or David.⁴⁹ In a related vein, Wenham holds that the divine purpose functions through the deception in that it provides the means by which the promise of progeny would begin to reach fulfillment.⁵⁰

One may demur, though, and suggest that YHWH stands on the side of Jacob, not against him. To be sure, the ancestral promise says as much. Does, then, YHWH’s failure to prevent Laban’s deception not pose a challenge to YHWH’s fidelity to Jacob and to the ancestral promise? Perhaps, but only if one wants to ignore fulfillment as a key to understanding Gen 29:21-30. Brueggemann suggests that this scene does not level a challenge against YHWH’s ability or willingness to keep the promise, but it does require patience on Jacob’s part, for promise-keeping may be postponed.⁵¹ While Brueggemann is right that YHWH remains steadfast to Jacob and the promise, he does not mention the ways in which Laban’s deception advances the promise. Directly after this scene YHWH will return to the narrative to begin working toward the promise of progeny in orchestrating the multiple births of Jacob’s wives. Here YHWH seems free to work inversion *against* Jacob given the divine preference shown for the unloved Leah, posing an initial challenge to the assumption that YHWH fails to protect Jacob from Laban’s plot.

⁴⁹ von Rad, *Genesis*, 291.

⁵⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 238.

⁵¹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 253.

The common denominator amongst all these instances appears to be the ancestral promise. YHWH supports Jacob, as the ensuing narrative will make clear, but YHWH's primary focus seems to be the outworking of the promise, and yet again he is not beyond availing himself of deception in the interest of moving toward fulfillment.

Laban's deception of Jacob by giving Leah before Rachel creates the circumstances allowing for a preliminary movement toward fulfillment of the ancestral promise. Jacob now has recourse to multiple wives who will bear for the first time multiple *children* of the promise (29:31-30:24). The requirement that Jacob work another seven years for Rachel protracts his stay, allowing for Laban both to experience and recognize YHWH's *blessing* by means of Jacob's presence (30:27-30). Third, the promise of *land* becomes a bit more difficult to parse, but three items merit mention for how they indirectly contribute to the fulfillment of the land promise. First, only upon reaping the great benefits during his time with Laban does Jacob acquire that which is necessary in allowing him to return to the land and, more importantly, to face Esau. Second, Jacob's residing with Laban for an additional seven years provides even more narrative time for Esau's anger to abate and thus make more certain Jacob's safe return to the land. The fact that Rebekah has yet to send word to Jacob (cf. 27:44-45) cements this point all the more. Third, Laban's deception will be met with another deception in which he will play the victim (Gen 30:25-31:54); Jacob and YHWH will be the perpetrators. It is within this context rife with deception, under these circumstances, that fulfillment of the ancestral promise begins to take shape.

Children, the Ancestral Promise, and Deception (Gen 29:31-30:24)

Among the most fundamental tenets of God's promise to Abraham is that he will be the father of many descendants, a promise occurring at least three times within the span of a few short chapters (12:2; 15:5; 17:2). The importance of this aspect of the promise in the life of Jacob receives structural legitimation from Fishbane, who situates this narrative depicting an onslaught of childbirth at the center of the Jacob cycle.⁵² Thus far, however, all one can surmise from the narrative is not the great numbers of descendants claiming Abraham as their father but rather, according to Christopher Heard, a divine winnowing of several branches of the elect's family tree, removing Lot, Ishmael, and Esau from covenantal consideration.⁵³ Now, however, YHWH again returns to the narrative scene as a character with an agenda: fulfilling the promise of progeny.

In 29:31-30:24 it is God alone who hears and answers Rachel and Leah's respective concerns, granting not a single child of the promise but ultimately twelve children of the promise. That God becomes the principal actor here is clear from the narrative; Jacob receives no notice in the four conceptions of Leah in 29:31-35, though one should not question his paternity of the children.⁵⁴ He also does not participate in any way in naming the children.⁵⁵ The disappearance of Jacob's name in these verses serves to highlight all the more that God bears primary responsibility for the births. It is God's initiative and no other that brings about these children, a theological point deeply

⁵² Fishbane, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle," 31-32. See the helpful graphic representation of his structure on p. 20.

⁵³ Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 184.

⁵⁴ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 266.

⁵⁵ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 268.

embedded in the narrative through the tethering of several of the names to a direct action of or response to God. The following table attempts to synthesize this information:

Table 2. God in the Names of Jacob's Children

Verses	Wife	Child's Name	Etiology
29:32	Leah	Reuben (רְאוּבֵן)	YHWH <i>has seen</i> (רָאָה) my affliction
29:33	Leah	Simeon (שִׁמְעוֹן)	YHWH <i>heard</i> (שָׁמַע)
29:34	Leah	Levi (לֵוִי)	My husband will <i>attach himself</i> to me (יָלֹוּה)
29:35	Leah	Judah (יְהוּדָה)	I will praise YHWH (אֲדֹרָה אֶת־יְהוָה)
30:5-6	Bilhah	Dan (דָּן)	God has vindicated me (רִנְנִי)
30:7-8	Bilhah	Naphtali (נַפְתָּלִי)	I struggled (נִפְתָּלִי) with God, I struggled (נַפְתָּלִי) with my sister
30:10-11	Zilpah	Gad (גָּד)	Luck (גָּד) has come
30:12-13	Zilpah	Asher (אֲשֵׁר)	In happiness (בְּאֲשֵׁרִי)
30:17-18	Leah	Issachar (יִשָּׁכָר)	God has given my reward (שָׁכָרִי)
30:19-20	Leah	Zebulun (זִבְלוּן)	God has given me a good gift, this time my husband will exult me (יִזְבְּלֵנִי)
30:21	Leah	Dinah (דִּינָה)	-----
30:22-24	Rachel	Joseph (יוֹסֵף)	God has taken away (אָסַף) . . . May YHWH add (יִסַּף)

The confluence of the child's name connected in some way with God stands out. Of the twelve children named here, eight contain some tie with the deity.⁵⁶ All, save for Dinah, become an eponymous ancestor for the later Israelite tribes.⁵⁷ All, therefore, have a role

⁵⁶ Technically the proportion is even higher if one removes Dinah from contention. Hers is the most terse of narrations, and her name receives no explanation like her brothers. Similarly, she does not become the eponymous ancestor of an Israelite tribe. The twelfth son, Benjamin (בְּנִימִין) is born to Rachel in 35:16-18. His name does not contain a theophoric element but his name appears to mean "son of the right hand."

⁵⁷ *Contra* Thomas L. Thompson, "Conflict Themes in the Jacob Narratives," *Semeia* 15 (1979): 19, who advances that the narrative is a fabrication and not meant to speak to the history of Israel's later tribes. The idea of history as a necessary prerequisite for the authenticity and import of these verses is

in fulfilling the promise. In fact, the first and last births, of Reuben and Joseph respectively, contain names highlighting YHWH's action. One should not, however, conclude that this structure de-emphasizes the intermittent children, as does Thomas Meurer.⁵⁸ Meurer contends that the middle children come primarily from the maidservants, thus not from the initiative of YHWH but from the strategies and stratagems of Leah and Rachel alone. Coats also isolates the central theme as conflict, noting that the promise does not figure at all in these texts.⁵⁹ The sheer fact that several of these children—Dan, Isaachar, and Zebulon specifically—have names associated with God immediately calls Meurer's statement into question. Another key verse, 30:8 and the birth of Naphtali, levels another challenge against seeing conflict as the sole central operative issue. Francis Andersen sees this verse as paralleling 32:29—"for you struggled with God; and with men you did succeed"—evidencing that in 30:8 Rachel relates a struggle with her sister and with God.⁶⁰ This translation makes great interpretive sense given that in 30:2 Jacob responds to Rachel's request for children with the harsh retort that God alone has withheld children from her. Conflict most assuredly contributes to the narrative flow in 29:31-30:24, and it is conflict with and amidst the activity of God.

unnecessary, though. Ancient Israel may quite likely have utilized this story as a means of explaining her understanding of the origins of the twelve tribes who come from Israel, who one must remember, is Jacob!

⁵⁸ Thomas Meurer, "Die Gebärwettstreit zwischen Lea und Rahel: Der Erzählaufbau von Gen 29:31-30:24 als Testfall der Erzählerischen Geschlossenheit einer zusammenhanglos wirkenden Einheit," *BN* 107-108 (2001): 95.

⁵⁹ George W. Coats, "Strife Without Reconciliation: A Narrative Theme in the Jacob Traditions" in *Werden und Wirken des Alten Testament. Festschrift für Claus Westermann zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Rainer Albertz; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980) 83. See also his *Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (FOTL 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 209, 216, where he calls this account a "digression" concerned only with articulating a conflict between sisters within the larger conflict between Jacob and Laban.

⁶⁰ Francis I. Andersen, "Note on Gen 30:8," *JBL* 88 (1969): 200. See also Frank Crüsemann, "Die Gotteskämpferin: Genesis 30,8" in *Für Gerechtigkeit streiten: Theologie im Alltag einer bedröhten Welt* (ed. Dorothee Sölle; Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1994), 41-45.

The structure Meurer identifies serves as an envelope, enclosing each intervening birth in a context in which the deity appears active in fulfilling one aspect of the ancestral promise: progeny. Within the inclusio, God *sees, hears, vindicates, struggles with, gives reward and gift, takes away, and adds*. God is also in the business of opening wombs (29:31; 30:22) and closing them (29:35?; 30:2). And the result of this burst of divine activity is for the first time in Genesis multiple children of the promise.

The wives are also vitally important characters who advance the promise. Both have problems at the outset. It is not inconsequential that this narrative unit begins with YHWH noticing Leah's unloved status and responding by opening her womb, while Rachel remains barren. Here one may observe an oddity within Genesis: this scene presents the only time YHWH shows a preference for the firstborn to the detriment of the secondborn. Sherwood appeals to a similar situation in which there are two wives—Sarah and Hagar—and poses a fascinating set of questions, especially the affinity between Rachel, Rebekah, and Sarah (all of whom were “barren” [עקרה]) and whether this would necessitate Leah and her progeny sharing a similar fate as Hagar, outside the promise.⁶¹ Conversely, each wife ‘becomes’ Hagar and Sarah at different moments. Leah shares Hagar's fertility, yet ‘becomes’ Sarah when she ceases bearing (29:35) and gives Zilpah to Jacob as a wife, just as Sarah gave her maidservant to Abraham.⁶² Rachel begins like Sarah, barren, and likewise gives her maidservant to Jacob. According to Sherwood, the compound effect is a tension in that Leah and Rachel find themselves “on

⁶¹ Sherwood, *Had God Not Been on My Side*, 145.

⁶² Sherwood, *Had God Not Been on My Side*, 146-147.

equal footing.”⁶³ It is not as though one is Hagar and the other Sarah; both women occupy both roles at various points in the narrative. Their birthing contest comes down to one common denominator: YHWH works in and through both to bring about children for the bearer of the promise.

Deception also is not too far off in this narrative of incipient fulfillment. Were it not for Laban’s deception of Jacob in 29:21-30 Jacob would have found himself married to the barren Rachel, not the fruitful and fertile Leah. His prospects for achieving numerous progeny would have become dismal at best. Through Laban’s deception, the circumstances emerge which YHWH employs to begin fulfilling the ancestral promise.

While deception may not figure explicitly into this scene, YHWH remains a startlingly silent character. Perhaps he plays the role of trickster by upsetting what has seemingly become a new convention, preference for the younger, by instead electing Leah as the matriarch who will bear the majority of Jacob’s children.⁶⁴ Perhaps his reticence to respond to Leah’s pleas for Jacob’s love or Rachel’s reason for barrenness casts him in a trickster light. A dark side certainly exists in the birth of Jacob’s children, for YHWH does not appear overly concerned with the plight and struggle into which the chosen family continues to be thrust. YHWH does not seek to resolve the conflict but rather contributes to it by opening Leah’s womb while Rachel remains barren. Meurer sums up the theological message of this passage by writing of the uncircumventable freedom with which YHWH acts.⁶⁵ This freedom, however, seems wholly bound up

⁶³ Sherwood, *Had God Not Been on My Side*, 147.

⁶⁴ Leah actually bears more children for Jacob than Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah combined!

⁶⁵ Meurer, “Der Gebarwettstreit zwischen Lea und Rahel,” 107.

with a unique and unwavering concern for the ancestral promise. And it continues to be this context of strife and deception that YHWH prefers.

The narrative, when read as a whole, depicts a rapid influx of children at God's behest, set in the context of a dispute between Jacob's two wives. Yet amidst and through such a dispute one finds a theologically loaded passage that begins to fulfill the ancestral promise of a great nation by the birth of Jacob's twelve children, who also become conduits of the blessing, not to mention deceivers themselves (Gen 34). God's activity in providing numerous descendants for Jacob, from whom will come the "great nation" (גוי גדול) of 12:2, functions theologically to highlight God's presence with Jacob and to anticipate the blessing to all.

Trickster as Blessing (Gen 30:27-30)

If 29:31-30:24 establishes the circumstances necessary to realize the promise of progeny, then 30:27-30 presages the concept of blessing all nations by means of Jacob and his descendants. In 30:27, in the context of their renewed negotiation, Laban says to Jacob, "If I have found favor in your eyes, I know by divination that YHWH blessed me on account of you" (אִם־נָא מִצָּאִי הֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ נִחְשָׁתִי וַיְבָרְכֵנִי יְהוָה בְּנִלְלִךְ). This mention marks the first instance in the text in which the descendants of Abraham are explicitly said to be a blessing to a foreigner. The method by which Laban learns of this blessing, however, remains unclear. A potential meaning of the word נִחְשָׁתִי is indeed to learn by divination, as Gen 44:5, 15 shows.⁶⁶ Another possibility also exists. J. J. Finkelstein argues the word may be cognate with the Akkadian *nahāšu*, which means "to prosper," with the resultant translation running something like "... I have prospered, and YHWH has

⁶⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 282. See Sherwood, *Had God Not Been on My Side*, 213-215, for a fine summary of the various positions.

blessed me on account of you.”⁶⁷ Laban’s ambiguous speech—both meanings are equally plausible—relates the cunning trickster at work, perhaps availing himself of language that is overly fawning so as to guarantee Jacob does not depart.⁶⁸ Each possible translation also emphasizes a different yet complementary way of reading the import of these verses.

If one opts to read with the Akkadian cognate *nahāšu*, the contrast between an insolvent Jacob and the rich Laban becomes that much more potent. Laban has prospered by no work of his own hands, but by YHWH through Jacob. Jacob has little materially to show for his fourteen years of servitude, yet to reiterate, Jacob may arrive penniless, but he also arrives with God on his side. Therefore, reading *nahāšu* in 30:27 presages the reversal of fortunes that will occur in short order, leaving Laban with the weakest of the flocks and Jacob with the strongest, which may be understood as an implication of YHWH’s promise of presence and protection for Jacob. The agent of this reversal, as will be discussed in relation to Gen 31:1-16, is the trickster God YHWH.

Conversely, if one translates “I have learned by divination,” a whole host of theological implications present themselves. According to Lipton, Laban’s use of divination casts him as an outsider, a foreigner.⁶⁹ While Laban is clearly genetically kith and kin to Jacob, the narrative begins to separate him from the chosen family in a variety

⁶⁷ J. J. Finkelstein, “An Old Babylonian Herding Contract and Genesis 31:38f,” *JAOS* 88 (1968): 34 n. 19.

⁶⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 255, describes Laban’s address as “an obsequious way of addressing a superior,” while Sherwood, *Had God Not Been on My Side*, 212, notes the “exaggerated” nature of Laban’s language, as well as its awkwardness. The initial clause has no clear apodosis, leading Sherwood to characterize Laban’s speech here as “broken” and “stammering.” On the fragmented nature of Laban’s speech, see also Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 496.

⁶⁹ Diana Lipton, *Revisions of the Night: Politics and Promises in the Patriarchal Dreams of Genesis* (JSOTSup 288; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 158-165, especially pp. 163-165.

of ways. Most telling is Laban's use of the personal name of Israel's God, YHWH.

Claus Westermann incisively sees great significance in that one would expect Laban, a non-Israelite, to use the more generic אלהים in reference to God.⁷⁰ Westermann does not, however, comment on the significance of Laban's choice of words for God.

The theological import conveyed by Laban's use of the personal name YHWH is that one may regard Laban's blessing as coming only from the personal God of Jacob. This point is punctuated all the more if Laban only learns of his blessed position vis-à-vis Jacob through divination of, arguably, Laban's own personal deities. The god of Laban is not the same God he calls "YHWH" in 30:27. In 31:19 Rachel steals her father's household gods, perhaps out of fear that he would learn of Jacob's escape through divination, and in 31:47, 53 Laban swears in Aramaic by invoking the name of his own personal god.⁷¹ Laban's deity (or deities) is unable to bestow the same profitable blessing on Laban as has YHWH, the God of Jacob. God's promise is thus at work here,

⁷⁰ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* (Continental Commentary; trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 481.

⁷¹ The identity of Laban's deity of choice by whom he swears here has evoked much scholarly discussion. The text critical note to 31:53 complicates matters even further; the Samaritan Pentateuch and Greek have the singular form of the verb יִשָּׁפֵט, denoting that the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor are one and the same), while the MT has the plural יִשָּׁפֵטוּ, understanding the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor as two distinct entities. While this study gives preference to the MT, there are sound text critical reasons for accepting the plural rendering of the MT as the more original reading. The primary evidence comes from another textual issue in the same verse, this time regarding the phrase "the God of their father" (אלהי אביהם). By merit simply of its odd placement in the overall syntax of the sentence, one may regard this description as an explanatory or clarifying gloss that is likely secondary to the original text. That the phrase is absent in two Hebrew manuscripts and the LXX buttresses this point even further. The phrase also creates a jarring interruption into Laban's first person speech that begins in v. 51. One might also remain mindful of the possibility, though perhaps unlikely, that אלהי be translated as plural "gods." As it stands in the text, this gloss may serve to highlight the singularity of the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, which is also likely the impetus behind the difference in singular and plural verb form earlier in the verse. It is thus not unlikely that these two textual issues belong together—though they need not come from the same hand—in the subsequent attempt to equate the God of Abraham with the God of Nahor. Heard, *Dynamics of Dissection*, 167-168, offers a helpful reminder: even the earliest interpreters and readers wrestled and struggled with this text. Ultimately, I agree with Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 500, that here Laban and Jacob swear by their own respective deities. Given the surrounding narrative context, combined with the textual issues here discussed, it seems clear that Laban's god(s) is not equivalent with the God of Jacob.

and the theological impact becomes all the more palpable when the recognition comes for the first time from a foreigner. Fokkelman describes the theological nature of Laban's words succinctly:

From the enemy's mouth we now hear that God's blessing has accompanied Jacob all the time. God has kept his promise made at Bethel, Jacob creates prosperity wherever he appears. . . . The *b^erākā* shines about him. And who has benefited by it so far? Laban⁷²

Fokkelman helpfully confirms the context of the ancestral promise as operative here, as well as noting that Laban the other stands to be blessed also by God. Here one sees the realization of Gen 12:3 (cf. 28:14) in miniature by means of Laban's acknowledgement that YHWH blessed him through Jacob, just as Jacob's descendants will be a blessing to all nations.

This blessing is not a guarantee, however, for in what follows YHWH transfers Laban's wealth to Jacob. How should one understand the quick succession of events? Laban at first is blessed by YHWH, a comment to which Jacob staunchly agrees in v. 30, and by v. 43 Laban is left with the weakest of the flock while Jacob possesses the strongest. How should one make sense of the seeming unraveling of Laban's blessing? Reading within the context of the ancestral promise provides a potential solution. Central to Gen 28:13-15 is the promise of divine presence and protection "until" (עד) God's purposes come to fruition. Thus far in the narrative the promise still hangs in abeyance, awaiting the future fulfillment that until now has only been partially realized. In Laban, however, the promise finds not only an outlet for blessing but also an individual who potentially could harm the heir to the promise, Jacob, by prolonging his stay with Laban and thus minimizing—or perhaps wholly negating—the possibility for blessing to all

⁷² Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 142.

nations purposed in 12:3 and 28:14. Laban may thus be trying to arrogate for himself the conduit of his blessing, Jacob, as a guarantee of continued prosperity. Aware of this potentially deceptive tactic, the narrative next moves to display God's intervention in accord with the promise of presence and protection, as will be discussed below in reference to Gen 31:1-16. The message appears to be that blessing to the nations is contingent upon their not impeding the sharing of the blessing with other nations.⁷³ Whether Laban speaks earnestly or not in 30:27 about his understanding of events, his blessing is quickly reversed by means of an overt act of divine deception.

The Great Escape and YHWH's Deception of Laban (Gen 30:25-31:54)

Deception and fulfillment have proven to be pervasive and related themes in the Jacob-Laban narratives. Jacob has already acquired the multiple children who will ultimately become the progenitors of the people Israel, and we have just seen how blessing the nations occurs amidst and through deception. Now, in Gen 30:25-31:54 the Jacob-Laban narratives draw to a close with the primary concern being the final element of the ancestral promise that remains most fully unfulfilled: the return to the land. As one may expect, deception will figure prominently in bringing about the circumstances for its potential fulfillment.

In Gen 30:25-31:54 readers encounter a complex web of interrelated texts and deceptions that help both to clarify and drive the narrative forward. Each section will be treated in turn. First, Gen 30:25-43 will be discussed both for how it depicts deception and sets the stage for the bold revelation in 31:1-16 that YHWH is behind the deception

⁷³ Recall from chapter one and the discussion there of Gen 12:3. Laban has not blessed Jacob, and thus he receives as he has given. See chapter one, pp. 42-45.

of Laban. Second, Gen 31:1-16 will receive thorough analysis to show YHWH's role in the deception of Laban, as well as how the deception furthers the ancestral promise.

Tricksters in Conflict (Gen 30:25-43)

Three interrelated scenes comprise this narrative section: vv. 25-34, 35-36, and 37-43. In 30:25-34 Jacob and Laban renegotiate the terms of their agreement, with Jacob first requesting to leave so as to care now for his own family (vv. 25-26, 30), followed by Laban's counteroffer of a wage of Jacob's choosing (vv. 28, 31).⁷⁴ Jacob accepts Laban's proposal, naming only the spotted and speckled goats and black sheep of Laban's flocks as payment. Westermann reminds the reader that in so doing Jacob has not merely named his wage but also has agreed to continue working for Laban.⁷⁵ Laban quickly and unwaveringly assents to Jacob's terms, possibly because he knows that such a request will yield only a very small number of animals for Jacob's taking.⁷⁶ Moreover, given that he again offers the possibility for Jacob to name his own wage, as he did in 29:15 much to Laban's benefit, it is even more likely that the conniving and clever Laban already has a preemptive plan in mind, as the ensuing narrative makes overt.

Verses 35-36 describe Laban as attempting to alter Jacob's wages by means of deception. Laban acts quickly—v. 35 states “on that day” (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא)—by taking the spotted, speckled, and black of his herds and entrusting them to the watch of his sons.

⁷⁴ Brett, *Genesis*, 93, draws a connection with Jacob's request to leave in 30:25 and the ancestral promise given to him at Bethel. Jacob asks Laban to leave and return to “my place” (מִקְוִי). The same word Jacob uses here, מִקְוִי, is used six times in the Bethel narrative, framing the ancestral promise.

⁷⁵ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 481.

⁷⁶ Sarna, *Genesis*, 212, writes that Near Eastern sheep are often white and goats dark brown or black. Therefore, Jacob's named wage is the abnormal of the flock; Laban therefore likely accepts because he believes he is getting a “bargain.” That Jacob names his wage as the oddities of the flock, and that they ultimately bear these in abundance, highlights all the more not only the miraculous nature of what will happen but also God's participation.

Heard sees Laban's action in going through his flocks as ambiguous, left without a clear sense from the narrator as to how one should understand this episode.⁷⁷ Evidence exists within the narrative, however, that Laban has less-than-sterling intentions here.

Similarly, one should not regard Laban's actions here as does Westermann, seeing them merely as "precautionary measures" because he does not trust Jacob to separate the animals faithfully.⁷⁸ Instead, this act is clearly one of deception, evidenced by the fact that Laban sets them at a distance of three-days' journey from Jacob.⁷⁹ George Coats also reads Laban's activity as deceptive, drawing a parallel with his earlier deception by switching Rachel for Leah.⁸⁰ In both cases the deception involves a manipulation of Jacob's agreed upon wage. Had Laban intended to pick out Jacob's wages himself, there is no reason for such a vast separation. If Laban were acting in earnest one would expect him to let Jacob know his wage had been collected, or perhaps to corral the animals in a space allotted to Jacob. The agreement to which Laban assents (v. 34) dictates that Jacob is to go through the flocks and pick out his wage, and then Laban is to come to Jacob to verify the wages (v. 33), not the other way around. Moreover, nothing in the narrative

⁷⁷ Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 155-156. Heard's assertion here that Laban's actions are ambiguous is odd. Just two pages earlier Heard had challenged Laban's credibility in appealing to local custom as an excuse for deceiving Jacob with Leah rather than Rachel, providing as a reason only that "Laban is a liar" (153). It remains unclear why Heard is willing to make such judgments in some cases and not in others. Perhaps his words, "A man who would lie about his daughter's identity on her wedding night cannot be assumed to provide reliable information about local marriage customs" (153), are applicable in 30:35: a man who would lie about Jacob's wage for the first seven years of work cannot be trusted to provide the agreed upon wage for Jacob's subsequent work.

⁷⁸ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 482.

⁷⁹ Within the Pentateuch, a journey of three days is at times tied to an act of deception. For example, in Gen 31:22 it takes three days for Laban to realize Jacob has fled; as will be discussed below, Laban regards this escape as a deception. Another example exists in Exod 3:18; 5:3; 8:23, where God suggests to Moses and he subsequently asks that Pharaoh let the Israelites venture only a three days' journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifice to God, when in reality the intention is to flee Egyptian control and not return. See chapter one, pp. 19-20 for a brief discussion of this latter scene as one of deception.

⁸⁰ Coats, "Strife Without Reconciliation," 88.

reveals Laban's intention to turn these animals over to Jacob as a wage. Therefore, Laban's actions can only be viewed as an attempt to alter the agreed upon contract he has established with Jacob.

Jacob appears to have learned from history, as the narrative portrays him as rightfully chary of Laban's allowing him to select his own wage. The first time resulted in Jacob being hurtfully deceived. Laban had already proven himself untrustworthy in the giving of Leah as a wife before Rachel. Now Jacob takes measures to insure history would not repeat itself. Verses 37-43 narrate Jacob's coterminous deceptive activity while tending the rest of Laban's flocks. While Jacob's shenanigans here may seem odd and unclear to contemporary readers, the text is graphic in its detail. Brueggemann gives this feature adequate voice, seeing the text as "embellishing [the story] with exaggerated (though not decipherable) vocabulary."⁸¹ Jacob takes and peels back branches from the poplar, almond, and plane trees, revealing white (לבן) streaks on the branches (v. 37). He then places the peeled branches in the watering troughs, and when the flocks come to drink they also mate, giving rise by some elusive means not yet spelled out at this point in the text—although clarified in 31:1-16 as an act of God—to spotted and speckled young (vv. 38-39).⁸² He continues this technique with only the strong of the flocks, separating his take from those of Laban (vv. 40-42). The results are unequivocal: Jacob's property and wealth increase at the expense of Laban (vv. 42-43).

⁸¹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 251.

⁸² Scott B. Noegel, "Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster in Gen 30:31-43," *JANES* 25 (1997): 10-12, argues that Jacob fashions the rods to serve as *faux phalluses*, and that the herds mate "upon (אֶל) the rods." Noegel's analysis is reliant upon a close reading of the text, yet he fails to provide any discussion of 31:1-16 as a hermeneutical lens orienting one's reading of 30:37-43.

This scene also bears striking resemblance to an earlier episode of deception: Laban's deception of Jacob in 29:21-30. Noegel deftly illustrates the numerous lexical and thematic connections between the two: Jacob is duped into receiving Leah, who is described as having "weak eyes" (29:17), and Jacob retaliates by insuring that only the "weaker" members of Laban's flocks would reproduce.⁸³ The meaning of Rachel and Leah's names may also connote the flocks: Rachel (רחל) means "ewe lamb" and Leah (לאה) means "wild cow."⁸⁴ Both deceptions also involve drinking (29:22; 30:38) and birthing (29:34-35; 30:39).⁸⁵ Noegel identifies several other parallels, though those listed here should provide adequate support for the view that these two scenes of deception relate to one another.⁸⁶ Jacob does not merely outwit Laban; he repays deception with deception. As the narrative continues, however, the agent of Jacob's deception comes in to focus in a most conspicuous way.

God's Deception of Laban (Gen 31:1-16)

In Gen 31:1-16 one encounters quite possibly the most potent example of divine deception in Genesis. God returns to the narrative scene and dictates that the time has come for Jacob to return to his homeland. Jacob then summons his wives and summarily reflects upon his sojourn with Laban, readily recognizing that God has indeed been with

⁸³ Noegel, "Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster," 14-15.

⁸⁴ Noegel, "Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster," 15. Noegel expands upon this point, claiming that the narrative equates Laban's daughters with the flocks on several occasions, among them when Jacob first meets Rachel, who is approaching with the sheep (29:9), and in 31:4 when Jacob calls his wives to the field "to his flock."

⁸⁵ Noegel, "Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster," 16.

⁸⁶ For deeper connections involving word plays and puns, see Scott B. Noegel, "Drinking Feasts and Deceptive Feats: Jacob and Laban's Double Talk" in *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (ed. Scott B. Noegel; Bethesda; CDL Press, 2000), 166-173.

him as promised (v. 5) and protected him from Laban's perpetual duplicity (v. 7). Encapsulating this theological reflection is Jacob's acknowledgement that God has insured his success even, seemingly, to the point of participating in the deception of Laban. Jacob, speaking to Rachel and Leah, quite candidly attributes the prior deception of Laban in chapter 30 to God. Verse 9 provides the clearest statement: "and God has *caused* to be stripped away (יָצָא) the cattle of your father and given [them] to me." The text records that God, not Jacob, bears responsibility for the deception in 30:37-43.

Scholars have advanced various approaches to make sense of this difficult textual assertion. Any attempt to explain Jacob's manipulation of the flocks' breeding in 30:37-43 by appealing to contemporary understandings of genetics and prenatal care misses the overwhelming theological point the text is making.⁸⁷ Moreover, Taschner rightly cautions against the assumption that Jacob's use of the rods would have made sense to an ancient audience, noting that they may also have been puzzled and surprised at Jacob's success only to learn later of God's role.⁸⁸ Some commentators hold that Jacob does nothing more here than implicate the deity, a point to which we will return below, yet the narrative reveals that much more is going on in and behind Jacob's statement. Immediately thereafter in 31:10-13 God strikingly corroborates Jacob's claim in a dream. God says, effectively, that he has orchestrated the success of Jacob's endeavor with the rods, gesturing toward the spotted and speckled of the flock and noting that this result has

⁸⁷ For examples of such interpretations, see James Douglas Pearson, "A Mendelian Interpretation of Jacob's Sheep," *Science and Christian Belief* 13 (2001): 51-58, and more recently Joshua Backon, "Jacob and the Spotted Sheep: The Role of Prenatal Nutrition on Epigenetics of Fur Color," *JBQ* 36 (2008): 263-265.

⁸⁸ Johannes Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung in der Jakoberzählung (Gen 25,19-33,17): Eine Analyse ihres Spannungsbogens* (Herders Biblische Studien 27; Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 113. One should not assume that this breeding technique is something lost only on contemporary readers, argues Taschner. For this reason, he sees these various perspectives as originally connected to one another and ultimately unfolding to reveal God's participation.

come about not because of Jacob's own ingenuity but "because (כי) I have seen all that Laban did to you" (v. 12).⁸⁹

Several rhetorical factors in the narrative further buttress God's participation in the deception of Laban. Primary among them is the verb יָצַל in v. 9, deriving from יָצַל, "take or snatch away." According to Mathews, one may instead have expected the more common לָקַח "taken" as opposed to the much stronger "take or snatch away."⁹⁰ The hiphil form in the text with God as the subject highlights all the more the causative aspect of what God has done.⁹¹ Lipton draws an apt parallel to Exod 12:36: "And the Lord has disposed the Egyptians favourably toward the people, and they let them have their request; thus they stripped (יָצַל) the Egyptians."⁹² Here again the word occurs with God's involvement, yet the Exodus example softens God's role in that God is not the subject of the verb יָצַל as in Gen 31:9. In both instances, however, YHWH allows for and creates the circumstances by which a given party obtains prosperity at the expense of another. In Gen 31:9 the impact is just that much more noticeable given God's obvious place as the subject of the verb. Likewise, the qal form of נָתַן at the end of v. 9 has God as its subject. He is the one directly causing the stripping away of Laban's flocks and the one who grants them to Jacob. One should remain mindful also that in v. 16 Rachel and

⁸⁹ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 114, also deems God's intervention to be a result of Laban's unfair treatment of Jacob.

⁹⁰ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 513.

⁹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 123, notes in his description of ancient Israel's theology of rhetoric that YHWH serves as the subject of strong, active verbs that are "transformative, intrusive, or inverting." Special attention, he says, may then be placed on moments within ancient Israel's rhetorical enterprise when YHWH is the subject of causative, *hiphil* verbs.

⁹² Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 124.

Leah respond, mimicking Jacob's use of the hiphil: "for all the riches which God has *caused* to be stripped away (הִצִּיל) from our father . . ."

This reading creates several questions that must be addressed. First, how can one make sense of the obvious tensions that exist between Jacob's words in 31:1-16 and Jacob's actions in 30:37-43? Second, can Jacob's speech be trusted in 31:1-16? Third, how does this instance of divine deception connect with the larger theme of the ancestral promise and its furtherance? Each question will be addressed in turn.

Texts in tension. Understanding the connection between 30:27-43 and 31:1-16 is seminal for grasping the import of God's intervention on behalf of Jacob. Von Rad holds that the two accounts belong to two different sources, J and E respectively, with E presenting a "moral purification" of Jacob's earlier deception.⁹³ Can one, though, instead read the two scenes together as a literarily cogent unit? At first glance one may acknowledge the presence of several seemingly insurmountable tensions between the two episodes. These tensions, however, may be resolved when read synchronically and with an understanding of the artistic nature of biblical narrative.

The first tension exists between 30:31-34 and 31:8. In the former, Jacob names his wage as the spotted and speckled goats and the black sheep, the anomalous of the herd. In the latter, Jacob reports to his wives that Laban had variously named Jacob's wages as *either* the spotted *or* speckled, and whichever Laban deemed the wage, that was what the flocks bore. It may be easy to see a discrepancy between the terms of chapter 30 and the actuality of chapter 31, yet such is not the case. In fact, the alleged discrepancy is absolutely vital to the unfolding plot and confirms Jacob's words to his

⁹³ von Rad, *Genesis*, 307.

wives in 31:1-16. Just one verse earlier in 31:7 Jacob asserts that Laban had changed the agreed upon wage ten times, a point which scholars have noted does not occur in the narrative and is thus, at best, a severe stretching of the truth.⁹⁴ Verse 8, then, in the mouth of a reflective Jacob looking back upon his years of service to Laban, shows the progression: the original agreement was for the spotted, speckled, and black cattle, and upon seeing Jacob's prospering, Laban seeks to change the terms of the deal by claiming *only* the spotted were discussed as payment, and then only the striped, and so on. This reading is most fully spelled out by Fokkelman, who goes so far as to construct the imagined words of a bewildered Laban to an ever-increasing Jacob: "'No, Jacob, we had agreed that the speckled animals should be yours,' and a season later, 'but Jacob, you must be mistaken! I said the striped animals . . .'"⁹⁵

One may thus make sense of this purported tension by appealing to the literary artistry of biblical narrative. Alter notes that biblical narrative is often "selectively silent in a purposeful way."⁹⁶ This narratorial reticence carves out a niche for the reader, who is then left—in almost Midrashic fashion—to fill in a story's or character's gaps. The narrator provides hints, for instance, Jacob's statement that Laban has cheated him by changing his wages ten times, and the task of discerning potential meanings resides with the reader.⁹⁷

Another potential tension lies in the intersection of Jacob's action in 30:37-43 and his report of God's action in 31:7-13. How is Jacob said to be the actor in one scene and

⁹⁴ Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 158, offers a brief bibliography of some representative positions.

⁹⁵ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 153.

⁹⁶ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 115.

⁹⁷ See Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 126.

God the actor in the other? Here one must consider again the literary artistry of biblical narrative, paying specific attention to *how* things are narrated as opposed strictly to *what* is narrated. Alter has pointed out the propensity within the biblical text for dialogue or direct speech as the means of driving the narrative forward rather than through simple narration.⁹⁸ In his view, narration serves largely as a connective “bridge” between larger blocks of dialogue.⁹⁹ The absence of dialogue and the presence of extended narration, therefore, become significant.

This point finds its outlet in 30:36-43, the only text in the entire Jacob cycle that is entirely narration.¹⁰⁰ Neither Jacob nor Laban speak. What one finds, instead, is a meticulous narration of Jacob’s practice of selected breeding by employing the peeled, white branches. Nothing of Jacob’s thoughts or the impetus behind such a numinous practice receives any clarification or exposition. Scott Noegel regards the ambiguity evident in the text surrounding Jacob’s measures as a purposeful mechanism to reinforce the idea of deception.¹⁰¹ To press Noegel further, the ambiguity also allows for the subsequent clarification Jacob will provide by means of dialogue with his wives. Only in 31:7, 9, 12, and 15 does one garner any sense of what has taken place. There, Jacob shares with his wives that it is God who has been behind it all, just as he had promised in 28:13-15 at Bethel (cf. 31:3). Again, as promised, God comes to the fore, revealing his action behind-the-scenes on Jacob’s behalf.

⁹⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 66.

⁹⁹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 65.

¹⁰⁰ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 158.

¹⁰¹ Noegel, “Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster,” 8, 16-17. Among the ambiguous facets of the text Noegel draws attention to are words with unclear referents (i.e., whose “flocks” are being manipulated and when), the variety of different adjectives used to describe the multi-colored animals, as well as how Jacob employs the rods for his own benefit.

Adele Berlin is also instructive here in her view that biblical narrative may at times combine different points of view through repetition that may or may not deviate from an original utterance or narration.¹⁰² The compound effect of these multiple and at times diverse points of view is a “unified, multi-dimensional narrative.”¹⁰³ Yet Berlin is only helpful inasmuch as she recognizes the importance of isolating and hearing the distinct points of view. It then falls to the reader to adjudicate matters of interpretation.

Johannes Taschner maintains a similar position, but one that helps clarify *how* the text means into *what* it means. He holds that the omniscient narrator presents for readers the same scene from three different perspectives, each with an increasing level of clarity. First, in 30:37-43 the story is recounted from the narrator’s perspective, followed by a second report by Jacob to his wives in 31:5-13.¹⁰⁴ The third and final perspective comes from a divine point of view in Jacob’s dream.¹⁰⁵ For Taschner, the dream stands as an interpretation of Jacob’s activities in 30:37-43, bringing the proper subject into focus: God.¹⁰⁶ In this way, Taschner recognizes yet another occasion on which the protection of God (*Schutz Gottes*) assumes a preeminent place in response to Laban’s plotting.¹⁰⁷ The narrative spanning these three perspectives begins vaguely and crescendos to this central theological affirmation that God has been behind it all.

¹⁰² Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 73.

¹⁰³ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 82.

¹⁰⁴ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 111-112.

¹⁰⁵ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 112.

¹⁰⁶ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 112-113.

¹⁰⁷ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 113.

According to Alter, this after-the-fact revelation is also endemic to biblical texts, which will often suppress important details until a critical and pertinent juncture in the narrative.¹⁰⁸ In chapter 30 it is not immediately relevant that God is at work in some mysterious way (although the attentive reader of the Jacob cycle may assume this to be the case), yet in chapter 31, with the threat of further internment to the bearer of the promise, it becomes immediately relevant. Brueggemann rightly notes the significance of this episode coming immediately upon the heels of the birth of Jacob's children. For him, Gen 31:1-16 is the "theological summary" for the entirety of Gen 29-31, and therefore it succeeds in "affirm[ing] that all of Jacob's life is kept (cf. 28:20) and valued by this God who works inversion for the sake of the promise."¹⁰⁹ Yet Brueggemann seemingly reduces the promise here solely to the return to the land, which is surely part of yet not the entirety of the ancestral promise. In the ancestral narratives, the promise expands; it is not reduced. God's work in the deception of Laban is bound much more deeply to the various particulars of the promise than Brueggemann appears to suggest.

Similar language connects chapters 30 and 31. Two of the three words used to describe the cattle that would become Jacob's wages in chapter 30 pose a neat parallel with 31:10, 12. The roots עָקַד and נָקַד both occur in 30:39 and 31:10, and נָקַד occurs also in 30:32. Niditch sees this connection as evidence of the "new detail" Jacob provides in 31:1-16 about the events of 30:37-43.¹¹⁰ This affinity demonstrates not only a connection between the two chapters, but a connection that focuses upon the central action of 30:37-

¹⁰⁸ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 66. See also Fokkeman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 159, 162.

¹⁰⁹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 258.

¹¹⁰ Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2000), 91.

43: the coloring of the animals. Additionally, this connection highlights how the promise continues to be operative in Jacob's daily life. His deception will succeed whereas Laban's will not, all because YHWH will insure it to be so.

Jacob's attribution of the prior deception of Laban to God in 31:1-16 commends itself to another way of seeing the connection between chapters 30 and 31. Niditch has outlined the traditional pattern of the 'hero' based upon her work in folklore.¹¹¹ A vital part of this pattern is the deceiving of the deceiver. The interactions between Jacob and Laban fall nicely into her schema, as she recognizes. Again, though, recalling Alter's insights about patterns and type-scenes, this schema is adapted in a meaningful way. God's preemptive involvement on behalf of Jacob and to the detriment of Laban is unprecedented in any of the folklore parallels.¹¹² As such, God's role in chapters 30 and 31 stands as a unique part of the type-scene and gives expression to a theologically loaded, unique, unrivaled, and inimitable experience with and understanding of a God who is not above deception as a means of achieving his ultimate ends.

In the final form of the biblical text, Gen 30 and 31 are meant to be read together as mutually informing texts. Erhard Blum avers this very point, affirming the difficulty in comprehending Jacob's intentions in Gen 31 without the particulars of Gen 30 having already been narrated.¹¹³ Similarly, Wenham describes the two scenes as two different perspectives on the same event: the author's in Gen 30 and Jacob's in Gen 31.¹¹⁴ Gen 31

¹¹¹ See the helpful chart in Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 107.

¹¹² Michael James Williams, *Deception in Genesis: An Investigation into the Morality of a Unique Biblical Phenomenon* (Studies in Biblical Literature 32; New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 199.

¹¹³ Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (WMANT 57; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1984), 122.

¹¹⁴ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 271.

is much more, though, than simply Jacob's own take on things. Here again one also sees a glimpse behind the curtain, from the divine perspective, albeit from the mouth of Jacob. God's activities redound to Jacob's benefit, and the story told in 31:1-16 is not solely another viewpoint on what Jacob accomplishes but rather what YHWH accomplishes for and through Jacob.

Lipton's study of dreams in the ancestral narratives lends support to this line of reading. One may remember from chapter two that one key element of these dreams is that they recast and revise previous events in terms that help clarify a divine hand at work. Such is the case here, argues Lipton, for God accepts responsibility for the deception of Laban.¹¹⁵ Lipton understands God's role against the backdrop of "dual causality," which she defines as follows:

Briefly stated, 'dual causality' describes the complex interplay of human action and divine intervention employed by writers who were uncomfortable with anthropomorphic or other explicit expressions of divine intervention; who wished to convey a sense of historical realism; who sought to emphasize the role played by human strengths and weaknesses in the fulfilment [*sic*] of God's will; or who were motivated by a combination of all three concerns.¹¹⁶

Dual causality provides a helpful hermeneutical lens through which one may better understand this scene. This perspective has the benefit of recognizing that neither Jacob nor God are merely bystanders in the deception of Laban. Moreover, Lipton interestingly ponders whether "confusion" may serve as a characteristic of dual causality narratives, noting the very opaque nature of Gen 30:37-43. She concludes that this confusion serves a narrative purpose, making readers receptive to the idea that God had been behind it

¹¹⁵ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 143-144.

¹¹⁶ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 133.

all.¹¹⁷ Her understanding of confusion as a lack of clarity about what is occurring exhibits certain parallels with our discussion of ambiguity and deception from the previous two chapters. It is perhaps fitting, then, that Lipton sees confusion (ambiguity) as fostering and fueling deception.

When read *in tandem*, Gen 30 and 31 achieve at a theological level an oft ignored sentiment, though one that appears to be ubiquitous in the Jacob cycle: God's commitment to the ancestral promise is both unwavering and absolute. Chapter 31 brings the latent character God to the forefront, and it is God alone who the narrator shows can and does upset the equilibrium between the two deceivers Jacob and Laban. Fokkelman rightly calls God "the only effective 'factor' in the attack-counter-attack of the two sly men . . ."¹¹⁸ Susan Niditch further clarifies that by choosing to reveal God's explicit participation in this way, God becomes "a part of the scene without intruding too heavily upon its trickster pattern."¹¹⁹ Fokkelman perhaps summarizes the connections between the two chapters best:

The scope of Jacob's speech [in 31:1-16] is the precise complement of the scope of the report in Gen. 30. That is why the two texts are corresponding descriptions of the outside and the kernel of one and the same event.¹²⁰

At bottom, the narrative expands and becomes increasingly provocative as new details emerge. Here, at the necessary moment, Jacob opts to make known the origin of his wealth, prosperity, and protection: the God of the promise he encountered at Bethel.

¹¹⁷ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 142.

¹¹⁸ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 161.

¹¹⁹ Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 110.

¹²⁰ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 159.

Trusting Jacob. One question still persists: can Jacob be trusted in what he relates about God's role in the deception of Laban, and if so, why? Jacob has already proven he has no misgivings about acting or even speaking deceptively. In fact, based upon what the reader knows of Jacob at this stage in the narrative, one may wholly expect him to spout dubious speech without flinching.¹²¹ One should proceed with caution, however, and not fall prey to the *a priori* assumption that Jacob can never speak truthfully. Just because he may speak deceptively in one circumstance does not make him unable to speak honestly in another.¹²²

Scholarship's response to this question runs the gamut of possibilities. Brett accuses Jacob of "inflat[ing] the facts" so as to convince his wives that their father and not Jacob is at fault.¹²³ Coats holds a similar view, arguing that Jacob the deceiver here shines brightly, crafting a story to persuade his wives and not to offer anything authentic.¹²⁴ Humphreys similarly contends that God is nothing more than a "rhetorical factor" adduced by Jacob in the interest of convincing his wives to join him in flight.¹²⁵ For Humphreys, that it is Jacob and not the narrator who reports this dream complicates its viability all the more. To be sure, Jacob's speech does possess a rhetorical purpose—he does intend to and succeed in convincing his wives to come along—but rhetoric need

¹²¹ See C. D. Evans, "The Patriarch Jacob—An 'Innocent Man,'" *Bible Review* 2 (1986): 34.

¹²² Fokkeman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 161, correctly cautions against such a way of reading. He writes: "A correct literary analysis is not interested in a preconceived portrait of Jacob, but wants to elicit the image of Jacob from the story itself, line by line."

¹²³ Brett, *Genesis*, 95.

¹²⁴ Coats, "Strife Without Reconciliation," 89.

¹²⁵ Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 180. Most recently, Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 273, takes such a view. He writes: "God's protecting presence is a recurring them[e] in Jacob's speech." See also Turner, *Genesis*, 135.

not necessitate deception.¹²⁶ Humphreys' view also strains to accommodate the fact that God has spoken *through the narrator* in 31:3, instructing Jacob to return home, and that God will likewise speak *through the narrator* in 31:24 when he instructs Laban to do Jacob no harm. Could these two narratorial mentions of God not substantiate Jacob's story? Indeed, they accomplish precisely that, for in 31:13 Jacob parrots God's command to return home, and in 31:7, 12 Jacob speaks of God's unique protection of him. Moreover, Humphreys' eager willingness to trust the narrator is problematic; one may equally ask if the narrator can be trusted! Shimon Bar-Efrat raises just such a caution.¹²⁷

Westermann conversely sees "no contradiction" in Jacob's pointing to a divine hand as the true, numinous actor of Gen 30.¹²⁸ Reflecting upon a similar question, Kevin Walton concludes that at best one is unable to know whether Jacob is speaking deceptively or not.¹²⁹ Lipton maintains that the particulars of the dream are authentic, yet Jacob's claim that the dream is of one piece is "fabricated."¹³⁰ Lipton attempts to establish a chronology for the various elements of Jacob's dream report, arguing that the narrative has reshaped them so as to recast previous events in a different light.¹³¹

¹²⁶ On the dream as rhetoric and authentic, see Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 121-127, where she argues compellingly that Jacob does indeed use the dream in the hopes of persuading his wives, but in doing so he also makes a larger statement about God's role in the deception that has both forward- and backward-looking ramifications.

¹²⁷ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup 70; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 33, explains that despite the narrator's omniscience the narrator is neither "completely objective" nor "impartial towards their protagonists."

¹²⁸ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 491.

¹²⁹ Kevin Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown: The Presence and Absence of God in the Jacob Narrative* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 118.

¹³⁰ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 130.

¹³¹ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 132.

Profound reasons exist for trusting Jacob's recollection of his dream theophany. First, our literary analysis above attests to the veracity of reading Gen 30 and 31 together as mutually illuminating texts. Readers and interpreters should not be overly credulous in believing that the first account of a given story (30:37-43) is always more reliable than the second (31:1-16). The question is not an either/or but rather a both/and. That both accounts exist alongside one another in the final canonized form of the text precludes one from picking-and-choosing.¹³² One must ask how the two fit together. In this case, 31:1-16 supplements, clarifies, and expands upon 30:37-43. Second, while Jacob is the speaker in 31:1-16 he does not remain entirely autonomous; the narrator may opt to fashion Jacob's words in any particular way. Fokkelman thus rightly notices the scarcity of any narratorial comments or cues that would cast Jacob's words in a deceptive tone.¹³³ The narrative does, however, remove Jacob as an effectual agent in regards to the success of the ruse, which may be unfitting and unexpected of the brazen patriarch.¹³⁴

Third, Jacob adduces Bethel, and according to Walton it would be puzzling for Jacob to lie while "swearing by his most sacred experience."¹³⁵ That experience not only corroborated his obtaining of the blessing and birthright at a most tumultuous time in his life but also saw him receiving the ancestral promise, which we have already shown has served as a resounding force in his life ever since. Fourth, Jacob's wives serve as a sort of barometer against which the reader can measure the veracity of what Jacob says. Their

¹³² Sherwood, *Had God Not Been on My Side*, 300, adduces two other examples within the Hebrew Bible in which "new information" stands in dissonance with a given character's speech: the words of Jacob recounted by his sons upon his death (Gen 50:16-17) and Bathsheba's avowal that David had promised her son Solomon was next in line for succession (1 Kgs 1:13).

¹³³ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* 161.

¹³⁴ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 158.

¹³⁵ Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown*, 118.

agreement, then, in 31:14-16 confirms that Jacob's words conform to reality as they understand it. They do not learn anything new from what Jacob tells them save for the fact that God appeared to him with this information.¹³⁶ It is not incidental that these previously battling sisters now, for the first time, speak with one voice. Fifth, proponents of the view that Jacob does not warrant the reader's trust in this instance must explain why Jacob's dream theophany here is problematic yet his dream theophany at Bethel is not. In both scenes Jacob has a nocturnal experience with the divine. In both scenes Jacob receives a word of promise. And most importantly, in both scenes the narrative recounts the action from Jacob's perspective.¹³⁷ Why should readers not trust Jacob in Gen 31 yet trust him at Bethel? Are all Jacob's experiences with God merely rhetorical or feigned? In the end, interpreters have not adequately addressed these central and important issues. In light of them, the quick dismissal of Jacob's reported dream theophany in Gen 31 is unwarranted.

One final consideration warrants attention and upholds the authenticity of Jacob's words. In 31:5-13 Jacob takes over the role of narrator. George Savran argues persuasively that in such moments elsewhere in Genesis—for example, Abraham's servant in Gen 24 or Judah in 44:18-34—the character recedes into the background, assuming the usual inconspicuous though omniscient posture of the regular biblical

¹³⁶ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 161-162.

¹³⁷ While Gen 28:10-22 does not occur explicitly on the lips of Jacob, Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 50-51, describes a sudden stylistic change in the description of Jacob's dream at Bethel. There the narrative switches to a repeated use of the particle הנה followed by participial forms, which results in a change in perspective. He writes: "Up till now he [the narrator] had been telling us all kinds of things from the superior point of the omniscient narrator, now he abandons this attitude; he withdraws behind his protagonist and in a subordinate position *he records what his, Jacob's eyes see*. . . . This has great consequences for the experiencing of time in the narration. There is no longer a narrator who looks back to a past; there is only the present *as Jacob experiences it*—there, a ladder! oh, angels! and look, the Lord himself! No more narratives but five participles one after another with the strength of a durative present." (italics mine). See also Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 43-82, on point of view, esp. p. 62, where she holds that הנה followed by a verb of perception may be taken as a hint at a change in perspective.

narrator.¹³⁸ What results is an inverse relationship: “the more authority a character is given, the more self-effacing he becomes, and the more the ultimate control of God is emphasized.”¹³⁹ Therefore, Jacob’s position as narrator of his own history in 31:5-13 succeeds in accomplishing two things: first, it renders Jacob an authoritative witness to the truth; second, it propels God to the narrative foreground. At the strictly literary level, then, Jacob’s report about God’s activity in the deception of Laban gains another layer of complexity and legitimacy.

Connection with the ancestral promise. As has been seen to be the case with the many deceptions in the Jacob-Laban narratives, this instance of divine deception both echoes and furthers the ancestral promise. Jacob Myers comes closer than most others in affirming an explicit connection between the previous deceptions and the resultant fulfillment. He writes: “From the tone of the text [31:3] as it now stands, it would appear that the convergence of circumstances was part of [YHWH’s] plan to fulfill the promise made to Abraham and to Isaac.”¹⁴⁰ Myers’ treatment, however, is tantalizingly brief and does not discuss the theological implications of this possibility.

God’s command that Jacob “return to the land (אֶרֶץ) of your fathers (אֲבוֹתֶיךָ), to your birthplace (לְמוֹלַדְתְּךָ), and I will be with you” (v. 3) is evocative of several aspects of the promise. At one level it recalls God’s original uttering of the promise to Abraham in Gen 12:1: “Go, from your land (מֵאֶרֶץ) and from your birthplace (מִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ) and from the house of your father (מִבֵּית אָבִיךָ) to the land which I will show you.” This constellation of

¹³⁸ George Savran, “The Character as Narrator in Biblical Narrative,” *Prooftexts* 5 (1985): 14.

¹³⁹ Savran, “The Character as Narrator,” 14.

¹⁴⁰ Jacob M. Myers, “The Way of the Fathers,” *Int* 29 (1975): 135.

similar words is telling. It achieves more than a mere recalling of the ancestral promise; it also seeks to reverse Jacob's fourteen plus year exile by instructing him to return to the promised land. While Abraham is to go "from" (מִן) his land, birthplace, and family, Jacob is to return "to" (אֶל) the land, his family, and his birthplace. Matthews and Mims deem this episode a parallel to Jacob's flight from his family to Haran; they note that when Jacob both enters and leaves Haran a theophany accompanied by the promise provides the proper theological orientation, showing Jacob is not alone.¹⁴¹ Additionally, Charles Mabee rightly notices that YHWH's command "tells Jacob what to do, but no[t] how to do it."¹⁴² While Mabee does not draw the connection, the same ambiguity is evident in YHWH's command that Abraham up and leave everything. The text simply records that God commands and Abraham departs. Read in this way, the incipient fulfillment of the promise of land comes into focus in YHWH's command that Jacob return *to the land*.

More specifically, YHWH's words to Jacob call to mind the ancestral promise granted to Jacob at Bethel. The final clause in 31:3, "and I will be with you" (אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ) recalls YHWH's reassurance in 28:15: "I am with you" (אֲנִי עִמָּךְ). Gen 31:13 draws the connection even more explicitly. YHWH identifies himself as "the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me." The resonances with Bethel, a pillar, and a vow should be clear.¹⁴³ One should also understand the deception itself, from the mouth of YHWH in 31:12, as an outworking of YHWH's promise at Bethel of

¹⁴¹ Victor H. Matthews and Frances Mims, "Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation," *PRSt* 12 (1985): 187.

¹⁴² Charles Mabee, "Jacob and Laban: The Structure of Judicial Proceedings (Genesis XXXI 25-42), *VT* 30 (1980): 194.

¹⁴³ See Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 514.

presence and protection for Jacob. This point becomes especially evident given that YHWH couches discussion of the deception in terms of his maintaining a watchful eye over Jacob, taking special notice of what Laban has been doing to him (vv. 7, 12).

YHWH's insistence that Jacob depart now touches upon the ancestral promise in one other way. Jacob's renewed flight requires confidence in the ancestral promise. That Jacob prepares to leave so quickly upon hearing from God testifies to his trust in the promise. Turner gives even greater import to the necessity of Jacob's reliance upon YHWH's fidelity to the ancestral promise by recognizing that a number of unanswered questions still persist for Jacob: has Esau's anger abated? Is Rebekah still alive? What circumstances exist at home?¹⁴⁴ In the face of this plethora of unknowns the ancestral promise, embodied by the trickster Jacob, forges onward, protected by the trickster God.

Divine Deception, Flight, and the Promise (Gen 31:17-54)

Jacob's hastened departure does not end the deception. Rather, yet again the twin themes of deception and the ancestral promise appear together in ways that are less overt than some of those discussed previously. Three issues warrant brief discussion: YHWH's command to depart as deception, Rachel's theft of the *teraphim*, and YHWH's protection of Jacob and his family in accordance with the ancestral promise.

Departure and divine deception. Not only is Laban deceived by Jacob and YHWH's stealthy rigging of the wage agreement but also by the sheer fact that Jacob does depart unannounced. On three occasions the text regards Jacob's hastened departure as a means of deception, and two of these occur on Laban's lips. In v. 20 the narrative states that Jacob "stole the heart of Laban," a construction formed from some form of the

¹⁴⁴ Turner, *Genesis*, 134.

verb “steal away” (גנב) plus “heart” (לב), commonly regarded as an idiom implying deception. In v. 26 the same construction appears, only now Laban asks why it is that Jacob “stole his heart.” Lastly, in v. 27, only the word גנב is used, oftentimes translated as “deceive.” In all three of these occurrences the deception is associated no longer with Jacob’s obtaining of great wealth but solely with Jacob’s surreptitious exit. Yet this exit was not of Jacob’s choosing but instead a response to God (31:3). Therefore, the text again portrays YHWH as, in a way, deceiving Laban through the command that Jacob and his family leave and return home.¹⁴⁵ One should remain mindful also of the way this deception connects with the ancestral promise, discussed above.

Rachel’s theft of the teraphim. Prior to their departure the text records that Rachel steals (חננה) her father’s *teraphim*. Detailed investigation and discussion of the nature and background of the *teraphim* press beyond the bounds of the present study, yet it is vital to recognize that both Laban (v. 30) and Jacob (v. 32) refer to them as “gods.”¹⁴⁶ Anne-Marie Korte sees in this scene “a remarkable deconstruction of the theological dichotomy” between the God of the Fathers and the *teraphim*.¹⁴⁷ For her, the point is not that the two concepts are so vastly different in regards to “corporeality, materiality or

¹⁴⁵ Mabee, “Jacob and Laban,” 194, correctly writes that nothing in the narrative indicates that YHWH takes umbrage at the method of leaving Jacob chooses.

¹⁴⁶ This word occurs a number of times in the Hebrew Bible. In all the biblical occurrences of the word (Gen 31:19, 34, 35; Judg 17:5; 18:14, 17, 18, 20; 1 Sam 15:23; 19:13, 16; 2 Kgs 23:24; Ezek 21:26; Hos 3:4; Zech 10:2) they appear to represent some type of deity and perhaps connote their function as an instrument of divination; only the occurrences in 1 Sam deviate from this function as there the *teraphim* serve as a stand-in for the sleeping David. See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 485, 493, for a brief yet helpful explanation of the term and a thorough bibliography, as well as Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 115-123, on the function, etymology, and other biblical attestations of the word.

¹⁴⁷ Anne-Marie Korte, “Significance Obscured: Rachel’s Theft of the Teraphim: Divinity and Corporeality in Gen 31” in *Begin with the Body: Corporeality, Religion and Gender* (ed. J. Bekkenkamp and M. de Haardt; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 181.

tangibility” but rather that each function with varying degrees of inclusiveness.¹⁴⁸

Korte’s conclusions react against traditional understandings of this scene which have great merit, namely that YHWH is here juxtaposed with and shown to be superior to the *teraphim*. In this comparison, however, Korte is right that one should not equate Rachel with uncleanness or taboo because she says she is menstruating as a means of covering her deception (v. 35). Her claim to be menstruating, though, does cast ridicule upon the *teraphim*. Assuming they were some sort of household gods, this episode makes a larger theological statement: while YHWH is a God who delivers his chosen and protects them from oppression in line with the promise, the *teraphim* are nothingness and have no power or vitality.

That this theological statement is made in the context of a deception is significant. According to Esther Fuchs, given that Jacob’s (and YHWH’s) deception of Laban by fleeing as well as Rachel’s stealing of her father’s *teraphim* both use the verb נָסַח, the two scenes are related though dissimilar.¹⁴⁹ Whereas נָסַח functions literally in reference to Rachel’s theft, it is used figuratively for Jacob.¹⁵⁰ Fuchs does not mention v. 27, however, where נָסַח occurs without the idiomatic accompanier לָבָן in reference to Jacob. Technically Jacob has not stolen anything from Laban, yet in v. 43 Laban clearly names the daughters, grandchildren, and flocks as his, leading to the possibility that he saw them as a sort of booty Jacob had also taken. Matthews and Mims describe this scene as one in which YHWH functions as Rachel’s “fellow trickster, who can demonstrate his

¹⁴⁸ Korte, “Significance Obscured,” 179, 181.

¹⁴⁹ Esther Fuchs, “‘For I Have the Way of Women’: Deception, Gender, and Ideology in Biblical Narrative,” *Semeia* 42 (1988): 74.

¹⁵⁰ Fuchs, “For I Have the Way of Women,” 74.

superiority by protecting his people and discrediting the images and power of rival deities.”¹⁵¹ To reiterate, Matthews and Mims do not clarify precisely how YHWH is here a trickster, but Fuchs’ insightful assertion that the two most recent deceptions are connected may provide some clarity.¹⁵² She describes Rachel’s deception as one laden with what Sternberg calls permanent gaps; the scene is one in which ambiguity is ubiquitous.¹⁵³ Based upon what one has encountered thus far in the Jacob cycle, the prevalence of ambiguity in this scene may lead one to suspect deception. What Fuchs leaves unsaid, however, is that the keen reader may fill in these gaps so as to make sense of the narrative. Doing so, it seems, reveals one possible way of understanding YHWH as her co-trickster.

Rachel’s theft occurs immediately after Jacob’s speech to his wives (vv. 5-13) and their assent (vv. 14-16). There Jacob had stated (and YHWH agreed) that it was YHWH who had taken Laban’s possessions and granted them to Jacob. Laban’s daughters, then, affirm the same in v. 16, only this time claiming that all the wealth YHWH has “caused to be stripped away” (הֶצִיל) belongs not to Jacob but to them and their children. Against this broader backdrop, one may construe Rachel’s theft of the *teraphim* as her acting in accordance with YHWH’s words reported by Jacob in vv. 5-13. If she understands *all* (כָּל) of her father’s property to belong to her and her sister, and YHWH is the mechanism by which this property is transferred from Laban to them, then Rachel’s deception of her

¹⁵¹ Matthews and Mims, “Jacob the Trickster,” 189.

¹⁵² Fuchs, “For I Have the Way of Women,” 70, 80, underscores the oft ignored fact that because Jacob does not know of Rachel’s theft (v. 32b) she deceives not only Laban but also her husband, Jacob!

¹⁵³ Fuchs, “For I Have the Way of Women,” 70, 79. For Fuchs, unlike when males deceive in the Hebrew Bible, Rachel’s deception lacks an explicit motive, narratorial judgment, and any sense of closure. Of course, I disagree with Fuchs that each of these elements—especially a judgment issued by the narrator—serve a necessary or even recurring function in scenes depicting males engaged in deception. See chapter one, p. 41.

father extends beyond her insistence that she is menstruating in v. 35. Just as YHWH had taken all Laban's flocks and given them to Jacob, so too the narrative hints that YHWH has some hand in Rachel's stealing of her father's *teraphim*.

Gen 31:24 and the ancestral promise. Further substantiating the point above that YHWH plays a part in the missing case of the *teraphim* is his reappearance in the narrative, now to Laban, with the instruction against doing anything good or evil to Jacob. The phrase "good or evil" serves as a merism, covering the full range of possibilities for what Laban may or may not do to Jacob; the Hebrew literally reads "good *to* evil" (מטוב עד-רע). This statement does not, though, censure Laban entirely, forbidding him to speak a word at all as Honeyman suggests.¹⁵⁴ Were this the case, Laban certainly does not adhere to instruction well, for he indeed speaks with and against Jacob, accusing him of deception and theft (vv. 25-30, 43-44, 51-52). Mathews correctly understands the merism as placing a limit on Laban's "authority."¹⁵⁵ The injunction against doing *good* to evil makes better sense when read this way; YHWH, not Laban, is the sole source of good and prosperity in Jacob's life. W. M. Clark and E. A. Speiser argue respectively based upon parallels elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible for a forensic understanding of the phrase, meaning that God forbids Laban from prosecuting his accusation.¹⁵⁶ This line of reading is equally important, for the threat exists that Laban will uncover Rachel's theft, about which even Jacob is aloof. That Laban cannot speak

¹⁵⁴ A. M. Honeyman, "Merismus in Biblical Hebrew," *JBL* 71 (1952): 12, translates the phrase as "not any word at all."

¹⁵⁵ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 523.

¹⁵⁶ W. Malcolm Clark, "A Legal Background to the Yahwist's Use of 'Good and Evil' in Genesis 2-3," *JBL* 88 (1969): 269; Speiser, *Genesis*, 246. This understanding fits within the larger context of Gen 31 established by Mabee, "Jacob and Laban," 194-205, who sees the prolonged discussion between Jacob and Laban as an example of a judicial proceeding.

anything “good to evil” to Jacob thus obtains an additional dimension of protection against legal redress given the prospect of Laban’s discovery of Rachel’s theft.

YHWH’s words to Laban in 31:24 have several connections with the ancestral promise and concern for its perpetuation. First, as many have noticed, Laban’s dream is reminiscent of YHWH’s appearance to Abimelech in a dream in Gen 20:3.¹⁵⁷ In Gen 20 the scene relates to the promise by means of its concern for Sarah’s well-being as the mother of the promised child. On both occasions YHWH intervenes, appearing to one whom the patriarch has deceived, so as to eliminate any chance of reciprocation. Both situations see YHWH protecting the deceiver subsequent to a deception. Second, Fokkelman maintains that an obvious parallel exists with 24:50, where Laban and others respond to the providential journey of Abraham’s servant by stating, “This comes from YHWH; we are not able to speak to you evil or good.” Whereas in 24:50 Laban saw God’s purposes at work and spoke as such, in 31:24 YHWH must threateningly inform him that similarly Jacob’s deceptive flight comes “from YHWH.”¹⁵⁸ Third, God demands that Laban “take care (שמר) not to speak good to bad to Jacob.” The verb used here (שמר) is used by YHWH at Bethel when conferring the ancestral promise on Jacob. Gen 28:15 says, “. . . I will *protect* you . . .” (שמרתך). The link between these two verses underscores that the ancestral promise is the operative interpretive context for YHWH’s intercession on Jacob’s behalf in 31:24. Driving this point home, Jacob clearly recognizes YHWH’s protective presence in his final speech to Laban (v. 42).

¹⁵⁷ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 299; Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 523, Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 150-152; Turner, *Genesis*, 137.

¹⁵⁸ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 165.

Fourth, the protection afforded Jacob by YHWH results in Laban's eventual defeat. Lipton, as one may now expect, sees Laban's dream as casting its shadow back across the entire Jacob-Laban narratives (Gen 29-31), recasting the human conflict between Jacob and Laban as one in which God has had a hand all along.¹⁵⁹ Upon failing to one-up Jacob time and again, Laban can conclude only with a covenant over which YHWH will preside (vv. 49-50, 53). This covenant, argues Vera, has the twin concerns of protecting Jacob's newly acquired family and of imposing a protective limit for both parties that the other cannot transgress.¹⁶⁰ The two tricksters mark this geographic boundary with a stone (vv. 45-54). Jacob and Laban's erecting of a stone at Mizpah recalls the ancestral promise previously memorialized with a stone (28:18). The latter marks the giving of the covenant, the former YHWH's demonstrated commitment to it.

Understood from this perspective, YHWH's directive stands as an injunction against endangering the bearer of the promise in any way, and yet another example of YHWH's protection (שמר) amidst deception in line with the ancestral promise. By warning Laban to do Jacob and his family no harm, God creates and ensures a framework wherein the blessing can and will be spread to the west, east, north, and south (28:14).

Conclusion: Deception and Incipient Fulfillment of the Ancestral Promise

This chapter has investigated the way in which the ancestral promise begins to move toward fulfillment in and through the many deceptions occurring during Jacob's sojourn in Haran. The opening verses of chapter 29 were seen, much akin to the analysis

¹⁵⁹ Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 172. See also José Loza Vera, "La Berît entre Laban et Jacob (Gn 31.43-54)" in *World of the Aramaeans I, Biblical Studies in Honour of Paul-Eugène Dion* (ed. P. M. Michèle Daviau, J. W. Wevers, and M. Weigl; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 63-64, on the connection between Gen 31:43-51 and what precedes it.

¹⁶⁰ Vera, "La Berît entre Laban et Jacob," 66.

of the opening verses of the entire Jacob cycle, to reintroduce the centrality of the ancestral promise and YHWH's fidelity to it by means of his guiding Jacob safely to Laban's family. Second, Laban's notorious 'wife-swap' was discussed as a deception that succeeds in setting the stage for Jacob acquiring two wives, as well as their maidservants, who end up bearing with YHWH's help alone twelve children of the promise. We also emphasized the way in which Laban's deception of Jacob need not necessitate a negative evaluation of Jacob's deception of his father Isaac in Gen 27, but rather may underscore the notion of fulfillment that arises as a concern in both scenes. Taken together, Gen 29 provides an overall orientation for the Jacob-Laban narratives. This perspective of promise related to deception helps to condition the reader to regard that which befalls Jacob in Haran not as judgments for prior wrongs but as an outworking of YHWH's commitment to the ancestral promise.

Provided this interpretive context, three scenes of incipient fulfillment of the ancestral promise were treated. First, in Gen 29:31-30:24, the narrative reports a rapid succession of twelve births by Jacob's wives, a circumstance afforded by Laban's previous deception in giving the fertile Leah in marriage prior to the barren Rachel. Emerging from this reading was also the highly theological nature of these birth narratives, evidenced by the preponderance of either theophoric names for the children or the mother's recognition that the child arose solely through an intercession of YHWH. Second, Gen 30:27-30 highlighted the fulfillment of the promise that Israel will serve as a blessing to the nations through Laban's avowal that YHWH had blessed him through Jacob. Whether Laban was here speaking deceptively or not is of little consequence since his blessing is short-lived, for in the final text treated, 30:25-31:54, Laban becomes

the object of a deception and the cost is his wealth accrued by attempting to exploit Jacob's services. This final scene is rife with deception and counter-deception, yet the final arbiter emerges in 31:1-16 when Jacob reports that YHWH, not he, had been the one who successfully manipulated the breeding of the flocks first narrated in 30:27-34. Concomitantly, it was shown that YHWH deceives Laban in another way by instructing Jacob and his newly acquired wealth to depart and return to the land of the promise.

Taken *in toto*, the compound effect of these narrative movements reveals remarkable progress toward the end goals of the ancestral promise. Turner's thesis, then, which began this chapter—that within the Jacob cycle the ancestral promise sees advances only in the realm of progeny—is incorrect. Jacob leaves Haran with multiple children who will eventuate into the entire people Israel, but also as one who has blessed Laban, and one who at YHWH's command begins the trek on his way back to the promised land. The promise has certainly not reached fulfillment, yet it also is not stuck at an impasse, hanging in abeyance as Jacob and Laban attempt to outwit one another. Quite the opposite, for just as the trickster oracle reaches fulfillment through deception (Gen 27), so too does the ancestral promise continue toward fulfillment through deception. While Jacob's stay in Haran may at times be an unhappy one, it is within and through all these experiences that the ancestral promise works itself out, guided at every turn by the Trickster God.

CHAPTER FOUR

Replaying the Fool: Esau vs. YHWH and Jacob (Gen 32-35)

Introductory Remarks

Traditional interpretations of this final section of the Jacob cycle settle on the idea that these narratives depict a transformative moment in Jacob's life. The nocturnal struggle and concomitant name change from "Jacob" (יעקב) the "supplanter/deceiver" (cf. 25:26; 27:36) to "Israel" (ישראל) the "God-wrestler" (32:29; cf. 35:10) is taken to solidify a change in Jacob's character that allows for his successful reconciliation with Esau and suitability as a viable candidate for the ancestral promise. Matthews and Mims are among the foremost proponents of this reading. For them, the Jacob cycle is about preparing Jacob to become the rightful heir to the promise.¹ Conflicts with Esau, Laban, and God help to mold Jacob into a character worthy of receiving the promise.² It is this final encounter with God in Gen 32 that is most formative for Jacob. With his new name, Matthews and Mims believe he at last reaches a level of maturation that allows for him to become the rightful heir to the covenant.³ Other interpreters view Gen 32 in a similar vein. Von Rad labels Jacob's new name "a name of honor" that will now insure God's recognition and acceptance of him.⁴ Brueggemann argues for a transference of power between God and humanity whereby Jacob assumes a new identity as both a man and a

¹ Victor H. Matthews and Frances Mims, "Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation," *PRSt* 12 (1985): 186, 187.

² Matthews and Mims, "Jacob the Trickster," 187.

³ Matthews and Mims, "Jacob the Trickster," 193.

⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL; rev. ed.; trans. J. H. Marks; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 321.

community in relationship with God.⁵ Kenneth Mathews sees Jacob's renaming as evidence of an impending "metamorphosis" of his "moral character."⁶ And Wenham goes so far as to describe the renaming as a "rebaptism."⁷

As will become clear in the course of this chapter, the traditional interpretation outlined here is wanting. First, the view presented in Matthews and Mims misses crucial elements in the literary flow of the text. Jacob is not a character on the way toward earning the ancestral promise or becoming a fit candidate to receive it. God's selection of Jacob occurs already at the beginning of the cycle (Gen 25:23), not the end, and more importantly, Jacob has already received the promise at Bethel in 28:13-15. No preparation or testing as Matthews and Mims suggest is overt or even necessary in the text. All along the promise belongs to Jacob. The promise to Jacob, just like the promise to Abraham, rests on the bedrock of God's own initiative and covenantal fidelity, not on the assumed merits of the patriarchs.

Second, a thorough scrutiny of the text leaves the reader pondering precisely how much Jacob truly changes after Gen 32. In fact, his renaming in 32:29 appears to do quite little to change his deceptive character as he unremittently deceives Esau again in Gen 33 in a number of ways, among them his ambiguous offer to return the "blessing" (33:11; cf. 32:29) and reneging on his promise to follow Esau to Seir and instead

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 268-269.

⁶ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26* (NAC 1B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 559.

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 296.

journeying to and making residence in Sukkoth (33:12-17). It is also not insignificant that the narrative continues to employ the name “Jacob” well beyond Gen 32.⁸

A third difficulty also presents itself: the continued role of God in all that follows. As is evident above, the traditional interpretation sees Jacob as a character that must, in a way, become palatable to God before receiving the promise. The analysis in the preceding chapters, though, has leveled a strong critique against this posture of reading that seeks to place God outside Jacob’s life and experiences. And to reiterate the argument of chapter two, Jacob is chosen by God from birth (25:23), a choice confirmed at Bethel when God bestows the ancestral promise upon him (28:13-15). To place these closing chapters of the Jacob cycle in the overall context of the interpretation presented in this study, chapter two focuses upon how Jacob receives the ancestral promise through deception, while chapter three presents the multifarious ways in which the promise moves toward fulfillment amidst and through the various deceptions between Jacob and Laban. The operative question for chapter four then is not ‘how does Jacob attain the promise despite deception?’ but rather ‘how does God function in Jacob’s life through deception to guarantee the promise’s perpetuation and bring the Jacob cycle to some type of resolution?’ To achieve any sense of resolution, Jacob’s only remaining obstacle in the narrative must be addressed: Esau. He exists as the final and most ominous threat to Jacob and thus by extension to the continuance of the ancestral promise.

This chapter will challenge the traditional interpretation, arguing specifically that Jacob by no means repents of his deceptive ways but rather continues with them, and

⁸ See Fredrick C. Holmgren, “Holding Your Own Against God! Genesis 32:22-32 (In the Context of Genesis 31-33),” *Int* 44 (1990): 11; Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Readings; 2d ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 145. Among the relevant texts, one may consult Gen 32:29-30, 32; 33:1, 5, 8, 10, 17, 18; 34:3, 6, 7, 13, 27, 30; 35:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10x2, 14, 15.

with God, for the sake of the promise and at the expense yet again of his brother Esau. The encounter at the Jabbok (32:23-33) will be shown, through its use of ambiguity and deception, not to transform Jacob's future but rather to commend his past dealings with those whom he has deceived. As such, this struggle with God becomes concurrently a prefiguration of his deceptive reunion with Esau (Gen 33). But as was the case in chapters 25 and 27, the success of this trickery is not of Jacob's own making; the divine trickster is also at work for Jacob, not against him. In Gen 32-35 divine deception casts its glance both backward—in essence, approving yet again the successful deceptions of Isaac, Esau, and Laban—as well as forward, insuring Jacob's continued success in his meeting with Esau to advance the ancestral promise toward inchoate fulfillment.

This chapter will unfold in three parts. First, we will examine Jacob's preparations for reconciliation with Esau, seeing in them the work of a consummate trickster whose goal is to allay Esau's presumed anger. Here attention will be given specifically to two encounters—with the messengers of God at Mahanaim (33:2-3) and the enigmatic wrestling match between Jacob and God (32:23-33)—for how each sets the stage for Jacob's triumph over Esau in Gen 33. Second, the reconciliation of the brothers will be analyzed as a text rife with deception. Through clever fawning and outright deception Jacob reconciles with Esau, holds on to the promise, and most importantly, returns to the land. Lastly, Gen 34-35 will receive brief treatment as a sort of epilogue to the cycle in which deception persists. The result of the deception in Gen 34, however, is of insurmountable import in the cycle, for it leads to God's directive that Jacob return not merely to the promised land but to the land *of the promise*, Bethel. It is here at Bethel

that the ancestral promise will be reaffirmed, though now not only to Jacob but in the presence of the signs of the promise's fulfillment: his wealth, wives, and children.

Encounters: Preparations for Reconciliation (Gen 32:1-33)

No sooner does Jacob escape the threat of Laban with the assistance of divine trickery than he is thrust into another impending conflict, this time with his brother Esau, the object of the original act of divine trickery in Jacob's life (25:23). How would this scene play out? Has Esau's anger attenuated, or will he succumb to his earlier murderous intentions (27:41)? Jacob is uneasy, uncertain as to his brother's objectives, and so sets in motion a litany of attempts to placate Esau by means of messengers, flattering words, and gifts (32:1-22). Upon organizing all his wealth and family and situating them as a buffer between himself and the approaching Esau, an unnamed entity, only later identified as God, accosts Jacob (32:23-33). The outcome of this struggle is a blessing for Jacob, but a blessing that comes with a price, won at the expense of a permanent injury to the bearer of the promise.

The ancestral promise remains at the fore in the narrative, a point which extant scholarship has readily noted. Yet what has not received adequate voice here are the manifest ways in which the narrative connects God to these events in a way that benefits Jacob. While scholarship has been preoccupied largely with the question of what these narratives say about Jacob and his undergoing some sort of transformation, such a question cannot be answered without attending to the concomitant question that forms the basis for this study: what does the text say about God? If Jacob experiences a change—a view already challenged above—then one might expect God likewise to change his

approach in dealing with Jacob. What one finds, though, is that God remains steadfast to the point of trickery in his twin concerns for Jacob and the ancestral promise.

Divine Messengers and Fearful Flattery (Gen 32:1-22)

Gen 32-33 is a text of encounters. First with the messengers of God (32:2-3), then with God (32:23-33), and finally with Esau (33:1-20), these encounters hold the narrative together and help to orient the reader to the proper theological perspective: that God continues to be at work on Jacob's behalf. The encounter with the messengers of God and then with God give shape to Jacob's encounter with Esau, both affecting the way in which he will approach his brother as well as equipping him with the necessary arsenal to achieve success in the encounter.

The first encounter at Mahanaim (32:2-3) has long perplexed interpreters of the Jacob cycle. Among the most pressing issues seems to be what meaning and import these verses contribute to the surrounding narrative. The text is terse and to the point; it is the point, however, that remains unclear. Jacob, his family, and his possessions take leave of Laban and press onward toward the land. Along the way, at some unnamed juncture, they chance upon two messengers of God (מלאכי אלהים), leading Jacob to identify the place as God's camp and name the place Mahanaim (מחנים). Immediately thereafter Jacob is seen assiduously preparing for his meeting with Esau, and no subsequent mention of Mahanaim occurs anywhere else in the Jacob cycle.

Scholarly discussions have only added to the ambiguity of these few verses. Some, most recently Tzemah Yoreh, have argued that vv. 2-3 were once attached to the scene of Jacob's struggle in vv. 23-33, and that the "man" with whom Jacob fought was

in fact a member of this encampment.⁹ Cornelis Houtman points out a number of questions the text leaves unanswered: is the meeting hostile or polite? where are the messengers from? how did Jacob see the messengers? who comprises the two camps?¹⁰ Victor Hamilton similarly underscores the deafening silence in this brief scene; neither Jacob nor the messengers speak or react to one another.¹¹ Outwardly the scene appears quite odd in its present context. What, then, is its purpose at the close of Jacob's sojourn with Laban and at the outset of his journey home?

Gen 32:2-3 is of fundamental importance in comprehending what lay ahead for Jacob. Westermann regards these verses as originally independent from the Jacob cycle, making their way into the text by the hand of J, who has inserted them at a crucial point in the narrative.¹² While Westermann's explanation of the mechanism by which 32:2-3 enters the narrative may be prone to dispute, his final statement that the text is highly purposive in its present context is a necessary prerequisite to grasping its meaning. From this perspective, the point of the narrative begins to come into sharper focus.

⁹ Tzema Yoreh, "Jacob's Struggle," ZAW 117 (2005): 95-97, maintains that both episodes belong to the Pentateuchal source E and were separated by a J redactor who desired that the identity of Jacob's opponent be obscured. Hos 12 preserves a quite distilled version of the Jacob cycle, and v. 5 appears to share Yoreh's reading, recording Jacob's opponent as a "messenger" (מַלְאֲכִי). Yoreh's reading, though, requires a reconstructed text that eliminates v. 3b, the etiology for Mahanaim, ascribing it instead to the later J redactor. More problematic, Yoreh's thesis does not account for two seminal aspects of the final form of the Genesis text: 1) that a "man" (אִישׁ) wrestles with Jacob, not an angel; 2) the final form of the text understands this being to be God, evident in Jacob's new naming being explained by the saying "you have wrestled *with God* . . ." as well as Jacob's etiological statement explaining the rationale for his naming the place Peniel as stemming from his understanding that he had seen *God* face to face and survived. See also F. M. Th. Böhl, "Volksetymologie en Woordspeling in de Genesis-Verhalen," *MKA W Letterkunde* 59A (1925): 23. For the most recent proponent of this reading, see Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 280.

¹⁰ Cornelis Houtman, "Jacob at Mahanaim: Some Remarks on Genesis xxxii 2-3," *VT* 28 (1978): 37-38, 43.

¹¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 317.

¹² Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 505.

Gen 32:2-3 sets the stage for the impending encounter between Jacob and Esau by both recalling the ancestral promise bestowed upon Jacob at Bethel and affording Jacob the insight for how to go about facing his brother. Concerns over the narrative's silence need not delay us; instead, here one finds another fine example of the way in which biblical narrative is purposefully silent so as to inform meaning.¹³ The task is left to the careful reader to draw the various connections between Jacob's encounter with the divine messengers at Mahanaim and his preparations for the encounter with Esau that follow. The import of the Mahanaim encounter lies not in its opaqueness but in how it reintroduces the recurrent theme of the ancestral promise while concurrently giving Jacob a stratagem in facing Esau. This relevance will be treated under two separate but related rubrics: Mahanaim and the ancestral promise, and Mahanaim and Jacob's stratagem.

Mahanaim and the ancestral promise. The brief encounter at Mahanaim exhibits a number of telling lexical links to the ancestral promise scene at Bethel in Gen 28.¹⁴ The most potent of these connections is the phrase "messengers of God" (מַלְאכֵי אֱלֹהִים). While the singular form is ubiquitous in the biblical text, this particular plural construction occurs only twice in the entire Hebrew Bible: at Mahanaim (32:2) and at Bethel (28:12).¹⁵ In the latter Jacob had observed the "messengers of God" ascending and descending a stairway with God stationed at its top. God then spoke, granting the ancestral promise to Jacob. At Mahanaim, however, God and his emissaries are silent. But there are words from Jacob that elucidate another facet shared by the two scenes.

¹³ See chapter three, p.143.

¹⁴ *Contra* Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (Old Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 2000), 98, who contends that Jacob's separation is a self-interested action motivated by fear, not by any resonances with Bethel.

¹⁵ Houtman, "Jacob at Mahanaim," 39; Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 317.

Jacob responds at the sheer sight of the Mahanaim messengers by exclaiming that he has arrived at the camp of God. His exasperated utterance in 33:3—“*This* is God’s camp” (מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים זֶה)—mirrors that found in 28:17, when upon waking from his dream he says, “*This* (זֶה) is none other than the house of God, and *this* (זֶה) is the gateway to Heaven.” The shared emphatic use of “this” (זֶה) in relation to Jacob’s recognizing the true nature and identity of an unknown locale ties the two scenes together.¹⁶ Both also employ nearly identical etiological naming formulas for a previously unnamed place.¹⁷ In 28:19 Jacob “*calls the name of that place Bethel*” (יִקְרָא אֶת־שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא בֵּית־אֵל), and in 32:3 Jacob “*calls the name of that place Mahanaim*” (יִקְרָא שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא מַחֲנֵיִם).¹⁸ These lexical affinities assist even further in tethering the two scenes together.¹⁹

Several other lexical parallels contribute to the context of promise. In both scenes the narrative uses a form of the verb “encountered” (פָּגַע); in 28:11 Jacob “encounters” the place that will become Bethel, while in 32:2 the messengers of God “encounter” Jacob.²⁰ Kenneth Mathews understands the angels at Mahanaim as scouts surveying the lay of the land ahead of Jacob and his family.²¹ According to Westermann, the scene is one that communicates God’s awesome and unique power, especially evident in the image of

¹⁶ Houtman, “Jacob at Mahanaim,” 39.

¹⁷ Houtman, “Jacob at Mahanaim,” 39. See also Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 317.

¹⁸ In English one notices no difference. The differences between the Hebrew are of no consequence; the only dissimilarity is the absence of the direct object marker אֶת in the Mahanaim etiology.

¹⁹ Johannes Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung in der Jakoberzählung (Gen 25,19-33,17): eine Analyse ihres Spannungsbogens* (Herders Biblische Studien; Freiburg: Herder, 1999), 141, also recognizes many of these same cross-references.

²⁰ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 317.

²¹ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 547.

God's (military?) encampment, in the face of Jacob's fear at meeting Esau.²² Assuming Mathews and Westermann are correct, one may view the messengers in line with the promise of presence and protection in 28:15. Both texts (33:3; cf. 28:11 x2, 16, 17, 19) also describe Jacob's surroundings initially only as a "place" (מקום).²³

Fokkelman notes a parallel with Jacob's vow at Bethel in 28:20-22. There and in 32:2 one finds the only place where the words "go" (הלך) and "way" (דרך) appear together in the Jacob cycle.²⁴ This connection is most significant for how it unites the promise in theory (or, Jacob's understanding of it) with the promise experienced as a present reality for Jacob. In 28:20 Jacob seeks to clarify the divine word of promise, requesting that God protect him "on this way (בדרך) that I am going (הולך)." In 32:2 Jacob encounters the messengers while he is "going on his way" (הלך לדרכו). We have already seen in chapter three that God has certainly been with Jacob during his time with Laban. Now that Jacob has left Laban behind, God shows through the presence of two divine messengers that he continues to abide with Jacob at a time of similar apprehension: a looming encounter with Esau.²⁵

One may discern also a vital thematic link between Bethel and Mahanaim. Brueggemann highlights a related scene in Josh 5:13-15 where Joshua, on the verge of leading the Israelites into the promised land, encounters a man who identifies himself as

²² Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 505.

²³ See Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup 70; Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 188.

²⁴ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 197. See also Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 141.

²⁵ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 141.

captain of the host of YHWH.²⁶ Just as Joshua and the Israelites were about to enter the land, so too is Jacob at Mahanaim drawing near this sacred boundary. Applying this comparison to the text under consideration here, a striking connection comes to the fore. While the Bethel theophany takes place on Jacob's way *out of* the land of promise, the Mahanaim encounter takes place on Jacob's way *back into* the land of promise.²⁷ At these two critical moments in his life, Jacob meets with the divine. During the first he receives the ancestral promise, and during the second the confidence of YHWH's continued presence and protection.

Mahanaim and Jacob's stratagem. The Mahanaim encounter does much more than simply recall the ancestral promise; it also looks forward to Jacob's impending encounter with Esau. Attempts to ascertain the meaning of this scene outside its larger surrounding narrative context yields only a frustratingly palpable silence on how this text helps make sense of Jacob's activities that follow. Within the final form of the text, Gen 32:2-3 is not a displaced, partial account meant to shed light on the identity of Jacob's opponent in vv. 23-33 but rather a fundamental piece of how the reader is to understand God's role in Jacob's preparations for meeting Esau. In fact, as the narrative continues, it will become clear that Jacob understands this encounter much more deeply than the narrative appears at first glance for its readers. These two short, seemingly innocuous verses present Jacob with two separate stratagems for his initial dealings with Esau. This

²⁶ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 261. On the connection with Judg 5:13-15 see also Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 505.

²⁷ Johann Marböck, "Heilige Orte im Jakobszyklus. Einige Beobachtungen und Aspekte" in *Die Väter Israels: Beiträge zur Theologie der Patriarchenüberlieferungen im Alten Testament* (ed. A. R. Müller and M. Görg; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989), 220, notes that encounters with the divine separate the Jacob-Esau and Jacob-Laban narratives.

point gains full voice through an analysis of two key words from 32:2-3: “messengers” (מַלְאכֵי) and “Mahanaim” (מַחֲנֵי). Each will be treated in turn.

The word “messengers” (מַלְאכֵי) occurs three times within the span of only seven verses (32:1-9). First the reference is to the messengers of God (v. 2), but the text then quickly transitions to human messengers (vv. 4, 7). By means of this echo a connection between the two becomes evident. This point gains even greater support when one realizes that the word “messenger(s)” occurs only two other times in the Jacob cycle—28:12 and 31:11—only the former of which is in the plural, in comparison with eleven occurrences elsewhere in Genesis.²⁸

What then is the nature of this connection? Edward Curtis suggests that by repeating the word “messengers” the text shows Jacob mimicking what God has done.²⁹ Curtis goes on to acknowledge the possibility that Jacob may have viewed the camp at Mahanaim as a sign of God’s willingness to help, but then rejects this possibility, citing that Jacob shows no interest in availing himself of any divine assistance.³⁰ This conclusion seems odd for a number of reasons, among them that Jacob’s journey homeward has arisen as a direct result of God’s command (31:3), one to which Jacob demonstrates an unwavering obedience.³¹ Additionally, God had protected Jacob from any threat Laban may have posed after his flight (31:24, 29). More immediate to the

²⁸ Those eleven occurrences are found in Gen 16:7, 9, 10, 11; 19:1, 15; 21:17; 22:11, 15; 24:7, 40; 48:16.

²⁹ Edward M. Curtis, “Structure, Style and Context as a Key to Interpreting Jacob’s Encounter at Peniel,” *JETS* 30 (1987): 132.

³⁰ Curtis, “Structure, Style and Context,” 133.

³¹ Brett, *Genesis*, 100, insightfully notes that in 31:3 YHWH commands Jacob to return to both land *and* family. Esau is no doubt a member of that family. Might the divine command in 31:3 already hint that Jacob will succeed in encountering Esau?

context, we have already seen that the messengers in vv. 2-3 do not display any overt hostility toward Jacob, and Jacob's response at seeing them hardly implies any negativity or ambivalence. Looking forward, Jacob utters a prayer to God in vv. 10-13, showing that he is not beyond seeking God's help when needed. Curtis' argument appears to rely upon an unfortunate *a priori* assumption that Jacob is perpetually a self-interested villain with a strained relationship with God. While Curtis is correct that Jacob takes his cue in sending his own messengers to Esau from God, he is incorrect in claiming that in doing so Jacob displays an arrogant aversion to the offer of divine assistance.

It is better to understand the "messengers" connection in terms of divine guidance and protection in accordance with the promise at Bethel. If our discussion above on the resonances between the Mahanaim and Bethel scenes has merit, then the appearance of the "messengers of God" gives Jacob the idea to send his own messengers to Esau as a preemptive move affording him the ability to gauge Esau's demeanor and intentions.³² Mathews couches the connection in terms of "encourage[ment]" for Jacob to make the first contact with Esau.³³ The narrative shrouds precisely how Jacob concocts this plan, yet the literary proximity between God's messengers and Jacob's messengers creates an unspoken link between the two. For Mathews, however, the silence regarding how Jacob comes to this decision does not pose a problem; just as Jacob credits God with giving him the idea regarding the breeding of Laban's herds in 31:10, so too Jacob gets an idea for how to protect himself and his property from Esau in 32:8.³⁴ Jacob indeed does what God does, not as a matter of haughty presumption in the attempt to handle matters

³² Houtman, "Jacob at Mahanaim," 42.

³³ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 549.

³⁴ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 550-551.

himself. Jacob instead does what God does simply *because* God does it; God gives Jacob the idea to initiate first contact with Esau. God has proven trustworthy and steadfast thus far for Jacob; there is no reason to presume that changes at Mahanaim. Just as YHWH allayed any fears Jacob may have had at Bethel coming off the deception of Esau by conferring on him the ancestral promise, so now at Mahanaim YHWH addresses Jacob's fears at meeting his deceived brother by giving him a method to insure his protection. Jacob makes the initial contact, but one must then inquire about the nature of that contact.

At the narrative level, Jacob's employment of "messengers" recalls his previous trickery. The clearest example is found in v. 4 when Jacob sends his messengers not to an unnamed place but rather to "the land of Seir, the field of Edom" (ארצה שעיר שדה אדום). Nearly every one of these words is reminiscent of a particular trait endemic to Esau that led to his being deceived. Seir recalls Esau's hairiness (שעיר) mentioned at birth and by Jacob in the deception of Isaac (25:25; 27:11), a characteristic that Jacob would exploit in his pursuit and successful acquiring of the paternal blessing. The field also recalls the description of a grown Esau as a "man of the field" (איש שדה) in 25:29, another facet of Esau's character used at his expense. And "Edom" quite clearly hearkens back to Esau's ruddy appearance at birth as well as the "red" (אדום) lentil stew for which he sold his birthright to Jacob (25:25, 30). Hamilton regards these parallels as referring to three specific areas of "tension" that exist between the two brothers: birth, birthright, and blessing.³⁵ But all three are tensions because they were part of the deceptions by which Jacob attained prominence over his brother with the help of YHWH.

³⁵ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 320.

A similar case may be made for “Mahanaïm.” Grammatically the form in v. 3, *מַחֲנֵי*, is a dual, likely referring to two camps. Houtman points out the peculiarity of the dual form given that Jacob equates the place with only one camp, the “camp of God” (*מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים*).³⁶ Again, though, this brief encounter finds its outlet in a subsequent act of the patriarch as in v. 8 Jacob divides all the people and animals with him into two “camps” (*מַחֲנֹת*). While not an exact parallel, the semantic affinity and fact that the narrative seems to envisage two camps in both vv. 3 and 8 attests to the veracity of reading the dual camps (of God?) as influencing Jacob’s decision to separate his own party. Mathews strengthens the connection by appealing to the dual, seeing each of Jacob’s two camps being under the watchful eye of the two messengers of God from v. 2.³⁷ And Wenham astutely points out the theme of God’s protective presence here in that the Hebrew word for camp, *מַחֲנֵה*, includes the word *חֵן*, meaning “grace, favor.”³⁸ To find “favor” (*חֵן*) is Jacob’s express desire in sending messengers to Esau (v. 6). No worry is necessary, however, for God’s favor will insure that Jacob is met with favor from Esau.

Laurence Turner adroitly explains the significance of the connections between Mahanaïm and the following narrative in terms of a movement from divine to human.³⁹ One first meets divine “messengers” and only subsequently “human messengers”; likewise, “Mahanaïm” denotes a divine encampment that secondarily gives rise to Jacob’s separation of all that is with him into two camps. Turner rightly sees this “easy movement” between heaven and earth, divine and human, as one that typifies the Jacob

³⁶ Houtman, “Jacob at Mahanaïm,” 41.

³⁷ Mathews, *Gen 11:27-50:26*, 550.

³⁸ Wenham, *Gen 16-50*, 290.

³⁹ Turner, *Genesis*, 139.

cycle and has already received graphic representation with the Bethel staircase.⁴⁰ That Jacob's activities mirror those of the divine serves to solidify "divine involvement" in readying Jacob for encounter with Esau.⁴¹

As one might expect, however, trickery continues to loom. Taschner writes that Jacob undertakes two specific and calculated measures in response to the encroaching Esau: dividing his "camp" (מחנה) and sending livestock ahead as a "gift" (מנחה).⁴² Scholars are largely in agreement that this gift is an attempt to buy off Esau and thus depicts Jacob acting as trickster.⁴³ A clever word play between "camp" and "gift" reinforces this idea of trickery. Taschner notices that the two letters interchanged in each word are ך and ך, the same two letters that form the word "favor" (חן) which Jacob desires from Esau.⁴⁴ For Taschner, this paronomasia parallels an earlier play where the final two letters are switched, in Gen 25 and 27 between "birthright" (בכר) and "blessing" (ברך).⁴⁵ Since Gen 25 and 27 are rife with deceptions, this word play may indicate the presence of deception tied to Mahanaim and what Jacob gleans from his encounter there.

Given the phonetic and consonantal similarity between מחנה and מנחה it is possible that the narrative wishes to communicate that the camp of God theophany gives Jacob the idea to separate himself into two camps and to send a gift in the hopes of appeasing Esau. Both ideas come from God. In the treatment of Gen 33 it will be apparent how a "gift"

⁴⁰ Turner, *Genesis*, 139.

⁴¹ Turner, *Genesis*, 139-140.

⁴² Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 145.

⁴³ See Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 355; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (Westminster Commentaries; London: Methuen, 1915), 299.

⁴⁴ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 146.

⁴⁵ Taschner, *Verheissung und Erfüllung*, 146.

evokes deception; it seems clear from the text, however, that in 32:14-22 Jacob sends a series of gifts not as an honest expression of sorrow or guilt at the shattered relationship with his brother but simply to placate Esau. Two deceptions are evident here.

First, Jacob withholds from Esau his true motivation behind the multiple gifts. One may discern this point by a comparison between Jacob's preliminary and subsequent communications with Esau in Gen 32. Upon sending the original batch of messengers to Esau so as to learn his intentions in v. 6, Jacob instructs them to tell Esau his purpose is to find "favor (יָרַם) in [Esau's] eyes," a noble and transparent enough goal. The messengers return with news that a band of 400 men accompany Esau, which Jacob—despite the fact that Esau allows the messengers to return unharmed—understandably interprets as a formidable threat.⁴⁶ Chris Heard advances the possibility that the 400 men represent nothing more than Esau's extended semi-nomadic family group coming to welcome Jacob home.⁴⁷ While the reader never gains a clear insight into Esau's temperament, given that the promised word from Rebekah never comes (cf. 27:45) Jacob's pessimistic take on the situation is hardly indefensible. The narrative quickly picks up and resumes the tension five chapters later; with Jacob, the reader likely expects the same homicidal Esau last seen in 27:41.

As a result, Jacob sends several caravans as a gift, this time telling his servants only to say the animals are a gift and that Jacob "is behind us" (vv. 19, 21). Esau receives no rationale for the gifts. Buttredding the deception even further, the latter half

⁴⁶ The vastness of Esau's entourage, coupled with his refusal of Jacob's gift in v. 10—because he has enough—lends credence to my interpretation presented in chapter two that Isaac's blessing of Esau is not a curse or anti-blessing. See chapter two, pp. 94-95.

⁴⁷ R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah* (Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 129-130.

of v. 21 has Jacob speaking to himself, saying “Let me appease him [lit. cover his face] with a gift going before me and afterwards I will see his face, perhaps he will accept me” [lit. “lift my face”] (אכפרה פניו במנחה ההלכת לפני ואחרי-כן אראה פניו אולי ישא פני).⁴⁸ Jacob’s express motive is not to gain Esau’s favor by an honest gesture but to bribe him into meeting Jacob with favor so as not to seek retribution. Moreover, whereas previously Jacob plainly limns the reason for the messenger’s visit to Esau, here he deceptively withholds that information from Esau. The gift shows Jacob to be concerned solely with Jacob; he merely wants to mollify Esau so as to save his own skin. The gift also, though, shows God’s concern for Jacob, in that the idea for the stratagem comes from the divine.

A second deception arising out of the insight Jacob gains from the Mahanaim encounter has gone unnoticed by scholars. The scene has already been set: Jacob telling his servants how they should address Esau. Each is to indicate the herds are a gift from Jacob *and* that “behold, he [Jacob] is behind us” (vv. 19, 21). On first glance this statement comes across as quite innocuous, but couched within the surrounding narrative it becomes an example of deception. Verse 20 shows Jacob coaching a second, third, and countless other successive groups with the same words. Therefore, assuming all goes according to plan, the first dispatch responds to Esau as commanded and then summarily says Jacob is behind us. Presumably Esau would then expect Jacob to arrive next, but instead he would be met by another installment from Jacob’s camp, who would summarily say Jacob is behind them, only to be followed by another group from Jacob’s

⁴⁸ That this speech is part of Jacob’s inner monologue gains support in several ways. First, and perhaps most telling, the speech lacks Jacob’s calling Esau “my lord” and his self-deprecating posture as “your servant,” instead employing simple pronouns through pronominal suffixes. Second, the speech is introduced by another “and he said,” causing a separation. Third, the text is in the first person, and elsewhere when Jacob addresses Esau it is second person (cf. “you will say” in vv. 19, 21). And fourth, the cohortative style with which the line begins (“let me cover his face . . .”) is jarring and discontinuous when compared with Jacob’s instructions to his servants for how to address Esau.

camp, and another. One may only conjecture as to the net outcome, but perhaps Esau would become increasingly more frustrated or even confused with each successive arrival. This plan also runs the risk of backfiring, for by sending such a large retinue to his brother Jacob in effect shows Esau that the birthright and blessing have come to fruition.⁴⁹ Lending further support to this possibility, v. 22 resolutely concludes that “the gift crossed over before him [Jacob], and he stayed that night in camp.” It is not as if Jacob stations himself somewhere between his various dispatches as he has his servants say to Esau; rather he spends the night in the safety of camp (מחנה). Here again one sees the wordplay between “gift” and “camp.” The “gift” (מנחה) passes on ahead of Jacob and into ‘enemy’ territory, while he stays within the confines and security of “camp” (מחנה).⁵⁰

The ensuing narrative creates a geographical puzzle for readers regarding what exactly happens. Verse 23 sees Jacob on the same night he sends the gifts ahead to Esau crossing the Jabbok with his wives, their maidservants, and his eleven children (*sans* Dinah!). He possibly crosses another stream (v. 24) and then sends all his possessions across ahead of him. The text here is nearly incomprehensible, as Skinner has rightly noted.⁵¹ Are the wives and children part of the possessions he causes to cross over after the first crossing? Does Jacob join them only to return to the banks of the Jabbok in solitude? Or does Jacob remain behind on the banks? The text’s geography is problematic, yet two items stand out. First, as Serge Frolov maintains, Jacob has placed

⁴⁹ Jeffrey M. Cohen, “The Jacob-Esau Reunion,” *JBQ* 21 (1993): 160.

⁵⁰ The text is unclear as to whether Jacob stays in his own camp, or perhaps more convincingly at the camp of the messengers of God. Since that first encounter in 32:2, Jacob has seemingly not moved.

⁵¹ John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC 1; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), 408.

his entire family and possessions—the results of the promise—as a buffer between himself and Esau.⁵² Frolov describes Jacob’s activities:

He begins with endangering his messengers (Esau could kill them), continues with making his camp more vulnerable in order to get a 50 per cent chance of escape, then relinquishes part of his cattle, and finally abandons his wives and children—to say nothing of the remaining servants and cattle—to the mercy of Esau (whom he accused a little earlier of being capable of murdering ‘the mother with the children’).⁵³

To be sure, Jacob does not come off very well here. Not only does Jacob deceive Esau by separating himself at such a great distance from his brother, he also endangers because of his own fear all that he has received as a result of the promise.⁵⁴

But a second point requires attention, namely that from this arrangement Jacob is now alone (v. 25). Having sent “messengers” (מַלְאָכִים) ahead and divided his family and possessions into two camps, one may now describe Jacob as his own “camp” (מַחֲנֶה). He has thus far done what he understands God to have instructed him to do based upon the encounter at Mahanaim. Now alone, he turns to God.

Jacob’s prayer. Amidst all this posturing and plotting, Jacob offers a prayer in vv. 10-13 that warrants brief mention for how it aids in couching the adjacent narratives in terms of God’s fealty to the ancestral promise. Here Jacob appeals to the history of the

⁵² Serge Frolov, “The Other Side of the Jabbok: Genesis 32 as a Fiasco of Patriarchy,” *JSOT* 91 (2000): 42, 56.

⁵³ Frolov, “The Other Side of the Jabbok,” 56.

⁵⁴ Frolov, “The Other Side of the Jabbok,” 56 n. 39, further sees Jacob’s failure to live up to the promise made to Laban in 31:50 to protect Leah and Rachel from any and all danger. I wonder, though, whether this arrangement may have been a bit perplexing to Jacob as well. Certainly the “human shield” Frolov sees Jacob placing between him and Esau serves as a more than adequate buffer, but if Esau were to attack Jacob’s options are quite limited. He cannot retreat to Haran lest he incur Laban’s anger and vengeance at breaking the boundary they established (or perhaps even another seven years of labor), nor would moving forward toward an incoming Esau and his army make much sense. A lateral movement may prove efficacious, but one would assume were Esau’s army to attack that Jacob, not numerous flocks, children, or wives, would be their main objective. Indeed, all the aforementioned family and property are put at grave risk, but one should not then assume Jacob incurs no risk to himself.

promise between himself and God. Jacob opens the prayer with an address to the “God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, YHWH” (v. 10), which clearly evokes YHWH’s self-revelation to Jacob in 28:13 at Bethel. Wenham notes that extended epithets such as these often do not appear in the speech of humans about or addressing God; the rhetorical effect becomes Jacob appealing to God not only based upon his own merits but also upon the long history between God and Jacob’s father and grandfather.⁵⁵

At various points in the prayer Jacob openly quotes or paraphrases the ancestral promise, in essence aiming to convince YHWH that it will prove worthwhile for him to intervene. He begins with reference to the promise of land, evident in the phrase “return to your land,” which likely refers back to 31:3 and the divine command that Jacob take leave of Laban. Jacob therefore reminds YHWH that he is simply following a divine order by returning home. In v. 13 Jacob repeats the promise of protection (Jacob reports YHWH as having said, “I will surely do good for you,” which Hamilton points out YHWH has never said; it is likely, though, with Wenham that here Jacob simply paraphrases the additional promise of presence and protection from 28:15⁵⁶) and progeny. Earlier in the prayer Jacob makes plain the threat to the promise of progeny by requesting God’s help “lest he [Esau] come and kill me, mothers, and children” (v. 12). Jacob in effect calls upon YHWH to intercede not merely for his own sake but for the sake of the promise, for of what value is the promise and all YHWH had done up until this point if it is now allowed to be destroyed, especially by the brother YHWH did not choose? The

⁵⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 291. W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 188, argues that Jacob omits from his prayer the fact that Esau is also son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, meaning Esau may possess an equally likely right to these promises. Where Humphreys errs, in my estimation, is his apparent forgetfulness that while Esau may share with Jacob these genetic relationships to Abraham and Isaac, YHWH has already weighed-in on the matter, selecting Jacob and “dis-electing” Esau.

⁵⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 323; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 291.

mention of offspring as numerous “as the sands of the sea” (v. 13) recalls the only other use of the same phrase in 22:17 when YHWH likewise intervenes to save Isaac’s life.⁵⁷

Some interpreters regard Jacob’s prayer as little more than a rhetorical ploy to persuade God into participating. Spina disparagingly calls it “a quintessential ‘foxhole’ prayer.”⁵⁸ Humphreys goes further, holding that Jacob crafts his prayer so carefully that God is left with little room to maneuver. He writes: “Jacob co-opts God’s assurance and promise into his own terms for the specific future he seeks.”⁵⁹ It remains unclear specifically how Humphreys believes Jacob can or will force God’s hand, but such a cynical reading of the prayer is problematic. Brueggemann claims that amidst all the rhetorical shaping Jacob does in the prayer, at bottom “he is only asking that what is rightly his from God should now be given.”⁶⁰ Indeed, the prayer does speak with “a candor that presumes upon God,” but this presumption still takes the form of a request.⁶¹ Additionally, in matters of form Jacob’s prayer differs very little from prayers beseeching God’s help found in the Psalter, which set out to persuade God with an equal boldness and vigor.⁶² One may adduce other biblical examples of daring speech directed (successfully) at God: Abraham’s bartering with God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah

⁵⁷ Arnold, *Genesis*, 282. See also Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 291.

⁵⁸ Frank Anthony Spina, “The ‘Face of God’: Esau in Canonical Context” in *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 14.

⁵⁹ Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 188.

⁶⁰ Walter Brueggemann, “A Case Study in Daring Prayer: Genesis 32:9-12,” *Living Pulpit* 2 (1993): 12.

⁶¹ Brueggemann, “A Case Study in Daring Prayer,” 12.

⁶² Josef Schreiner, “Das Gebet Jakobs (Gen 32,10-13)” in *Die Väter Israels: Beiträge zur Theologie der Patriarchenüberlieferungen im Alten Testament* (ed. A. R. Müller and M. Görg; Stuttgart, Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989), 296.

(Gen 18:22-33) or Moses' insistence that God not destroy the Israelites after the Golden Calf incident (Exod 32:1-14). This latter example offers an apt parallel to Jacob's prayer in that Moses appeals to God's fidelity to the promise to "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, your servants" (v. 13) as the impetus for how YHWH should act in that situation.

The prayer does operate at another, deeper level in the narrative, one that tethers Jacob's request for divine assistance with a history of his deceptions guided by God. Four specific occurrences draw our attention. First, the word usually translated "staff" (מִקֵּל) in v. 11 has important resonances. Frolov notes that this word appears in the entire Hebrew Bible only eighteen times, with one-third located in Gen 30:37-41, the perplexing story of Jacob's attempt to manipulate the breeding of Laban's flocks with rods (מִקֵּל).⁶³ According to Frolov, this semantic overlap highlights the "unfinished" nature of Jacob's return.⁶⁴ But another possibility exists, namely that the word is reminiscent of the successful deception of Laban, perpetrated jointly by Jacob and YHWH.⁶⁵ Placed within the context of Jacob's prayer, the line "with my staff (בְּמִקְלִי) I crossed this Jordan" may be heard by YHWH on two different levels: that the once destitute Jacob has grown exceedingly wealthy through YHWH's fidelity to the promise, and that the method by which YHWH has demonstrated that fidelity in the past has come in and through deception.

A second example builds upon this same previous deception. The word meaning "deliver" (נָצַל) in v. 11 is the same root that appears in Gen 31:9, 16 with a meaning of

⁶³ Frolov, "The Other Side of the Jabbok," 48.

⁶⁴ Frolov, "The Other Side of the Jabbok," 50.

⁶⁵ See the discussion in chapter three, pp. 136-156. To be fair, Frolov does relegate this possibility to a footnote, though he describes Jacob as the master manipulator here and not God. The מִקֵּל is ultimately for Frolov a sign of Jacob's "social status." See Frolov, "The Other Side of the Jabbok," 50 n. 22.

“snatched/stripped away” in reference to God’s giving to Jacob at Laban’s expense by insuring the success of Jacob’s plan with the rods. And so in his prayer, Jacob makes certain his request resonates with the divine ear through a meaningful wordplay.

Brueggemann sums up the essential message: “As God has ‘snatched’ property for Jacob from Laban, so Jacob prays to be ‘snatched’ from the power of Esau.”⁶⁶

Two final examples are perhaps even more germane to the present discussion in that they recall Jacob’s original deceptions in Gen 25:27-34 and 27:1-45 of which Esau was the victim. At the beginning of v. 11 Jacob makes a statement that most translations construe in regards to his “unworthiness” before God. In the Hebrew, however, the resonances are much richer. The word usually translated “unworthy” comes from the root קטן, which we saw in chapter two means “little, younger.”⁶⁷ Gen 27:15, 42 employs this same root to identify Jacob as the younger son of Rebekah. One should thus not take Jacob’s statement here that he is קטן as an admission that he is undeserving but rather as a reference to Jacob’s age in relation to Esau. This one word conjures up YHWH’s original election of Jacob prior to birth (25:23), along with the deceptions that ensued as a result, and solicits YHWH’s help in line with that election. Just as YHWH had chosen and watched over Jacob then despite his being קטן, so now Jacob asks that YHWH again take account of him as קטן and protect him from his elder brother, from Esau.

Lastly, Jacob’s double mention of the word “hand” (יד) in v. 12—asking for deliverance “from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau”—recalls the frequency with which this word occurs as part of Jacob’s deceptions of his brother. Turner provides an excellent list:

⁶⁶ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 265.

⁶⁷ See chapter two, pp. 66-70.

This request is somewhat ironic, since the ‘hand’ motif has been used to good effect previously when Jacob had been acting against Esau. Jacob’s hand gripped Esau’s heel (25.26), his hands were covered with goats’ skins (27.16), the savoury food and bread were given into his hand (27.17), and Isaac believed Jacob to have the hands of Esau (27.22-23).⁶⁸

In the past Jacob’s “hand” had deceptively triumphed over Esau with God’s help; now Jacob asks that God make certain Esau’s hand does not triumph over him.

Our analysis of Jacob’s prayer, imploring God for assistance through appeal to a joint history of promise and deception, shows that it functions with two levels of meaning. At one level, Jacob seeks to persuade God to deliver him from Esau for the sake of the ancestral promise, lest it be decimated in one fell swoop by Esau and his band. At a more subtle, deeper level, Jacob utilizes words connected with his past tricks, of which we have seen YHWH is a part, to provide concrete examples of occasions on which YHWH deceives for Jacob’s betterment. When read *in tandem*, Jacob’s prayer creates for the reader a tension and an expectation: will God answer Jacob’s prayer, and if so, how? At this stage, however, all the reader can do is wait alongside Jacob in the hope that God will in some way hear his prayer and deliver him from the presumed wrath of Esau. As the text continues, the initial tension over whether God intervenes is quickly replaced by a new tension centered on *how* God sets out to deliver Jacob. This divine assistance comes in a much more foreboding form than Jacob or the reader could anticipate: an encounter with the divine that quickly takes on a terrifyingly violent tenor. What kind of deliverance is this that sees God assault the bearer of the promise?

⁶⁸ Turner, *Genesis*, 141.

Trickster Wrestling (Gen 32:23-33)

Gen 32:23-33 exists as one of the most enigmatic scenes in the entire Bible.

Jacob remains alone on the banks of the Jabbok, having sent on ahead of himself all his family and possessions. Suddenly an abstruse, unnamed entity identified only as a “man” attacks him, and the two struggle until daybreak, at which time his assailant requests that Jacob let him go. In the midst of the contest Jacob’s hip is wounded by a simple touch, yet he hangs on long enough to receive both a new name and another blessing from the entity. The text retains a startling ambiguity as to the identity of this figure, but Jacob quite clearly understands him to be God. After the encounter Jacob limps onward toward his brother Esau with both a new name and another blessing.

Many commentators have understood Gen 32:23-33 as a story unbefitting its wider context. Ostensibly it appears to have little to do with the looming Jacob-Esau encounter with which the surrounding narratives are concerned. The preponderance of etiologies—for Israel, Peniel, and the dietary restriction pertaining to the hip sinew—within these few verses has led some scholars to similar conclusions. For example, John L. McKenzie writes that a connection with its surrounding context “is not skillfully made in the final form of the text.”⁶⁹ Perhaps more noteworthy, Martin Noth describes the scene as occupying an “infelicitous place in the midst of the story of Jacob’s encounter with Esau.”⁷⁰ Noth later expands upon the implications of this statement:

The Peniel episode (Gen. 32:23-33 [J]), which is bound very firmly to a specific place, was inserted still later in a rather loose fashion and intrinsically has nothing at all to do with the narrative theme ‘Jacob and Esau.’ Rather, it is a distinctly separate narrative which originally was

⁶⁹ John L. McKenzie, “Jacob at Peniel: Gn 32, 24-32,” *CBQ* 25 (1963): 71.

⁷⁰ Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (trans. B. W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 7.

concerned with cultic matters and all sorts of etiological secondary interests.⁷¹

Subsequently, von Rad has rightly said the text “interrupts” the overall narrative flow of the Jacob-Esau reunion, yet this interruption is a vital aspect for construing and understanding the whole.⁷² The analysis that follows wishes to challenge Noth’s notion that vv. 23-33 have no relation to the larger drama of the Jacob-Esau reunion, and to expand upon and demonstrate von Rad’s contention that the story is a prerequisite for a proper sense of Gen 32-33. Gen 32:23-33 is a carefully crafted story that is integral to the encounter with Esau.

In its present literary context the story functions much akin to the Mahanaim scene treated above, highlighting God’s involvement in the imminent encounter with Esau. Here however God adopts a more direct, threatening, even menacing stance in relation to Jacob. God, who all along we have seen has served as Jacob’s benefactor, insuring his success even in and through deception, now seemingly becomes Jacob’s opposition.⁷³ As was discussed in the introduction to this chapter, much has been made of this scene within extant scholarship as a turning point in the narrative, one in which God becomes Jacob’s adversary so as to purify Jacob’s less-than-stellar character; we have already demonstrated that this line of interpretation is wanting. Despite this equivocation, the text may still stand as a turning point. This encounter with the divine is one toward which all previous encounters build. At Bethel Jacob sees God aloft a

⁷¹ Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 95.

⁷² von Rad, *Genesis*, 320.

⁷³ Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 193-194, deems God’s attack on Jacob as a sort of punishment. He maintains that throughout the Jacob cycle God has been a character Jacob has constructed to suit his own needs. Now, at Peniel, the narrative seeks to put Jacob in his place. Humphreys writes: “It is time for God to reconstruct Jacob.”

staircase, and during his time with Laban God appears to Jacob in a dream. At Mahanaim it is God's messengers that Jacob meets. Now, for the first time in the text, Jacob literally encounters the deity "face to face," with whom he now engages in hand-to-hand combat. The turn in the narrative has two foci: first, Jacob limps from Peniel with the confidence that YHWH fights on his behalf and that he will prevail over Esau, the most potent threat to the promise. Second, with this encounter the final element of the ancestral promise moves toward incipient fulfillment: Jacob returns to the land.

Another question, seldom asked, appears equally if not more valid: what if God is here acting not *against* Jacob but rather *on his behalf*? What emerges if one reads God's attack on Jacob in line with the contours of the ancestral promise, which Jacob already possesses (cf. 28:13-15), and not as a method through which Jacob becomes a fitting candidate for that accolade? The following analysis will seek to make this point explicit.

Here the goal is not to limn a full interpretation of the multifarious nuances and aspects of Gen 32:23-33, as though such a task were possible in so small a space; one may consult critical commentaries for that. Rather, here the intention is to underscore the theological dimensions of this recondite encounter from another perspective, namely its deployment of trickery in the interest of the ancestral promise and how it equips Jacob with the necessary 'arsenal' of tactics ultimately to face Esau. This will be achieved through attention to three specific areas: the encounter as the answer to Jacob's prayer; the scene's ambiguity as to Jacob's opponent and who does what to whom; particulars of the scene as tied to deception.

An unexpected "deliverance." Does God's assault on Jacob stand in dissonance with the divine fealty to the ancestral promise we have emphasized throughout? Must

there be a discontinuity? Some think so. Marböck claims that in vv. 23-33 Jacob has a completely different experience with God than he had at Bethel.⁷⁴ McKenzie similarly notes the problematic nature of this encounter in relation to the promise in that God seemingly obstructs its fulfillment by blocking Jacob's entrance into the promised land.⁷⁵ Otto Kaiser argues that the prayer and ensuing divine onslaught demonstrate that even prayer cannot protect one always from God.⁷⁶ The text itself, however, provides compelling reasons for equating the wrestling match with the ancestral promise, seeing Jacob's struggle with God as a startling mode of deliverance in line with the promise. This point has been born out structurally by Fishbane, whose meticulous chiasmic outline of the Jacob cycle shows that the Bethel theophany (28:10-22) balances the entirety of Gen 32.⁷⁷ John G. Gammie presents a similar schematic.⁷⁸ In a related vein, Brueggemann details a concentric, inclusive structure in which Bethel corresponds specifically to the Peniel encounter in 32:23-33.⁷⁹ It stands to reason then that both episodes contain a word of promise and function for Jacob, not to his detriment.

One may wonder what this word of promise is in vv. 23-33. Karl Elliger offers a unique perspective, rightly seeing v. 31b as a reference to Jacob's prayer, yet proffering

⁷⁴ Marböck, "Heilige Orte im Jakobszyklus," 222.

⁷⁵ McKenzie, "Jacob at Peniel," 76.

⁷⁶ Otto Kaiser, "Deus absconditus and Deus revelatus: Three Difficult Narratives in the Pentateuch" in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw* (ed. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 81.

⁷⁷ Michael Fishbane, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25:19-35:22)," *JJS* 26 (1975): 20, 28-30.

⁷⁸ John G. Gammie, "Theological Interpretation By Way of Literary and Tradition Analysis: Genesis 25-36" in *Encounter with the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Martin J. Buss; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 121-122.

⁷⁹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 211-212. See also his graphic presentation of this schema on p. 213.

that God's answer is that he would "smash" (*zerschmettern*) Jacob.⁸⁰ This manner of response would be out of character in the God-Jacob relationship, and if smashing Jacob is God's objective, it appears it is one he fails to accomplish. Additionally, Elliger's view does not account for how divine "smashing" becomes divine blessing (v. 30). It is more convincing, in light of the structural analyses of Fishbane and Brueggemann cited above, to regard this encounter as God answering Jacob's prayer.

If this encounter is meant to function as a type of rescue for Jacob, one may ask rescue from what? The traditional interpretation limned at the outset of this chapter presents one possibility: that Jacob is rescued, in essence, from himself and from his old ways. Both Fishbane and Brueggemann lean in this direction. For Fishbane, the parallel lies in Jacob's receiving a blessing or sign of favor in each story.⁸¹ For Brueggemann, Jacob obtains "a new identity through an assault from God."⁸² Still others advance that Jacob confronts himself by answering with his name in v. 28, a tacit admission of guilt; "Jacob" is "Deceiver/Supplanter."⁸³ That the name "Jacob" continues well after Jacob's christening with a new name poses a problem for this interpretation. Another way of viewing the text, however, appears more convincing. Jacob's dangerous encounter with the divine rescues him not from himself but from the danger Esau allegedly poses.

⁸⁰ Karl Elliger, "Der Jakobskampf am Jabbok: Gen 32, 33ff. als hermeneutisches Problem," *ZTK* 48 (1951): 22.

⁸¹ Fishbane, "Composition and Structure," 34, 36.

⁸² Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 268. Brueggemann, however, is rightly more cautious than others in making too much of Jacob's supposed new identity, asking after the reconciliation scene in Gen 33 the following question: "Has the whole notion of a transformed Jacob been a ploy without substance? Or is it serious? Probably, we are not meant to know. We do not know whether Jacob is genuinely changed or if this is more of his posturing" (272). The fact remains, though, that Brueggemann does ascribe some sort of transformative power to vv. 23-33 on Jacob's life.

⁸³ Holmgren, "Holding Your Own Against God," 9; Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 333.

Perhaps the most striking facet of the text demonstrating this very point is the way in which it becomes a sort of answer to Jacob's prayer in vv. 10-13. There we have seen how Jacob implores God to act in accord with the ancestral promise. One key word in the prayer is most germane for our purposes here: "deliver" (נצל). In v. 12 Jacob employs the imperative form הַצִּילֵנִי ("deliver me"), seeking relief very clearly from Esau. At the conclusion of the nocturnal struggle in v. 31 Jacob acknowledges two things about his encounter: it was with God, and that through it his life has been "delivered" (הִנְצִיל). Both verses use the root נצל.⁸⁴ When read together, the text indicates that the struggle with the divine is in some way the answer to Jacob's earlier prayer for deliverance from Esau.

But how is this so? Why portray Jacob's deliverance in such violent fashion? On this question the text appears resolutely silent, yet this reticence seems to be the entire point of the narrative, for it is through this opacity that Jacob gains the confidence at last to face Esau. Jacob's deliverance indeed comes through combat, yet with whom? In answering this question, one may begin to make sense of the alacrity with which Jacob suddenly forges onward in Gen 33. The reason for this burst of confidence is that his opponent, it will be shown, is at one and the same time the trickster God *and* Esau.

Wrestling God, wrestling Esau. Gen 32:23-33 conceals much more than it reveals. The reader's eyes see as dimly in the night as does Jacob, unable to ascertain 'who is who,' let alone the identity of Jacob's accoster. This ambiguity, however, conforms to the overall artistic quality of the narrative, which is replete with meaning. By allowing the attacker's identity to unfold as the story progresses, a duality or tension

⁸⁴ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 220. See also Allen P. Ross, "Jacob at the Jabbok, Israel at Peniel," *BSac* 142 (1985): 349; Mark S. Smith, "Remembering God: Collective Memory in Israelite Religion," *CBQ* 64 (2002): 643; Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 337.

materializes that informs the larger complex of Jacob's impending encounter with Esau. Most interpreters regard Jacob's statement in v. 31 that he has seen "the face of God" and its echo in 33:10, where he acknowledges that seeing Esau's face is like seeing "the face of God," as indicating that in encountering Esau Jacob encounters God.⁸⁵ The analysis here wishes to inquire as to whether the obverse is equally, if not more, accurate: that in encountering God in Gen 32, Jacob meets Esau.

In line with this reversal of the usual trajectory, it will here be argued that Gen 32:23-33 employs ambiguity as a vector of interpretation. The scene's ambiguity creates dual yet interwoven planes of battle whereupon Jacob's struggle with—and victory over—God becomes concomitantly a struggle with—and victory over—Esau.⁸⁶ This victory creates the circumstances whereby Jacob will both face his brother with the surety of success and continue to avail himself of trickery in the reconciliation with Esau.

The narrative most potently captures this ambiguity through a blurring of the boundary between divine and human pertaining to Jacob's opponent.⁸⁷ At the outset in v. 25 it is quite simply a "man" (אִישׁ) who jumps Jacob. Readers have been conditioned to expect, and perhaps rightly so, the man to be Esau; at this point he is the only "man" on

⁸⁵ See Jerome Kodell, "Jacob Wrestles with Esau (Gen 32:23-32)," *BTB* 10 (1980): 69; J. Glen Taylor, "Decoding Jacob at the Jabbok and Genesis 32: From Crude Solar Mythology to Profound Hebrew Theology," *La Société Canadienne des Études Bibliques* 3 (2008): 21; Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 345-346.

⁸⁶ In Gen 32:29 Jacob's opponent announces that Jacob has "prevailed" (הִיכַל). Whether Jacob has indeed prevailed, persevered, or even barely survived—though Jacob clearly holds his own in combat—he is not destroyed by an encounter with God. Additionally, that Jacob survives the blow to his hip, and that his prowess results in the opponent ultimately asking for release, unable to escape Jacob's grasp, points to Jacob as victor. He prevails over his opponent, and wrests for himself a new blessing.

⁸⁷ *Contra* McKenzie, "Jacob at Peniel," 72, who argues the scene is not a theophany, evidenced by the sheer absence of the divine name and any divine attributes ascribed to Jacob's opponent.

Jacob's radar.⁸⁸ Yet toward the end of the battle in v. 31, as morning begins to break, Jacob understands the entity to be "God" (אלהים). Which is it, man or God?

Compounding the enigma is how the narrative portrays the opponent throughout. While identified as a mere "man" at first, what man is able to dislodge Jacob's hip with a simple touch (גע, v. 26)? From another vantage point, why would God need to resort to such tactics to gain victory over a mortal? Or, why does this maneuver ostensibly fail to incapacitate Jacob, who ardently persists and is successful in holding on (v. 27)? One may discern other confounding examples, among them the ability to bless—which the reader of the Jacob cycle knows belongs to both humans (27:28-29) and God (28:13-15; 30:27)—and the ability to rename, which lies solely with God.

Another facet of the text pointing to a divine identity for Jacob's attacker is the being's urgent request to leave at the site of daylight. Gunkel is the first to advance the idea that this demand shows that in the earliest version of the story Jacob was wrestling with a nocturnal river God.⁸⁹ Johannes Bauer isolates five criteria held in common between Gen 32:23-33 and other literature depicting similar scenes, leading him to conclude that Jacob's struggle is with a river demon (*Flußdämon*).⁹⁰ Most recently, J. Glen Taylor argues that the appropriate background for comprehending the scene is

⁸⁸ Of course, the "man" could just as well be a furious Laban, opting to disregard the covenantal agreement made with Jacob, yet the fact that Laban had already restrained himself from harming Jacob—in response to divine fiat—makes this possibility less persuasive. Laban does not again figure into the narrative, and Esau has returned as the primary antagonist.

⁸⁹ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 349, 352.

⁹⁰ Johannes B. Bauer, "Jakobs Kampf mit dem Dämon (Gen 32,23-33)" in *Die Väter Israels: Beiträge zur Theologie der Patriarchenüberlieferungen im Alten Testament* (ed. A. R. Müller and M. Görg; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989), 18-19. The five criteria are (i) it is evening; (ii) the attack takes place during a time of trepidation; (iii) daylight results in a loss of power for the entity; (iv) a sudden 'magical' act occurs; (v) there is a lasting effect for one of the participants.

Egyptian solar imagery, and Jacob's opponent is the emerging sun.⁹¹ While Gunkel, Bauer, and Taylor may be correct as to the origins and background of the story, the fact remains that in the final form of the text it is not a river demon or the sun but rather man and/or God who assaults Jacob.⁹² The text makes this point explicit at both its beginning and ending. Furthermore, arguments over what type of divinity the being is miss the point; this question resides solely with the reader, not Jacob. Jacob's view and thus the final view of the text is unequivocal: he has wrestled with God and been delivered. The more poignant question that is rarely asked is how to negotiate the divine and human attributes of Jacob's opponent so that one does not obliterate the other.

Stephen Geller offers a helpful treatment. He suggests that the text operates around two binary oppositions: victory-defeat and human-divine.⁹³ Concerning the latter, the text progresses in a way commensurate with its narrative purpose. Geller divides the story into three sections: vv. 25-26, where Jacob's opponent is most clearly human; vv. 27-30, where the explanation attached to the name "Israel" meaning "you have wrestled with God and with men" allows for both options; and vv. 31-33, where Jacob's struggle is with God.⁹⁴ The trajectory man, God/man, God functions for Geller as a part of a biblical type-scene in which a human is unable to identify a divine figure until that figure does something wondrous; the revealing act Geller isolates here is the renaming of

⁹¹ Taylor, "Decoding Jacob at the Jabbok," 5-6.

⁹² R. W. L. Moberly, *Genesis 12-50* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 31, suggests a more inclusive approach, citing the fact that the narrative is evocative of this litany of possible interpretations (God, Esau, night spirit, river spirit, Jacob himself). All, he argues, are true in their mysterious communicative power.

⁹³ Stephen A. Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok: the Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative," *JANES* 14 (1982): 45.

⁹⁴ Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok," 45. On this point see also Turner, *Genesis*, 143.

Jacob.⁹⁵ Other instances of this type-scene occur in Gen 18-19, Judg 6, and especially Judg 13.⁹⁶ Geller uses this type-scene as a tool to exegete the narrative's unraveling of the identity of Jacob's opponent; here we wish to emphasize instead, as Alter notes, what innovation the narrative affords vv. 23-33 in constructing this type-scene.

The contention here is that what marks the portrayal of the type-scene in Gen 32 as unique is the *literary* hybridity of the unknown entity. In each of the three occurrences of this type-scene just cited, there is no equivocation in the text *for the reader* that the unknown entity represents a divine messenger.⁹⁷ Only the characters encountering them are uncertain of their identity. Judg 13 provides the most compelling parallel. In Judg 13, despite the figure being called a "man" at several points (vv. 10, 11x2) or a "man of God" (vv. 6, 8) at others, the text first introduces him as undeniably a "messenger of YHWH" (v. 3).⁹⁸ Buttressing this point from a narrative perspective, every occasion on which the divine being talks to either Manoah or his wife the speech is prefixed with the introductory phrase "the messenger of YHWH said" (וַיֹּאמֶר מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה, vv. 3, 13, 16, 18).⁹⁹ Conversely, in Gen 32:23-33, as we will see, the text is ambiguous as to who speaks and acts. The only hints provided as to the opponent's identity come from the narrator in v.

⁹⁵ Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok," 45-46.

⁹⁶ Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok," 45. The Judg 13 text bears striking similarities to our Genesis text. In Judg 13:15-18, Manoah asks the name of the "messenger of YHWH," who in turn replies, "why do you ask my name; it is wonderful/incomprehensible."

⁹⁷ Admittedly, in Gen 18-19 the reader does not learn of the men's identity until 19:1, though there and increasingly in what follows the text is clear in its articulation that the men are not simply human but rather divine agents sent for the purpose of protecting Abraham's family. They do not share the literary hybridity evident in Gen 32:23-33.

⁹⁸ One also should not overlook the fact that Manoah's wife seemingly has some idea of who the figure is, saying in v. 6 that he looked like "an angel of God" (מַלְאֲכֵי הָאֱלֹהִים).

⁹⁹ Verse 18 only calls the figure a "messenger." The text also makes this point abundantly transparent in v. 16b: "For Manoah did not know that he was a messenger of YHWH."

25 (“a man”) and Jacob in v. 31 (“God”).¹⁰⁰ The reader is as in-the-dark as is Jacob at the start of the confrontation.

Within the Genesis text, then, the reader gets the sense that the figure could be either a man or God. Yet the final form of the text does not allow for an either/or choice, for in the process of selecting one identity the reader loses vital aspects of the other. He appears at the narrative level to be both man and God, manifesting in some places distinct traits endemic to one, and then vacillating to traits endemic to the other. This dual-nature is not meant to suggest a new identity for Jacob’s attacker as some semi-divine, God-man creature, nor should it be taken as an argument in favor of seeing Jacob’s opponent as an angel. The text here avoids the Hebrew word for “angel” (or “messenger,” as I have translated מַלְאָךְ).¹⁰¹ Similarly, this is not some sort of inner-psychological battle Jacob wages in his own mind or perhaps during a dream.¹⁰² Gunkel already cautions against this reading at the turn of the twentieth century, cleverly writing: “One’s hip does not become disjointed in a prayer struggle.”¹⁰³ Rather, the contest is very real in regard to two fronts: God most immediately, and Esau imminently in Gen 33. The narrative’s

¹⁰⁰ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 220, correctly states that there is no reason not to trust Jacob’s assessment of the situation in v. 31. He writes: “Again Jacob is the first and the best interpreter of his own history; again he produces his authoritative interpretation on the spot.” See also Mark D. Wessner, “Toward a Literary Understanding of ‘Face to Face’ in Genesis 32:23-32,” *RestQuart* 42 (2000): 170, who argues the phrase “for I have seen *Elohim* face to face” is reserved for meetings between God and humans. *Contra* Taylor, “Decoding Jacob at the Jabbok,” 4-5, and Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 336, who puzzle at Jacob’s naming the place Peniel (“face of God”) when all he had encountered was a “man.”

¹⁰¹ Geller, “The Struggle at the Jabbok,” 54. This silence is all the more striking given that Geller rightly sees the word as a *Leitwörter* elsewhere in Gen 32.

¹⁰² Jeffrey M. Cohen, “Struggling with Angels and Men,” *JBQ* 31 (2003): 128, writes: “One does not have to be a professional psychologist to see Jacob as a man beset, suffering from psychic distress that is real and not invention. Perhaps his anxieties surface again, hypostasized in the forms of hostile angels.” Steve Molen, “The Identity of Jacob’s Opponent: Wrestling with Ambiguity in Genesis 32:22-32,” *Dialogue* 26 (1993): 197, wonders at the possibility of seeing the contest “as Jacob’s dream rehearsal for what transpires the next morning.”

¹⁰³ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 349. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 295, also argues against the interpretation that the encounter was a dream or “wrestling in prayer.”

ambiguity should not and cannot be so easily overcome or dismissed; through its retention Jacob's meeting with God becomes proleptic of his meeting with Esau.

One may wish to compare this type-scene with others in which YHWH becomes adversary. Hendel limns several texts that may warrant investigation, among them Gen 22 and Exod 4:24-26.¹⁰⁴ This latter example, the ever-evasive bridegroom-of-blood passage, serves as an especially apt and illuminating comparison. Geller recognizes several affinities: a nocturnal attack and touching a leg.¹⁰⁵ Hamilton isolates another: both assaults occur at a border region during a return trip to Canaan and Egypt respectively.¹⁰⁶ It is a wonder also whether the near inexplicability of the passage forms the crux of another similarity. Again, however, a key difference exists: in the Exodus passage the opponent is unabashedly portrayed as YHWH. The same may be said for Gen 22, if one accepts the view that YHWH operates as Abraham's opponent.¹⁰⁷ In Gen 32:23-33, however, Jacob's opponent is at one and the same time man and God.

But who then is the "man" with whom Jacob wages metaphysical battle in and through his contest with God? Within the story world of Genesis, the most likely candidate is obviously Esau. Jacob has prayed for deliverance "from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau" (v. 12), and we have demonstrated how vv. 23-33 serve as God's answer to the prayer. Moreover, in what follows the focus will be upon the way in which this encounter with God prepares and equips Jacob for encounter with Esau.

¹⁰⁴ Ron Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel* (HSM 42; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 105-106.

¹⁰⁵ Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok," 58.

¹⁰⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 343.

¹⁰⁷ That Gen 22 uses "elohim" rather than "YHWH" need not present an insurmountable problem. If anything, the Gen 22 passage and its use of "elohim" provides a close parallel with Gen 32:23-33, which also uses "elohim," albeit in a context that suggests both human and divine qualities for the figure.

Roland Barthes' seminal article on this scene from a semiotics/structuralist point of view provides further corroboration that vv. 23-33 have Esau readily in mind. He argues that Jacob's victory upsets the expected "balance" of the scene; weaker (Jacob) overcomes stronger (God).¹⁰⁸ Yet this balance does not arise out of nowhere, for earlier in the story of Jacob and Esau a similar inversion occurs with the younger Jacob overcoming the elder Esau (27:36). God, as has been shown, has a hand in that instance as well. Based upon this history of inversion, in our scene God becomes a 'stand-in' for Esau. Barthes sums up the essential implication: "Jacob having just been marked in his struggle with God, we can say in a sense that A (God) is the substitute of the oldest Brother, who is once against defeated by the youngest."¹⁰⁹

Building upon this resonance with the first block of Jacob-Esau narratives in Gen 25 and 27, Steven Molen advances additional compelling reasons for seeing the "man" as Esau. Countless scholars have recognized that Jacob's name (יעקב) sounds remarkably similar to the name of the river, "Jabbok" (יבק), and the activity, "wrestling" (יאבק) that occurs there.¹¹⁰ Looking at the Jacob cycle more broadly, the reader knows that Jacob's name also means "deceiver" (27:36), a nuance given by his brother Esau. Molen describes the connection: ". . . his [Jacob's] thoughts on the night of the river conflict are revolving around his brother. If phonetically speaking Jacob is at the appropriate place

¹⁰⁸ Roland Barthes, "Wrestling with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Genesis 32:23-33" in *The Semiotic Challenge* (ed. Roland Barthes; trans. Richard Howard; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 254.

¹⁰⁹ Barthes, "Wrestling with the Angel," 254. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 208, likewise says the scene comports with Gen 25:29-34 in that both speak of a conflict between two men.

¹¹⁰ Molen, "The Identity of Jacob's Opponent," 190; Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 210; Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 329; Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 556; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 295.

involved in the activity appropriate to his name, thematically speaking whom else but Esau would Jacob wrestle?”¹¹¹

Molen also insightfully situates his reading of vv. 23-33 in relation to the prenatal (trickster) oracle with which the Jacob cycle begins (25:23). He writes:

And just as the abrupt introduction to the struggle might reflect Jacob’s ever-present fears of what will transpire the next morning, the setting and circumstances of the struggle could hark back to how the two brothers began their rivalry. The rushing water of the Jabbok, the darkness, the length of the struggle, and almost symbiotic conflation of the contestants all suggest a return to that first struggle in the womb.¹¹²

More than Jacob’s surroundings create the possibility for a proleptic encounter with Esau. At the beginning of the wrestling match the reader almost immediately loses any sense of who is doing what to whom. In v. 25 the “man” attacks, yet v. 26 begins simply with “and he saw” (וַיֵּרָא); no explicit subject is supplied, nor is the antecedent of “he” clear. Not until the latter half of v. 26 does the reader learn that Jacob’s opponent is the proper subject, but the reader again quickly experiences another disorientation at the start of v. 27 and continuing in to v. 28. The phrase “and he said” (וַיֹּאמֶר) occurs no less than four times in half as many verses—a section of text Molen describes as “covered in a thicket of ‘he’s’ and ‘him’s’”¹¹³—never with a clear subject or antecedent. Only at the end of v. 29, when Jacob answers with his name, is the reader able retroactively to reconstruct what has happened. Molen likens the ambiguity latent in the struggle at the Jabbok with the ambiguity in the prenatal wrestling of the twins in 25:23.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Molen, “The Identity of Jacob’s Opponent,” 190.

¹¹² Molen, “The Identity of Jacob’s Opponent,” 190.

¹¹³ Molen, “The Identity of Jacob’s Opponent,” 195.

¹¹⁴ Molen, “The Identity of Jacob’s Opponent,” 191.

Through carefully crafted paronomasia, type-scenes, and ambiguity Gen 32:23-33 recasts Jacob's encounter with God as concurrently an encounter with his besmirched brother Esau. This posture of reading the wrestling match, seldom recognized, gives depth to the narrative, creating two interrelated planes of combat. In 'reality,' on one of these planes Jacob defeats God (vv. 26, 31), and on another the narrative presages what will become for Jacob an equally successful victory over Esau. Thus far, however, we have only told half the story; there exists also the dark underside to this battle of tricksters. As our treatment of Gen 33 will highlight, Jacob attains victory over Esau yet again via deception, yet the means and methods by which he carries these deceptions out are not of Jacob's own making. They are, instead, the gifts of a divine trickster and are indelibly tethered to vv. 23-33 and to the ancestral promise. In the next section we will look at the various ways in which vv. 23-33 portray God as Trickster in combat with his chosen trickster, Jacob.

Wrestling the divine trickster. Scant attention has been paid to how the wrestling match proceeds through deception and trickery. Acknowledgment of deception in this scene will prove to be a vital prerequisite for a proper understanding of Jacob's persistence in deceiving Esau in Gen 33, given that the two stories are so closely interwoven with one another. Here attention will be given briefly to four specific instances: the initial attack, the blow to Jacob's hip, the request for one's name, and Jacob's new name "Israel."

We have already noted the word play with Jacob, Jabbok, and the Hebrew word used in v. 25 for "wrestle" (יִאבֹק). This play has led Wenham to paraphrase v. 25 as "he

Jacobed him!”¹¹⁵ While Wenham is correct that the nature and form of the contest remain elusive, this word play may help shed some light on the matter. Broadening our perspective to encompass the whole cycle, we know well that Jacob’s name means “deceiver.” His name also derives from his activity of clutching Esau’s “heel” at birth. Therefore, if at the outset of the struggle Jacob gets “Jacobed” is it not possible that the narrative, through this homophony, communicates that the attack be interpreted as a trick from Jacob’s perspective? After all, Jacob is clearly taken by surprise; he is alone. He is ignorant of the looming attack; he is told nothing. This information is withheld from him. If this word play may be taken to hint at a deception, it accomplishes two things: first, placed at the beginning of the account it helps orient the reader to look out for subsequent deceptions, and second, it anticipates another similar sounding word that will create a fundamental link to Gen 33: חָבַק (“embrace”) in v. 4, used to describe Esau’s initial response to the first sight of Jacob in nearly twenty years.

Our second example, the violent touch to Jacob’s hip, is an act of deception with covenantal overtones. Gunkel proffers that the original, earlier version of the story depicts Jacob as the one employing dirty tactics to achieve victory, namely that Jacob is the deliverer of the blow to his opponent’s hip, not its recipient.¹¹⁶ Arguably, Gunkel understands this scene as one of trickery based upon his description of Jacob’s maneuver as “a wrestler’s trick.”¹¹⁷ If one may draw an analogy to the contemporary world of professional wrestling, by this logic the deity fells Jacob with a proverbial (and illegal)

¹¹⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 295.

¹¹⁶ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 349, argues that a redactor adds v. 33b, thus attributing the blow to God. On this problem, see also Johannes P. Floß, “Wer schlägt wen? Textanalytische Interpretation von Gen 32,23-33,” *BN* 20 (1983): 92-132.

¹¹⁷ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 349.

‘low-blow.’ In fact, several scholars argue for just such an interpretation. Stanley Gevirtz holds that God strikes Jacob not on the hip socket but rather on his genitals, arguing that the Hebrew usually rendered “hollow of the thigh” (כף-ירך) is a euphemism for this area of the body.¹¹⁸ It is a wonder how an attack of this type could leave Jacob with a permanent limp, but we have already seen how this story operates with multiple planes of meaning. Steve McKenzie similarly sees deception as operative in this instance, though he unfortunately does not extrapolate on his assessment.¹¹⁹ It is sufficient to label it an underhanded tactic that Jacob could hardly have anticipated, and one that should have signaled his defeat. To be sure, God’s maneuver is an odd means of deliverance for Jacob; if Jacob was not prone before, he most certainly is now.

There is, however, another dimension to the blow received by Jacob, one that hearkens to the ancestral promise. Those who emphasize that Jacob is struck on the genitals see this as an attack on his procreative abilities; it acts as a firm reminder that God alone grants children of the promise.¹²⁰ Not only does this interpretation err by assuming Jacob obtains the promise in and through this encounter, it makes little sense given that Jacob has already become the father of multiple children of the promise, evident in 29:31-30:24. There we showed that the narrative recognizes YHWH’s sovereignty over this aspect of Jacob’s life through the narrative’s tying of several names of Jacob’s children to acts of God. A more compelling perspective arises if one sees

¹¹⁸ Stanley Gevirtz, “Of Patriarchs and Puns: Joseph at the Fountain, Jacob at the Ford,” *HUCA* 46 (1975): 52, 53. See also S. H. Smith, “‘Heel’ and ‘Thigh’: The Concept of Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau Narratives,” *VT* 40 (1990): 466-469; Taylor, “Decoding Jacob at the Jabbok,” 19; Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 331.

¹¹⁹ Steve McKenzie, “You Have Prevailed: The Function of Jacob’s Encounter at Peniel in the Jacob Cycle,” *RestQuart* 23 (1980): 229. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 558, also describes this maneuver as “trickery.”

¹²⁰ Smith, “The Concept of Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau Narratives,” 469.

language of the “thigh” (ירך) as evocative of biblical oath-taking, which is associated with the gesture of placing one’s hand under the thigh. The word ירך occurs in Gen 24:2, 9—in reference to Abraham’s servant—and 47:29. This latter passage, Geller notes, attaches the action of taking an oath with the covenantal language “steadfast love and faithfulness” (חסד ואמת), which appears also in Jacob’s prayer in 32:11.¹²¹ Based upon this view, one may regard God’s touching of Jacob’s “thigh” as a symbolic action whereby God swears an oath to Jacob that his prayer for deliverance from Esau would be answered. Through this motion Jacob receives not only assurance of the promise; his limp serves as a permanent reminder of it as he marches to face Esau. Jacob, through this divine gesture, comes to embody the ancestral promise and God’s fidelity to it.

Two final instances of divine deception involve naming. The first recalls the deception of Isaac (and Esau) in Gen 27, that decisive moment eventuating in the twins’ separation. In 32:28 the opponent asks Jacob’s name, and he responds accordingly with “Jacob.” A unique angle emerges if one focuses not on what Jacob says but on what his opponent leaves unsaid. Verse 30 records Jacob asking his opponent’s name; he is met only with an evasive response: “why do you ask my name?” (למה זה חשאל לשמי). In 27:18 Isaac asked a disguised Jacob a similar question: “who are you, my son?” (מי אתה בני). Just as Isaac, whose eyes are darkened by blindness, asks who is before him, Jacob, whose eyes are blinded by darkness, inquires as to who struggles with him. Father and son ask the same question. The results, though, are remarkably different. In asking his question Isaac is deceived and gives away his prized blessing, while in asking his

¹²¹ Geller, “The Struggle at the Jabbok,” 50.

question Jacob too is deceived—the deity does not supply this information—but receives (another) blessing (v. 30b). Again, blessing is transmitted in and through deception.

Second, Jacob’s new name “Israel” attests to the prevalence of deception in Jacob’s life. The etymology of the name is disputed and need not detain us.¹²² Our focus here is upon the interpretation God gives for the name in v. 29: “for you have struggled with God *and with men* and have prevailed.” Here the traditional interpretation outlined at the start of this chapter—that this new name signals a new, purified Jacob—again comes under fire. The concern lies not in forecasting a new destiny for Jacob; the name rather speaks of Jacob’s past.¹²³ It is significant that the phrase “and with men” does not find a correspondence in the name “Israel.”¹²⁴ This addition casts an approving backward glance over the entirety of Jacob’s life, relating his success with “men.” The name can hardly attest to Jacob’s strong interpersonal and communication skills! Rather, those men who are most quick to come to mind are Isaac, Laban, and most importantly Esau, all objects of Jacob’s deceptions. God therefore states that Jacob has “prevailed” (חִיבַל) through deception. One should not, however, take this statement as God’s indictment of Jacob. The explanation reveals that Jacob struggles “with God” (עִם-אֱלֹהִים) as well. Jacob’s new name then announces that as he has succeeded in the past, so too will he succeed in the future. God wrestles with, and as we have seen, for Jacob.¹²⁵

¹²² For the various treatments of the name’s etymology, see W. F. Albright, “The Names ‘Israel’ and ‘Judah’ with an Excursus on the Etymology of Tōdāh and Tōrāh,” *JBL* 46 (1927): 154-168; Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1966), 207-208; Robert Coote, “The Meaning of the Name Israel,” *HTR* 65 (1972): 137-146.

¹²³ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 335; Turner, *Genesis*, 144-145; Brett, *Genesis*, 99.

¹²⁴ See von Rad, *Genesis*, 322, for other, less-convincing alternatives.

¹²⁵ This notion of God wrestling *for* Jacob may in fact be precisely the significance of the name “Israel.” Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 217, writes: “The name ‘God fights’ [‘Israel’] may then

A final cursory mention of the blessing Jacob receives is in order. It is important to recognize that the blessing is not isolated only to the new name Jacob receives.¹²⁶

Speiser is one who takes this position, opting to translate שם ויברך אתו in v. 30b as “He, then, bade him farewell.”¹²⁷ This translation is problematic, primarily given that the root ברך meaning “to bless” clearly appears here as well as throughout the Jacob cycle. And given the discussion above relating Gen 32:23-33 to Jacob’s earlier deceptions of Esau, one quickly sees that a blessing figures prominently in both scenes. Indeed, the blessing will also play a significant role in the reconciliation with Esau (33:11).

This brief foray into the use of deception in vv. 23-33 provides another necessary dimension to the interpretational context of Gen 33. The two scenes, as we have shown and scholarship has long recognized, are indissolubly linked. The inability to see deception in the struggle leads to the unfortunate failure to see it in Gen 33. Jacob again will deceive Esau during their reconciliation. No apologetics are necessary. Coming out of Peniel, Jacob possesses a renewed sense not of who he is to become but of who he has been all along. Jacob is and remains a trickster because the God who calls him, and wrestles with him, is a Trickster as well.

mean: God fights with you, because he is forced to by your stubbornness and pride. And also: henceforth God will fight for you, for he appreciates your absolutely sincere and undivided commitment.” I disagree with Fokkelman’s temporal insinuation that it is only at this moment that God begins to fight for Jacob; the trajectory of our study thus far has shown that God has worked on Jacob’s behalf since the utterance of Gen 25:23. Fokkelman’s point, however, that the name may connote God fighting as Jacob’s ally is illuminating for much of what follows in Gen 33.

¹²⁶ Hermann Eising, *Formgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Jakobserzählung der Genesis* (Emsdetten, 1940), 128-129, understands the blessing as the ancestral promise, which would not be unusual given that God has already reaffirmed the promise at various points along the way (cf. 31:3, 12-13).

¹²⁷ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 1; New York: Doubleday, 1964), 255.

Reconciliation and Deception (Gen 33)

In Gen 33 the Jacob cycle reaches its highest arc of tension. A reunion nearly twenty years in the making looms. All the questions the reader has carried along the way are about to be answered. What is Esau's mental disposition? How will Jacob and his family fare? Will the estranged twins reconcile? The narrative has conditioned the reader to expect certain answers to these questions. One likely anticipates that Esau will retaliate with the same murderous vengeance with which the narrative last left him (cf. 27:41; 32:7), that Jacob and his family will be slaughtered or at best taken hostage (cf. 32:12), and that the prospects for reconciliation are thus not very good. That the narrative presents the polar opposite of what the reader likely expects attests to the literary artistry of the story. Readers may therefore believe Jacob also to have undergone a radical change, though nothing could be further from the truth. He is the one constant amongst everything.

Interpreters almost uniformly deem Jacob a changed man coming out of his encounter with God in Gen 32:23-33.¹²⁸ He has shed his old mischievous ways. A modicum of scholars hold to a medial position, contending Jacob has gained a profound new outlook on life, yet his almost immediate failure to act in accordance with this outlook simply signifies that one cannot change overnight.¹²⁹ The deceptions are residual. Here we wish to press the opposite side of the continuum, arguing that the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau is a narrative fraught with deceptions. What these

¹²⁸ See among others Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 347; Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 561; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 301, 304; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 530; Fokkerman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 221; Sarna, *Genesis*, 403-404; Speiser, *Genesis*, 257; Curtis, "Structure, Style, and Context," 135, 136; Jeffrey M. Cohen, "Struggling with Angels and Men," *JBQ* 31 (2003): 128.

¹²⁹ Kodell, "Jacob Wrestles with Esau," 69; Holmgren, "Holding Your Own Against God," 9.

deceptions achieve is the incipient fulfillment of the final aspect of the promise left hanging in abeyance from Jacob's sojourn with Laban: return to the promised land.

Jacob Deceives Esau, Again

At last Jacob limps forward to encounter his brother Esau. Along with the reader, Jacob remains uncertain as to how Esau will respond, but the encounter with God (and "Esau") in 32:23-33 has imbued him with a sense of confidence in himself and trust that God accompanies him into this fateful encounter. It is against this backdrop that one must interpret much of Jacob's activities in Gen 33.¹³⁰

Jacob begins the reconciliation with what can only be described as a carefully orchestrated show to earn Esau's "favor" (יָרַח). In fact, this is the precise reason Jacob offers in response to Esau's question in v. 8. At the sight of Esau and the 400 accompanying him, Jacob quickly returns to an old stratagem: dividing his family up into multiple "camps" (cf. 32:2-9). Attention has readily been given to the fact that Jacob shrewdly situates his family in relation to Esau in the inverse order of his affection for them—Bilhah, Zilpah, and their children first; Leah and her children second; and Rachel and Joseph last—and that Jacob assumes the front position, a stark contrast to his using his family as a buffer in 32:4-22. What has not received adequate attention, however, is that this arrangement shows Jacob still up to his old tricks. By placing the maidservants and their children first, the text communicates that Jacob deems them most expendable. This point receives potent voice from Jacob himself when in vv. 8-10 he offers them

¹³⁰ Both Fishbane, "Composition and Structure," 26-27, and Gunkel, *Genesis*, 354-355, interpret the reconciliation scene as one in which Jacob continues to deceive Esau. Gunkel goes so far as to describe Esau in Gen 33 as "a good-natured buffoon who can be won over by beautiful speeches and gifts" (354). Concurrently, the reader is to "rejoice" at Jacob's cunning outwitting of his brother.

without hesitancy as a gift for Esau. Never does Jacob make this known to them, nor does he solicit their advice in the matter.

Jacob's posture in approaching Esau also helps couch this scene in the context of deception. Jacob bows to the ground seven times, a gesture that has led Turner to aver that Jacob's blessing has come to naught.¹³¹ In 27:29 Isaac had stated in the context of blessing that others would "serve" (עבד) Jacob and that his brothers would "bow" (חיה) before him, but in the Jacob cycle עבד is used only in reference to Jacob and most strikingly here *by Jacob* as a description of his inferior status before Esau (cf. 32:5; 33:5, 8, 13, 14).¹³² Moreover, the only other occurrences of חיה in the cycle are when Jacob and his family bow to Esau in Gen 33. Even Turner must admit, however, that this prostration may be nothing more than "an insincere act of self-deprecation to save his [Jacob's] own skin."¹³³ In his more recent commentary, Turner appears to espouse just this position, writing: "If his [Jacob's] words cannot be trusted [in Gen 33:12-17, see below], then his actions of bowing before Esau can hardly be taken at face value."¹³⁴ In fact, this interpretation appears quite likely, based upon Jacob's response that he has done this all to earn Esau's "favor." It is a deceptive and disingenuous ploy.

Another possibility also exists that has gone unnoticed by scholars. Esau knows the basic content of Jacob's blessing, having been told by Isaac on the heels of Jacob's timely escape (27:37); there Isaac tells his favorite son Esau that the blessing has made

¹³¹ Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (JSOTSup 96; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 123.

¹³² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 67, notes that brothers regularly address one another as "my brother" in the Hebrew Bible. Jacob's self-deprecating manner of address then is not without import.

¹³³ Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, 123.

¹³⁴ Turner, *Genesis*, 148.

him servant to his brother. Now, for Jacob to assume such a posture may recall in Esau's mind the blessing he had lost. Jacob's clever ruse in bowing before Esau may have made it seem to Esau as though he was the one who had received the blessing as planned. As we will see, Jacob's calculated offer of "my blessing" (ברכתי) in v. 11 lends further credence to this possibility.

Another part of Jacob's charade that is often neglected is the manner in which he approaches Esau. Readers must remain mindful that after Peniel Jacob now walks with a noticeable limp. Depending upon the severity of the injury, for Jacob to prostrate himself not once but seven times in drawing near to Esau must have been physically taxing on the patriarch.¹³⁵ Concurrently, however, Benno Jacobs has suggested that this pitiful sight of obeisance may have aroused compassion in Esau.¹³⁶ Here one sees an instance in which Jacob avails himself of the outcome of the encounter with God in 32:23-33 to assist in protecting himself from Esau.

The initial theatrics seemingly pay off, yet the narrative provides one final glimmer of tension. Jacob, limping and genuflect, is met by Esau running (רוץ) directly at him. But for what reason? The narrative only reports that he runs "to encounter/meet" (לקראתו) his brother.¹³⁷ The next verb used of Esau has him חבק ("embrace") Jacob, yet

¹³⁵ Shubert Spero, "Jacob and Esau: The Relationship Reconsidered," *JBQ* 32 (2004): 250, says Jacob "must have cut a truly pathetic figure."

¹³⁶ Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis* (trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob; New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 226. Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 467, muses over Esau's interior monologue: "My hated brother, my rival, the conniving supplanter paying me supreme homage, abasing himself supremely! Is this not a confession of his guilt, an acknowledgement of my rightful superior standing? See how he places himself at my mercy, trusting me with his life? And look how he has aged and how he limps along! Does he not begin to resemble Father?"

¹³⁷ It is interesting that the exact same form לקראתו is used of Laban's running "to meet" Jacob in 29:13 in a scene where Laban arguably has ulterior motives (cf. 24:28-33).

this verb exhibits strong phonetic similarities to the “wrestling” (עבק) Jacob had experienced the previous night.¹³⁸ Have Jacob’s worst fears come true; has Esau attacked? It is only with the successive flurry of verbs to describe Esau’s actions that one learns Esau greets Jacob not with vengeful anger but with authentic kindness. What, though, has brought about this change in Esau’s demeanor? The text is silent on this point, yet this homophony connects Esau’s activity in 33:4 with God’s activity in 32:25. For Jacob, the violent embrace of God somehow allows for the loving embrace of Esau.

Evidence exists that readers may be correct in still approaching Esau with a healthy dose of suspicion. His magnanimous and passionate gesture of embracing Jacob leads to a “kiss” (נשק) in v. 4. The Hebrew word “kiss” is *suprapunctuated*, with small dots placed above each letter, leading some to regard the kiss as especially passionate, while others deem it a “‘Judas’ kiss.”¹³⁹ This “kiss” is the last in a string of five nearly successive verbs for how Esau greets Jacob: he “runs” (רץ), “meets” (קרא), “embraces” (חבק), “falls” upon the neck (נפל), and “kisses” (נשק) Jacob, all within the span of a single verse. This rapid string of verbs reminds the reader of the last time five consecutive verbs were used of Esau: he “ate, drank, rose, went” and “spurned” his birthright in 25:34.¹⁴⁰ In meeting Jacob, Esau again shows himself to be overly impetuous, a burst of emotion, one living for the moment. That his activities here mirror those when Jacob first deceives him suggests the possibility of reading the two scenes *in tandem*; in both, Esau’s perfunctory and overly credulous behavior allows for him to be deceived again.

¹³⁸ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 343.

¹³⁹ Holmgren, “Holding Your Own Against God,” 14, cites Prov 27:6: “Profuse are the kisses of an enemy.” Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 467, says the rabbis believed God changed Esau’s heart.

¹⁴⁰ Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch*, 130.

Jacob remains guarded, and as such he continues to trick Esau by choosing his words carefully. In the procession of his family Jacob essentially flaunts the outcome of the ancestral promise which he receives on account of his obtaining the blessing, yet when Esau inquires as to who these all are in relation to his brother, Jacob plainly states that they are “the *children* (הילדים) with whom God has *avored* (חנן) your servant” (v. 5). Two points are important. First, Hamilton rightly recognizes that Jacob makes no mention of his wives, lest he incur Esau’s wrath by reminding him of the disastrous bid to earn his parents’ *favor* by marrying an Ishmaelite wife (28:8-9).¹⁴¹ Second, Jacob cleverly does not attribute his wives and children to the success of God’s “blessing” but only to God’s “favor” (חנן).¹⁴² These two calculated moves recall the shrewdness of Jacob’s speech in Gen 25:27-34 and signify that the trickster Jacob is up to his old tricks.

Note also that upon their reunion Jacob continues to attempt to buy off Esau (vv. 8-11).¹⁴³ He is still uncertain as to Esau’s objectives, and his speech reveals this fact. Jacob avoids all pleasantries—one might surmise he would make inquiry about his father Isaac, who has been on his deathbed for twenty years, or about his mother Rebekah, who loved him so dearly and has failed to send word that Esau’s demeanor has changed—and continues in his mendacious ways.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps Rebekah’s failure to inform Jacob of Esau’s change of heart is a deafening silence the patriarch cannot overcome. Within the

¹⁴¹ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 344.

¹⁴² The reader of the cycle knows well that Jacob’s wives and children are the result of the promise. See chapter three, “Divine Deception and Incipient Fulfillment of the Ancestral Promise.”

¹⁴³ In what one may regard as another deception, Esau asks what Jacob means by parading everyone in front of him, to which Jacob replies, “to find favor in the eyes of my lord.” Here Jacob quotes the same reason he had instructed his servants to tell Esau in 32:6. I have argued above that this is an instance of deception, given that neither there nor here does Jacob reveal his true aims: to appease Esau with gifts (32:21).

¹⁴⁴ One may perhaps take Jacob’s reticence to ask about his family as another example of his fearful choice of words, since Esau had planned to kill Jacob once Isaac dies (27:31).

family unit he learned he could only trust his mother. That she, and she alone, has not sent the promised word leaves Jacob understandably speculative of Esau's aims.¹⁴⁵

All of this posturing eventually gives way to two more potent, blatant deceptions: the return of the "blessing" in vv. 10-11 and Jacob's failure to meet Esau in Seir as promised (vv. 12-17). Each will be treated in turn.

With the encounter with Esau looming, Jacob had persistently tried to propitiate Esau with lavish "gifts" (מנחה) that his brother would repeatedly decline. Now face to face, Jacob attempts the strategy again. In v. 10 Jacob again offers Esau a "gift" (מנחה) that is declined, yet suddenly in v. 11 Esau moves to accept. Why has this gift so suddenly piqued Esau's interest? The shift in Esau's receptivity matches a shift in Jacob's vocabulary. In v. 11 Jacob offers not a "gift" (מנחה) but a "blessing" (ברכה). This is not just any ordinary blessing; Jacob calls it "my blessing" (ברכתי). Using this word conjures up Gen 27 and the stolen blessing, and there is little reason to presume this remembrance is beyond Esau's recognition, especially since it is what ultimately leads to his acceptance. Commentators often see here Jacob returning the blessing he had stolen so long ago in the attempt to make amends.¹⁴⁶ Within the larger context of the Jacob cycle specifically and Genesis more broadly, however, this view cannot be sustained and is rather another deception of which Esau is the victim.

¹⁴⁵ Holmgren, "Holding Your Own Against God," 12, 14, muses over whether Esau is in fact acting deceptively here.

¹⁴⁶ Westermann, *Genesis* 25-36, 526; Wenham, *Genesis* 16-50, 299; Hamilton, *Genesis* 18-50, 346; Sarna, *Genesis*, 230, calls it a "reparation." Gammie, "Theological Interpretation," 123-124, maintains that Jacob comes up with this idea at the moment he persists in holding on to his opponent until he is blessed in 32:27; Esau similarly will not release Jacob until he blesses his brother.

The point that seems lost on Esau in his eager acceptance of the blessing is that once uttered the blessing is irrevocable.¹⁴⁷ Isaac indicates as much after Esau uncovers the deception (27:33). Presumably Jacob is aware of this little known fact, if not because he was the one blessed and thus has a deeper understanding of its intricacies, then for the fact that he, not Uncle Esau, blesses each of his children in Gen 49:1-27 with a manner and content reminiscent of Isaac's blessing.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, Jacob's history of deception with God's sanction had endured far too much to pass off one of his most cherished possessions so blithely. One must also remain mindful that Jacob having the blessing, not Esau, is precisely how YHWH wants it (25:23; cf. 28:13-15).

Probing more deeply into the story, especially the connection between Gen 32 and 33, one may remember that Jacob has another blessing now at his disposal: that which he wrestled from God in 32:30.¹⁴⁹ Jacob never once specifies to Esau which blessing he intends, though the considerations just outlined make it viable that Jacob gives Esau this 'empty' additional blessing—the content of which the reader is never told—rather than the blessing of their father Isaac.

Conceivably the most patent example of Jacob's outright deceiving of Esau amidst their reconciliation occurs in vv. 12-17. Now reconciled, Esau suggests that they journey on together, and Esau is willing to accommodate Jacob's pace (v. 12). Without

¹⁴⁷ Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (trans. Keith Crim; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 54, writes: "Blessing cannot be recalled, and it works unconditionally."

¹⁴⁸ The various individual blessings in Gen 49 similarly speak of cursing (v. 7), division/separation (v. 7), brothers bowing down (v. 8), specific locales for dwelling (v. 13), supremacy over a people (v. 16), election of a particular brother (v. 26). Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, also recalls the dual promises given to Jacob and Esau respectively in Gen 27. Note also the dimness of Jacob's eyes later in life, which matches the dimness of Isaac's eyes at the time of blessing.

¹⁴⁹ Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok," 42, sees Jacob's mention of "my blessing" in 33:11 as hearkening back to 32:27 and Jacob's request for a blessing. Jacob's statement, "seeing your face is like seeing the face of God" links these two scenes dramatically.

hesitation Jacob demurs by appealing to the frailty of his children and the nursing of his flocks (v.13). Hamilton points out the oddity in Jacob referring to his children as “frail” given that “they seem to have weathered the journey thus far with no ill effects”; out of his entire party, Jacob’s limp clearly qualifies him as the most frail.¹⁵⁰ Is Jacob here merely making excuses? The narrative reveals that much more is operative when in v. 14 Jacob insists that Esau venture on ahead of him while he will follow at the speed of the children and cattle until he meets Esau again “in Seir” (שְׂעִירָה). Upon turning down Esau’s offer to have some of his men accompany Jacob (v. 15), which would force Jacob to come to Seir,¹⁵¹ the text resolutely and unabashedly states that Esau makes his way to Seir, but Jacob sets out for and settles in Sukkot (vv. 16-17). Jacob deceives Esau again!

Some commentators have sought to soften this deception in various ways, yet the narrative expresses no concern for such apologetics. Heard avers that Jacob’s hesitancy stems from fear that Esau will discover his disability, but it is probable that Jacob’s multiple prostrations have already made his handicap readily apparent to his brother.¹⁵² Hamilton expressly argues against the view that this deception shows Jacob has not undergone a change, yet he provides no support for this argument.¹⁵³ Alfred Agenta appeals to Jacob’s fear of his brother as the rationale behind his tentativeness, yet the fact

¹⁵⁰ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 347.

¹⁵¹ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 348.

¹⁵² Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 132.

¹⁵³ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 347, cites a quotation by E. M. Good, “Deception and Women: A Response,” *Semeia* 42 (1988): 129, that presumably serves as his rationale: “Though he became Israel, he is not ‘upright’ Israel but, throughout chs. 32-33, ‘uptight’ Israel.” I have already sought to show that Jacob has ample reason to be “uptight” since he does not know of Esau’s mental disposition and Rebekah has not sent any word that Esau has rescinded his anger. While Jacob may be “uptight,” that still does not mitigate the presence of deception in 33:12-17.

remains that fear may motivate deception; it does not, however, apologize for it.¹⁵⁴

Westermann uniquely sees Jacob's words to Esau as a genuinely honest expression of the differences between the two, which require that they not live adjacent to one another.¹⁵⁵

For Westermann, the phrase "until I come to my lord in Seir," is Jacob's way of courteously not "contradict[ing]" Esau.¹⁵⁶ One may wonder, though, what Jacob thinks he may contradict. Note that it is Jacob who originally suggests coming to Seir, not Esau.

This reading of Gen 33 shows that Jacob does not appear to have changed as much as extant scholarship suggests. Throughout the reunion Jacob deceives Esau with flattering speech and gestures, ostentatious and ambiguous gifts, and a bald-faced lie. Those who wish to maintain that Peniel transforms Jacob must make sense of these aspects of his character in some other way. But it is striking that Jacob's penultimate encounter with Esau in a sense replays their first encounter years ago: Jacob deceives, and Esau is the object of that deception.

Reconciliation and Deception in Tension?

A final consideration warranting inquiry may arise out of this analysis: how is the reader to resolve the idea that the brothers reconcile amidst Jacob's continued deception of Esau? Does this interpretive posture temper the authenticity of this reconciliation? It will here be suggested that authentic reconciliation occurs amidst deception in Gen 33, the successful outcome of which serves as the final step moving toward the inchoate fulfillment of the ancestral promise of land.

¹⁵⁴ Alfred Agyenta, "When Reconciliation Means More than the 'Re-Membering' of Former Enemies: The Problem of the Conclusion to the Jacob-Esau Story from a Narrative Perspective (Gen 33,1-17)," *ETL* 83 (2007): 131.

¹⁵⁵ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 526-527. See also Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 299-300.

¹⁵⁶ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 526-527.

Several approaches have been put forward in response to this issue. Perhaps the most well known is that of George Coats, who posits that the overriding narrative theme in the Jacob cycle is “strife without reconciliation.”¹⁵⁷ This theme is not only predominate but also primary; even the theme of promise, he contends, is subordinate to it.¹⁵⁸ Coats maintains that Esau extends an offer of genuine reconciliation in 33:4, which is met by Jacob’s qualified hesitancy and uneasiness at the thought of accompanying his brother to Seir.¹⁵⁹ For Coats, true reconciliation is occasioned only when the reconciling parties dwell together.¹⁶⁰ This tethering of reconciliation and residence is Coats’ main flaw. There exists no reason to assume reconciliation requires a shared dwelling space.

Other scholarly attempts wish to situate the problem within an historical dimension by attending to the national import of the narrative. Proponents of this way of reading emphasize the fact that Jacob and Esau are the eponymous ancestors of the nations Israel and Edom, and thus for them to reside together would make little sense. For instance, Frank Crüsemann regards Gen 33 as a text ultimately tethered to the political realities of its time, with the impetus behind the reconciliation and separation of the brothers being concerned to show two separate national entities that are both free and at peace with one another.¹⁶¹ As a result, the (trickster) oracle (25:23) forecasting a

¹⁵⁷ George W. Coats, “Strife Without Reconciliation: A Narrative Theme in the Jacob Traditions” in *Werden und Wirken des Alten Testament. Festschrift für Claus Westermann zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Rainer Albertz; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 83.

¹⁵⁸ Coats, “Strife Without Reconciliation,” 82-83.

¹⁵⁹ Coats, “Strife Without Reconciliation,” 103.

¹⁶⁰ Coats, “Strife Without Reconciliation,” 103, writes: “Reconciliation should apparently be symbolized by physical community. What good is reconciliation if brothers do not live together?”

¹⁶¹ Frank Crüsemann, “Dominion, Guilt, and Reconciliation: The Contribution of the Jacob Narrative in Genesis to Political Ethics,” *Semeia* 66 (1994): 72.

history of enmity goes unfulfilled.¹⁶² Erhard Blum regards the primary motivation of the text as tethered to the formation of Israel as a political reality with a unique identity, which can only be maintained by separation from other nations and peoples.¹⁶³ Konrad Schmid defends a similar view of peaceful co-existence between two peoples requiring separate dwellings, though he couches it in more literary than historical terms; he does, however, appear to make an historical application in his judgment that peace requires separation of territories.¹⁶⁴

In each of these readings, separation does not mitigate reconciliation but exists as a natural outcome of the larger national concerns of the text. While they are helpful in providing evidence that reconciliation may persist despite the tensions latent in the narrative, these interpretations run the risk of over-simplifying the historical relationship between Israel and Edom. The biblical account presents a quite complex and vacillating relationship that some see in evidence in the larger Jacob cycle as well.¹⁶⁵ These political

¹⁶² Crüsemann, “Dominion, Guilt, and Reconciliation,” 74.

¹⁶³ Erhard Blum, “Genesis 33,12-20: Die Wege Trennen Sich” in *Jacob: Commentaire à plusieurs voix de, Ein mehrstimmiger Kommentar zu, A Plural Commentary of Gen 25-36: Melanges offerts a Albert de Pury* (MdB 44; ed. J. D. Macchi and T. Römer; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2001), 229.

¹⁶⁴ Konrad Schmid, “Die Versöhnung zwischen Jakob und Esau (Gen 33,1-11)” in *Jacob: Commentaire à plusieurs voix de, Ein mehrstimmiger Kommentar zu, A Plural Commentary of Gen 25-36: Melanges offerts a Albert de Pury* (MdB 44; ed. J. D. Macchi and T. Römer; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2001), 225.

¹⁶⁵ To be sure, there are accounts of diplomatic, non-violent cooperation, such as 2 Kgs 3:8-9, 12, 20, 26, where Edom joins with Israel and Judah against Moab, and the injunction in Deut 23:8-9 that “you are not to abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother.” Accompanying the Deuteronomy text is the allowance for Edomites to enter the Temple. See Diana Edelman (ed.), *You Shall Not Abhor an Edomite for He is Your Brother: Edom and Seir in History and Tradition* (Archaeology and Biblical Studies 3; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995). Within the Hebrew Bible, however, the Israel-Edom relationship is hardly univocally one of peaceful relations. In Num 20:14-21 Edom refuses to grant the wandering Israelites safe passage into the land, which seems to have generated a long history of hostility between these two ‘brother’ nations. See 1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 8:14; 1 Kgs 11:14-16; 2 Kgs 8:20-22; 14:7, 10; 1 Chr 18:11-13; 2 Chr 21:8-10; 25:19-20; Isa 11:14; 34:5-6; 63:1; Jer 9:24-25; 25:21; 49:7-22; Ezek 25:12-14; 32:29; 35:1-15; 36:1-7; Joel 4:19; Amos 1:6,9, 11-12; 9:12; Obad; Mal 1:2-4. If the emphasis lies on these nations living peacefully with one another, the less-than-flattering portrayal of Esau in Gen 25 and 27—where he is, not

readings also commit a similar error of which they accuse Coats, reducing the text to the simple equation of separation as concomitant with peace.

What is needed is a narrative appraisal of this question, one that takes into account the various perspectives in Gen 32-33. Agyenta is among the very few who attempt such a reading, but he relies heavily upon the assumption that the Jacob of Gen 33 is a new and different man.¹⁶⁶ My proposal is more modest. One should consider three perspectives. For Esau, reconciliation has taken place. For Jacob, Esau has been reconciled to him. These two points gain fullest expression in Gen 35:29, where Esau and Jacob reunite without narrated incident one final time to bury their father Isaac. These two perspectives converge in the third perspective: that of God. The divine concern throughout the Jacob cycle has been intimately bound up with the perpetuation and incipient fulfillment of the ancestral promise. Through the deception of Esau in Gen 33, that promise reaches its apogee within the Jacob cycle. Jacob does not go to Seir but instead to Sukkot and eventually on to Shechem, where YHWH had reiterated the promise of land to Abraham (12:6). For the first time since he fled from Esau nearly twenty years ago, Jacob is back in Cisjordan, back in the land of the promise.¹⁶⁷ That he arrives “peacefully” (שָׁלֵם) is of great consequence; at Bethel Jacob had asked that YHWH guide him to the house of his father “in peace” (בְּשָׁלוֹם).¹⁶⁸ He proceeds to purchase a parcel of land and thereupon establish an altar to “El, the God of Israel.” God has

incidentally, actually given the name “Edom”—presents another problem. See also Schmid, “Die Versöhnung zwischen Jakob und Esau,” 226, who admits the complexity inherent in reconstructing the historical background of the narrative and its attendant interests.

¹⁶⁶ See Agyenta, “Reconciliation,” 127-133, esp. pp. 127-129 on viewpoint.

¹⁶⁷ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 349.

¹⁶⁸ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 350; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 300.

fulfilled his part in Jacob's life, and now Jacob fulfills his. Had Jacob resided with Esau in Seir there would be no advancement toward the promise of land. It is through deception that Jacob is able to enter the land again. This movement toward fulfillment has been God's purpose all along. In this way, just as Turner may speak of "separation within reconciliation,"¹⁶⁹ we may adequately speak of reconciliation within deception.

Deception and the Ancestral Promise, Reprise (Gen 34-35)

The final two chapters of the Jacob cycle present a miscellany of various post-reconciliation experiences of the patriarch and his family. Related are stories of the rape of Dinah, Simeon and Levi's murderous revenge, God's command that Jacob return to Bethel, Benjamin's birth and Rachel's death, Reuben's intercourse with Bilhah, a second recounting of Jacob's renaming, and the death and burial of Isaac. Here the focus, however, will be quite narrow and the treatment quite cursory, looking at how these chapters—specifically the response to Dinah's rape and the return to Bethel—continue the Jacob story in a way that shows one final time the interconnectedness of deception and the perpetuation of the ancestral promise.

Some of Jacob's children appear equally as deceptive as their father. In 34:13, after the rape of Dinah, the narrative recounts two of Jacob's sons speaking with Shechem and Hamor "in deceit" (במרמה), saying they will assent to the marriage with their sister if only the men of Shechem agree to be circumcised. Shortly thereafter in v. 25 Simeon and Levi act upon this deception, slaughtering all the Shechemite males as they recover.

¹⁶⁹ Turner, *Genesis*, 148.

It is striking that God does not appear in this chapter, potentially leading one to believe that he fails to find much humor in this deception. Interestingly, James Kugel adduces a number of later Jewish texts that understand the brothers' impetus in killing the Shechemite males as arising out of an ordinance from God.¹⁷⁰ According to Kugel, this interpretation comes about as a desire to tidy up the problematic nature of Simeon and Levi's activities.¹⁷¹ What Kugel leaves unstated is the implication that arises from this way of reading: in saying Simeon and Levi act as God's instruments in punishing the Shechemites, God in turn becomes complicit in their deception! While these texts take us beyond the bounds of the canon, they do buttress an underlying point of this study that within early Judaism the idea of God using deception is not entirely unpalatable.

In the final form of the text, however, God does play a pivotal role. Gen 34 closes with Jacob's lament over the danger in which Simeon and Levi have placed their family, and chapter 35 opens with a theophany—as always at a quite opportune moment—in which God instructs Jacob and his family to go to Bethel and build there an altar. Theologically, Gen 35:1 achieves more than just delivering Jacob from a dangerous situation (although no doubt the promise of divine presence from 28:15 is evident here); it also hearkens back to the theophany at Bethel where Jacob inherited that very promise. Therefore, God's appearance at the outset of chapter 35 confirms his choice of Jacob and his heirs, made at Bethel in Gen 28, on the very heels of a deadly act of deception.

Rounding out the Jacob cycle are narrative hints at the patriarch's previous deceptions. First, the deception of Esau is recalled by God in 35:1b when God jogs

¹⁷⁰ James L. Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob: Ancient Interpretations of the Biblical Story of Jacob and His Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 65-66. Among those texts cited are *T. Levi* 5:3; 6:8, 11; *Jth.* 9:2-4; *Jub.* 30:5-6; *Jos. Asen.* 23:14.

¹⁷¹ Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob*, 66.

Jacob's memory by couching his instruction for a return to Bethel in terms of the time during which Jacob "was fleeing from Esau your brother." There, at Bethel in 28:10-22, YHWH had made the choice for Jacob abundantly clear by giving Jacob the ancestral promise after two deceptions of Jacob's own family (25:27-34; 27:1-45). Second, Jacob takes the initiative in requiring his family to rid themselves of any foreign deities. Hamilton conjectures that the *teraphim* Rachel stole from Laban would surely be included.¹⁷² Jacob's injunction against any other deities may evoke his deception of Laban with the rods—and God's help—in 30:37-31:16, as well as the divine command to depart, which Laban regards as a deception. These two seemingly innocuous mentions bring to mind the long history between the trickster Jacob, the Trickster God, and the ancestral promise. In fact, now at the close of the cycle God reiterates the promise to Jacob yet again; albeit in somewhat different terms, the particulars are present. Verses 11-12 relate the promise of progeny and nationhood as well as land. The list of Jacob's twelve sons, from whom the entire people Israel will descend, are enumerated in vv. 22b-26, highlighting a transition from promise potential to promise realized. Just as Jacob is "Israel," so too will they become "Israel." By this stage in the narrative, "Israel" is a polyvalent word. The name points to much more than the isolated incident in 32:28. It now references an entire complex history, from Abraham to Jacob, in which deception, blessing, and the promise have intermingled so as to achieve the divine prerogative.

The final scene the narrative leaves with the reader is the image of the twins Jacob and Esau, for the first time working as a unit, burying their father Isaac (vv. 27-29). Lying behind these two brothers is a shared history of strife and deception. That they work together is not only a mere matter of Jacob's ingenuity or Esau's dimwittedness.

¹⁷² Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 375.

Just as their separation occurs by matter of divine fiat (25:23), so also has their reconciliation been orchestrated by the Trickster God (32:23-33). And just as at the beginning of their lives the twins are very different from one another (25:25-34), so too now they remain distinct. Commentators readily point out the similarity between 35:27-29 and 25:9, where Isaac and Ishmael reunite to bury their father Abraham.¹⁷³ In both cases, however, there exists an unspoken inequality. Ishmael and Esau are outside the promise. Isaac and Jacob, conversely, are emblems of the promise, the result of God's own choice. Indeed, Jacob's life is paradigmatic of its incipient fulfillment.

Conclusion: Tricky Encounters

In this second block of Jacob-Esau narratives the Jacob cycle has truly come full circle. Whereas Jacob had previously fled his home and family due to his brother Esau's homicidal plotting, Jacob has now returned to his homeland and family, having reaped the benefits of the ancestral promise along the way. Upon his return, however, the promise again meets its most ominous threat: Esau.

This chapter has leveled a serious challenge to the hegemonic, traditional interpretation of Gen 32-33, which holds that Jacob's life and ethics are transformed through a violent encounter with God in 32:23-33, making him a suitable prospect to receive the ancestral promise. Jacob, it was reminded, is elect from birth (25:23) and obtains the promise by a free gift of God at Bethel (28:13-15) near the beginning of the cycle, not its end. Additionally, the sustained prevalence of the name "Jacob" even after 32:23-33 serves as a narrative clue that the 'old Jacob' indeed may not be as far removed as extant scholarship has suggested.

¹⁷³ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 374; Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 133; Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 389-390; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 328.

Through careful attention to three specific encounters—with the messengers of God (32:2-3), God (32:23-33), and Esau (33:1-17)—our analysis has emphasized a way of reading that shows Jacob and God working *in tandem* to thwart Esau and any threat he may pose to the promise. These encounters frame the narrative, orienting the reader to see God's purposes operative throughout: in Jacob's sending messengers and a gift ahead to Esau (32:4-9, 14-22) and in Jacob's proleptic defeat of Esau (32:23-33). At each stage we saw how God's fealty to the ancestral promise was intertwined with past, present, and future deceptions, ultimately allowing for Jacob to outwit Esau one final time and in so doing return after a nearly twenty year hiatus to the promised land. In the end, Jacob really does not change all that much. He is a trickster from beginning to end. But to recognize Jacob alone is to recognize only half the equation: YHWH too is also a Trickster from beginning to end.

CHAPTER FIVE

Concluding Remarks and Prospects for Further Study

Introductory Remarks

With our reading of the Jacob cycle now in place, this chapter will examine what conclusions one may draw from this investigation, as well as suggest several areas for further fruitful study. Special attention will be paid to the theological implications of divine deception in the Jacob cycle and how this phenomenon relates to the perpetuation of the ancestral promise in Genesis.

A Theology of Deception in the Jacob Cycle

Summary and Conclusions

The overriding thesis of this work is that YHWH engages in deception in the Jacob cycle so as to advance the ancestral promise (Gen 12:1-3; cf. 26:4-5; 28:13-15) toward incipient fulfillment. Chapter one established the context for the study. Within extant scholarship divine deception has received some attention, particularly in the Deuteronomistic History and prophetic books (Isaiah and Jeremiah especially), though no sustained treatments exist for Genesis more broadly or the Jacob cycle more specifically. Regarding divine deception in the Jacob cycle, scholarship has taken three distinct positions. First, there are those who wish to separate YHWH from any complicity or role in deception, often arguing that the Jacob cycle presents a series of unedifying tales of an unethical patriarch whom YHWH chastises and punishes for his deceptions. Second, one may discern within the work of some scholars various implicit references to YHWH as

deceiver. Third, a modicum of scholars have noted several instances where divine deception occurs in the Jacob cycle, though these statements are often tantalizingly brief and undeveloped. Given this basis, we surveyed a number of texts from the ancient Near East that unabashedly depict deities—among them Ea/Enki, Inanna, Re, Isis, Horus, Seth, and Inaraš—acting deceptively, as well as noted the presence of trickster deities in modern anthropological studies.

It was argued that the most profitable method for investigating a theology of deception is a synchronic, literary hermeneutic with theological aims, emphasizing both *how* the text means and *what* the text means. Only then is one able to appreciate the rich literary artistry of the text while still giving pride-of-place to the text we have; appeals to source criticism or other diachronic methodologies explain these issues by hypothesizing about different layers of tradition or editorial growth. While this mechanism is likely the means by which the biblical text came to be, these approaches do not address the topic fully, for the final form of the text is a multifaceted, multivocal whole that has been shaped in a particular way and with a particular purpose. Attention to the shape of the canonical form of the book of Genesis allows for one to make sense of the whole, not its constituent parts.

Chapter two centers upon the first block of Jacob-Esau narratives (Gen 25-28), covering a swath of history from womb (*beten*) to Bethel. YHWH's oracle in 25:23 is central here; almost every translation renders the line "the elder will serve the younger," which fails to give adequate attention to the ambiguity of the Hebrew. A better translation given the evidence is the more general "the greater will serve the lesser." Through its use of ambiguity in matters of diction, syntax, and context in the book of

Genesis, YHWH's word to Rebekah becomes a trickster oracle in which YHWH withholds vital information from the matriarch about the fate of her twin sons. Because of this ambiguity—and of Rebekah's special love for Jacob—two deceptions take place. First, in 25:27-34 Jacob tricks Esau into exchanging his coveted right of the firstborn for nothing more than a bowl of lentil stew. Second, Rebekah and Jacob deceive an aged and blind Isaac into blessing Jacob rather than the intended Esau (27:1-45). God is not outside these events. The trickster oracle casts its shadow over these narratives as well, and God plays a role behind the scenes that comes to the fore at Bethel (28:10-22, esp. vv. 13-15). Here YHWH does not lambast or judge Jacob in any way for the previous deceptions; rather Jacob receives, of YHWH's own volition, the ancestral promise, thus affirming the deceptive means by which Jacob obtains both birthright and blessing. Bethel, therefore, from the perspective of the literary flow of the narrative, stands as the theological pivot of the entire Jacob cycle.

Chapter three treats Jacob's sojourn in Haran at the residence of his uncle Laban (Gen 29-31). During this tumultuous time in Jacob's life YHWH's fealty to the promise continues to be in evidence. YHWH uses deception to advance each element of the ancestral promise toward fulfillment. First, Laban's deceptive wife-swap, switching Leah for Rachel (29:15-30), results in Jacob having two wives with two maidservants, all of whom together birth twelve children of the promise from whom the entire *people* Israel evolves (29:31-30:24). Second, as a representative of the nations, Laban affirms that YHWH has *blessed* him in and through Jacob (30:27). Third, YHWH commands Jacob and his newly acquired family and wealth to return to the *land* (31:3), a flight which Laban regards as a deception (31:27). Gen 30:37-31:16 stands out as perhaps the

most potent act of divine deception. In 30:37-43 Jacob employs rods to affect the breeding of the flocks, a tactic that results by some mysterious circumstances in a plethora of spotted and speckled animals, precisely those which Laban had agreed would be Jacob's wages. In Gen 31:1-16, however, Jacob ascribes credit for the success of the ruse to God rather than his own ingenuity.

Chapter four addresses the final meeting with Esau and Jacob's subsequent return to Bethel (Gen 32-35). Described as a text of encounters, Jacob comes face to face with the "messengers of God" (32:2-3), God (32:23-33), and ultimately Esau (33:1-17). The first two of these encounters provide the proper theological orientation, assisting the reader in seeing the plan of God being acted out so as to bring about the final incipient fulfillment of the promise: Jacob's return to the land. This final section of the Jacob cycle is not meant to establish a purified and transformed Jacob but rather depicts Jacob and YHWH both up to their old trickster antics. Jacob deceives Esau in preparation for their encounter. Even after the wrestling match with God (32:23-33) Jacob persists in deceiving Esau by trying to buy Esau's "favor" with an unidentified "blessing" (33:8-11), citing his own childrens' frailty as the reason he cannot venture on with Esau when Jacob is really trying to separate himself from his brother (33:12-14), and telling Esau he will meet him in Seir but then taking up residence in Sukkot (33:15-17). Jacob changes very little over the course of the narrative. The nocturnal encounter with God, traditionally understood as the decisive event leading Jacob to change his stripes, rather is a scene replete with ambiguity. Jacob's opponent possesses qualities and acts in such a way that readers are uncertain whether he is a human or God. The rhetorical effect of this ambiguous portrayal creates two separate planes of combat: on one, Jacob battles and

bests God, yet on another his struggle is a prequel to the inevitable meeting with Esau. Just as Jacob prevails over God/Esau, so too will he prevail over Esau in their final meeting. Jacob's deception of his brother allows him to return to the promised land.

Theological Implications

Our analysis in the foregoing chapters shows that one cannot divorce YHWH from Jacob's many deceptions. On some occasions YHWH operates behind the scenes (Gen 27:7, 20, 28), on others YHWH avails himself of the deceptions of another (29:15-30, cf. 29:31-30:24), and still in others YHWH is the primary deceiver (30:37-31:16). What theological implications arise from such a portrait? I will suggest four that I deem most important for the task of Old Testament theology, though no doubt there are more.

First, and most germane, God's unique fidelity to the (ancestral) promise comprises surprising and unexpected modes of fulfillment. The primary mode emphasized in this study is deception. Where YHWH deceives or uses deception in the Jacob cycle it is always for the betterment of YHWH's chosen, yet those who are deceived are not debilitated or obliterated by the deception without due cause. Take, for example, Esau, who despite being duped out of the promise meets Jacob some twenty years later as an extremely wealthy man. By comparison, we have identified Laban as a figure whose blessing turns into a curse, in line with the penultimate statement in Gen 12:3 that YHWH will bless those who bless Israel and curse those who curse Israel. At the same time, this divine devotion does not mean trouble will not befall the elect, as is evident during Jacob's time in Haran, but it does reveal that YHWH remains steadfast even then. YHWH is not disinterested when it comes to the promise, and the Hebrew

Bible does not limit YHWH to a single mode of operating. Old Testament theology must remain attentive and receptive to startling new ways in which God engages humanity.

Some of these methods may appear unpalatable to contemporary readers, yet the conclusions of this study raise an important issue: perhaps what Eric Seibert has called “disturbing divine behavior” is only disturbing to our contemporary sensibilities and has very little to do with the actual portrait of God gleaned from the Hebrew Bible.¹ Within the Hebrew Bible one may in fact discern a trajectory of continuity in which YHWH’s fealty to this chosen *family* gets extrapolated to this chosen *people*, and YHWH exhibits no qualms about defending this people through infanticide (Exod 12:29), genocide (Deut 7:1-2; 20:16-18; Josh 10:40), and deception (2 Sam 17:14; 1 Kgs 22:19-23, 2 Kgs 6:15-20; 7:6-7). YHWH’s tampering with *our* conventional mores testifies not only to YHWH’s steadfastness but also to the divine freedom to traverse any bounds in the interest of the promise. The Jacob narrative stresses God’s unique sovereignty, even to the point of deception.

Second, and related, this reading underscores the centripetal force of the ancestral promise. YHWH demonstrates an unbridled passion for the promise as the overarching norm governing life. All other claims to power outside the divine prerogative prove only to be illusory and fleeting. Neither Laban nor Esau poses a legitimate threat to the promise that YHWH is unable to overcome. There exists no situation in Jacob’s life that is outside the bounds of the promise, be it the deception of his brother and father, his internment with Laban, or the purported threat of reconciliation with Esau. One cannot separate YHWH’s activities and interventions from the divine word of promise, nor can

¹ See Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

one contend that the promise is secondary in the narrative. The promise and YHWH's fidelity to it hold the narrative together. The lengths to which YHWH goes show that the divine resolve for the promise is unflinching, unyielding, and resolute.

Third, there is a certain level of destabilization that accompanies this portrait of YHWH as Trickster. This God has subversive tendencies. One may readily discern this point in the divine proclivity throughout Genesis for the secondborn as opposed to the firstborn child. But this image extends further and is much broader in scope. God is a God of inversion who is not circumscribed by the strictures imposed by the various power brokers of the narrative. The subversive nature of YHWH attested in the Jacob cycle contains a dogged insistence that YHWH is free to undermine any sense of propriety, decorum, and convention as is deemed fitting to the situation at hand. For example, while I have not sought to chart a particular historical development or appropriation of these traditions about the trickster God, one can readily imagine that such an image could be of great meaning and encouragement in response to ancient Israel's unrelenting experience with empire: Assyria, Babylon, and Persia most specifically. One may surmise that a trickster God would have been attractive to ancient Israel for this very reason; one has less use for a trickster God if one is in a position of power and authority. In Genesis, God (and Jacob) redraw the boundaries of what is expected and what is possible through their deceptions. The limits become limitless, for what is possible extends as far as God and Jacob's aptitude to trick. YHWH is a God of inversion and subversion.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, this portrait of God resists any absolute claims that seek to whitewash, sanitize, or domesticate God. YHWH is, as David Carr

describes, “untameable.”² The God of the Hebrew Bible is beyond codification; God is unsettling. As an unpredictable character, YHWH’s activities often fly in the face of what readers may expect of God. Both good and bad, joy and pain, blessing and curse come from God.³ The Jacob cycle gives ample voice to this perspective. YHWH serves as Jacob’s benefactor, championing the patriarch’s cause, yet this great care for Jacob does not mitigate the possibility of violent encounter with YHWH (Gen 32:23-33). How should one reconcile the diverse portraits of God in the Hebrew Bible, or should one at all? This project proposes one way that does not jettison one image for another by reading divine promise and deception *in tandem*. The Hebrew Bible enjoins its readers not to resolve the tensions in God’s character in any easy or dismissive way. Value and meaning reside in the tension. YHWH is a God of tension, or perhaps more accurate to the witness of the Hebrew Bible, a God *in tension*.⁴

This perspective has potential ramifications for how one goes about doing Old Testament theology. The Old Testament’s way of doing theology is not systematic, and attempts to systematize that which is unsystematic inherently run the risk of a selective picking-and-choosing of what portraits of God one will treat and not treat. An honest theological engagement with Israel’s Scriptures must take them into account *in toto*,

² See David M. Carr, “Untamable Text of an Untamable God: Genesis and Rethinking the Character of Scripture,” *Int* 54 (2000): 347-362.

³ Walter Brueggemann sees this tension expressed in Exod 34:6-7, his central credo for understanding Old Testament theology. For a canonical appropriation of this credo, see most recently Nathan C. Lane, *The Compassionate, But Punishing God: A Canonical Analysis of Exodus 34:6-7* (Eugene: Pickwick Press, 2010).

⁴ See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

recognizing the diverse voices with which the text speaks.⁵ Such an approach will not produce a unified, consistent, coherent picture of Old Testament theology, but it will at the very least recognize the fullness of the rich theological reflection of ancient Israel's God in all facets of being. The method employed in this study provides a helpful hermeneutic toward this end. Paying attention to the symbiotic relationship between *how* a text means and *what* it means—emphasizing a unique synthesis of literary and theological concerns—may prove beneficial in advancing the task of Old Testament theology with an appreciation for our postmodern context.

Prospects for Further Study

While the conversation on divine deception in the Hebrew Bible is still in its infancy with much productive conversation to come, this study also opens avenues for research in a number of areas. Here we isolate five that may further discussion on the topic, though which by no means exhaust the possibilities.

YHWH as Deceiver in the Context of Ancient Near Eastern Gods as Deceivers

In chapter one we isolated a number of texts from the ancient Near East that depict various deities acting deceptively. Given the prevalence of this motif within the milieu of ancient Israel's nascence and development, how might conceptions outside Israel have influenced and affected Israel's own construction and understanding of YHWH as divine deceiver? Does the image in the Hebrew Bible appear to correspond to

⁵ Within the last quarter of a century Old Testament theology has seen a shift from seeking a "center" to the Old Testament (see Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* [trans. J. A. Baker; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961]) to appreciating multiple theologies in the Hebrew Bible. See especially Erhard Gerstenberger, *Theologies in the Old Testament* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), and Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structure Legitimation," *CBQ* 47 (1985): 28-46; Walter Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *CBQ* 47 (1985): 395-415.

or react against images from other ancient Near Eastern peoples? Investigation of how ancient Israel appropriates this tradition may touch upon a number of other pertinent areas, among them international relations and questions of social identity.

YHWH as Deceptive Yet Trustworthy

Another potential area of inquiry involves how one might negotiate the Hebrew Bible's portrayal of YHWH as deceptive yet trustworthy. To be fair, a modicum of scholarly treatments do exist on this topic, many of which were surveyed in chapter one, but now with the Jacob cycle as a part of the picture the question takes on a new valence. Must YHWH's deception always be punitive, or are there other places in the canon where deception functions in a way similar to the Jacob cycle, as an *extension of* YHWH's trustworthiness?

YHWH as Divine Deceiver in Socio-Historical Context

The foregoing chapters have offered an unabashedly literary-theological reading of the entirety of the Jacob cycle, consciously and intentionally bracketing out questions of history. Now, with this interpretive bedrock laid, it would prove worthwhile to situate this reading in a specific historical context, in effect attending to an historical question of another kind: "the communicative purpose of the final Hebrew text."⁶ The underlying operative assumption is that literary hermeneutics may inform sociological considerations and realities on the ground.

The contributions of Chris Heard and Mark Brett are formative in this regard for their attention to the predominance of deception in Genesis and its socio-literary

⁶ Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (Old Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 2000), 11.

implications.⁷ Comparing the contributions of Brett and Heard, however, produces fascinating findings. The two volumes were published within one year of each other. Both place Genesis in the Persian period and put the final message of that book in conversation with the policies of Ezra and Nehemiah, both employ a literary hermeneutic toward sociological ends, and both interpret nearly the same texts and adduce much of the same scholarly literature. Their conclusions, however, could not be more different. For Brett, Genesis becomes a type of resistance literature, challenging the exclusivity latent in the endogamy advocated by Ezra and Nehemiah—a challenge Brett sees deriving from the confluence of deception and marriage in the Jacob cycle⁸—while for Heard, Genesis supports this exclusivity by affirming endogamy as the only method for sustaining identity. The same literature, historical context, evidence, and time of writing produces polar opposite conclusions! This notice may testify to the inconclusiveness of the Genesis text on the point of endogamy/exogamy.

The literary phenomenon of a divine trickster raises a litany of new questions. In what historical context do these images fit best? When would they have proven most meaningful? What can one say about the social reality and religious ethos of ancient Israel in light of this reading? And how might the notion of divine deception in the Jacob cycle inculcate hope in the period during which the cycle and the book of Genesis reaches its final form?

⁷ See R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Dislocation: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah* (Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 171-184; Brett, *Genesis*, 137-146.

⁸ Brett, *Genesis*, 92, 93, 107-108.

Divine Deception in Relation to the Other Ancestral Stories of Genesis

Having examined divine deception in the Jacob cycle and its tie to the ancestral promise, one may rightly ask whether this reading is endemic only to the Jacob cycle. Do similar examples of deception tethered to the promise occur in the ancestral stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph, and if so, how do they compare with the theology of deception in the Jacob cycle? As a matter of suggestion, the wife-sister narratives (Gen 12, 20, 26) provide a sound place to begin. In Gen 12:14-20 and especially 20:1-18 Abraham deceives a foreign ruler into thinking Sarah is his wife, which leads to her being taken from him. On both occasions YHWH quickly intervenes—there can be no child of the promise without the mother of the promise—and as a result Abraham is sent on his way and obtains from (is rewarded by?) the foreign ruler wealth and property. How might a literary reading of the multiple occurrences of this type-scene contribute to a theology of deception in the Abraham or Isaac narratives? It may also be beneficial to give attention to Gen 50:20, a dying Joseph's comment of retrospective providence governing his entire life and resulting in his and his family's settling in Egypt. One should remain mindful that Jacob ends up in Egypt as a result of his brothers' deception (37:29-35) and achieves a place of prominence in the Egyptian administration as a result of the deception of Potiphar's wife (39:1-23). Throughout the Joseph narrative the text continually affirms that YHWH is in control of history and the experiences of this chosen family (39:2, 3, 5, 21, 23; 41:16, 25, 28, 32; 42:28; 43:23; 45:5, 7, 8, 9; 48:9, 11; 48:15; 50:20, 24). What does a theology of deception in the Joseph narratives look like, and how might it compare with a theology of deception in the Abraham or Jacob cycles? Is Genesis perhaps united by a theology of deception?

A Canonical Theology of Deception?

One final venue for further research involves a renewed appreciation of the theological task described above. While divine deception may not occur in every book of the Hebrew canon, it does occur in nearly every part of the canon: the Pentateuch, Deuteronomistic History, and the Prophets.⁹ It appears YHWH engages in deception for manifold reasons—to bring Israel out of Egypt, to protect Israel in the wilderness from enemy nations, to punish a false prophet, to kill a wicked Israelite king, or as an accusation from a suffering prophet—and scholarship has yet to address this complex characterization of God in the Hebrew Bible in any sustained way. One suggestion that appears outwardly plausible is to regard the various instances just listed under the larger rubric of YHWH's fidelity to the nation that descends from Jacob/Israel. Is there a larger umbrella under which all instances of divine deception may be subsumed? How does promise and covenant figure in the deceptions elsewhere in the canon? And, perhaps most fascinating, given the prevalence of divine deception in the Hebrew Bible, how might one speak of a *canonical theology of deception* as a major theological tenet of the Hebrew Bible?

Concluding Thoughts

YHWH functions throughout the Jacob cycle as a Trickster *par excellence*. Through participation in and with Jacob's many deceptions, an under-appreciated theological portrait of God emerges, one in which YHWH's cunning matches and at

⁹ Of the texts surveyed in chapter one, only the Writings lacked an explicit example of divine deception. This silence, however, need not deter one from the task, for isolating a theology of deception in the Jacob cycle paves the way for employing a similar literary-theological method to explicate texts and perhaps see therein additional examples of YHWH as Trickster. Within the Writings, I suspect the book of Job to be a worthwhile place to begin the investigation. One may also wish to seek out parallels to Samuel and Kings in 1 and 2 Chronicles.

times exceeds that of the patriarch. This divine unscrupulousness, while not entirely benign, is the mechanism by which YHWH tenaciously works toward the divine purpose. In and through deception YHWH makes advances toward the “great nation” that will become Israel, blessing to the entire cosmos through Israel, and a return to the promised land. In the Jacob cycle, therefore, one observes not an aberrant, devious God but a divine trickster who will go to any lengths for the sake of the ancestral promise. In the Jacob cycle one may discern a true theology of deception.

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