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## **Abstract**

### **The Presence and Absence of God in the Jacob Narrative**

**Kevin Anthony Walton**

**PhD Thesis, 1998**

This thesis explores the theological complexity of the Jacob narrative. In particular this is centred upon the paradox of divine presence and absence, and the contrast of the human and the divine.

In the first part, an investigation is made of three key episodes which contain an encounter with the divine: the opening oracle (25:19ff), Bethel (28:10-22) and Peniel (32:23-33). It is concluded that the first passage is constructed as an introduction, making explicit the theme of the presence of God in the Jacob story, but also introducing the human side of the paradox. Bethel and Peniel are based on older pre-Yahwistic traditions, now shaped and incorporated into the story of Jacob to throw a theological perspective over the wider plot.

The second part consists of a reading of the wider Jacob story, with particular attention to the theme of divine presence and absence and the interaction of the human and the divine. It is argued that even the most human of stories betray a theological interest and contribute to the overall paradox, but also that there are several indications of the presence of God.

In the conclusion, it is noted that behind the present unity of the Jacob story there is evidence of earlier traditions, a growing together of material, and supplements offering new perspectives. It is also concluded that a close reading of the final text and a historical-critical appreciation need not be mutually exclusive, and that a cautious use of critical insights has thrown light upon the final form. Finally, it is argued that the theme of the presence and absence of God offers a way of reading the Jacob story in a theological way, that does most justice to its historical depth, final form, and canonical status.

# **The Presence and Absence of God in the Jacob Narrative**

**Kevin Anthony Walton**

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**University of Durham  
Department of Theology  
PhD Thesis  
1998**

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This thesis has been written in the context of three parishes in the North-East of England where I have served as priest. I would like to express my thanks to colleagues and people of these parishes, who have allowed me the time to undertake this work, and whose own lives so often bear witness to the struggles of faith.

Finally, I am grateful to my family, and especially to Linda my wife, for supporting me through this long process.

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## Abbreviations

### 1. Periodicals, serials and reference works

<u>BA</u>	<u>Biblical Archeologist</u>
<u>BDB</u>	Brown, F., et al. <u>The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Genesius Hebrew and English Lexicon</u> , (see bibliography)
<u>Bib</u>	<u>Biblica</u>
<u>BO</u>	<u>Bibliotheca orientalis</u>
<u>BZ</u>	<u>Biblische Zeitschrift</u>
<u>BZAW</u>	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<u>CBQ</u>	<u>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</u>
<u>ExpTim</u>	<u>Expository Times</u>
<u>FRLANT</u>	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
<u>HSM</u>	<u>Harvard Semitic Monographs</u>
<u>HTR</u>	<u>Harvard Theological Review</u>
<u>HUCA</u>	<u>Hebrew Union College Annual</u>
<u>Int</u>	<u>Interpretation</u>
<u>JAAR</u>	<u>Journal of American Academy of Religion</u>
<u>JBL</u>	<u>Journal of Biblical Literature</u>
<u>JSOT</u>	<u>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</u>
<u>JSOT Supp</u>	JSOT Supplement series
<u>JTS</u>	<u>Journal of Theological Studies</u>
<u>PIBA</u>	<u>Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association</u>
<u>RB</u>	<u>Revue Biblique</u>
<u>SJOT</u>	<u>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</u>
<u>ST</u>	<u>Studia theologica</u>
<u>TZ</u>	<u>Theologische Zeitschrift</u>
<u>VT</u>	<u>Vetus Testamentum</u>
<u>WMANT</u>	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<u>ZAW</u>	<u>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</u>
<u>ZTK</u>	<u>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</u>

### 2. Translations, texts, miscellaneous

<u>ANE</u>	Ancient Near East
<u>ET</u>	English Translation
<u>JPS</u>	Jewish Publication Society
<u>LXX</u>	Septuagint
<u>MT</u>	Masoretic Text
<u>NEB</u>	New English Bible
<u>NRSV</u>	New Revised Standard Version
<u>REB</u>	Revised English Bible
<u>RSV</u>	Revised Standard Version
<u>TEV</u>	Today's English Version (=Good News Bible)

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1 The theme: presence and absence of God: the divine-human contrast

The story of Jacob is theologically complex. On the one hand are clear indications of divine revelation and purpose for Jacob. On the other hand are events surrounding Jacob, as well as his own character and actions, which show little evidence of divine presence or faithful response.

This contrast permeates the whole of the Jacob story, and although widely acknowledged, it is hardly taken much further by most commentators. This thesis attempts to look at this paradox and see how it can be used as an interpretive key for the Jacob story.

The paradox can be seen in various ways. It centres around the presence and absence of the divine. It can also be expressed in terms of the divine and the human. In many places, God is explicitly present as a character in the plot: God chooses, blesses, addresses, guides and protects Jacob, whether directly or through human agents. Absence refers to the lack of any mention of the divine for much of the narrative, the way that Jacob often seems to have to take his fate into his own hands, and the lack of much explicit moral or theological comment. There is interest in the character and motivation of Jacob: in terms of moral behaviour (often articulated in terms of the 'guilt' or 'innocence' of Jacob) and religious acts (often seen as part of the wider question of the 'patriarchal religion'). On the one hand, Jacob is singled out by divine oracle as the one to receive the patriarchal blessing even before his birth, it is he who receives the name of Israel and is father of the twelve sons who become the twelve tribes, and he has the remarkable experience with God at Peniel. On the other hand, he cheats his father and brother, endures a long inglorious stay with his uncle Laban, and his experience at Peniel is far from a straightforward giving and receiving of a blessing.

### 2 The structure of the thesis

The Jacob story finds a structural unity around the motif of flight and return. The story begins in a family setting of conflict between the two brothers. As a result of Jacob's deception of Esau and his father Isaac, he is forced to leave and stay with his uncle Laban. This journey sets up a tension that is resolved at his return.

It is however noticeable that at key points of the narrative, there is an encounter with the divine. These encounters stand out because of the high concentration of explicit theological content and, it will be argued, because they offer an interpretive key for the whole of the

narrative. The most significant episodes are the nocturnal encounters at Bethel and Peniel, both coming unexpectedly at points of transition for Jacob, and the oracle given to Rebekah before the birth of Jacob and Esau. This latter episode is less distinctive from the surrounding narrative but is nevertheless significant for its theological content and for creating a certain expectation.

For this reason we shall consider these three passages individually in some detail before looking at the wider plot. This will enable us to look at the passages in their own right, doing justice to their peculiar nature, to ask related questions of prehistory, and to begin to ask how these passages might anticipate the development of the wider story. It might be argued that by treating these episodes separately we are not doing justice to how they fit into the wider story, and also that we might be prejudging the historical relation of these passages to the wider narrative, inasmuch as this is an issue. Nevertheless, reference will be made to these passages later on regarding how they relate to their wider context, and regarding historical questions, we shall see that the same solutions will not be offered for each passage. It might also be argued that these are not the only episodes containing divine appearances or communication. However, these are the most developed. The one exception is the return of Jacob to Bethel in ch. 35. In this case, we have left consideration of this passage until the end because evidently it does mark an end.

After studying the three episodes, we shall look at the larger blocks of narrative: the first part of the Jacob and Esau plot, in particular ch. 27; the Jacob-Laban plot; the conclusion of the Jacob and Esau plot, and ch. 34 and 35. Throughout this, we shall still be exploring the contrast between the human and the divine, the extent to which God seems present or absent. The study of each part will generally be preceded by the spelling out of introductory issues, especially, though not exclusively, of the historical-critical nature. A reading of the text will then follow, and then conclusions, bringing out any historical-critical viewpoints and also highlighting how the divine and human contrast has been developed.

Having completed this study, we will be in a position to draw together the thesis in the conclusion. Because each part of the thesis will generally contain its own introductory and concluding remarks, this introduction and the conclusion will not be extensive.

Justification should also be given for locating the end of the Jacob story at 35:29. This is

especially in the light of the argument put forward by Westermann<sup>1</sup> regarding ch. 37 and 46-50, where a distinction is made between the Joseph story in its strictest sense and material which has been added in the framing chapters which in reality concludes the Jacob story. In this way, argues Westermann, the Joseph story has been made part of the Jacob story. However, there is some unclarity on this, since Westermann also makes the point that ch. 37, in its present form and context, is the introduction to the Joseph story,<sup>2</sup> and a distinction is made between the nature of the family conflict in ch. 25-36 and that in the Joseph story. From the point of view of the final form of the narrative, a distinction can be made between the Joseph story and the Jacob story. It is of course true that there is overlap, and that the distinction is not complete, but there is a transition at the end of ch. 35 and the beginning of ch. 37, with ch. 36 marking the division. This also does justice to the toledot structure of the final text, where the story of Jacob (and Esau) is dealt with as the *תולדות יצחק* and the story of Joseph (and his brothers) is under the *תלדות יעקב*. Furthermore, just as the *תלדות יעקב* may contain material originally distinct from the Joseph story but more in common with the Jacob story, so ch. 26 within the *תולדות יצחק* has little to do with the story of Jacob and Esau, and the material of ch. 34 has a great affinity to the Joseph material. Thus, the restriction of consideration to ch. 25-35 is justified on the basis of a marked shift in the plot once Isaac is buried and on the final structuring of the patriarchal narrative around the toledot formulae. This does not deny an underlying unity across different sections nor a varied traditio-historical development.

### 3 Major works consulted

As already mentioned, each section will generally include a consideration of issues raised in critical debate and it will become evident that some names appear more often than others. Below are those critics that have been of greatest help in shaping my own views on the text. It is of course recognized that the list is not comprehensive, and other works will also be mentioned where appropriate.

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<sup>1</sup>C. Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, London: SPCK, 1987 (ET of 1982), 22ff.

<sup>2</sup>*Genesis 37-50*, 34. Rendtorff (*The Old Testament: an Introduction*, London: SCM, 1985 (ET of *Das Alte Testament: Eine Einführung*, 1983, 136) sees ch. 48 as an insertion at the end of the Joseph story, uniting what he calls the Jacob narrative with the Joseph story into a wider 'Jacob story'. Nevertheless, he is still able to see the two as discrete stories.

Gunkel's commentary on Genesis<sup>1</sup> remains a classic text that must be taken into consideration in any study. In dialogue with Gunkel we will be able to draw in considerations of the classic source critical approach which Gunkel takes as a starting point, but also of course the approach of form criticism which Gunkel championed: the study of the individual unit, literary genre, elements of folk tradition. Gunkel is also valuable for a sense of the aesthetic and for an instinctiveness in his approach, which often survives particular form critical judgements.

Von Rad's commentary<sup>2</sup> also stands as a great monument to the study of Genesis. Like Gunkel, von Rad shares much of the accepted critical view of his day, including the principle of source criticism and Gunkel's form critical approach. However, unlike other commentaries before or at the same time, von Rad is much less rigorous in finding sources to the extent that for large parts of the text the source critical approach plays no part. His particular contribution is, like Gunkel, an instinctive approach to passages, but unlike Gunkel, von Rad also shows a concern for the dynamics of the text in its present form as well as for its theology, albeit combined with a consistent historical-critical approach.

Westermann's commentary<sup>3</sup> is also included for its comprehensiveness, rigour and detail. In many ways, this commentary in its wider approach has not found the acceptance which Gunkel and von Rad have, perhaps partly because of the independence of view that Westermann takes, making it difficult to categorize with any trend or school of thought. On the other hand, this independence is also its strength together with the weight of scholarship, and one feels that the contribution of this commentary is by no means exhausted.

Among most recent treatments of the patriarchal narratives is Blum's Komposition der Vätergeschichte.<sup>4</sup> This is distinct from the above commentaries in that it is more consciously part of the move in Pentateuchal studies away from the documentary hypothesis associated with Wellhausen. This is done by what Blum sees as a more thorough and consistent

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<sup>1</sup> H. Gunkel, Genesis, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 7th ed., 1966 (orig. 1901).

<sup>2</sup> G. von Rad, Genesis, London: SCM, 1972 (ET of Das erste Buch Mose: Genesis, 9th ed., 1972).

<sup>3</sup> C. Westermann, Genesis 12-36, London: SPCK, 1986 (ET of 1981).

<sup>4</sup> E. Blum, Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, WMANT 57, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984.

outworking of Gunkel's form critical work, building also on the work of Rendtorff.<sup>1</sup> Equally interesting is Blum's claim to give equal consideration to both the diachronic dimension of the text and the synchronic,<sup>2</sup> although one suspects that the first sentence of the conclusion better betrays his interest: 'Unsere Analyse hatte das Ziel, das Werden der Vätergeschichte von den kleinsten Einheiten...bis zu dem uns vorliegenden Überlieferungsganzen nachzuziehen.'<sup>3</sup> It is too early to judge the long term impact of Blum's work, but it is certainly a significant attempt to strike out in a different direction.

So far, the works mentioned above have all operated within historical-critical frameworks, even if with greatly differing methods and results. One work which stands in stark contrast is Fokkelman's Narrative Art in Genesis<sup>4</sup> which refuses to take any consideration of historical questions and looks at the text from a purely modern literary perspective. As shall be seen this brings to light many aspects of the text otherwise neglected, and this book is an important witness to the integrity of the text itself and a challenge to more conventional scholarly approaches.

#### 4 Presuppositions

Before starting the investigation, comment should be made about our own starting-point and some of the presuppositions behind the approach offered here.

One of the main issues in reading a text in the present climate is the conflict between diachronic and synchronic interests. The purpose of this work is to understand the Jacob story as it is rather than to trace for their own sake historical traditions which may lie hidden in the text. However, part of the purpose of the thesis is to show how historical-critical approaches, when used with caution, can indeed highlight features within the text and so enrich our reading. Thus our dialogue with different commentaries and view-points will also be an exercise in method, testing which approaches bear exegetical fruit. In addition, it is not inappropriate to try to draw conclusions about tradition and development, but this is not the main purpose of this work. It is also acknowledged that finding a balance between

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, R. Rendtorff, Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch, Berlin: BZAW 147, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 461.

<sup>4</sup> J. P. Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, Assen: van Gorcum, 1975.

synchronic and diachronic methods is very difficult, although this work is one such attempt with regard to the Jacob story.

In terms of applying any particular hypothesis or historical method the approach will be inductive, that is, not starting with any overall model and then applying it to individual passages but seeking to treat each passage on its own, and then seeing what overall conclusions may be drawn. This seems particularly necessary given the lack of any consensus concerning the development of the patriarchal narratives. Certainly, the documentary hypothesis is widely challenged, although there is little prospect of any alternative finding a similar consensus and the hypothesis still finds its proponents.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps less challenged is the idea of the narrative being the result of a growing together of smaller units which were once told independently,<sup>2</sup> although there is a move to date material later than previously thought and to link it to the exile and/or to a perceived Deuteronomic ('Dtr.') school.<sup>3</sup> A challenge from a different perspective which perhaps has not been given enough attention is that of de Pury,<sup>4</sup> who questions the assumption that the smaller unit must necessarily be older than the wider cycle and puts forward the idea of an early Jacob cycle where the different elements would always have found a part. These questions all justify a

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<sup>1</sup> Among recent text books: W. H. Schmidt, Introduction to the Old Testament, London: SCM, 1984 (ET of Einführung in das Alte Testament, 2nd ed., 1982). Surprisingly, Schmidt hardly mentions recent criticisms of the old consensus: 'Despite all doubts the number and sequence of the documentary sources seems firmly established since Wellhausen's day,' (p. 50). Contrast Rendtorff, The Old Testament: an Introduction. Part of the reason for the persistence of the Documentary Hypothesis is the increased recognition given to the work of redactors -so E. Blum, Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch, BZAW 189, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990, 2.

<sup>2</sup> As stated most famously by Gunkel, for whom the simplicity or smallness of a unit is a mark of its antiquity. See especially the introductory paragraphs to his commentary, and the famous opening statement: 'Die Genesis ist eine Sammlung von Sagen', (Genesis, vii). This is still assumed to be self-evident by Blum (Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte), whose method is to identify the smallest 'Einheiten' and then trace their development to larger units.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. J. Van Seters, Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis, Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992; H. H. Schmid, Der sogenannte Jahwist: Beobachtungen und Fragen zur Pentateuchforschung, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976; tentatively: J. Blenkinsopp, The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible, London: SCM, 1992, 123ff; Blum, Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte and Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch.

<sup>4</sup> A. de Pury, Promesse Divine et Légende Culturelle dans le Cycle de Jacob: Genèse 28 et les traditions patriarcales, vols 1 & 2, Paris: J. Galbalda & Cie, 1975. Also R. S. Hendel, The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel, HSM 42, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987; and in a wider context: F. M. Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel, Cambridge: Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973, (e.g. ch. 6).



certain caution in starting with assumptions or in jumping too readily to conclusions.

Finally, the overt nature of this work is theological rather than purely literary, historical or sociological. This means acknowledging the overall religious dimension of the scriptures, seeing them as reflecting and addressing the faith of Israel. It is also natural and legitimate to take into account their privileged position within contemporary communities of faith, including from my own perspective, the Christian Church.

From these comments a certain affinity with the broadly 'canonical' approach may be observed.<sup>1</sup> The aim is to bring together theological, literary and historical tools. The starting and end point is the final text which is also seen as having a religious significance. Furthermore, this study will aim to show that the concept of canon in a general sense is not one imposed at a later date on what were once untheological texts but was inherent in the whole process of transmission. In terms of the Jacob story, the 'divine' coexisted with the human from the earliest levels of tradition, as far as we can tell.

Nevertheless this work does not seek to identify itself with any particular method or approach in such a way that it rejects others out of hand. Whereas diversity is to be welcomed, one regrettable aspect of the present diversity among scholars is a sense of fragmentation of approaches and a frequent inability to find common ground or interest. Certainly my own reading of the Jacob story has been enriched by all sorts of insights: from the historical, from the purely literary, from theological, and from Jewish writers whose questions and insights can seem startling and refreshing.

In short, this work aims to lead to a richer appreciation of the theological complexity of the Jacob narrative, around the polarity of divine presence and absence, the divine and the human, and it offers a model for reading Genesis and the Pentateuch in the present climate of methodological uncertainty and diversity.

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<sup>1</sup> See especially B. S. Childs, (Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture, London: SCM, 1979).

## **PART ONE: POINTS OF DIVINE DISCLOSURE**

### **1 The opening oracle (25:19ff)**

#### 1.1 Introduction

##### 1.1.1 The limits of the passage

The formula  $x$  ואלה תלדות is a clear indication of a new section, introduced by this episode. Our main consideration will be vv19-26, since from v27 the focus shifts from the divine disclosure of the oracle and also because the final phrase giving Isaac's age at the birth of the twins forms an inclusio with the opening notice of his age on marrying Rebekah.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, we shall also consider how vv27-34 are linked with this opening, enabling us to see how at this early stage of the narrative there is already a contrast of the divine and the human.

##### 1.1.2 Historical-critical issues

There is widespread agreement that vv19-20, together with v26b, are part of the Priestly source. This is due to the distinctive opening phrase ואלה תלדות, used by P to structure the whole of the book of Genesis. Whether the source should be seen as independent or redactional from the outset depends on wider arguments, though in this section such a distinction between the source and the final redaction is unclear. Certainly v26b, with the adjective אִתָּם presupposes the birth of the twins.<sup>2</sup> Regarding the rest of the passage, there is little scope for division along source critical lines, with few of the traditional source critical criteria appearing within the passage.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>An alternative ending might be vv27-28 (e.g. von Rad, *Genesis*, 266; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 413-4; though note: 'Vv. 27-28 stand outside the frame as they form the transition to vv.29-34 and ch. 27.' Similarly Fokkelmann: 'The verses 27 and 28 have no action. They are the quiet fading of scene 1 ...and a loose transition to the second passage has been made.' (*Narrative Art*, 94). Another option is to treat vv19-34 as a whole -e.g. G. J. Wenham (*Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 172): 'The narrator offers us glimpses of three episodes in their early years...These introductory verses serve as a trailer to the main story.' In favour of this, the insertion of the story of Isaac at Gerar creates a distinction between this group of verses and the bulk of the story. Nevertheless, as Wenham comments, there are discernible episodes within the wider passage.

<sup>2</sup> So Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 411.

<sup>3</sup> Gunkel finds traces of E, for instance with the reference to the hairiness of Esau which anticipates 27:11 (which he sees as an E text). However, he can only base his argument on

Other hints of traditio-historical development might be the lack of any surviving explicit etymological link with the place of Seir (which might be expected to stem from the word שער) in v25, or with Edom (following the word אדמוני -see v30b), especially as this verse precedes the explicit etiology for the name Jacob. However, this is to argue from silence and it would be unlikely for any other name than Esau to have been introduced in parallel to that of Jacob. No doubt there are allusions to the names Edom and Seir, but nothing more. In contrast, Gunkel supposes that an older etymology for Esau may now have disappeared, but again this is difficult to prove.

Westermann also points to the oracle (vv22-23), arguing that v24 flows better from v21, with the result that the oracle can be seen as an independent unit inserted at this point.<sup>1</sup> The original setting of the oracle, argues Westermann, would be the Davidic period, giving grounds in the patriarchal period for Israel's defeat of Edom.

As part of his argument he claims that v24b (...והנה תומם בבטן...) contradicts the oracle itself, since it seems to suppose that the discovery of twins was not expected, but this does not do justice to the text as it is, where the force of והנה is the discovery that the oracle was correct.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, v24a draws a line at the end of the pregnancy, reinforcing the idea that an ordeal is over. More significantly, the oracle itself presupposes the situation of the pregnancy and so is more difficult to disentangle from its present context than might appear to be the case. Finally, it is only in the context of v30 (itself seen by some as a gloss) that we can detect any clear allusion to the political situation of Israel and Edom. This is not to deny any reference to the two powers, but it should not be seen as the dominant factor.

Regarding the setting for this passage, most scholars suggest that vv21ff were themselves written as an introduction to the Jacob story,<sup>3</sup> anticipating many of the motifs of the story.

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assumptions: 'Die Geburt muß von beiden Quellen erzählt worden sein,' (Genesis, 293.) Certainly, more recent commentators have been reluctant to divide the text into J and E sources.

<sup>1</sup> Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 411.

<sup>2</sup> This is reflected in the translation in the Westermann's commentary: 'When the time came for her to give birth there were *indeed* twins in her womb,' Genesis 12-36, 411, (own italics). This is in spite of his own argument -see above.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. von Rad, Genesis: 'an expository preface to the whole' (265). Van Seters disagrees (Prologue to History, 280-1), calling the section (including vv27-34, though excluding the P additions) 'a very common and widespread folk-tradition at the pre-Yahwistic level of composition.' This however does not justice to the clear function of the passage in introducing the Jacob story. The most that can be said in Van Seters' support is that this section may well contain elements which have now been formed into this 'expository preface' -see below, p. 22.

The Priestly frame enhances this introductory character, whilst drawing the whole of the Jacob story into the תולדת יצחק.

Finally the passage contains the tradition of the long awaited child, born of the barren mother, and seen as a gift from God. Most obvious parallels are the stories of the barrenness of Sarai/Sarah and the eventual birth of Isaac, the birth of Samson (Judg. 13) and of Samuel (1 Sam. 1).<sup>1</sup> However these passages all have their distinctiveness and are too widely distributed to draw any traditio-historical link. It seems therefore that the narrator is drawing on a well-known motif.<sup>2</sup> Likewise the oracle has similarity with other predictions in Genesis about later Israel (e.g. Gen. 9:25-27, Gen. 27:27-29, 39-40, Gen. 49, also Num. 23-24), although these other examples are all blessings rather than oracles.

## 1.2 A reading of 25:19-26

### 1.2.1 Structure

The passage can be structured as follows:

v19-21 setting the scene, introducing the necessary ingredients for the familiar story of a long awaited child.

Vv22-23 describing the further complication, causing Rebekah to seek the oracle;

vv24-26 with the births and namings, complicated because of the twins, and the note on Isaac's age providing a formal conclusion.

### 1.2.2 Exegesis

Vv 19-20: The heading of the תולדת יצחק places the story within the wider toledot framework stretching back through the book of Genesis. It also reminds us that this is not the story exclusively of Jacob, but also involves his brother Esau. In terms of the wider context, v19 recapitulates details already known: that Isaac is born of Abraham, and that

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<sup>1</sup> M. R. Hauge, ('The Struggles of the Blessed in Estrangement', *ST* 29, 1975, 1-30), adding the birth of Joseph to the list, sees the tradition of the long awaited child as a key motif to the Patriarchal Narratives in particular, although in each occurrence of the motif a different aspect is emphasized. Thus in this case, there is the unique focus on struggle.

<sup>2</sup> R. Alter (*Genesis: translation and commentary*, WW Norton & Co: New York, 1996, 126) calls it an 'annunciation type scene'. Also, within a wider Canaanite context, Hendel (*The Epic of the Patriarch*, 37ff).

Isaac is married to Rebekah. What is new is the age of Isaac (40 years) on marrying Rebekah.

V21 introduces the action proper. The description is very stereo-typical with one half of the verse paralleling the other.<sup>1</sup> There is as yet no hint that all this will have taken twenty years (v26b), and any tension arising from Rebekah's barrenness is passed over. This contrasts strongly with the Abraham story where the desire for a son for Sarah stretches over several episodes. Here, the same problem, lasting twenty years, is dealt with in one verse.<sup>2</sup> Thus, what is not of interest to the writer is passed over and the focus on what is of interest is all the stronger. The formality of this verse also belies the pain and upset that the answer to this prayer will bring about in the lives of the protagonists. As it is, this verse lulls the reader into a sense that all is to be well: there is relief that the anguishings of Sarah and Abraham (not to mention Hagar and Ishmael) are not to be repeated (though anguish there must have been!), and there is the added expectation that this child (there is as yet no expectation of twins) will have a special place in God's plan since he is a gift from God.

So far, Isaac is the central subject with Rebekah as the almost passive object. At first she is simply mentioned as אשתו and הוּא, and when she is named as the subject of a clause, she is still אשתו. This reflects the formal side of the patriarchal narratives, the story of the promise given to the patriarchs who then pass it to the next generation. In this way, it corresponds closely in style and form to the previous verse (P).

Before moving on, comment should be made about the use of the divine name in this passage, since it is found four times whereas אלהים is not found at all. Although some sort of source critical explanation should not be dismissed, it is perhaps significant that the writer should want to emphasize the identity of the divine as YHWH at the beginning of the Jacob story, making it clear that wherever God is mentioned, it is YHWH who is meant.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> waw + verb (עָתָר) + לוֹ/יִצְחָק + לִיהוָה/יְהוָה + (clause concerning) Rebekah.

<sup>2</sup> A. B. Ehrlich (*Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel*, vol. 1, Hildesheim: Olms, 1968, 117) notes a further factor in this contrast, where ten years of childlessness ends in a child for Abraham (16:3), double the time ends with a double miracle in the birth of twins. However, the contrast does not quite work since in the former case it is Ishmael who is born, and there is a further wait for a son to be born of Sarah.

<sup>3</sup> G. J. Wenham ('The Religion of the Patriarchs.' in A.R. Millard & D.J. Wiseman eds, *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, Leicester: IVP, 1980, 180ff) makes the observation that there is a tendency in the patriarchal narratives to mention YHWH at the beginning and end of scenes, as indeed in the opening and closing episodes of the Abraham cycle (ch. 12 and 24). This would seem to indicate

Furthermore, the use of the divine name might be expected in these verses given the stereotypical language -terms עָתָר and דָּרַשׁ both evoke the Biblical picture of Israel's settled cultic religious practice.<sup>1</sup> Finally the use of the divine name is consistent with the idea that this episode is the work of writers who have the wider narrative and later religious perspective in view.

v22-23 introduce the complication. Now Isaac retreats to the background, and Rebekah becomes the focus of attention. The struggle of the twins graphically illustrates how the relationship between the two will develop, and it is clear that this is the interest of the passage. Unlike with Isaac, Rebekah's speech is reported directly and graphically, drawing the reader into a greater feeling of sympathy, and we sense that Rebekah feels the situation much more directly and profoundly.<sup>2</sup> The unclear syntax of v22b, reflects that this is an outcry perhaps in pain.<sup>3</sup> Whether Isaac knows any of this, we are not told. Certainly this

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an editorial hand. See below, p. 58 on the use of the divine name.

<sup>1</sup> The root עָתָר (in Qal, Hiphil and Niphal form) is found in a wide variety of passages, although almost always in an Israelite context -exceptions being the book of Job (22:27, 33:26), and Is. 19:22. However, the latter, concerning Egypt is a clear reference to the plague traditions of Exodus, where the strongest concentration of the term is found. In this case, the term describes Moses' action in asking YHWH to lift a plague from the Egyptians. Other instances of the term include a prayer to end famine (2 Sam. 21:14), to stop a plague (2 Sam. 24:25), for help in battle (1 Chron. 5:20), safety on a perilous journey (Ezr. 8:23) and release from imprisonment in exile ((2 Chron. 33:13, 19). It is evident that in all these cases the term denotes a supplication for rescue from a particular distress. Isaac is seen as following this pattern as the lack of a child is itself a cause for distress, and indeed threatens the whole patriarchal story of promise.

One divergence from this use is Judg. 13:8, where Manoah asks for guidance about how to bring up his promised son (Samson).

It should however be noted that the term is not used exclusively with YHWH -occasionally the prayer is answered by אֱלֹהִים (e.g. Judg. 13:8, 2 Sam. 21:14); in Ezr. the object is אֱלֹהֵינוּ, though this term should not be considered synonymous with YHWH; in Job, the lack of the divine name is consistent with the bulk of that book. Given this, it would be rash to claim that the term could ever have only been understood in an exclusively Yahwistic sense. Nevertheless the term does have strong associations with the Israelite turning to YHWH in case of need.

For דָּרַשׁ, see below.

<sup>2</sup> In this way, the passage anticipates her offer to Jacob later on (27:13).

<sup>3</sup> A. Dillmann translates: 'Wenn also, warum doch ich?' (*Die Genesis*, 3rd ed., Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1892, 318) -likewise Alter, *Genesis*, 127 who also suggests that Rebekah's speech is broken off mid-sentence; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 413: 'It is the primeval cry of 'Why?' about the meaning of life'. Certainly, von Rad is dismissive in his judgement: 'Judged as a narrative, however, this report is remarkably without vividness. The prayers to Yahweh...are simply asserted, but not related,' (*Genesis*, 265): on the contrary, in these few words of Rebekah are packed a great deal of emotion and anguish which anticipates much that will come for the twins and their mother.

picture of Isaac being more passive and less in control is consistent with ch. 27 as well as ch. 24. The word לרה (v23aα) again emphasizes the chief role of Rebekah.<sup>1</sup>

It is surprising that we are told simply that Rebekah went to enquire את-יהוה. What this means in practical terms is clearly assumed or regarded as unimportant. The idea of going to 'enquire of YHWH' (דרש) is one well attested in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the monarchic period. It seems to have been a chief function of the prophet to provide enquirers with a message from God -see especially 1 Sam. 9:9. Passages such as 1 Sam. 28:7, where Saul goes to a medium, 1 Ki. 22:5ff, which distinguishes between 'the prophets' and 'a prophet of the Lord', and 2 Ki. 1:2ff, where Ahaziah sends messengers to consult Baal-Zebub, point to the competition that must have existed between Yahwistic prophets and other prophets.<sup>2</sup> Those who have given these traditions their canonical form are unanimous in wanting to make clear a distinction between these different sets of prophets, and so it is not at all surprising that this oracle, given at the beginning of the story of Israel's ancestor, should explicitly come from YHWH, even if in the wider Pentateuchal picture, the idea of a prophet of YHWH seems anachronistic.<sup>3</sup>

The vocabulary and parallelistic structure of the oracle give it a distinctive poetic tone. In itself, the oracle gives no clear indication of which two nations are meant. There would be no doubt that Jacob/Israel would be the one, and in the context of v25, Edom is meant by the other. No doubt some reference to the subjugation of Edom in the time of David can

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<sup>1</sup> C. G. Allen ('On Me be the Curse, My Son!', in M. J. Buss ed., *Encounter with the Text*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, 167-8) wonders whether we should in fact see Rebekah as the necessary link between Abraham and Jacob. For a more detailed consideration of her approach see below, p. 105-6. It is certainly significant that Rebekah and not Isaac should receive this crucial information about the twins, and this contributes to the wider picture of Rebekah and Isaac. One of the motifs in the patriarchal narratives is that of the matriarchs who, each in their own way, offer contrasts to the respective patriarch. In terms of the interest in the divine-human encounter, this contrast adds a further perspective to that understanding, as shall be seen in relation to ch. 27, where the relationship between the matriarch's acts and the divine plan is very unclear.

<sup>2</sup> At 1 Ki. 22:5ff the four hundred prophets prophesy (albeit falsely) about YHWH (v6b). This may suggest some overlap between prophecies concerning YHWH and other gods.

<sup>3</sup> Westermann (*Genesis 12-36*, 413) makes the point that the setting of the idea of 'enquiring of Yahweh' is consistent with the monarchic setting of the oracle which follows. This is also true, but does not recognize the similarity with the motif of praying to YHWH in distress. Regarding this motif, Westermann suggests that it survives from a 'narrative from the patriarchal period' since 'it is in accord with the patriarchal period in that the father is the intercessor'. However, this in turn fails to do justice to the strong Yahwistic overtones of the description which suggests a later setting than any pre-Yahwistic patriarchal age.

be understood, though this does not exhaust the scope of the oracle.<sup>1</sup> The effect of such an oracle placed at the beginning of the Jacob story is to make clear from the outset that as well as dealing with two brothers, the story also has in its view two neighbouring peoples. However, it also makes the theological point that what is to happen is within the foreknowledge of God.

Vv24-26 return to the patriarchal era and Rebekah's pregnancy, and also from the divine perspective back to the human, graphically depicting the fraternal rivalry which is a consequence of what is predicted in the oracle.

The opening phrase of v24 (...וימלא) emphasizes the duration of the pregnancy but also takes the reader to the moment of birth. The narrated perspective is still that of Rebekah ('her days', twins in 'her womb'). The force of ונהנה is to confirm the oracle: now that the birth is about to take place, we discover that there are indeed twins. For Rebekah, of course, this has a special significance since she alone, we might assume, is party to the divine perspective.

The description of Esau has a light comic touch as the reader is invited to imagine a baby covered in red<sup>2</sup> hair popping out of the mother. There are perhaps also cultural overtones, suggesting an uncultured, 'wild' way of life.<sup>3</sup> However the description also introduces into

<sup>1</sup> 2 Sam. 8:12-14. This is widely agreed among commentators. What is less clear is how far we should go in translating the individual traits of each twin and their relationship with each other (Esau being older than Jacob) into national-historical terms. Even Blum, who sees the national dimension as foundational to the story, accepts that the twins are depicted as characters in their own right, rather than as allegorical ciphers (*Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 79).

<sup>2</sup> The only other use of the word אדמוני is a reference to David (1 Sam. 6:12, also 17:42). In this case it describes the hero's ruddy appearance. Could it be that we have in this less complimentary description of Esau a very subtle ironic allusion to David, the subjugator of the Edomites -the oracle spoken to Sarah will be fulfilled through another ruddy (אדמוני) character?

Note also: 'Even at birth and before, he [Esau] had all the symptoms of a violent, sinful person. As an embryo he fought to approach the temple of the idols, he was born with the redness that is symbolic of bloodshed. As a youngster he was drawn to the excitement of the hunt ... King David, too had the redness of bloodshed, but he surmounted all obstacles to become the Sweet Singer of Israel,' in N. Scherman and M. Zlotowitz, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*, Artscroll Tanach Series, New York: Mesorah, 1980, vol. 3, 1013.

<sup>3</sup> 'a sign in this instance of excessive sensual vigour and wildness': C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch: Volume 1, (Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament)*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1864, (ET), 268.

For Ancient Near Eastern parallels: E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964, 196; Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch*, 111ff. This description of Esau as a type for the



the Jacob-Esau story elements which will be important later on: the colour red anticipates Esau's craving for the red soup in v30, and more importantly, his hairy mantle will be a crucial factor in Jacob's deception (27:11). Furthermore there are gentle allusions to both Edom and Seir, Edom's dwelling place. The word שער also anticipates the naming of עשו, and is the nearest to any etymology for Esau in Genesis. This cluster of allusions establishes the link between the individual Esau and the people of Edom, though Esau also remains an individual in his own right.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Jacob is second to be born is emphasized by the adverbial phrase אחר-יכן. This is of course of vital importance in the whole question of the right of the first-born (see excursus below). The passage also anticipates ch. 27 where Jacob steals the natural right of the first-born, the father's blessing, by reversing the order of their birth: he is the first to see his father and so secures the advantages of the first-born. Furthermore, the first reference to Jacob is as the brother of Esau, thus indicating that the fate of the two will be tied up in each other.

Whereas interest in Esau centres on appearance, in Jacob the interest is in his action. The picture of grasping the heel gives the 'human' side to the divine oracle: if it is true that the older will serve the younger, it is not least because of the blatant efforts of the younger to secure the advantage.<sup>2</sup> For the time being he has failed, but we know he will bide his time. That this action of Jacob is not a fleeting grasp but an accurate indication of his personality is confirmed in the etymology, where this episode is to be permanently remembered through his name.<sup>3</sup>

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uncultured man is also relevant to the next episode (v27ff).

<sup>1</sup> This would not have been the case if an explicit etymological connection had been made with the names Edom or Seir.

<sup>2</sup> For an interpretation of 'heel' as a euphemism for genitalia, see S. H. Smith, "'Heel' and 'Thigh': The Concept of Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau narratives." *VT* 40 (1990), 465. In this case, the image is of Jacob attempting to appropriate for himself the procreative powers of Esau.

<sup>3</sup> Apart from the Piel form found at Job 37:4, the verb לקב is only used at Gen. 27:36, Jer. 9:3, Hos. 12:4 -in two cases, with a clear link to Jacob, in Jer. with a probable allusion to this tradition. However, V. P. Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis: chapter 18-50*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 227) refers to examples of the verb in Ugaritic texts where the root is used in a metaphorical way. What any original etymology for the name יעקב might have meant is unclear. None other is offered in the Bible, although the popular scholarly view is that the name is a shortened form of the name 'Jacob-El' which does not occur in the Biblical text but widely in other ANE literature. See 'יעקב' -H.-J. Zobel, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 6, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977-1990 (ET of *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Stuttgart, 1970ff), 188-90.

The final clause brings this episode to a close with a formal tone and by moving back to the perspective of Isaac. That twenty years have elapsed before the birth is only now revealed.

*v27-34: a consideration of their thematic relationship to the preceding verses.*

It has already been argued that these verses form a further scene within the introduction to the Jacob story. Our interest here is how the verses contrast with the oracle.

V27, connecting the birth to the following scene begins to make a clear differentiation between the twins. Thus the separation mentioned in the oracle (יִפְרְדוּ) becomes apparent. Unlike with Isaac's preference for Esau, we are not told why the mother should prefer Jacob: perhaps because he was more domesticated or because of the oracle. In any case, Isaac's preference is based on self-interest and his love of game, whereas no motive of self-interest is indicated for Rebekah. This may play a part in determining how we should judge Rebekah's action in ch. 27.

The incident concerning the stew centres around the key concept of בִּכְרָה. In the context of this passage alone, it is not clear exactly how this term corresponds to the idea of the patriarchal promise or blessing (בְּרִכָּה), and this probably requires some traditio-historical consideration.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the two are not exactly the same; on the other hand, within the wider narrative context, the promise motif provides an overall uniting key.<sup>2</sup> More importantly for our concern at the moment, the term picks up the contrast of the בָּר and צַעִיר in the oracle, and sharpens the irony of the older (the real first-born) serving the younger. The irony is particularly sharp because the term בִּכְרָה carries with it connotations

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Regarding the change in the form of the verb קָרָא between the naming of Esau (3rd person plural) and Jacob (3rd person singular), the MT reading seems secure despite textual variants (LXX, Syriac and the Vulgate, which also have a singular verb in v25.) The variants are probably to be explained as a harmonization with v26. On other hand, the Targum and the Samaritan text make the verb in v26 plural -again, probably to bring the two verses in harmony.

As to why there should be two different verb forms, it is probably simply a stylistic variation, although the suggestion has been made that a more definite 'He called' could refer to God or Isaac as subject (Rashi in M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann eds, Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtorah and Rashi's Commentary, New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 115). However, this does not really account for the same form for the giving of the name Edom in v30.

<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 108-9.

<sup>2</sup> Von Rad (Genesis, 268): 'The divine promise is like a sign before and over all these individual narratives, and within this bracket, so to speak, there is much good and evil.' The value of von Rad's approach here is that he is able to treat each discrete episode with its own historical particularity and distinctiveness, whilst also seeing each as contributing the wider narrative context.

of divine favour, here reversed (e.g Dt. 21:17).

The contrast between this scene and the oracle is that in this later scene, the status rightly given to the first-born is not given to Jacob by God (as might be expected from the oracle) but is extorted from Esau in cold calculation: whereas divine favour might be hinted at in the oracle, now, the only factor is human craftiness. Thus these verses add to the impression already given of a real struggle by one brother to get on top of the other -a struggle that is no less real despite the wider divine perspective given by the oracle before their birth.

Nevertheless, this scene also introduces the motif of Esau's unworthiness to receive the birthright, an aspect which helps to make the sordid tale of human deception and struggle more palatable to religious sensibilities. This motif is nowhere clearer in the story of Jacob and Esau than in the matter of fact but outright statement that Esau despised his birthright (v34b). In interpreting this motif commentators vary from Gunkel,<sup>1</sup> who sees this simply as a humorous tale of the clever Jacob deceiving his clumsy brother, to commentators giving a much more moral interpretation, emphasizing Esau's shortsightedness and lack of interest in the birthright on the one hand, and Jacob's intense desire for it, on the other.<sup>2</sup> This final clause, a very rare moral judgement by the narrator, certainly adds to the complex depiction of Jacob and Esau and the varying forces at play in their destinies, but von Rad's<sup>3</sup> note of caution, that we should not venture too far in looking for psychological interpretations, would seem appropriate: certainly there is some condemnation and especially mockery of Esau, and we might agree that at least Jacob could see beyond his immediate needs; but the passage remains open-ended and refuses any black and white judgements in favour of one

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 297-99. For a greater consideration of this and opposing views, see below, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Keil-Delitzsch, (The Pentateuch), 269; F. Delitzsch, (A New Commentary of Genesis, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1889 ET), 137: Esau forfeits the blessing of the first-born 'because minded *κατα σαρκα*. The brotherly artifice of Jacob is indeed sinful, and we see this one sin produce the first sin of deceiving his ageing father...By reason however of the fundamental tendency of his mind towards the promised blessing, Jacob is the more pleasing to God of the two brothers.'

Better grounded in the narrative itself is the observation that Esau is depicted as 'uncouth' or a 'glutton', especially in the way he exaggerates his hunger, in the bluntness of his speech and the quick succession of verbs in v34aβ -see R. Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981, 44; S. Bar-Efrat, Narrative Art in the Bible, Sheffield: JSOT Supp. 70, 1989, 79. 216-7, Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: chapters 18-50, 182.

By contrast, Bar-Efrat sees the description of Jacob as an *אִתְּנָה* (v27) as a term hinting at the narrator's positive evaluation of Jacob (Narrative Art in the Bible, 33).

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, 267-8. Von Rad also points to a certain unclarity about the connection between the birthright and the patriarchal blessing. This question is also touched on in relation to ch. 27 (p. 118-9).

or the other of the brothers. Instead, we are left with the impression of the very human story of rivalry between two brothers, neither of whom emerges in an exemplary way.<sup>1</sup>

*Excursus: the motif of בכרה*

Besides v31ff, the term בכרה is used in ch. 27 (v19 and 32), and ironically, in blessing the sons of Joseph, Jacob deliberately treats the younger Ephraim as the first-born (ch. 48:17ff). More broadly, the contrast of the older and the younger, and the idea of the supremacy of one over the other lies at the heart of the whole of the Jacob-Esau narrative.

The idea of the first-born, expressed in the root בכר, is widespread in the Old Testament, as more generally in the ANE.<sup>2</sup> In the Pentateuch it concerns the first-fruits of the field (e.g. Ex. 23:16) or of beasts and indeed of sons (Ex. 13:2). With human beings, in some cases the first-born is defined by the father, the first-born being the first of the father's strength (Dt. 21:17b $\alpha$ ); elsewhere the first-born of the mother is the defining principle, where the first-born is the one to open the womb (Ex. 13:2). In the case of Jacob's sons, it is Reuben who is recognized as the first-born, defined as the first strength of his father Jacob (see Gen. 49:3).

Dt. 21:15ff deals with what is termed the משפט הבכרה, where it is made clear that in a state of polygamy, the first-born of the father has a right over any other son, even of a more favourite mother. How this passage might be related to the state of Jacob and Esau is not clear.<sup>3</sup> Tsevat argues that in narrative, the status of the first-born is less fixed, although he also states that the several exceptions to the rule in narrative emphasize the choice of God disrupting the natural order. His suggestion that the patriarchal narratives want to describe a time in which the first-born did not enjoy a privileged position does not really do justice

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<sup>1</sup> 'Jacob has a sharp mind and no conscience, but Esau is all belly and no brain,' T. W. Mann, The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988, 52. In this light, it is probably inappropriate to give too much weight to the term נָתַן, used to describe Jacob in v27. It can certainly mean 'innocent' but may also denote simplicity; furthermore, far from being a straightforward description of Jacob, there may be a degree of irony in the use of the term (see Alter, Genesis, 128). By contrast, Ibn Ezra sees the word as denoting integrity, being antithetical to the deceit used by Esau, the trapper of animals, (N. Strickman and M. Silver eds, Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis, New York: Menorah Publishing Company, 1988, 251).

<sup>2</sup> For much of the following, see Tsevat, Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, vol. 2, 121-27. Also Speiser, Genesis, 194-5, on Mesopotamian legal practice.

<sup>3</sup> C. M. Carmichael, Women, Law, and the Genesis Traditions, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979, 31 sees the Deuteronomic law as written in the light of the ill-treatment of Leah and her son Reuben.

to the tension within the narratives where the status of the first-born son does matter. In the light of this principle, Tsevat also argues that what Esau sells to Jacob is simply the special portion due to the first-born: 'Esau's rank and position are not affected by this transaction, as ch. 27 shows quite clearly.'<sup>1</sup> However, in ch. 27, it is questionable whether such a clear distinction can be made, and the repeated use of the term by Jacob seems to indicate that the status of the first-born is tied up with the theme of the blessing.

The other concentration of the term of the first-born is in the exodus tradition where Israel is described as YHWH's first-born, and where all the first-born Egyptians are slain because of Pharaoh's refusal to allow Israel to leave Egypt (see esp. Ex. 4:22-23). This tradition provides an historical basis for the idea of the first-born, particularly in relation to the law of redemption for the first-born son, (Ex. 13:15).

Regarding the particular privileges of the first-born, it is important to bear in mind the spiritual or even priestly aspect brought out by some Jewish commentators. Because he is set apart, the first-born son is deemed quasi-holy,<sup>2</sup> and, before the institution of the Levitical priesthood, the first-born is seen as acting as priest.<sup>3</sup> This aspect is important in highlighting the responsibility of the first-born.

Two recent treatments are worth special mention. Syrén's recent monograph<sup>4</sup> on the theme of the first-born who loses his status is restricted to Genesis and especially the stories of Abraham/Ishmael and Jacob/Esau, which he sees as clear parallels to each other. His interest is on understanding the idea of בכרה in its narratological context, and his contribution is in showing how the idea fits the national and theological interests of Israel (in particular, he argues, of the post-exilic community), since the repeated favouring of the younger over the

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<sup>1</sup> Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, vol. 2, 126.

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Plaut ed., The Torah: A Modern Commentary, New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981, 175.

<sup>3</sup> So J. H. Hertz, The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Genesis, London: Oxford University Press, 1929, 220, also J. Calvin A Commentary on Genesis, vol. 2, London: Banner of Truth Trust (ET of 1554) 53, and Delitzsch (A New Commentary on Genesis, 136) who cites the Mishna tradition that the first-born had the Abodah (priestly office). Based on this understanding, Rashi finds an extra meaning to Esau's remark that he is about to die (v32): 'Esau said, 'What is the nature of this Service [of the first-born]? Jacob replied, 'Many prohibitions and punishments and many acts involving even the punishment of death are associated with it ...He [Esau] said: If I am going to die through it, why should I desire it,' Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, Pentateuch, 117.

<sup>4</sup> R. Syrén, The Forsaken First Born: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives, Sheffield: JSOT Supp 133, 1993.

first-born, and their consequent peaceful separation, relate to Israel's self-understanding against its neighbours, as a nation elected by God.

Whereas Syrén's interest is in the developed narrative concept of the first-born, Levenson<sup>1</sup> bases the concept in what he sees as the ancient cultic tradition of Israel. Starting with the practice of child sacrifice, he controversially argues that this practice was once much more acceptable in Israelite religion than later prophetic critiques and most Jewish and Christian commentators would allow. Furthermore, Levenson argues that this idea provides a key motif to narratives in Genesis, not to mention in New Testament christological understanding.

Levenson points to the striking paradox underlying the idea of the first-born: like the first-fruits of a crop, the first-born son represents the best, and as such belongs to God. Hence, if not literal sacrifice, then at least redemption 'is necessary because the first-born son belongs to YHWH...The underlying theology of the redemption of the first-born son is that...the life of the son in question is his not by right, but by gift.'<sup>2</sup> As a result, 'Justice is not done to the complicated role of the first-born son if we fail to note both his exalted status and the precariousness of his very life. The beloved son is marked for both exaltation and for humiliation. In his life the two are seldom far apart.'<sup>3</sup> This also applies to the idea of 'chosenness' which overlaps greatly with the concept of first-born.

This idea is played out in the story of those who are exalted to the status of first-born in Genesis, and for Jacob it means that since he is the one chosen over Esau and thereby attains the status of first-born, he must undergo a state of humiliation, a symbolic death, before enjoying his exalted status. This is what Jacob's exile from the Promised Land and his human father represent.

To sum up, the idea of the first-born, whether human, animal or of crops, is widespread not just in Israel but in the ANE. A law such as Dt. 21:15ff may be regarded as a tightening up of the more varied application of the idea, just as the tying of it to the exodus tradition gives it a salvation-historical basis. Theologically, the idea proves fruitful to Israel's religious

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<sup>1</sup> J. D. Levenson, The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Levenson, The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, 59.

<sup>3</sup> This idea relates to the above-mentioned priestly understanding of the status of the first-born as both a privilege and a responsibility, although Levenson does not really give explicit consideration to this tradition.

traditions, especially in giving a concrete expression to the idea of Israel being elected or chosen, bringing with it both privilege and responsibility.

A frequent twist to this motif which contradicts the Dt. law but which proves to be particularly fruitful is that of the younger son gaining the status of the first-born. This emphasizes even more the free choice of YHWH, and sets his choosing of Israel in a certain dialectic: his choice is not natural, but stems from his sovereign will. It is also played out in the lives of human beings where one man's exaltation means another's humiliation. This gives Israel a means of understanding its own special status among other nations which depends not upon its own power or historical primacy, but on its relationship with YHWH. Finally, as Levenson has shown, the idea of *בכרה* touches on the theologically suggestive paradox of exaltation and humiliation stemming from the resilient idea of sacrifice. It is within this understanding of *בכרה*, as much inferred as spelt out, that the Jacob narrative operates as the very human events around the life of this individual and his family are part of the wider workings of the divine scheme.

### 1.3 Conclusion

#### 1.3.1 Historical-critical summary

As already mentioned, vv19-26 -with vv27-34 -has been constructed to provide an introduction to the Jacob story, though probably using older traditions. The Priestly framework emphasizes that this scene marks a new stage in the patriarchal story, and draws the story of Jacob into its own understanding of the תולדת יצחק, one effect of which is to make this the story of both sons of Isaac.

In both theme and the wider structuring of the book of Genesis, this opening scene stands in close relationship to the following verses. These verses themselves seem to draw on the motif of the contrasting lifestyles and on the story of the selling of the birthright -itself probably already a tradition about Jacob and Esau. Together, vv19-34 provide a series of scenes of the early life of the twins which anticipate what is to follow and introduce the link with the neighbouring peoples of Israel and Edom.

#### 1.3.2 God

Most obviously, this scene sets the divine within the life of Jacob. Even before his birth, it is clear that all that will follow is set within the wider providential scheme. This is particularly emphasized by formal, stereo-typical elements: the opening toledoth formula placing the life of Jacob within the wider unfolding of history from creation, the initial emphasis on Isaac reminding us of the patriarchal promise, the motif of the long-awaited child as a divine gift arousing great expectations. Added to this are the words of the oracle. Nevertheless God's providential scheme creates its own paradoxes. The first of these relates to the initial barrenness of Rebekah. As Hamilton<sup>1</sup> points out, Rebekah's barren state might put into question the certainty with which she is depicted as the chosen wife for Isaac in ch. 24. In the end, of course, the motif of barrenness emphasizes the providential nature of the birth of the twins, whereas the narrative passes over the waiting and the doubts.

The other striking paradox is the notion of one -and especially the younger -twin favoured over the other. The oracle given to Rebekah carries all the solemnity of a declaration of

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 18-50, 175. Calvin sees the issue in more dogmatic terms: 'This small and contemptible origin, these slow and feeble advances, render more illustrious that increase, which afterwards follows, beyond all hope and expectation, to teach us that the Church was produced and increased by divine power and grace, and not by merely natural means,' (Calvin, A Commentary on Genesis, vol. 2, 42). Also W. Brueggemann, Genesis: a Bible Commentary for teaching and preaching, Atlanta: John Knox, 1982, 212.



divine will, seeming to raise the idea of election with related questions of fairness.<sup>1</sup> For Calvin, this is a clear example of God's election acting contrary to human nature, of the divine working counter to the human: 'The sum of the whole, then, is that the preference which God gave to Jacob...was not granted as a reward for his merits, neither was obtained by his own industry, but proceeded from the mere grace of God himself.'<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, in the following episode, the harshness of this aspect of election is softened by hints of Esau's unworthiness, most notably in the rare unequivocal judgement of the narrator that Esau despised his birthright (v34). In contrast to the above approach, this motif of the relative worthiness and unworthiness of Jacob and Esau respectively tends to be maximized in traditional Jewish interpretation. Thus, for instance, the struggling in the mother's womb shows the twins each trying to run, but in different directions: Jacob to the Torah schools and Esau to the pagan temple;<sup>3</sup> the colour red depicts bloodshed; Esau's tendency to hunting symbolizes how he ensnares his father whereas Jacob's attachment to the tents refers to the tent of Shem and Eber (where Torah is studied);<sup>4</sup> Esau is not really deceived but chooses the material lentils over the birthright.<sup>5</sup> This particular hermeneutic tends to see the human and divine as less of a paradox, since the divine plan is consistent with the natural tendencies and actions of Jacob and Esau.

Interestingly, Calvin<sup>6</sup> in treating the episode of the birthright agrees that Esau's behaviour is unworthy. He draws the theological distinction between Esau as natural man, left to his own disposition, and Jacob, renewed by the Holy Spirit through God's election and therefore now demonstrating the grace of adoption by even denying himself food in favour of 'heavenly things.' In other words, Jacob's disposition to God results from divine election rather than causes it.<sup>7</sup> To a reader, working outside the doctrinal framework of Calvin, this

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of election is much clearer in Mal. 1:2-3 and theological questions around it are alluded to in Rom. 9:10-13.

<sup>2</sup> A Commentary on Genesis, vol. 2, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Rashi in Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, Pentateuch, 115.

<sup>4</sup> Rashi in Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, Pentateuch, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Scherman and Zlotowitz, Bereishis, vol. 3, 1025.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis, vol. 2, 52.

<sup>7</sup> However, on commenting on Jacob's deceit in ch. 27 (A Commentary on Genesis, vol. 2, 93) Calvin abandons and seems to contradict this approach by arguing that Jacob gains the blessing in spite

may seem just as convoluted as some of the more ingenious rabbinic readings.

Our own approach has been to see both ideas held together in the text, but the focus of interest is less on the paradox of nature and grace (as for Calvin) as on human and divine. There is an interest in the divine, how God's will is worked out, and how the divine plan works through human beings, with a strong sense of paradox and mystery; but there is also an interest in Jacob and Esau as human beings, responsible for their own action, with strong emotions.

In terms of the more general depiction of God, unlike in many episodes in the patriarchal narratives, the depiction of the divine is impersonal and mediated. Twice, God is the subject of a clause though in one case, in a stereo-typical context (v21a) and in the other (v23a) his speech is almost certainly not to be understood as given directly to Rebekah but through a cultic prophet. Thus God is not depicted as a character in the plot but as the mysterious mover behind the scenes.

Regarding the use of the divine name, we have suggested that this may be part of the redactional hand, making it clear at the beginning of Jacob's life, that it is YHWH, the God of Israel, who is meant. Furthermore the notions of enquiring at a prophet and of answering in distress (עֲתֹרָה) are anachronistic links with the religious life of Israel.

### 1.3.3 The human

As just indicated, interest in the human is far from being subsumed in this opening scene. This is of course true in the wider patriarchal story where the divine is manifest through the story of a family. This is now made clear as we are introduced to the תולדת יצחק, but especially as the focus shifts to Rebekah and the twins in her womb. It is the mother who feels the struggle, indeed her very body is the location of that struggle. She it is who seeks and finds the divine perspective. Nevertheless, although she is told what the struggle means, there is no hint how the oracle is to be fulfilled. We can probably assume that the oracle is not just a prediction but also an indication of the divine plan. But it is left to Jacob (and his mother) to bring the plan about.

The struggling in the womb provides the human side to the divine word. Likewise, Jacob's grasping at the heel of his brother offers a view on how the divine plan will be fulfilled, born

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of his unworthy behaviour (in contrast to Esau who obeys his father).

out in the etymology for Jacob itself, that the founder of Israel is to be characterised by his grasping nature. His status is as much something he grasps as he receives.

An indication of the writer's interest in the human side of this story is also to be found in the subtle characterization. As Vawter writes: 'The character of Jacob is by far the most carefully and subtly delineated of all the patriarchal figures, and from these legends he emerges as the most clearly defined human with a personality that develops and matures.'<sup>1</sup> As we proceed through the Jacob story we shall see how this proves to be the case, though not simply in the characterization of Jacob but in other members of his family and in their interrelation as well.

One additional perspective is that of Israel: just as the language used in relation to the divine draws the reader into Yahwistic beliefs, so the contents of the oracle and allusions to the nation of Edom make the reader aware that this is the story not just of two brothers but of two neighbouring peoples. This identification furthermore makes the point that YHWH is as much involved in the relative status of these peoples as he is in the individuals depicted.

Thus within the opening scene, although there is a clear indication of the divine perspective, this perspective is ambiguous leaving many open questions, and we see that the graspings of Jacob will be just as much a factor in the story ahead as any providential guiding of events. The two aspects will be two sides of the one coin. Finally, as we move to the second scene from v27 the plot moves fully to the human side leaving the divine behind for the time being -or at least so it seems. Thus the scene of Jacob buying the birthright is a very crude contrast to the opening scene of the oracle. The next clear indication of the divine perspective will not be until some years later, when Jacob seems to have achieved his mastery over his brother but is left vulnerable: seeming to have gained all, he seems to lose all in consequence.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Vawter, On Genesis: A New Reading, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, 289-90.

## 2 Bethel (28:10-22)

### 2.1 Introduction

Although, as we have seen, the divine has already been present in the story of Jacob, this is Jacob's first direct encounter with God. This is particularly striking because the experience, with its unsolicited and unambiguous self-revelation of YHWH and its accompanying promises, follows the morally questionable behaviour of Jacob in cheating his father and elder brother, and the consequential escape. A further significance of its placement is that it bridges the Esau and Laban sub-plots. Thus in the very placement of this passage between two sets of family entanglements, the contrast of human and divine is thrown into sharp relief.

A further note of interest picked up by scholars is the variety of divine themes in the passage: elements in the vision, the words of YHWH concerning both Jacob's life and beyond, the reactions of Jacob both immediately and in the next morning. Added to this is strong interest in the place of Bethel.

Given this strong concentration of differing themes it is no surprise that this passage is generally considered to have a complex pre-history, being a favourite passage for demonstrating the existence of the written sources of the Pentateuch and for investigating questions of tradition history behind written sources.

#### 2.1.1 Source criticism

To many, given the presence of the traditional criteria, it is almost self-evident that the sources J and E can be found in this passage. Indeed it is to be noted that in two currently popular student handbooks on exegesis in the German language<sup>1</sup> this is the passage chosen for an exemplary approach, with source criticism playing a main role. In addition, the reoccurrence of Bethel in ch. 35, brings in the question of doublets, although this wider aspect shall be considered later.

Aspects of the passage judged to be criteria for source division are as follows:

- variations in the divine name.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. Fohrer, Exegese des Alten Testaments, 5th ed., Heidelberg. Wiesbaden: UTB Theologie 1989, and H. Barth and O. H. Steck, Exegese des Alten Testaments: Leitfaden der Methodik, 12th ed., Neukirchener Verlag, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Gunkel, Genesis, 316; von Rad, Genesis, 283.

- v16 and 17 as doublets.<sup>1</sup>
- in v17, the place *is* the house of God, in v22 it is to be so *after* Jacob's return.<sup>2</sup> (See also v19a).
- is it appropriate for Jacob to be afraid *after* the divine speech?<sup>3</sup>
- it is argued that a conditional oath is inappropriate after a promise from God.<sup>4</sup>

The validity of these criteria will be considered later.

The clearest division of the passage is as follows:<sup>5</sup>

J -vv13-16, 19

E -vv10-12, 17-22 (excluding v19).

What is unusual about this is that the basic frame is provided by E (generally seen as the later source) with J texts seeming to elaborate within this frame, particularly by giving content to the dream.

#### *Variations within source critical approaches*

There is basic agreement among source critical approaches regarding the above division. Most differences are minor, such as the place of v10, or the reference to Luz (v19b).

V21b (E) also causes a problem because of the name YHWH, thus Gunkel ascribes this part to the redactor.<sup>6</sup>

One issue faced in some studies is the relationship between J and E. *Barth-Steck* notices that the verses ascribed to J appear to be secondary. To investigate their relationship a comparison is made of the two sets of verses in Gen. 28, drawing in the reference in Hosea 12:5.7 (MT) as a third set. By treating these three hypothetical accounts as independent variations of the same form, thereby assuming that Hosea is not dependent on Gen. 28 or

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<sup>1</sup> Gunkel, Genesis, 316; von Rad, Genesis, 283.

<sup>2</sup> Barth-Steck, Exegese des Alten Testaments, 123.

<sup>3</sup> Barth-Steck, Exegese des Alten Testaments, 122.

<sup>4</sup> 'Beides zusammen wäre dem Frommen unerträglich: was Gott zugesagt hat, würde der Mensch durch ein Gelübde...nur in Zweifel ziehen,' (Gunkel, Genesis, 316-7; also von Rad, Genesis, 283).

<sup>5</sup> See von Rad, Genesis, 283.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis, 321.

on either of its main sources,<sup>1</sup> it is noted that Hosea and J have most in common, with an appearance by God, followed by speech from God to Jacob. Since these agree, Barth-Steck argue that they better preserve the older form,<sup>2</sup> and that E is a later form which has transformed the divine promise into a vow by Jacob. The two sources were woven together by a 'jehowistische Redaktion'<sup>3</sup> using E as the framework. Thus Barth-Steck end by affirming the traditional view of two independent sources, now woven together.

*Fohrer* carries out a similar exercise as Barth-Steck but ends with a very different picture. In a preliminary examination he carries out a 'Scheidung', pointing out parts of the passage which do not really 'belong together'. These fragments are sorted into groups, resulting in an 'einfache Einheit' to which other strands were added. This basic unit is fairly much the same as the parts ascribed to E above, and Fohrer indeed agrees with this ascription because of the use of the term אלהים.

Where he differs from Barth-Steck and other source-critical approaches is that he does not treat the other verses as a parallel account. Indeed he sees the promises in vv13-16 as dependent on the E version, in particular on the vow which Jacob makes, their purpose being to shift the emphasis from the localized place to the land in more general terms. He calls them 'jahwistisch', but they are not the source J but a 'Bearbeitungsschicht'.

### 2.1.2 Form and tradition criticism

For the studies considered above, source criticism is but the first step to tracing signs of development behind the written sources.

As expected *Gunkel* sees much evidence of pre-literary development. He identifies several motifs which contain 'höchst altertümliche, ursprünglich mythologische Vorstellungen',<sup>4</sup> including the symbol of the ladder which points to the idea of God sending messengers from

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<sup>1</sup> Barth-Steck make this assumption without seeking to justify it. Also E. Otto, 'Jakob in Bethel. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Jakobüberlieferung.' *ZAW* 88 (1976), 177.

<sup>2</sup> Barth-Steck qualify this with the view that the promises in their present form show evidence of strong reformulation by J.

<sup>3</sup> *Exegese des Alten Testaments*, 135.

<sup>4</sup> *Genesis*, 317.

heaven where he lives. He also points to many parallels in other literature. Furthermore, the phrase 'House of God' reveals an ancient conception where originally the heavenly house inhabited by the deity would have been thought to be sited above the earthly shrine. Added to this is the tradition of venerating stones.

In a separate conclusion,<sup>1</sup> Gunkel argues that the story as it is predates the prophetic period, because of the positive view of Bethel as YHWH's shrine. In its earliest form the stone would have been considered to be 'God's house', with the appearing divinity being the local numen, the  $\text{לֵן}$  of Bethel. Later development makes this connection weaker.

Thus Gunkel sees a long prehistory, going back to 'pre-Israelite' times, although he does not enter into detailed analysis of this development. Implicit in his approach is the religious-historical idea of religion developing from 'primitive' concrete conception of localized gods to the developed belief in God who does not literally dwell in one place.

Likewise, *Barth-Steck* think there may be traces of a Palestinian pre-Canaanite 'Megalithkultur',<sup>2</sup> which considered the divinity to be dwelling in the stone. The first tangible 'Überlieferungsgestalt' is a narrative dating from the time when Bethel became a Canaanite cultic shrine with the worship of El. A 'proto-Israelite Jacob' group then adopted the shrine, identifying El with the patriarchal god, and introducing Jacob. Then the independent story becomes incorporated into the Jacob-Esau-Laban cycle, with the emphasis shifting from the place Bethel to the journey motif and to the character of Jacob. From this developed the two sources, each adapting the episode. Likewise, *Fohrer* sees pre-Israelite origins because of non-Israelite religious elements, the name Bethel containing the name  $\text{לֵן}$ ,<sup>3</sup> and archaeological excavations uncovering a pre-Israelite settlement.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, not all critics employing historical-critical methods accept the use of source criticism as the correct starting-point. Among such approaches are Westermann and Blum.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 321.

<sup>2</sup> Exegese des Alten Testaments, 132.

<sup>3</sup> Fohrer points to Gen. 35:7, and 31:13 and Jer. 48:13 of other possible traces of the El-Bethel.

<sup>4</sup> Otto ('Jakob in Bethel') carries out a more extensive attempt to root the tradition of Jacob in Bethel to the pre-monarchic tribal period. This approach assumes the existence of a pre-monarchic tribal system in Israel, where each tribe had its own shrine with its own particular traditions, some of which were promoted, some suppressed, depending on the influence of the particular tribe which bore the tradition.

*Westermann* starts by noting two aspects of the narrative:<sup>1</sup> the etiological interest in Bethel and the interest in Jacob. He sees this dual interest as an indicator of development, with an original pre-Israelite cult etiology reshaped by the Israelite writer(s) who introduced the character of Jacob and the promise of v15. To this were added vv13b, 14 and 20-22, which expand the promise and add the vow, and which introduce aspects relevant to later Israel. He also sees some incongruity between the divine promise and the vow: 'The same thing cannot simultaneously be a divine promise and the condition of a vow'. He therefore sees a simple three-stage reconstruction, running parallel to the formation of the people of Israel. Regarding the differing designations for God, he argues that each has to be considered in its own context -something we shall consider in the exegesis.

The Bethel episode is the starting-point for *Blum's* study of the patriarchal narratives, forming a key building block in the Jacob story, itself the oldest part of the patriarchal narrative. Apart from those verses which contain the divine promise and the vow, the passage contains nothing which would indicate that it belonged to a wider narrative context, forming instead an independent, self-contained narrative unit (vv11-13a, 16-19) which cuts across traditional source division but which looks to be skilfully formed.<sup>2</sup> This original unit belonged to the genre of the 'Kultgründungsansage', though Blum does not offer any consideration of a specific *Sitz im Leben*.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12-36, 452.

<sup>2</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 8ff. In his work Blum seems to use two criteria for distinguishing an original unity: the first, articulated at the start (p. 7) is to what extent the passage or elements within it are dependent upon the wider context. The second method that he seems to use is to look for an inner coherence between the different elements. For this he uses what he calls 'synchronic' methods (e.g. p. 19). However these concepts are nowhere analysed in any detail, and in the former case, it is difficult to distinguish between a literary dependency and a more general affinity or influence which different stories can have on each other.

In the case of the Bethel passage, having eliminated elements presupposing the wider context (i.e. v10, the divine promises and the oath) -essentially a diachronic judgement, a 'synchronic' investigation of the remaining verses reveals a 'künstvoll gestaltete und thematisch in sich ruhende Erzählung' (p. 34). In particular he finds an inner and outer narrative framework around the description of the dream: v12a (ויחלם) corresponding to v16a (וייקץ); and v11\* to v18\*, which contain similar expressions and syntax but which also stand in an antithetical relationship. Thus the text divides naturally into four sections (beginning ויפגע (v11), ורנה (v12a), וייקץ (v16), וישכם (v18)). Within each section and also between each one there are thematic and linguistic links. Hence Blum finds no room for division along source critical or any other grounds.

For a criticism of the method and conclusions of Blum, see S. McEvenue, 'A Return to Sources in Genesis 28:10-22?' ZAW 106 (1994), 375-89.



Later<sup>1</sup> Blum considers the place of vv20-22 concerning Jacob's oath. Besides v21b which contains a Deuteronomic covenant formula, the oath itself should be seen in the historical context of the temple at Bethel in the Northern Kingdom some time between its institution by Jeroboam and its destruction by Josiah. The verses thus transform the story into an etiological justification for the setting up of the Bethel cult by the Northern monarchy.

Finally, within the promise made by YHWH (vv13ab-15),<sup>2</sup> v15 belongs to the same redactional layer as 31:3 and 32:10-13 where Jacob recalls the promise. He sees them as part of a wider Dtr. redaction which goes beyond the patriarchal narratives and which shifts the emphasis from the particular place of Bethel to the promised land in general. Regarding v13aβ -14, Blum considers these to be presupposed by v15 (hence the summary phrase *לך את אשר דברתי לך*),<sup>3</sup> and to be part of a pre-Deuteronomic 'Vätergeschichte'.

Overall Blum's approach is a clear attack on the documentary hypothesis. In particular he has rejected the criterion of which divine term is used. He is also cautious in his treatment of the earliest stages of the passage even though he sees this as one of the oldest passages in the Jacob narrative.

Significantly, however, he never really considers the theological dimension of the passage, not even in the religio-historical sense of Gunkel, preferring instead a national-political model.

Although *Van Seters'* work is often considered to be a logical development of the source critical approach, his treatment of the Bethel passage leans heavily on Blum. In general terms, he agrees with Blum in finding a basic unit to which additions were made. The content of this early cult etiology is different for Van Seters only because he excludes two references to YHWH: v13aα -because of the unclear meaning of the preposition<sup>4</sup> and because he regards it as doubtful that YHWH would appear without speaking (something unique within the OT, he claims)<sup>5</sup>- and v16a, since Jacob would not have been able to

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<sup>1</sup> *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 88-89.

<sup>2</sup> *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 152-64

<sup>3</sup> *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 163.

<sup>4</sup> *Prologue to History*, 291.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, in the final form, YHWH does speak, but not in the basic form identified by Blum and adapted by Van Seters. This, of course, begs the question as to whether an original unit might have

identify the numinous without the deity making his identity quite clear.<sup>1</sup>

The greatest disagreement with Blum is that Van Seters considers all additions to come from the same source -the Yahwist who incorporates the Bethel story into a much wider narrative. Thus unlike all critics discussed above, he does not consider the promise and the vow to be incongruous, arguing instead that the vow is closely related to the divine appearance and promise. He also rejects the traditio-historical model of Blum which attempts to see different layers within promise texts.

When it comes to determining a setting for this Yahwistic work, Van Seters agrees with Blum in seeing evidence of a Deuteronomistic hand, and also sees the work as fitting into an exilic context. Thus for instance, he sees the vow as 'the paradigm of the individual Israelite faced with the crisis of exile'.<sup>2</sup> The tithe and promised house of God correspond to the exilic community's commitment to rebuild the Jerusalem temple -the fact that the tithe has no relevance within the story itself means that its inclusion is due to some external historical reference. Finally, the motif of divine presence until the return from Mesopotamia fits into the context of anticipating the return from Babylonian exile, and is also a 'democratisation' of the 'Beistandsformel', whose original Sitz im Leben was the assurance given to a king going to war and being promised success.<sup>3</sup>

This will be considered in due course, although it needs to be noted that Van Seters does not really deal with the obvious objection that Bethel with its associations with the Northern Kingdom and the cult of Jeroboam, would be problematic to any Deuteronomic writer.

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contained some message.

<sup>1</sup> Van Seters draws on Ex. 3 as an example here of where the deity makes clear his identity after a numinous experience. One could also draw on the Peniel experience (32:10ff) as an instance where Jacob cannot know the identity of the entity he has encountered without it disclosing its name. If Van Seters is correct here, which seems likely (see later), he has merely shown that Blum's reconstruction of the earliest form does not quite work.

<sup>2</sup> Prologue to History, 300. Likewise, N. Wyatt, 'Where did Jacob dream his dream?', SJOT 2 (1990), 55: 'This is the vow of every exiled Jew'. Wyatt goes further than Van Seter's in seeing the whole story composed in exile. Where Van Seter's and Wyatt's conclusions are weak is that they fail to see how the vow relates above all else to the situation (and perhaps character) of Jacob. Instead they give a methodological priority to finding a historical Sitz im Leben over and against the more obvious and secure 'Sitz im Text'. This is also pertinent to the supposed context for the motif of divine presence.

<sup>3</sup> Thus Van Seters compares Jacob's flight from Esau with David's flight from Saul, the former being a more developed form of the motif found in the latter.

One further study from the traditio-historical perspective that stands out is that of *de Pury*.<sup>1</sup> Like Blum (and indeed before Blum), de Pury considers the Bethel incident to be a key building block to the Jacob story. However, unlike Blum, de Pury defends a division of sources, but more importantly, he is almost alone in arguing for the primacy of the whole story, or 'geste' of Jacob, over against individual units.<sup>2</sup> This reversal of consensus, stemming from Gunkel, of the primacy of the small unit needs taking more seriously than it has been, and is based on a questioning of many of the presuppositions behind how Old Testament scholars have imagined oral tradition to have operated.

In regard to the elements of the Bethel episode, de Pury makes the point that, from the outset, any storyteller would only have been able to evoke interest in such a story if the hero -as well as the place -was already known to the audience -thus both motifs of place and person are needed for the story to have any dynamic (contra Westermann and Fohrer).<sup>3</sup> Likewise such a context would also have required some concrete outcome, such as the promises and vow which we now find. To take such elements away in the hope of finding an original form is to leave a story hardly worth telling!

Regarding the promise and the vow themselves, de Pury thus starts from the presupposition that if neither of these were present in the original episode, then some other consequence would need to have existed for Jacob. Furthermore, de Pury dismisses the commonly held assumption that a passage cannot have originally contained both an interest in an *hieros logos* and a promise. When he comes to look at the promises themselves, whilst admitting that they show signs of development, de Pury nevertheless claims to find elements which would correspond to an original story. In particular, given Jacob's expulsion from his

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<sup>1</sup> Promesse Divine.

<sup>2</sup> "Le récit isolé" (l'épisode) ne constitue pas toujours et a priori l'unité de base de la narration,' Promesse Divine, vol. 2, 501. Thus, he concludes: 'La conséquence de ces observations est claire. Comme nous l'avons maintes fois laissé entendre, nous sommes en droit de postuler l'existence d'un "cycle de Jacob" primitif, c'est-à-dire d'un cycle de récits dont la structure même est aussi ancienne quel les épisodes dont il se compose.' Here he is relying on the work carried out, for instance, by A. B. Lord, The Singer of Tales, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960. De Pury also finds support from R. Couffignal ('Le songe de Jacob: Approches nouvelles de Genèse 28, 10-22', Bib 58 1977, 342-60) who uses Propp's framework of the folktale to find an essential integrity to the Jacob story.

<sup>3</sup> 'L'on observera notamment que le récit ne prend un sens que dans la mesure où il se rattache à un héros connu par ailleurs. Aucun *hieros logos* ne met en scène un personnage inconnu or anonyme,' Promesse Divine, vol. 2, 367.

homeland,<sup>1</sup> both the promise of land for grazing his flocks and the promise of protection on the journey would be pertinent. Likewise, such concerns would be of relevance to listeners and narrators in a semi-nomadic context.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for de Pury, the Bethel incident is part of an original, wider story of Jacob, itself an oral hero cycle ('geste patriarcale') reaching back to the semi-nomadic grouping which claimed to be the descendants of Jacob, and for whom Bethel was an important pilgrimage centre before starting their precarious journey into the steppes.

### 2.1.3 Literary approach

Because *Fokkelman*<sup>3</sup> sets himself so consistently against the historical-critical approach, and interprets the text as he goes along,<sup>4</sup> one cannot really do him justice by treating him in an 'introduction'. However a few points can be distilled from his approach.

One is a methodological point he makes part way through: 'Historical research that starts from a literary text is not possible and thus not adequate until it has been determined to what degree the elements signified have been integrated into the structure.'<sup>5</sup> In other words, the meaning or significance of a word or object is determined first and foremost by its role in the structure. Thus Fokkelman implicitly rejects the approach of Gunkel and others who try to understand the meaning of symbols such as the ladder or the stone pillar by drawing on external material. It can be seen how this literary approach works out:

*-the structure of the dream*, the repetition of the particle הנה takes us from the perspective of the narrator to that of Jacob. The order of the three parts of his dream reflect the order in which he experiences things. Thus the possibility of different sources or of doublets does not come into the reckoning. Likewise the transition from amazement to fear corresponds to the psychological experience of gradually coming aware as one wakes up.

*-the 'place'* -here, Fokkelman plays down any sense of the place having an inherently

<sup>1</sup> Accepting this, of course, depends upon accepting de Pury's wider argument that the Bethel incident must always have been part of a wider context.

<sup>2</sup> Promesse Divine, vol. 1, 173-185.

<sup>3</sup> Narrative Art in Genesis.

<sup>4</sup> 'I shall arrange my results...by working unilinearly, parallel to the reading-process proper: accompanied by the reader I intend to follow the text from front to back, listening to its words and style patiently and closely,' (p. 46).

<sup>5</sup> Narrative Art, 70.

numinous quality, since, for him, the narrative context makes it clear that this anonymous place only becomes significant after the action of God. In this case, one might question how much the form really conveys this idea, and how much he reflects an enlightenment Protestant perspective.

*-the ladder* -instead of drawing on ANE material, Fokkelman makes a contrast with the tower of Babel:

'The Jacob's ladder against the background of all of Genesis: Gen 1-11 offers a history of the world...which contrasts sharply with the particular history of Abraham...Opposed to the various human initiatives of primeval history in general comes, from Gen. 12 onwards, God's initiative...The patriarch of Israel now beholds how God himself provides a connection: heaven and earth are now really connected, but not from below! For this ladder has been let down from heaven.'<sup>1</sup>

*-the stone* -again, meaning is to be determined not by religio-historical comparison but from the context. As the place, the stone itself is indefinite, insignificant, with 'minimum personality'. Through the anointing, and more importantly through God's revelation, it is given 'a maximum individuality and personality as a milestone in the history of salvation'.<sup>2</sup> Thus there is no consideration of Canaanite ideas influencing the thought of the passage.<sup>3</sup> As well as exploring these motifs in their context, Fokkelman considers the structure of the passage. In several places he finds chiasms, but most significantly in the overall structure.

### 2.3 Conclusion

It is only in looking at the passage that some of the ideas expressed above can really be tested. Nevertheless a few comments can be made at this stage.

Regarding Fokkelman, his work has reminded us of the primary unit of the final text. He is right in starting with the text as it is, and in seeking to understand the elements of the text in their literary context before setting up other hypothetical contexts. Thus for instance, we should not start from the assumption that there are certain doublets which lead us automatically to divide the text into sources. This for instance is a problem with Fohrer who

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative Art, 53 (footnote).

<sup>2</sup> Narrative Art, 67.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, de Pury (Promesse Divine, vol. 2, 422ff) plays down the idea of the stone having any sort of numinous quality. He argues that the stone is anointed by Jacob to function as a witness to the divine promise and to his vow. Thus even the phrase בית אלהים is equivalent to the idea of a 'pierre témoin' (p. 424).

first identifies what he sees as the basic unity, and then looks at the literary structure of this (see also Blum).

In response to the source-critical treatment of the passage, the main problem is that the E texts are fundamental to the passage, so much so that the promise texts -which by all standard criteria are seen as J texts -would seem to be more secondary. Thus 'E' constitutes the framework, and it is difficult to see the other verses coming from an independent, older source. Whereas Gunkel does not consider this problem, Barth-Steck have to resort to the reconstruction of a hypothetical original form of the Bethel story to reach a conclusion that best fits the documentary hypothesis.

With Fohrer also, fundamental questions need to be asked about the alleged criteria for source division. Even if these criteria point to unevenness in the text, we cannot assume that this unevenness did not exist at an oral level. Especially in the light of the work of Fokkelman and Blum in finding substantial unity in the text, each criterion will have to be looked at in its context, as part of a careful reading of the passage. But already, a few notes of caution can be voiced: the criterion of the divine name has rightly come under criticism,<sup>1</sup> and in a passage where divine revelation is central, we must consider how each term for God might contribute to the theme, and so whether there is some deliberate variation, or at least whether the variation reflects something more than source. The question of how Bethel is conceived to be 'God's house', or how the place or stone is thought to have some special quality again are central to the passage, and if we decide that the passage as a whole gives a less than straightforward conception of these issues we should not jump to the conclusion that there must be different sources. In particular there is a tendency to underestimate the capacity of ancient writers to deal with complex ideas or paradox. This comment also appertains to the somewhat arrogant assumption of Gunkel (expressed less forthrightly by others) that for a 'Frommer' to make an oath on the condition of the fulfilment of a promise given by God would be unthinkable -how can we know what is unthinkable if not from the text itself? Furthermore, how can we assume that the narrator intends the reader to consider Jacob as a paradigm for religious faith, without considering other more subtle intentions?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See R. Rendtorff, 'Jakob in Bethel: Beobachtungen zum Aufbau und zur Quellenfrage in Gen 28, 10-22.' *ZAW* 94, 1982, 515-6.

<sup>2</sup> So T. W. Cartledge, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, Sheffield: JSOT Supp. 147 1992, 166-75, who argues that the vow adds to the picture of Jacob as conniving and distrustful, turning the divine promises into obligations.

On the other hand, we should be prepared to consider the possibility that in order to express the complexity of the above theological ideas, the writer(s) drew on traditional material-whether stories, characters or motifs. In particular, Fokkelman does no justice to the seeming archaic elements of the text identified by Gunkel and others. The passage does seem to contain motifs that would not fit easily into later Israelite religion and surely this is an invitation to consider the relation of Israel's faith to the religious practice of Jacob here. Motifs -whether religious or not -should be understood from their literary context, but surely also from a wider context. This obviously touches on the complex debate about meaning and text, but it would seem to be appropriate to the passage itself, with its archaic features, to seek to penetrate behind the text to understand the dynamics of the text as it is. In particular, Fokkelman's interpretation of how the place and objects are considered to be significant seems to rely heavily on a view of matter which would deny an inherent quality of certain places or objects, until they have been invested with some specific meaning or memorial. We need to question how he comes to this view.

Thus some consideration of historical development need not be ruled inappropriate. Among form critics, there seems to be some consensus that the text contains pre-Israelite motifs. In particular, this interest seems to be clustered around the place of Bethel. First of all, we should give some consideration to the name Bethel itself, containing the Canaanite epithet El -whether the head of the Canaanite pantheon or a local 'el', numen. Linked to this are the various motifs -the vision of the ladder, the idea of a place as the house of God, the anointing of a stone -which seem to sit a little uneasily with later Israelite religion. Further, we should take into account the 'official' view of the cult of Bethel in the divided monarchy. By itself, this does not point definitively to a specific Canaanite *Sitz im Leben* since much depends upon wider reconstructions and assumptions, but pre- or non-Israelite provenance seems likely.<sup>1</sup>

We should also recognize that Jacob is clearly identified with Bethel -not just here but in ch. 35 and Hosea 12, and that in all probability the link goes deeper than the final narrative (so, de Pury). De Pury is correct in pointing out that the dynamic of the passage comes from this combination of person and place. It is certainly difficult to imagine how this story,

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<sup>1</sup> See also Vawter, *On Genesis*, 311-7 who tries to relate elements in the passage to a wider reconstruction of the development of patriarchal religion and to the standing of Bethel in Israelite religion.

stripped of any reference to a known hero such as Jacob, or of any context for his arrival at this place, or of any consequences following this appearance, could really have much to say. Here we run into a question which often seems to be ignored of what constitutes a self-standing narrative. But in response to de Pury, it could be argued that a narrative could presuppose a wider context whilst having a certain independence, with the main character of the story and aspects of his life commonly understood from a body of tradition.

Regarding the presence of the divine name in this passage, this would have been introduced at some stage of the development of the story, and contents of the promise and the journey motif would all have been developed as the passage became part of a wider narrative, involving Jacob's life, and the wider patriarchal story with its specific patriarchal promises. Regarding Van Seters' view about the late date of the passage, it seems highly unnecessary and unlikely to situate so much of the narrative in the exilic period. Evidence drawn up by him, and to a lesser extent Blum, for Deuteronomistic influence is not only scarce, but even contradicted by the positive stance towards Bethel and to cultic practices carried out there. It could be that some phrases show some Deuteronomistic influence, but even that depends on the wider issue of Deuteronomistic influence in Genesis, especially in the promise texts, and on the distinction between immediate dependency and a general affinity to be expected in a common canon of literature.

Thus there is some justification for the view of many that this passage shows evidence of a long prehistory, possibly reaching back to Canaanite influences, but also showing evidence of a 'Yahwistic' reworking, though with little attempt to 'reform' practices which might be frowned upon by later 'orthodoxy'. However it is difficult to be specific, especially as so much depends upon how one sees the early history of Israel. Some link with Northern Israel must be considered possible -though not necessarily with the period of the divided monarchy and there is certainly no concrete evidence to link the passage with the cult instituted by Jeroboam (contra Blum)<sup>1</sup>.

However some caution is also needed in how the terms 'Canaanite' and 'patriarchal' are used,

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the importance of the place of Bethel and the link with the important personage of Jacob, there is nothing in the passage to relate to the particulars of the cult instituted by Jeroboam, nor any sense of anticipating in the promise or oath anything outside of a general 'Israelite' perspective. There is not even any specific mention of sacrifice -either by Jacob or later generations. The promise to tithe could relate to any period or circumstance.

Regarding any links between the tradition of Jacob at Bethel and the Jeroboam cult, it could just as easily be argued that Jeroboam gave backing to the Bethel cult (whether it had fallen into disuse or not) because it already had the prestige of being connected with the figure of Jacob.



especially regarding the vexing question of how 'patriarchal religion' ever existed as a distinct entity, and what its relationship to 'Canaanite' religion or Yahwistic religion might have been. Such a question can only be addressed in a much broader-ranging study.

Likewise caution is needed in identifying specific theological concepts with different stages of religious development. It might be possible to comment on the likely setting of certain religious practices, but regarding the concepts behind such practices more caution is needed, especially against the tendency to regard some views as 'primitive' and others as more 'developed'. As already stated, to make such judgments is to underestimate the place of metaphor or the capacity of other cultures for complex theological thought.

In particular, the following concepts are found in this passage: the depiction of God, use of names for God, how the presence of the divine is to be conceived, the tension between the appearance of 'angels of God' and the more direct appearance of YHWH, the unusual event of a human seeing God (not picked up in any of the commentators considered above). Likewise the passage contains ideas of sacred place, objects and actions, the anointing of stones, the 'house of God'.

## 2.2 A reading of 28:10-22

### 2.2.1 Structure

For the purpose of this study, I shall consider the passage in five sections:

A: vv10-11 -this opens the episode, and can be considered to be an introduction.

B: vv12-13aα -the vision of Jacob.

C: vv13aβ-15 -the words of YHWH to Jacob. A further division can be made at v15, since before that, the promises made go beyond the life of Jacob, whereas the promise of v15 is more immediate.

D: vv16-17 -Jacob's immediate reaction.

E: vv18-22 -Jacob's reaction in the light of day.

Each section is introduced by a verb indicating the new stage (ויקץ, ויאמר, ויחלם, ויצא, וישכב).

If we consider sections B-E to be the main substance of the passage, we can see a certain correspondence between different sections: C and E, with C containing the promise of God, giving rise to E with the promise of Jacob; also B and D -with the experience of and reaction to the numinous.

### 2.2.2 Exegesis

#### A: vv10-12: (ויצא) -journey and arrival

The first part (v10) places what is to come into the wider context of Jacob's journey, reminding the reader of what has provoked the journey. The name Haran refers the reader back to Rebekah's urging to flee there (27:43), underlining the fact that Jacob is really on the run from his brother.<sup>1</sup> Beersheba is a name with strong patriarchal associations, as the place where Abraham and Isaac often stayed (22:19, 26:23,33). It is also associated with security (twice being the scene of a treaty with Abimelech -21:31, 26:26ff), divine assurance (26:24), and patriarchal worship (21:33, 26:25, also 46:1, completing the pattern of the three patriarchs). Clearly this place is as near to anywhere that Jacob might call 'home' (particularly with the ownership of the well -26:33), and is also associated with the presence and worship of God. Thus the reminder that Jacob is leaving this place, emphasizes the sense of absence he is to feel -from place, family and, it seems, God.

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<sup>1</sup> Thus bypassing the intervening verses.

The first two words of v11 are highly suggestive. The verb פגע suggests the chance arrival at the place.<sup>1</sup> The noun מקום likewise suggests the anonymity and chance arrival at this place. However the definite article suggests that this is not just any place:<sup>2</sup> as Westermann notes,<sup>3</sup> the definite article draws attention to the word and hints at a secondary meaning of the word as 'holy place'. This seems a better account for the combination of anonymity and definiteness here, than does Fokkelman's claim that the place has no inherent significance until God's appearance. The emphasis on the place is also drawn out by the repetition of the word. Likewise the stones which Jacob chooses may seem random, but they are stones המקום. Again the impression is not so much that these stones are 'nothings' but that they are suggestive of something to come.

Another element contributing to the sense of coincidence is that Jacob has only stopped here because this happens to be where the sun was falling. Now, as noted ominously by Fokkelman,<sup>4</sup> the sun will not rise again for Jacob until after the Peniel experience (32:32 - ויזרח-לו השמש).

Thus on his way from a place of familiarity and assurance to a place of uncertainty, Jacob stumbles upon this place. But the use of the definite article and repetition hint that this will not just be any place.

V10 both links this episode to the wider narrative (and so may be editorial) but also provides a suggestive contrast and preparation to v11 and the new place Jacob discovers.

#### B: vv12-13aα: (ויחלם) -the dream

From the perspective of Jacob, there is no expectation of any extraordinary dream.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also below, p. 182, relating to 32:1.

<sup>2</sup> A similar use of the definite article is found at Ex 3:2 with סנה, the burning bush. In both cases, the article marks the object or place as significant because of some divine presence. In that passage, the noun is repeated in a similar way to the repetition of מקום here. Gunkel (Genesis, 317) also points to Gen 12:6 as a similar use of the definite article with מקום.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis: 12-36, 454.

<sup>4</sup> Narrative Art, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Thus it is different from the usual form of incubation (see Ottosson -Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, vol. 4, 421-32; also N. M. Sarna, Genesis, JPS Torah Commentary, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989). T. H. McAlpine (Sleep, Divine and Human, in the Old Testament, Sheffield: JSOT Supp 38, 1987, 158-61) refers to similarities with the Ancient Near Eastern idea of incubation, but points out that it is very rare in the Old Testament, perhaps because of a concern to avoid the idea of God being manipulated.

The *structure* of the dream is clear -the verb יחלם is followed by three clauses with the different elements introduced in the same way (...והנה). Fokkelman<sup>1</sup> also notes how the repetition of והנה moves the reader from the perspective of detached, omniscient narrator to the perspective of Jacob.

Furthermore the *content* of the dream is progressive: at first, Jacob sees the סלם, an inanimate object; then, מלאכי אלהים -beings sent by God; and as the culmination, YHWH himself. The clear structure supporting the progressive content seems to indicate anything but the presence of doublets and, rather than contradicting each other, the three elements take the reader (as well as Jacob) further towards his direct and awesome experience with God.<sup>2</sup>

The imagery of the first part is highly suggestive of Ancient Near Eastern ideas as most commentators acknowledge. This may reflect the origins of this passage and is also an implicit acknowledgement of the 'non-Israelite' aspects of the religion of the patriarchs.<sup>3</sup> The picture of the ladder or ramp stretching from heaven to earth is highly suggestive,<sup>4</sup> giving

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative Art, 51: '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!'

<sup>2</sup> For an extended interpretation of this progression, see Scherman and Zlotowitz, Bereishis, vol 4, 1182ff. The ladder indicates the ability to rise to an understanding of God by studying creation and through philosophical enquiry. Jacob was not satisfied with such a limited knowledge of God and so God tested him with a second level of revelation, that of the angels representing a deeper spirituality. This still failed to satisfy Jacob and so he reached a true vision of God himself.

<sup>3</sup> A comparative approach is thus appropriate here. By contrast, Fokkelman's note (Narrative Art, 53) which sees Jacob's ladder against the background of all of Genesis, with a specific parallel to the tower of Babel, whilst not totally inappropriate in a wider canonical perspective, probably goes further than the passage allows, especially as he cannot identify any explicit links in vocabulary.

<sup>4</sup> The image of a ladder would seem to suggest a link between heaven and earth -e.g. Delitzsch: 'The ladder is an image of the invisible, but actual and unceasing connection in which God, by the ministry of His angels, stands with the earth,' (A New Commentary on Genesis, 163).

J. G. Griffiths ('The Celestial Ladder and the Gate of Heaven (Genesis xxviii 12 and 17), ExpTim 76 (1964-5), 229-30) sees influence from the Egyptian pyramid texts -see also Westermann (Genesis 12-36, 454). A. R. Millard ('The Celestial Ladder and the Gate of Heaven (Genesis xxviii 12, 17), ExpTim 78 (1966-7), 86-7) prefers Babylonian influence (also von Rad (Genesis, 284), seeing the word סלם (itself a hapax legomenon) as derived from Akkadian for stairway, and so the image conveyed is of a stone ramp. The particular parallel is the Babylonian Temple where a ramp connected the uppermost chamber (symbolic of the deity's heavenly dwelling place) with the temple, the place where the deity appears, particularly in the cult.

However, the link need not be taken too far (Millard), but can be seen as reflecting a more general conception of communication between heaven and earth, which would have been quite conceivable in Canaanite culture. Certainly, Wyatt ('Where did Jacob dream his dream?') seems to take the parallel with the Babylonian stairway too literally in seeing the vision of Jacob composed during the exile, where the dreamer is confusing Babylon and Jerusalem.

rise to various interpretations, but in the text is best seen as a multivalent sign, whose function is to suggest and cause to stop and wonder, rather than to be decoded precisely, since Jacob's attention is quickly drawn onwards. Above all, it points beyond itself to the appearance of YHWH himself and to his words. In this way, it has a similar function to the burning bush in Ex. 3.

Nevertheless, the imagery does suggest that this place is significant, especially that it is conceived in some sense as a meeting of heaven and earth, a place where the divine (whether through angels or however) communicates with the human. This is in spite of outer appearances in the light of day.

The second image of the angels leads naturally from the first. In this case, the word מלאכים probably denotes divine creatures, rather than simple messengers. We have already noted the parallel with Jacob's vision at Mahanaim. There is not really any suggestion that these angels are meant to be some accompanying presence with Jacob, rather their presence is more associated with this specific place.<sup>1</sup>

The final clause mentions YHWH explicitly. This remarkable mention of YHWH has been noted by commentators. However, this misses the point to some extent, since the use of the divine name here creates a climactic effect which the more generic term אלהים would not, by forming a contrast with the angels 'of God': now Jacob sees not a mere divine messenger, but YHWH himself! This daring depiction takes the reader by surprise, especially as YHWH is seen standing. It could be further argued that if this story originally told of the appearance

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In his study C. Houtman ('What Did Jacob see in His Dream at Bethel? Some Remarks on Genesis xxviii 10-22', *VT* 27 (1977), 337-51) sees the word סלם referring to the slope of the mountain of Bethel, where Jacob was asleep. He also comments on the fact that the ladder stretches from heaven to earth, showing that the initiative in this communication rests with the divine.

On another level of interpretation, R. Couffignal ('Le songe de Jacob: Approches nouvelles de Genèse 28, 10-22.' *Bib* 58 (1977), 342-60), sees the Jacob's dream as a variant of Freud's interpretation of the Oedipal myth, where the ladder is a phallic symbol and Jacob is dreaming of the union of his parents. The consequent erection of a stone and pouring of oil represents his symbolic incest, and the vow marks a reconciliation with the Father figure. For Couffignal, this is an example of how religion sublimates our primal desires.

<sup>1</sup> For a different view: B. Jakob (*Das erste Buch der Tora*, New York: Katz Publishing House (reprinted from 1934), 579-80), who sees the ascending angels as those the angels of Jacob's home country and the descending angels coming to accompany Jacob on his journey. (Also Rashi, in Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, *Pentateuch*, 132.) They thus symbolize God's continued protection of Jacob. This is part of a wider denial of a comparative approach to this passage, preferring to draw its meaning solely from the Torah.

not of YHWH but of El. then the use of the divine term here is a bold move to claim this story for the God of Israel with no room for ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> Given the non-Israelite imagery noted above, this need would have been strongly felt by later writers.

Critical commentators are generally so keen to note the 'discrepancy' in the use of the divine name, that they overlook the theological discrepancy obvious to any later Israelite: Jacob has seen God, admittedly in a dream, but nevertheless clearly, and...he has lived.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the fact that Jacob is granted a vision of YHWH, highlights how privileged he is, especially after his deception of his father and brother.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the ambiguity of the preposition עליו -whether before/above/beside it/him there is little to add to the range of opinion, although given the sense of progression already mentioned, to now state that YHWH was standing by Jacob rather than at the top of the ladder would be something of an anticlimax and make the ladder superfluous.<sup>4</sup>

#### C: vv13aβ-15: (ויאמר) -the divine speech

As mentioned earlier, in terms of content, the speech can be divided at the end of v14. Formally, this is confirmed by the particle והנה.

i) The first part contains stereotypical elements common to the patriarchal story: the self-introduction, and the promise of land, posterity, and blessing. Although the elements and phraseology are familiar, there is no exact correspondence with any other promise.

The promise begins with a self-introductory formula. The significance is not just in what is said, but also that here, for the first time, God speaks to Jacob. So far, Jacob's experience with God has been through his parents, but now God speaks to him directly.<sup>5</sup> It is surprising that there is no hint of reproach for what has happened, but neither is there any mention or

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<sup>1</sup> So Wenham, 'The Religion of the Patriarchs', in A. R. Millard & D. J. Wiseman eds, Essays on Patriarchal Narratives, Leicester: IVP, 1980, 181, supported by R. W. L. Moberly, The Old Testament of the Old Testament, Philadelphia: Augsburg-Fortress, 1992, 72-3.

<sup>2</sup> This theme will be developed in relation to the Peniel incident -see below, p. 85. In both cases, a parallel and a contrast can be drawn to Ex. 3 where Moses is told to cover his face because he is standing on holy ground.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ps. 24:4-6, Matt. 5:8!

<sup>4</sup> So B. Jakob, Das erste Buch der Tora, 580.

<sup>5</sup> Wenham, Genesis 16-50, 226.

hint of the blessing (or birthright). Nevertheless, we can assume that this dream is meant as an assurance to Jacob (as the words will show) and as a confirmation of the blessing he has received, with all that this means in terms of the patriarchal blessing first given to Abraham.<sup>1</sup> Thus any doubts in Jacob's or the reader's mind about whether Jacob had really inherited the Abrahamic promises are now dispelled.

The divine name is this time contained in the speech. Apart from any critical suggestions, its use here again affirms the identity of the God of the patriarchs with YHWH. The nearest parallel in the patriarchal narratives is the self-introduction to Abram (15:7); elsewhere the phrase אֱלֹהֵי-שָׂדֵי is used (17:1, 35:11), or the phrase ... אֱלֹהֵי (26:24, also Ex. 3:6 completing the patriarchal line). Outside of Genesis, the most usual phrase is 'I am YHWH' (see especially the Holiness laws).

It is striking that Abraham and not Isaac is described as אֲבִיךָ, though this probably reflects the importance of Abraham in the family line. Note, for instance, the phrase בְּרַכְתָּ אֲבִרְהָם (28:4).

The promise of land is itself a common aspect of the patriarchal promises. Often the reference is specific to the location of the patriarch (12:7 -הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת-; 34:15 -'all the land which you see'); elsewhere it is more general (15:18; 17:8, 26:3, 35:12). Here, the land is specified as the land on which Jacob is lying, although we can take this place to be representative of the promised land as a whole.

What is implied at the end of this first part of the promise ('and your seed') is brought out with the promise of innumerable descendants. The particular image used (dust) is also found at 13:15. Elsewhere the similes of stars or grains of sand convey the same idea (15:4, 22:16, 26:3). The directional terms combine the impression of numbers of descendants with geographical space.

The next clause is also found elsewhere. The meaning of the Niphal verb form seems literally to be that families 'will bless themselves by means of' Jacob and his family. The same form is found at Gen. 12:3 and 18:8. Another form of the verb is the Hithpael (22:18, 26:4 - preceding the story of Isaac and Abimelech), although there seems to be no significance in the difference of form. Fundamentally, as much in the patriarchal stories illustrate, the idea seems to be that other nations fare either well or badly depending on how they relate to the

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<sup>1</sup> The lack of any explicit reference to what has happened prior to this episode is a possible hint of tension between the function of this passage in the wider story and its more independent tradition-historical origins.

patriarchs. Although finding outworkings in the lives of the patriarchs,<sup>1</sup> these stories are probably best seen as illustrations of how it will be with Israel and her neighbours -see Ps. 72:17, also the story of Balaam and Balak (Nu. 24:9). Interestingly, this is the only part of the promise which relates back to the blessing of Isaac (27:29b), though there is probably no special significance in this. There, the image is linked to the idea of national strength (as in Nu. 24) and is easier to conceive against a national military or political background.

Although these promises look beyond the Jacob narrative, they are partially fulfilled in the life of Jacob: in the following episode with Laban, the number of Jacob's sons hints at the many descendants Jacob will have, especially when set in the context of the fertility of his animal stock; also Laban himself admits to being blessed through Jacob's presence (30:27). Furthermore, ch. 35, which contains itinerary notes about Jacob after his return to the land of promise, gives the impression of Jacob making the land his own.

Even so, the scope of the promises here, and their similarity to the promises running through the patriarchal narrative into the book of Exodus, direct our attention from the immediate context to the wider. It is precisely in a situation of dire personal need, that Jacob is told or reminded of the wider context. No doubt this implies safety and blessing for the immediate future, but nevertheless Jacob needs more immediate, tangible promises, and this is where the second part of the divine speech goes.

ii) The particle (והנה -v15) reconcentrates the attention of Jacob and the reader: if the previous promises seemed a bit distant, Jacob is now assured of YHWH's immediate presence with him. The language used to express God's presence and protection (אֲנִי אֶעֱרָב, שְׂמֵרְתִּיךָ, לֹא עָזַב) is common to the faith of Israel,<sup>2</sup> and so, no doubt, God's assurance to Jacob can be read as a paradigm for his protection of the believer/Israel, although it is not possible to trace the imagery of this verse to any particular Sitz im Leben or tradition,<sup>3</sup> since the language is so widespread. Within the Jacob narrative, this promise corresponds to

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<sup>1</sup> For instance the story of Abraham in Egypt (coming soon after 12:3); Sodom and Gomorrah -both in Abraham's intercessory role and in the respective fates of Lot and the inhabitants (again this comes soon after 18:18); Abraham and Abimelech; Isaac and Abimelech (which contains the relevant promise -26:4). As we shall note shortly, the same motif is present in the Laban plot. And finally, the beneficial effect of Joseph in Egypt may contain the same idea.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Ex. 23:20, Nu. 6:24, Josh. 1:5, Is. 8:10, Ex. 3:12, Ps. 23:4, Ps. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Contra Van Seters who sees it as reflecting the individual piety of the exilic community (*Prologue to History*, 302-6).



31:3.5 where God reaffirms his presence with Jacob now Jacob has to set out on a journey again and where Jacob is able to confess to his wives that God has been with him during the difficult years with Laban.

Thus Jacob is assured that God's presence goes beyond the confines of his family home (Beersheba) or the promised land (including Bethel) -God's presence might be specially tangible in some places, but for Jacob, as for Abraham and Isaac, God is identified chiefly by relationship rather than place. Nevertheless, God will bring Jacob back to this land. Thus in this promise relating more immediately to Jacob are the twin ideas of relationship and place -the relationship between God and Jacob involves place, but that relationship goes beyond place. No doubt this is something Israel was to learn in the exile but it is also part of the theological tension that sees the presence of God focused in a particular place (whether Temple, cult, people, Sinai, Zion) but not being limited there.

Regarding the relationship of the two parts of the speech to each other, they are clearly complementary, with one reaching more beyond Jacob's life (though there are also some signs of fulfilment in it), and the other more immediate to Jacob's concerns and being worked out in his life (although wider parallels can be seen in the story of Israel). Furthermore, the final part (...**וַיִּשְׁכַּח**) links the two together, since this refers most naturally to all the promises made in the dream.

It is quite conceivable that the two parts reflect different stages of growth. Certainly the patriarchal promises stand out, and would only really relate to an already well-established and wider plot involving the patriarchal story as a whole. It could of course be argued that any story can have elements pointing outside of itself, without us having to conclude that they are secondary. However, the vocabulary of these promises is particularly distinctive within the passage and they bear a strong 'family' likeness to other promises in the patriarchal narratives. They would thus be added to any earlier form of the Bethel story, and as promise texts elsewhere, serve to unite the whole of the patriarchal narrative (as well as the early chapters of Exodus).<sup>1</sup>

The second part of the speech links the Bethel incident more specifically to the Jacob story as a whole, and so would stem from an earlier stage in the development of this passage in

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<sup>1</sup> In general agreement with the thesis of Rendtorff, Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch, ch. 2, though with a greater degree of caution in attempting to relate particular phrases, motifs or clauses to particular stages of the development.

particular and of the Jacob story more generally.

This distinction between the scope of the promises again contradicts the findings of traditional source criticism, which generally fails to do justice to the distinctiveness of the two parts of the divine speech, seeing them both as J texts.

D: vv16-17:(וַיִּקְרָא) -Jacob wakes: first reaction

Just as the account of the dream was structured in such a way as to reflect how it was perceived by Jacob, so the different stages of his reaction are narrated as Jacob first wakes and realizes what has happened, then reacts to this realization, and finally, in the light of day, makes a more measured response. Thus there is no need to see vv16 and 17 as doublets. The impression given by the context is that Jacob wakes suddenly, and that it is still night, since morning is only mentioned in v18. His first reaction clearly sees the place itself as having some quality, since he is surprised that he did not realize YHWH's presence before he fell asleep. The narrator reports this speech or thought without any theological comment, and we may assume by Jacob's later action that his own perception is accepted by the narrator. The repetition of the definite noun  $\text{בֵּית־אֱלֹהִים}$  links back to the opening verses, just as the final description ('this is the gate of heaven') reminds us of the picture of the ladder stretching between earth and heaven.

The second stage of Jacob's reaction (...וַיִּירָא) is the natural consequence of the first. As Jacob realizes the nature of the place, he shudders with fear, especially as it is still dark. At this stage, he remembers the vision, although he has not yet taken stock of the words spoken to him. This would perhaps explain why Jacob is afraid, even though the vision and speech were meant to reassure him. For the moment we see the natural reaction of a mortal being to an experience of the numinous.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase 'house of God' anticipates the etymology to come. Given the etymological direction of these concluding verses, the reference to YHWH (v16a) might seem out of place. Wenham's suggestion<sup>2</sup> that Israelite writers have replaced another name -here El - makes sense of this. Clearly, the writer again wants to affirm that, despite aspects of the passage suggesting Canaanite and other Near Eastern ideas, it is YHWH who appeared to

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<sup>1</sup> This does not of itself rule out any traditio-historical explanation for the change from assurance to fear.

<sup>2</sup> See above, p. 44.

Jacob. Usually in the patriarchal narratives, this would be taken for granted, but here, the writer rules out any possible cause for ambiguity.

E: vv18-22: (וישכח) -the next day: Jacob's considered reaction

i) Vv18-19 pursue the thread of the previous section bringing to a conclusion the etymological motif. Furthermore, just as the previous section picks up the motif of place from the opening of the episode, so in these verses, the words אבן, שם, מראשתיו are repeated.

The act of standing the stone upright and anointing it is to set it apart as a sacred symbol, in this case in recognition of the place of Jacob's experience, although also in anticipation of his return. It is most likely as well that by his emphasis on this particular stone -at first viewed just as one of several stones of 'the place' -Jacob sees it has having some sacred significance. How far one can draw a distinction between the stone as a memorial or witness and the stone as having some inherent special quality is not clear. Certainly there is no attempt by the narrator to counter any possible misunderstanding. All this is very striking given the attitude found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, especially, although not exclusively, in the Deuteronomistic writings.<sup>1</sup> Judging by later commands and condemnations regarding similar practices, Jacob would seem to be indulging in Canaanite worship, even if there is no hint of Canaanite gods. The most obvious explanation for this action in the narrative is the recognition that in these earlier times, Israel's ancestors differed little in some of their customs from their Canaanite neighbours. Such an idea would hardly be invented, but would most likely reflect a long tradition.

Just as there is no attempt to theologize about the particular quality of the stone, so there is no exposition of what is meant by 'house of God' apart from Jacob's exclamation at v17. Given the emphasis on the word 'place' and the uneasy feeling that Jacob continued to have

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<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of uses of the term מצבה are negative: either as proscribed or condemned or destroyed in times of conquest and reform. Such instances are: Ex. 23:24, 34:13, Dt. 7:5, 12:3, 16:22, Lev. 26:1, 1 Ki. 14:23, 2 Ki. 3:2, 10:26, 27, 17:10, 18:4, 23:14, 2 Chr. 14:3, 31:1, Jer. 43:13, Hos. 3:4, 10:1, 2, Mic. 5:13. In all these cases it is associated with Canaanite worship, either directed at a Canaanite god or simply following Canaanite practices.

Elsewhere it is found at 2 Sam. 18:18, where its use seems to be neutral; where Moses sets up twelve pillars at the covenant meal at Sinai (Ex. 24:4), and in a prophecy, as a positive sign and witness to YHWH (Is. 19:19).

Apart from that, the word appears frequently in relation to Jacob -at Bethel (28:18, 22, 31:13, 35:14), but also to mark his final treaty with Laban (31:13, 45, 51, 52), and to mark the place of Rachel's burial (35:20).

after waking, it would seem most natural to suppose that he saw the place as having some inherent quality that suggested God's presence. Again the author simply narrates.

ii) Vv20-22: a clear understanding of the final oath is clouded by the ambiguous structure of the sentence, since grammatically, the apodosis can begin either with the phrase וְהָיָה יְהוָה לִי לֵאלֹהִים, or with the more concrete וְהָאֱבֹנִי. Following most commentators it seems most likely that the former is correct,<sup>1</sup> particularly as, at least formally, there is a change in subject from אֱלֹהִים to יְהוָה. Contra some objections,<sup>2</sup> it is certainly not unheard of for Israel to choose allegiance to YHWH.<sup>3</sup>

The first clause of the condition corresponds to the beginning of those promises made by YHWH in the dream which are more directly orientated to Jacob's situation (אֲנֹכִי עִמָּךְ). The second clause corresponds to the next of the promises, with the repetition of the verbs שָׁמַר and הִלַּךְ. The third clause is added by Jacob: as we shall see it will find some correspondence in the fulfilment clauses. The mention of bread and clothes betrays the very practical need in which Jacob finds himself, only daring to hope for these bare essentials. On the one hand this concrete reliance could be said to bear witness to a piety in Israel which sees the need for divine provision even in these fundamental matters;<sup>4</sup> on the other hand, it

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. G. J. Spurrell, Notes on the Hebrew text of the Book of Genesis, Oxford: Clarendon, 1887, 228, Delitzsch, A New Commentary on Genesis, 166, Gunkel Genesis, 321, von Rad Genesis, 286, Westermann Genesis: 12-36, 459, Blum Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 89-91, B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, Biblical Hebrew Syntax: An introduction to biblical Hebrew syntax, Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990, 526-7 and especially W. Richter, 'Das Gelübde als theologische Rahmung der Jakobsüberlieferungen' BZ 11 (1967), 21ff. Fokkelman disagrees (Narrative Art, 75-6). B. Jakob (Das erste Buch der Tora, 584) treats the protasis as temporal rather than conditional ('When God is with me...').

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 75-6. It is strange that Fokkelman, who champions a reading of the narrative as a united whole, comments that any indication of a calculating Jacob (implied if v21b was the start of the main clause), finds no support in the rest of this passage. It does not occur to Fokkelman to link the action of Jacob here with his actions in other parts of the narrative. This atomistic approach is more reminiscent of the form-critical approach. By contrast, see Alter (Genesis, 150): 'Jacob, however, remains the suspicious bargainer - a 'wrestler' with words and conditions.' Also Cartledge, Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East, 166-75.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Dt. 30:19, Josh. 24, and other parallels in Dt. mentioned below. In his broad ranging study of the genre of the oath, Richter ('Das Gelübde als theologische Rahmung') finds that this type of oath is widespread in the popular religion of Israel. See especially 1 Sam. 1:11, 2 Sam. 15:8, Nu. 21:2.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Lk. 11:3.

could point to a sense of desperation in Jacob, or maybe even a blunt bargaining,<sup>1</sup> something not untypical of Jacob's nature. In the wider context we can also detect a hint of irony: both bread and clothing have already played a role for Jacob (25:34, also 27:17; and 27:15), and in both previous cases they were the means used by Jacob to carry out his deception; now as a result of that deception (and despite its apparent success), Jacob relies on God to provide these items -not for further deception but for mere survival.<sup>2</sup>

Like the first and second clauses, the fourth and final clause of the protasis refers back to the divine promise (v15aβ). In this case however the image is more relational as the reference in the promise to land becomes the family home, and the return is בשלום, that is, with the threat of revenge and the reality of family disruption removed. This not only applies to the situation with Esau and Isaac, but it will also be pertinent to the relationship with Laban.<sup>3</sup>

The actual promise of Jacob relates to both general allegiance and specifically to the site of Bethel. On a narrative level, the first part, following the first clear revelation of YHWH to Jacob, depicts the latter's personal and free response.<sup>4</sup> Fokkelman<sup>5</sup> also notes that v21b, which states in effect that YHWH will be the God of Jacob brings to completion the earlier series of YHWH as God of Abraham and Isaac (v13). But on another level, Jacob's promise points forward to Israel's understanding of its relationship with God. The phrase יהוה לאלהים is used in the Bible to express the idea of choice, very often being explicitly linked with the covenant. In almost all cases the originator is YHWH who chooses his people,<sup>6</sup> although in Dt. 26:17, it is Israel who has declared YHWH to be their God, and

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<sup>1</sup> So Cartledge, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 168. Cartledge sees Jacob as expanding the promises made by God and forcing God's hand by making a vow to hold God to his word. Certainly this can be seen as an aspect of the complex motivation of Jacob.

<sup>2</sup> Showing the extremely subtle art of the narrative, which through the simple mention of everyday items such as bread and clothing juxtaposes different episodes in Jacob's life.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 29:6.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. von Rad, *Genesis*, 286.

<sup>5</sup> *Narrative Art*, 76.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 17:7.8, Ex. 6:7, 29:45, Lev. 11:45, 22:33, 25:38, 26:12.45, Nu. 15:41. It can be seen that the conception is characteristic of the Priestly redaction/source. Other occurrences are 2 Sam. 7:24 (=Dtr?), 1 Chr. 17:22, Zec. 8:8. *BDB*, 44, also notes six other occurrences in Jeremiah and six in Ezekiel. In many cases, it is to be noted that the term is linked explicitly with the covenant. Westermann (*Genesis: 12-36*, 459) sees a different setting for the phrase, drawing parallels with vows

in Dt. 29:12-13 there is a mutuality in the covenant. The writer is therefore using a phrase which draws a clear parallel to the covenant between YHWH and Israel, with Jacob acting as a type for later Israel, albeit with a characteristic emphasis on his own initiative.

This stereotypical language by itself would explain the use of the term YHWH (always used in such contexts). Furthermore the term adds to the strong insistence already discerned in the passage, that it is no other than YHWH who has appeared to Jacob at Bethel.

The second and third clauses of the apodosis clearly refer to the site at Bethel and are alluded to at 35:1ff. The switch to first person speech takes the reader once again (as in the description of the dream) to the perspective of Jacob, but it also ensures that the passage ends with a direct note of praise. The promise to tithe is a response to God's provision of food and clothing referred to earlier, and it thereby acknowledges that what Jacob has to give is already given to him by God. Even so the tithe is not specifically mentioned elsewhere in the Jacob narrative and does not have any particular function in this passage. It would seem therefore that its inclusion is meant to point the reader/listener - whether of the final text or at some point in the transmission of the story - to a contemporary custom. Most immediately, some connection with tithing at Bethel cannot be ruled out. However in the wider context, there is no doubt that the reader would have found some hint of the Israelite system of tithing.

Just as the tithe hints at the religious life of later Israel, so also the phrase 'house of God' hints, even if not primarily or intentionally by an original writer, to the Temple at Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> However, this aspect of the text should not obscure any reference to the place of Bethel, which in its own right is granted a special place in the Jacob story, and which no doubt had a significance in Israel as well.<sup>2</sup>

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made at 2 Sam. 15:7-9 and Jud. 11:30f. For him, the phrase calls to mind the cultic tradition within Israel of offering worship at a shrine. However, the evidence which Westermann cites is not really valid because the more precise term *לִבְד* is used in 2 Sam., and the phrase *לֵאלֹהִים* is absent in both passages.

<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, the proper term for the Jerusalem temple (or any Israelite temple) is *בית יהוה*. Given the use of the divine name elsewhere in the passage, we might have expected it here. However, the etiological interest of the passage here governs the use of the term *לֵאלֹהִים*. On the association of this passage with Jerusalem, see also J. Schwartz, 'Jubilees, Bethel and the Temple of Jacob.' *HUCA* 56 (1985) 63-85.

<sup>2</sup> It is of course true that Bethel seems to gain significance in the Bible with the cult set up by Jeroboam in competition to the Jerusalem Temple and Monarchy. However, there is every reason to suppose that Jeroboam was taking advantage of a shrine which was already well-established (Judg. 20:18-28, 21:2-4, 1 Sam. 10:3). These references, which bear no element of condemnation, clearly

Regarding any development behind vv18-22, the break at v20 probably reflects a growth in the text. Vv18-19, which bring to an end the etymological thread and pick up certain motifs which appeared in the opening verses of the passage, would seem to be a logical conclusion to any original Bethel story, which contains strongly Canaanite elements.

The final two verses point the story forward, although the conditions of Jacob's vow build on v15 (except the reference to bread and clothing).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore although there is no contradiction or doublet, the promise that the stone will in the future be the house of God, sits a little uneasily with Jacob's earlier exclamation that his place is the house of God, and with his naming of the place at this stage, although it could be that a cultic act simply reinforces what is already felt to be the case. Certainly it is not blatant enough to call a doublet.<sup>2</sup>

As it is, the conclusion of vv21b-22, by moving from the present response of Jacob to one in the future, calls to mind for the reader later Israelite institutions and ideas -the covenant, the tithe, possibly Bethel as an established place of pilgrimage, and by extension, the Jerusalem Temple -the house of God par excellence. Furthermore, within these verses, v21b does stand out and so could possibly be a further addition, designed to bolster the Israelite identity of the passage, though, like other comments made here, this cannot be certain.

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predate the tendency in prophetic and Dtr. circles to condemn Bethel. It follows from this that the tradition of Jacob at Bethel, giving as it does implicit approval to the Bethel cult, would predate Jeroboam. This seems more consistent with the way Bethel is depicted in the rest of the Bible than is Blum's view that Jacob is used by Jeroboam to promote Bethel (see above, p. 31).

<sup>1</sup> The link between v15 and the oath is another argument against the source critical reconstruction of the passage, since according to those criteria, v15 is J whereas the oath is E. Of course, it is possible to reconcile this difficulty by arguing that the oath is a literary creation of E, based on the original form (best preserved by J) which contained a similarly worded promise.

<sup>2</sup> Gunkel notes in passing (*Genesis*, 321) that according to the source critical approach E has two etymologies for Bethel. This again reveals a contradiction within an approach which uses inconsistencies to point to doublets and different sources, but at other times is unable to account for them.

## 2.3 Conclusion

### 2.3.1 Historical-critical summary

Negatively it has been argued that the documentary hypothesis does not work in relation to this passage. Without going over the detail again, it has been argued that a careful reading of the passage and study of the structure of different parts has cast doubt on the presence of genuine doublets. This relates particularly to the dream with its united structure and progressive content, and to the differing reaction of Jacob, with immediate and then more measured responses. This is not to rule out any development, but source criticism seems too crude an instrument for subtleties in the text. Furthermore, the study has found contextual reasons for the use of the divine name alongside the more general term אלהים.

Positively, whilst also holding to the principle that our point of departure is the final form of the text and that the end result is an understanding of the final form, I have tried to show that there is scope for a more cautious historical approach to the text, particularly using some of the insights of tradition criticism. In the case of this passage, this study supports the widely held view that the passage is the result of a process of development. At the heart of the passage is the interest in Bethel, concluding with the etymology, and elements of pre-Israelite Canaanite religion. This would have told of the discovery of a holy place, in particular with the revelation through a dream and the appearance of El. In response the recipient, after the natural sense of fear, would have set up the stone pillar and named the place Beth-El. Thus the form of an etiology of a holy place is the starting-point. Regarding the identity of the discoverer, this may or may not have been Jacob, though there is certainly no reason a priori why it should not have been.

After this, the story would have been assimilated into Israelite culture, possibly as Bethel became a Yahwistic place of worship and/or pilgrimage. The name YHWH would be introduced as part of this process, and if Jacob was not already the main character, this is where his name would be introduced. As the story becomes part of the Jacob story, and then of the wider Pentateuchal story, the promises in the dream are developed, though what lay behind them must remain unknown and we cannot be precise about how these developments happened. It would seem wrong to ascribe all 'Israelite' additions to the same stage (and certainly to see such a stage as exilic or Deuteronomic) since they are quite diverse in style and reference. Furthermore, we cannot make precise links with the Bethel cult at the time of Jeroboam, or any other time. Certainly the passage reflects a positive view of Bethel, but



it has been suggested that this could stem from an earlier context before Bethel became contentious (i.e. before any centralization of the cult or before the shrine became an object of criticism). Over and above this though are also aspects of the text which bring our attention to the wider themes of the patriarchal promises and Jacob's journeyings. As a result we are left not with a straightforward etiology, but with a patriarchal narrative of divine assurance and promise with strong etiological motifs.

This view stands in some contrast to that of de Pury who argues that the story of Bethel was always part of the wider Jacob story, although, as mentioned, the above reconstruction cannot rule out the place of Jacob or any content behind the existing form of the divine promises. To try to illustrate his argument, de Pury takes the example of the construction of a motor car.<sup>1</sup> He claims that critics such as Gunkel are not necessarily wrong in wanting to deconstruct the Jacob cycle in the same way that a car mechanic takes a car to pieces. The error is in how these separate parts are to be interpreted: in the case of a car -and, argues de Pury, of the Jacob narrative -the parts are not made autonomously and then subsequently assembled but are made from the beginning to be part of the whole.

Whilst this illustration has the merit of seeing the cycle as both united but with constituent parts, a more suitable illustration for our approach might be that of a cathedral.<sup>2</sup> Such a construction does not come about all at once but over a long period. Some elements are created specifically for their part in the building, others might be incorporated, and there are possibly the sacred relics over which the magnificent structure came to be built. Nevertheless, de Pury presents a note of caution, and reminds us that no story is ever told in isolation but always presupposes a wider context, even if there may be a relative autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

The conclusion offered here supposes that, as long as difficulties and provisionality is acknowledged, some historical work brings benefit. It may be argued that all historical-critical consideration should be laid aside as it obscures a real understanding of the final text. In this context, Fokkelman serves as a reminder of that possibility. Nevertheless I believe that an acknowledgement of the historical dimension has aided an understanding of the final

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<sup>1</sup> *Promesse Divine*, vol. 2, 515ff. It should of course be noted that in talking about the Jacob cycle as an integrated whole as the car, he is talking about the oral pre-cursor to any written form.

<sup>2</sup> R. Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature*, London: SPCK, 1992, 69.

<sup>3</sup> One weakness in de Pury's argument is that, although he postulates an oral, epic narrative, he is not able to point to any evidence of it in the present text. Thus, it can only remain a hypothesis.

text, in particular to some of the dynamics within it. This will be spelt out in relation to different themes, but in general terms, we have seen that behind the development has been a theological concern. Thus having some idea of the process of tradition does not obscure theological strands within the passage, but brings them to light, and the final canonical form can be seen as the natural fruit of this process. This is seen most clearly with the most obvious theme, that of God.

### 2.3.2 God

Given the concentration of divine terms and interest, it is perhaps surprising that many critics rightly see a dual interest in the passage in person and place, but in so doing neglect a most obvious third point, which is God himself. Instead, discussion of the divine is centred on the relation of divine terms to historical-critical issues or on how it impinges on the person of Jacob or the place of Bethel, or on the religio-historical interest in Canaanite traces in the passage.

God is clearly depicted in the passage: God is portrayed as a character, God appears, speaks, offers reassurance, promises, has a wider purpose of which Jacob is part, accompanies, protects, guides and claims to keep his word. Thus, as elsewhere in Hebrew narrative, God is portrayed in personal terms, with the term YHWH best seen not as a title or attribute but a name. Some aspects, such as God standing, are more obviously anthropomorphic. How we are to interpret these different aspects and attributes relates to the wider task of theology, suffice it to say that there is a given-ness about God and about the possibility of describing him in personal terms.<sup>1</sup>

However, a consideration of this passage in its wider context will sharpen our understanding of how it contributes to an understanding of God. Before the episode, apart from the oracle given to Rebekah before Jacob's birth, there is little direct reference to God. Instead, Jacob (and his mother) are left to work out his own destiny, and part of the tension of the previous chapter, as we shall see, is not just whether Jacob will succeed in his deception, but whether he is right: how he should act, if at all. Instead of a clear voice from God, there is the urging of his mother and the blessing of a father extracted through deception. Now at last, Jacob has his first direct experience of God. However, this experience does not last, and whereas we might be led to expect a clear divine lead and protection following the Bethel promises,

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<sup>1</sup> See Fohrer, Exegese des Alten Testaments, 213ff: 'Das Reden von Gott'.

Jacob will find himself once again caught up in a web of deception and, at least until the end of his stay with Laban, it will seem he has been thrown onto his own resources as before. Thus whereas God is often hidden, his voice silent and his purposes achieved through very 'worldly' and human factors, here, the opposite is true -Jacob actually sees God, he is spoken to directly, and God reassures Jacob that he will guide, provide, be with Jacob and fulfill his purposes. Finally, in response, Jacob addresses God directly for the first time (v22).

This passage therefore relates to the wider issue of the relationship between the presence and absence of God, and the human and the divine. Although much of Jacob's life suggests that human character and resources are determinative, this passage suggests that underneath all this, the divine plan is being worked out. Part of this dichotomy involves that of grace and sin: 'Namely, that the fleeing deceiver received such a word of grace';<sup>1</sup> but this is only part of a wider mystery of God working in the world: elsewhere von Rad<sup>2</sup> writes how the plans of God 'remained concealed from all relevant persons' even in or through the break-up of a family. In this passage, the veil over the mystery is lifted to reveal, if not revealing the answers to why God's purpose is fulfilled in the way it is, then at least giving the assurance that God is ultimately in control. After the passage the veil is dropped again, except for specific instances or hints. Thus this passage stands as a hermeneutical lens through which, with other key passages, we are to read the rest of the Jacob narrative.

Regarding terms used for God, there are clearly several references to the divine: the ladder and the angels of God. But these all point to God himself, and specifically YHWH. We have already noted ANE ideas of the divine and religion. But, on the other hand, we have noted that there is a strong Yahwistic stamp on the passage. Historically we have seen this tension as springing from the way the text has been adopted and shaped by Israel. This corresponds to the theological tension which both accepts the Bethel tradition (and more widely, the pre-Yahwistic patriarchal tradition) and qualifies it by seeing it in a new context.

This seems to be the best way to treat the use of the divine name in this passage. In particular, in v16 it would seem that YHWH has replaced El as the name of the deity. The reason behind the replacement would seem to be the concern to emphasize the identity of the patriarchal God with YHWH. Even if an original reference to El does not lie behind our present text, that concern is still a feature of the text. This same concern can also be

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<sup>1</sup> von Rad, Genesis, 287.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 280-1, regarding ch. 27.

discerned at v13aβ (and 21b which also reminds the reader of covenantal language). The name YHWH would also have been deemed necessary at v13aα to qualify the non-Israelite character of the vision. In that position it also marks the climax where Jacob sees first the ladder, then angels 'of God', then YHWH himself. Thus the divine name is used with deliberation to remove any room for theological misinterpretation.

It seems therefore that whereas the writers were prepared to depict Jacob carrying out religious acts that were later seen as unlawful, they were not prepared to allow the slightest impression that Jacob was worshipping any other god than YHWH -even if, according to the wider narrative (Ex. 3:14 and 6:3) that name was not known to the patriarchs.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this observation -although not dependent on the historical-critical method -is clearest when we are prepared to accept the historical dimension of the text.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, we also noted the fact that Jacob was actually able to see YHWH. This forms a parallel to Peniel on the one hand, but also relates to the tradition reflected in Exodus that a person could not see God and live (Ex. 33:20), and this will be taken further in the next chapter.<sup>3</sup> With regard to this episode, another significant contrast with the book of Exodus is the lack of the term שָׁדָד. It is of course precarious to argue from silence, but in a passage containing such a strong sense of the numinous and the divine, such a use might have been

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<sup>1</sup> This assumes reading both texts in Exodus together as indicating that the name YHWH was hitherto unknown. For a thorough treatment of this issue: Moberly, The Old Testament of the Old Testament. Moberly bypasses the question of sources in Ex. 3 -4, and argues that the text as it stands is consistent with Ex. 6, and that both passages witness to the view that the divine name was only revealed within the context of Mosaic Yahwism. Regarding the use of the divine name in Genesis, Moberly argues that writers were happy to merge their own perspective with that of patriarchal religion, tolerating what would be seen by later standards as an anachronism. Our reading of this passage supports the view that the name YHWH is introduced quite deliberately. In further support of Moberly, it has been observed that the use of the divine name is not the only way that the passage makes a connection between the patriarchal figure of Jacob and the faith of Israel.

For a critique of Moberly's view: C. R. Seitz, Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1998, 229-47. Seitz himself argues that in Exodus, it is only Moses who previously did not know the divine name. It is however questionable whether this reading, whilst doing justice to a turning-point in Moses' own life, does equal justice to the clear change in the relationship between God and his people that comes about with the Mosaic era. This is supported by the observations made below relating to the idea of holiness.

<sup>2</sup> Thus Wenham, in his more historically orientated 'The Religion of the Patriarchs', makes this insight into the text, whereas it is passed over in his commentary.

<sup>3</sup> It should, of course, be noted that the treatment of this motif is not straightforward in Exodus -see Ex. 24:10-11, 33:11.

expected. This is pointed out, for instance, by Westermann,<sup>4</sup> who uses the terms *tremendum* and *fascinosum* in reference to this passage, leaning heavily on the work of Otto's famous thesis on holiness.<sup>2</sup> For Westermann the term שִׁדְדָּ is only absent because, the word itself could only be used after a further development of these ideas. However, a more antithetical reason has been suggested by Moberly<sup>3</sup> who points to the absence of holiness in the patriarchal narratives as a whole and sets up a contrast with the revelation of God as YHWH to Moses where the term is concentrated. Thus a point of contrast can be made between this episode and Ex. 3 since in the latter, the word שִׁדְדָּ is used for the first time in the story of Israel beginning with the patriarchs. The reason for its absence until then, argues Moberly, is that the term is 'integrally related to the particularity of Israel's relationship with YHWH'<sup>4</sup>. Thus, although the passage contains the quality of the numinous, and the presence of God, the idea of the holy as expressed by the term שִׁדְדָּ as used in the Mosaic tradition is not, and cannot be, found, because it is one of those features absent from the patriarchal narratives.

### 2.3.3 Place (Bethel)

It has been observed in the exegesis how the narrative moves with Jacob from a place of familiarity with its connotations of family home and divine presence at Beer Sheba to a place of unfamiliarity and anonymity. The fact that its name is kept even from the reader means that we share the perspective of Jacob. Nevertheless the repetition of the term מִקְוֹ and the definite article tantalizingly hint to the reader that this is not just any place. The same can equally be said of the stone used for a cushion. The next transition is from the place of anonymity to the place of significance, and at least for the Israelite reader, of familiarity. From now on, Bethel will be to Jacob what Beer Sheba has been to Abraham and Isaac. This all witnesses to the importance of place in the patriarchal narratives and, more widely, to that of land in the Hebrew Bible. However, beyond this is the suggestion that this place

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis: 12-36, 460. However, in his concluding remarks on the religion of the patriarchs (p. 576), Westermann points out that 'the patriarchal stories are not yet aware of the holiness of God'.

<sup>2</sup> R. Otto, The Idea of the Holy: an Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924 (ET of Das Heilige, 9th ed.). Otto himself briefly discusses this passage (p. 131-2), seeing in Jacob's reaction (v17) the sense of being somewhere haunted. He sees the same idea expressed at the burning bush (Ex. 3), although there Moses covers his face (Ex. 3:6b).

<sup>3</sup> The Old Testament of the Old Testament, 99ff.

<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament of the Old Testament, 102.

has a special quality, and as we have noted, Jacob recognizes this in the setting up of the pillar and the giving of the name. This quality is not spelt out, but it seems to reflect the idea that it is in this particular place, which Jacob stumbles upon by chance (or is he guided there?) that the divine can be experienced, and perhaps that here, the divine meets the temporal (so, the vision of the ladder) or -in the terms of our wider theme -the human. If this reflects a pre-Israelite idea, there is no attempt to censure it.

However, this idea is set in tension with another idea, that of God's presence reaching beyond this place and accompanying his people, in this case Jacob. This is spelt out by the promises which relate to God's accompanying presence and protection (v15), and by the self-definition of God by relationship (with Abraham and Isaac -v13aβ).

In a wider canonical context this points to the dual aspects of God's people who travel (the patriarchal narratives, stay in Egypt and exodus, the wilderness tradition, exile) and who have a settled existence in the Promised Land (the preparations for the cult in Exodus/Leviticus, and for social regulation in Dt., the tradition of Zion/Jerusalem, the monarchy, the Temple). On the one hand the passage emphasizes that God will be with his people wherever they go; on the other hand, is the recognition that this place is special and that Jacob will return here, and the conclusion looks forward to a settled existence and cult at Bethel.<sup>1</sup> Theologically, the passage touches on the tension between the particular and the universal: God's presence focussed in one place versus God not restricted to a place, with both sides of the polarity finding a place in the passage. A similar tension can be found around the building of the Temple -see 1 Ki. 8:27ff.<sup>2</sup>

This canonical approach rejects the view of Van Seters who only relates this passage to one side of the tension, namely the exile and the need to speak to a displaced people. The reality is more complex than that.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> So Westermann, Genesis: 12-36, 460.

<sup>2</sup> We already noted in the introduction how Fokkelmann tends to play down any idea of the place of Bethel having any specific quality. This tendency can be found in others, especially in certain Jewish commentators: Herz (The Pentateuch and Haftorahs, 241-3) writes that the message of the dream is that the earth is full of the glory of God and he interprets v16 as meaning that religion is not restricted to any time or place; 'Praying at any place is like standing at the very foot of God's throne in glory, for the gate of heaven is there and the door is open for prayer to be heard,' quoted by Plaut (The Torah, 197). However, this contrasts with another tendency to identify Bethel with what was to be Jerusalem (see below, p. 62).

<sup>3</sup> Prologue to History. Admittedly, Van Seters' does acknowledge earlier cultic aspects alongside the exilic parts, containing the promises and the vow, which look forward to a future return

#### 2.3.4 Person (Jacob)

We have seen above how this passage provides a theological interpretive key for understanding the whole Jacob story. Structurally this is shown in two ways: in the promise given by YHWH that Jacob will return and in the oath given by Jacob. Together these elements look beyond the incident to an eventual fulfilment in the life of Jacob, thus creating a framework to the Jacob story.<sup>1</sup> In biographical terms, furthermore, it is noticeable that this is Jacob's first direct encounter with God. Again, it should be noted that coming after Jacob's act of deception, this incident highlights God's grace,<sup>2</sup> as does the fact that Jacob's dream is unsolicited by him. Nevertheless there is some ambiguity in the relationship between this incident and the previous chapter: does this appearance serve to justify what Jacob did previously? Is God's appearance here dependent on the fact that Jacob has already received the patriarchal blessing? That takes us back to an interpretation of the previous chapter itself, but it would be forcing the point to say that this episode justifies what Jacob has done, although the note of grace here should warn us equally against seeing what will happen with Laban as a punishment (as Fokkelman tends to argue). Clearly there is some connection between the blessing received by Jacob and this incident, but the narrative does not define this closely. Neither is there a clear connection with the opening oracle.

However, as well as representing an incident in Jacob's life, understandable in its own narrative context, the perspective of Israel is never far removed, as is often the case in the Jacob story. This can be seen in two ways:<sup>3</sup> firstly in the promises which would have seen their fulfilment in later Israel. We have noted how the promises are already partially fulfilled in the life of Jacob, not just those relating to his safe return, but also in an anticipatory way, those regarding progeny, land and blessing. On the other hand, there is no doubt that these

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and centralized cult (p. 300-1). However, it could just as well be argued that the conclusion of the passage is written from the perspective of an established cult.

<sup>1</sup> So Richter, 'Das Gelübde als theologische Rahmung,' 21-52. For Richter, the oath and its eventual fulfilment in ch. 35 are a literary invention of the Elohist source. However, it must also be the case that the oath itself presupposes the promise given by YHWH.

<sup>2</sup> 'The fleeing deceiver receives a word of grace', von Rad, Genesis, 287.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am using the categories put forward by Moberly (The Old Testament of the Old Testament, 138) who borrows them in turn from Christian ways of interpreting the Old Testament. Moberly's argument is that the two commonest methods used for a 'Christian' reading of the Old Testament (the promise-fulfilment model and typology) were already used for an 'Israelite' or 'Yahwistic' reading of the patriarchal tradition, the difference being that in the latter case the methods were applied in the actual rewriting of the tradition.

latter promises are only properly fulfilled with reference to the people of Israel.

The second way in which we are drawn into the Israelite perspective is the use of Jacob as a type for the later Israelite. For instance, it is of course true that Jacob's religious practices do not resemble orthodox Yahwistic practise, but the narrative is at pains to emphasize that it is YHWH that Jacob is worshipping. Thus Jacob is a type, albeit shadowy and imprecise since the writers never deny the discrete nature of patriarchal religion, of the Israelite who worships YHWH, the one true God who has brought his people out of Egypt.<sup>1</sup> This is clearest in v21b which approaches covenantal language, but is true of Jacob's response in general. It is also true, as we have seen, in the first part of YHWH's promise (v15) where the language is close to the piety of Israel. Finally, it also true in the institutions mentioned in Jacob's vow: the promise to build a temple, referring most directly to the later shrine at Bethel, and in a wider context to the Jerusalem temple, and the tithe. It is not possible to see any of this as a purely paradigmatic approach of a later writer wanting to encourage true worship of YHWH at the Temple (as Van Seters argues) since the picture of Jacob's religion is less than orthodox and the writer is happy to let the differences remain. Instead, this approach, which we can conveniently call typological, enables the writers to affirm the parallels in the religion without denying the differences.

In conclusion, to relate this passage to our wider theme of the human and divine, the place Bethel acts as the point of intersection. In his narrative study Mann aptly shows how the themes of divine and person converge at the place of Bethel:

The Bethel story is to the Jacob cycle what the charge to Abram was to the Abraham cycle (12:1-3); it provides the foundation for the redactional unity of the narrative. In both passages the patriarchs stand at the threshold of a journey, but

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<sup>1</sup> This tendency is strongly reinforced by Rashi, himself drawing on Rabbinic tradition. The word פגע (v11), carrying connotations of intercession, indicates that Jacob instituted the custom of Evening Prayer. The fact that מוקדום has a definite article means that the place must have already been mentioned -hence it is identified as Mount Moriah (from Gen. 22). This leads to a strong identification of Bethel with the site of the Temple in Jerusalem. This in turn leads to a long discussion about how Mount Moriah can be found at the same place as Luz. Rashi's own suggestion (Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, *Pentateuch*, 133) is that Mount Moriah was forcibly removed to Luz as the ground shrunk before Jacob to bring the two places together. A further popular idea is that Jacob did not proceed straight to Haran from Beersheba but first spent fourteen years studying Torah in the academy of Eber as a preparation for his time of exile, (Scherman and Zlotowitz eds, *Bereishis/ Genesis*, vol. 4, 1217.)

As already argued, the identification of the site of Bethel with the future site of the Jerusalem Temple, whilst questionable from a strictly historical point of view, is quite natural given both the wider perspective of the Bible and the mention of the tithe.



their points of origin and destination are reversed...Jacob is going where Abraham forbids Isaac to go (24:6,8), and is the only patriarch to court disaster by going East. Thus the threshold on which Jacob stands is fraught with danger, both behind and ahead. But the place on which he stands, or lies, is a threshold of a different order; it is the 'gate of heaven' (vs. 17). Yahweh is there in this 'awesome place.' Bethel is both literally and figuratively an intersection of the divine and human paths. Jacob is standing at a strange door which opens in three directions: behind is his past of failure and alienation; ahead is his future of both hope and uncertainty; and over above, coming down to meet him, is the presence of God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of the Torah, 55.

### 3 Peniel (32:23-33)

#### 3.1 Introduction

##### 3.1.1 Questions in relation to the text

This passage is notoriously difficult to interpret. For those interested in historical-critical approaches, there is widespread agreement that this passage has a long prehistory but also an acceptance that the development is so complex that it is extremely difficult to reconstruct it. For those interested in theological meaning, there is the highly unusual picture of God (or is it really God?) entering into a struggle with a human, and of seemingly being on the verge of defeat. In all, there are huge ambiguities and fundamental questions. Needless to say, for some, these questions are primarily questions to be resolved by historical-critical considerations; for others, the questions are better seen within a more sophisticated reading of the final text.

From a historical-critical perspective, Martin-Achard mentions the following difficulties or incoherences:<sup>1</sup>

- v23 suggests Jacob has crossed the stream; v24 seems to deny this, (contrast the Qal form of עבר in the first instance, and the Hiphil in the second).
- Who comes out on top in the struggle? v29 suggests that Jacob has won; but v31 shows him relieved to have escaped death. Von Rad,<sup>2</sup> with many others, sees this tension reflecting the complex prehistory of the text where an earlier account of Jacob defeating a divine creature has been 'concealed' by additions, at the expense of the coherence the narrative. The text as it is preserves these different conceptions.
- Is Jacob's hip dislocated because of a powerful strike or a magic touch?
- Two mentions of a blessing (v29b, v30), -Martin-Achard sees this as a doublet. This of course assumes that the giving of a new name is indeed a blessing.
- The coming of dawn is mentioned three times (vv25, 27, 32).

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<sup>1</sup> R. Martin-Achard, 'Un exégète devant Genèse 32:23-37.' In R. Barthes et al. Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique, Neuchâtel, 1971, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 320-21. Likewise Seebass, (Der Erzvater Israel und die Einführung der Jahweverehrung in Kanaan, BZAW 98, Töpelmann: Berlin, 17), for whom this is the clinching factor regarding the question of sources.

- In one case, the place is called Peniel, in the other Penuel.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, the following 'problems' are posed:

- The passage offers several etymologies: for the name Peniel (v31), the name Israel (v29), and the food tab (v). Westermann<sup>2</sup> considers that the word-play between  $\text{קרב}$  and  $\text{קראב}$  (wrestled) reflects an original etymology for the place of Jabboq. The question raised by these etiological elements is which, if any, are central and which are secondary. This question generally reflects the view that this text is a simple etiological tale, originally formed around one etiology.
- What are we to understand by the 'blessing' given to Jacob? Is it some power extracted from a demon, in the way one might rob it of some special knowledge or superhuman power<sup>3</sup>, or is it the blessing of God?
- Linked to this, who is the opponent of Jacob: a river demon, Esau, God, an angel, a psychological experience or nightmare?
- What is the relation of the passage to the wider Jacob story, especially ch. 32 and ch. 33?

Below are a sample of different approaches.

### 3.1.2 Historical-critical approaches (Gunkel, von Rad, Westermann)

*Gunkel*,<sup>4</sup> following the example of many, is able to reconstruct two parallel stories. The Yahwistic source relates Jacob crossing the Jabboq with family and possessions. Someone wrestles with him until sunrise and Jacob dislocates his hip. Jacob asks the name of the figure, receives no reply, but is blessed. He calls the place 'Peniel', marvelling that he has come away alive, albeit limping.

In the Elohist story, Jacob remains on the north side of the river, it is he who hits the figure on the hip and the figure pleads that Jacob let him go since dawn is coming. For this reason

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<sup>1</sup> Martin-Achard also mentions a 'double mention du nom' in vv28 and 29, but it is not clear how v29 is a question about Jacob's name.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis: 12-36, 517.

<sup>3</sup> Westermann, Genesis: 12-36, 519.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis; reference is also made to The Folktale in the Old Testament, Sheffield: Almond Press, 1987 (ET of Das Märchen im Alten Testament, 1917), which represents Gunkel's later views-see J. Rogerson in the introduction to the English translation (esp. p. 16).

Jacob learns that the figure is divine (whereas in J, the divinity of the figure is revealed by its refusal to reply). Once Jacob realizes this, he extorts a blessing (thus displaying his characteristic 'Klugheit'), and as a blessing, he is given the name 'Israel' with the explanation that he has prevailed over gods (אלהים).<sup>1</sup> The place is not named by Jacob, but is already called Penuel, and the E account ends with the explanation of the food tab. In this form, it is not Jacob who barely escapes with his life, but the demon, since the sun rises just after its escape.

However, Gunkel's main contribution is not in separating two sources but in attempting to highlight the original folktale elements behind both accounts. In particular, he finds that the concept of the divine being, beaten by Jacob (preserved in E and, argues Gunkel, in Hosea 12:5) is the most ancient, and certainly pre-Yahwistic, since he is quite clear that the 'god' described here is not YHWH, but a demon, possibly a river demon. The tale thus reflects other folktales of demons who savagely attack human beings at night, but whose power vanishes at daybreak. Eventually, this story came into Israelite circulation and the names Penuel, Jabboq and Jacob were added, though it was added into the Jacob-Esau cycle at a later stage still, as demonstrated by the very different portrayal of Jacob elsewhere: 'Der mutige Gottesbesieger und der Jaqob, der vor Esau zittert, sind eigentlich ganz verschiedene Gestalten.'<sup>2</sup> In his commentary, Gunkel detects vestiges of an originally mythical, legendary saga, with Jacob portrayed as a giant; however Gunkel's later and more revised view is that the story is essentially a folktale about spirits or demons.

Clearly, Gunkel's interest lies in tracing the 'original' tale, and the ideas behind this. There is no real attempt to draw theological conclusions, either for the reader today, or for Israel and the Pentateuchal writers. The only application which he does make in the commentary is in the last paragraph with a passing remark on how rich this passage has proved to be in providing allegorical readings.

Thus, questions facing the reader are resolved by the historical method: alleged repetitions derive from different sources, and even the giving of a name is seen as the doublet of the giving of a blessing. Ambiguity is also 'solved' in this way, so that in one source, Jacob (or the hero) wins, whereas in the other, he escapes with his life. The nature of the blessing and the identity of the attacker are determined by the original, folktale genre.

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<sup>1</sup> The Folktale in the Old Testament, 84.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 364.

Although *von Rad*<sup>1</sup> generally accepts the idea of continuous sources running through the Pentateuch, he does not accept that this passage contains parallel strands, the only real doublet being v23 and v24b.

Von Rad is a clear advocate of the historical approach and accepts Gunkel's view concerning the original pre-Yahwistic saga of a nocturnal attack on a man. He further argues that a historical understanding is essential:

This knowledge about such a long history is not, however, only a concern of a special science, but it concerns everyone who wants to understand the story; for only then can the reader be preserved from false expectations of a hasty search for 'the' meaning of this story.<sup>2</sup>

This last clause however shows that whereas Gunkel is happy simply to discover the 'original' story, von Rad has a wider concern to show the depth of meaning and ambiguity in the present text, and that for him, the historical method is an indispensable tool to this end:

It is therefore all the more amazing that Israel found this ancient framework and imaginative material, which derived from the crude, heathen past, completely suitable to represent Yahweh's work with Israel's ancestor. For the narrator's opinion is.... that in and behind this 'man', this nocturnal assailant, Yahweh himself was most directly at work with Jacob.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Gunkel, Von Rad is concerned to give voice to the 'Yahwistic' narrator, and in particular, to uncover the range of theological meaning.<sup>4</sup>

This is shown in his exegesis of the text. Throughout, he identifies pre-Israelite elements but then reverts to the perspective of the later narrator. Like Gunkel he sees an earlier conception of Jacob nearly defeating a heavenly being (betrayed in vv25, 26, 28b), now

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 319ff.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 319.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, 324.

<sup>4</sup> In many respects, von Rad's approach is anticipated by K. Elliger 'Der Jakobskampf am Jabbok. Gen 32:23ff als hermeneutisches Problem', ZTK 48 (1951), 1-31. Like von Rad, Elliger sees the work of the Yahwist in giving a theological emphasis to this much older story, with the real interest of final form of the story lying with the nature of God and God's grace and mercy. Elliger goes on to give an arguably very Lutheran interpretation of the attack by God on Jacob: God's attack on Jacob is an act of judgement but it also becomes the place where Jacob is spared, justified from past sin and given a new identity. Thus this event is a type for the Cross where Christ receives the judgement deserved by humanity, but where sinful humanity also finds justification (p. 30-31). As we shall see later, Elliger also makes a valuable connection between this incident and Jacob's prayer (32:10ff).

modified by additions (v25b, 32b). He then notes how the final narrator was happy to leave such ambiguity open.

For von Rad, most theological interest lies with the elements of blessing and the giving and concealing of names. Again, he sees that both the elemental clutching for blessing and the belief in the power of names are vestiges of the ancient tale, but he also shows how these themes are now central to the Yahwist's concerns. The blessing now is clearly from God, but the request for a blessing is still 'a primitive human reaction to an encounter with God', being 'the most elemental reaction of man to the divine'.<sup>1</sup> Clearly the concept of 'primitive' is loaded and ambiguous, but von Rad's use of the term here is instructive: whereas for Gunkel, what is primitive reflects an ancient way of looking at things, now largely superseded by newer ways of understanding reality; for von Rad 'primitive' is something which remains in human nature even in our technological age. This means that he is able to relate the text to our own experience in a way that Gunkel does not.

Von Rad notes that the connection to v29 seems loose at first -perhaps leaving us to infer that the text was not always one unit, but he is more concerned to show an inner continuity in the passage as it now is. As with blessing, the verse reflects an ancient view that to know the name of a divinity is to be able to summon or even manipulate it. Again though, von Rad sees embedded in this question about the name 'all man's need, all his boldness before God,' and especially 'the longing for God'.

Von Rad then goes on to comment on the blessing that God does give to Jacob with characteristic passion:

But how far removed from the petition itself is the final fulfilment, and what lies between this petition and its fulfilment (v29b)! ....Thus it is clear again that our narrative is far removed from all those sagas which tell of the extortion of a divine nature by man and of the winning of a blessing.<sup>2</sup>

A related shift in emphasis is noted earlier: the notion of 'prevailing' once referred to a struggle with a demon and the astonishment engendered was at the suicidal courage of Jacob (would not the astonishment have been more at the strength and cleverness of Jacob who had no choice but to defend himself?), but now the astonishment is reversed, so that we wonder at the fact that God let himself be coerced in such a way by Jacob's violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 321.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 323.

Not only is von Rad concerned to draw out theological and narrative meaning in the verse by verse exegesis, he also draws it out in an extended epilogue. He comments, as we have noted, on how the story has been radically and daringly adopted. He also argues that a historical perspective prevents one from finding the 'one' meaning of the passage, and that the breaks in coherence actually add to the depth. He then shows how we are to relate this passage to the wider context of the Jacob narrative (something Gunkel fails to do), but then he relates the passage to the Yahwist's salvation-historical perspective. In view of the giving of the name of Israel in this passage, such a broad Israelite perspective is required of the text itself.

Thus von Rad's approach has similarities with that of Gunkel, but more striking are the differences. He has sought to bring to bear findings of historical investigation for theological use, and in so doing has even offered what is close to a synchronic reading, and one which here anticipates the canonical approach. He has tried (largely successfully, in my view) to offer a reading which is both sensitive to a diachronic perspective, but also concerned with a synchronic and theological understanding. The only question that this approach poses is that of whether the historical starting-point is really as necessary as he claims -especially as scholars who eschew any historical discussion are also able to see ambiguity and paradox, and a great many scholars of the historical school do see ambiguity in a much more negative light, as a problem to be solved (as seems to be Gunkel's presupposition). This is a very important and broad-ranging question, and one which has already been touched upon and will have to be tested out.

Like von Rad, *Westermann*<sup>1</sup> finds no evidence of parallel sources, whilst accepting that the passage has a long prehistory stretching to pre-Israelite times, being attached to the river Jabboq, (hence the wordplay יבֶּקֶ-אֲבֹק). However, Westermann differs from von Rad and Gunkel in seeing certain elements as much later than the Yahwistic writer, in particular, verses which suggest that Jacob was wrestling with God (vv28f -Jacob's new name, v31b -Jacob's conclusion that he has seen God face to face). References to the food tab (v and v26b) are also later.

This creates the problem that the verses which have most given occasion for 'profound and

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis: 12-36, 512ff.

extensive theological explanations<sup>1</sup> are those which are 'secondary'. For Westermann it is impossible to understand the narrative as a whole from this perspective, and he makes the point that the theological meaning of these additions is to be studied separately. However, it should be pointed out that at no stage does he do so himself.

Regarding the Yahwist himself, he took the old tale and inserted it at this point in the Jacob story. In this form, the river demon tried to stop Jacob crossing the stream. This has to be the original plot since the Yahwist did not hold the view that YHWH was only active at night or feared the breaking of day. Jacob survives with the help of God and so has experienced that God is with him. 'He can now go on to meet his brother'.<sup>2</sup> Thus Westermann does consider the passage in a wider literary context, unlike Gunkel, although it is not the context which now exists.

From what has been noted, it is clear that Westermann regards certain parts of the text as an organic part of the whole, and others as additions to be discarded and treated separately. This must seem arbitrary, since there is no justification for his assumption that the 'Yahwistic' version (which is only a scholarly supposition) is the version which carries theological or literary weight.

In this sense, Westermann comes some way between Gunkel and von Rad. Gunkel is interested in the very beginnings, von Rad in the text as it is, albeit with its traces of historical development, whereas Westermann has chosen somewhere in between. Moreover, Westermann sees little room for ambiguity or depth of meaning in the way that von Rad does, with the result that he does little justice to the text as it is and the way it has clearly made an impression on exegetes through the ages. In his defence, Westermann argues that it is wrong to base the exegesis of the whole passage on a few isolated additions, as this does no justice to the bulk of the text.

### 3.1.3 Text as unity

This can be seen in two very different ways:

a) The text as being a unity from its very conception (Blum). Thus, to treat this particular text as a single unit is the result of a historical judgment.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12-36, 520.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12-36, 521.



b) The text as a unity, irrespective of what it once was (Barthes<sup>1</sup>).

*Blum*<sup>2</sup> is clearly concerned to understand this text both as a literary unity and as an integral part of its literary context. However, it becomes clear that this is because of his view that this text was conceived from the start as a single unit integral to the wider narrative.

Regarding literary context, he highlights several links: for instance, the words פְּנִים and עֹבֵר, the wider time frame, and the theme of blessing underlying the Jacob-Esau story. Added to this is the deliberate contrast between the nocturnal struggle with God and the peaceful daytime encounter with his brother. These are all elements which none of the above discussed scholars have really highlighted. In particular, Blum discusses the theme of blessing. On the face of it, the interest is in the outcome of the struggle, but the author uses the motif of the sunrise and the ambiguity in v26 about who is really defeated to point the reader to the 'truer' meaning of this passage which links with the struggle for blessing and its acquisition behind the Jacob-Esau narrative as a whole. Ambiguity is part of the technique of the author to point us to the wider context which deals with the question of Jacob's blessing, seen in a positive light in ch. 27, but seen as more problematic in ch. 33. Blum clearly has a point in relating the question of blessing in the Peniel incident to that in the rest of the narrative, as opposed to seeing the concept here as so totally different. However, there is also a sense in which the Peniel scene leaps out of its literary context. Blum accepts some possible tradition behind the literary text, with some etiological link between the struggle and the name 'Israel'.<sup>3</sup> We are then left with the question of how much this tradition has already taken shape. Is it not more likely that the rest of ch. 32 and 33 were composed or modified in the light of this incident, which after all, has a lot more depth, or that the two elements were brought and worked together? It seems that Blum has brought out an essential aspect of the narrative, but has not exhausted its meaning.

*R Barthes* explains how he intends to show 'comment notre passage s'offre à une analyse

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<sup>1</sup> R. Barthes, 'La lute avec l'ange: Analyse textuelle de Genèse 32:23-33.' In R. Barthes et al. *Analyse structurale et exegèse biblique*, Neuchâtel, 1971, 27-39.

<sup>2</sup> *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 143ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 145.

structurale très classique, canonique presque'.<sup>1</sup> This is consciously different from an historical analysis (which investigates the origins of a text), or a structural analysis (which looks at how the text is composed), and especially means eschewing the concern of any theologian -the search for meaning or truth:

Le problème, du moins celui que je me pose, est en effet de parvenir à ne pas réduire le Texte à un signifié, quel qu'il soit (historique, économique, folklorique ou kérygmatic), mais à maintenir sa signifiante ouverte.<sup>2</sup>

Barthes looks at the text from several perspectives: a sequential analysis, and, under the category of structural analysis, an actantial and then a functional analysis.

The sequential analysis looks at the sequence of events in the text and discovers three basic stages: passage (i.e. the crossing), struggle, and mutation. Regarding the passage (crossing), there are two possible readings: one, that Jacob crosses the stream and then encounters the figure; the other, that he encounters the figure and then is free to cross. We have already seen that this has been noted by other scholars, but, rather than seeing this as a 'difficulty' or obscurity to be cleared up either by reference to contradictory sources (Barthes is unconcerned whether there are sources or not) or redaction, he simply spells out the resulting ambiguity. The ambiguity leads to two possible readings: in the one, Jacob is left alone before crossing and so has to undergo an ordeal by combat before reaching his goal. In the other, Jacob crosses first and then remains alone to 'se marquer par la solitude',<sup>3</sup> making the combat a religious event with the change of names being like a baptismal experience. Both readings, one folkloristic, the other religious, are to be read alongside each other:

Le théologien souffrirait...de cette indécision; l'exégète la reconnaîtrait, en souhaitant que quelque élément, factuel ou argumentif, lui permette de la faire cesser; l'analyse textuel... goûtera cette sorte de *friction* entre deux intelligibles (author's own italics).<sup>4</sup>

The struggle itself is also marked by ambiguity : who is the  $\Psi\text{N}$  and who is the subject of the verbs? This ambiguity is resolved, but only retroactively. There is also a paradox in the

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<sup>1</sup> 'La lutte avec l'ange', 28.

<sup>2</sup> 'La lutte avec l'ange', 39.

<sup>3</sup> 'La lutte avec l'ange', 31.

<sup>4</sup> 'La lutte avec l'ange', 32.

way that the struggle is resolved: there is a 'coup décisif' but, paradoxically, it does not succeed. Thus the outcome is different than we would expect, and this introduces the idea of reversal: the weaker one defeats the stronger, but in return he is marked ('marqué') on the thigh. Barthes is able to see this idea of marking as significant to the life of Jacob as a whole. From the beginning, Esau, as the first-born, should have been the one marked out, but this marking out is reversed as Jacob supplants the older (Gen. 27:36), something anticipated in the birth where Jacob is grasping Esau's heel. The idea of marking here links to the theological theme of election.<sup>1</sup> In this text then, God (the stronger) is a substitute for Esau (the older) who is displaced by the younger (Jacob). This reading is close to that of Blum, who as we have seen, sees the blessing received by Jacob as parallel to the blessing he receives at the expense of Esau elsewhere.

Mutation or 'nomination' is the third and final element of the sequence. There are numerous changes which result from this text: the physical change to Jacob's body (as he acquires a limp), a new name and status for Jacob, a new name also for the place, and a new food tab. Each of these involve a transition ('passage') which of course underlines the whole event.

Structural analysis -The first model is based on the work of Greimas, and is called an actantial analysis. Characters, or even some inanimate objects, are placed into the category of one (or occasionally more) actant, an actant being a role within the narrative. This particular text has a pattern which is familiar in mythology: there is the Subject (Jacob) who is the subject of the quest, the Object of the demand (the crossing of the stream), the 'Destinateur' (God) who issues the challenge, the 'Destinataire' (Jacob), the Opponent (God) who opposes the Subject, and the Helper who assists the Subject, (in this case, Jacob himself). It is not unusual for a character to have more than one role, but that the 'destinateur' should also be the Opponent is very rare and indeed seems to break the rules, as it is virtually impossible for the Originator to also be the opponent. This accounts for the shock that the text causes.

The second model, based on that of Propp, is a functional analysis. Here Barthes shows how the narrative has many elements common to folktales. Again, the role of God is unusual, since the role he has in the narrative is structurally that of the evil character.

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes himself indicates that the reading could contribute to an understanding of the socio-economic relations between Edom and Israel.

### 3.1.4 Conclusion

Barthes' is the most unique treatment of the text, especially in refusing to offer solutions to 'problems' posed by the text. His approach is clearly unhistorical and general, in that he does not relate the passage either to the history of Israel or its literary conventions, or to the Ancient Near Eastern culture. Instead, he relates the passage to general patterns common to all popular folktales. Clearly this rests upon the view that all popular literature betrays common underlying patterns. This is indeed a sort of form criticism, but one which compares the form of this text not to texts from a close cultural and historical proximity, but to universal forms (and so there is no discussion of an original 'Sitz im Leben'). But more than that, Barthes is interested in showing the peculiarities of this text which are sharpened when it is set against general patterns. Thus the role of God is especially unusual as he turns out to be not only the Originator of Jacob's quest, but also his Opponent. Barthes does not see it as his place to develop the significance of this, but simply to note that it virtually breaks the rules of folktale syntax. Likewise, the discussion of 'marquage' and especially the marking of Jacob's thigh, relates to the wider motif of Jacob being marked out in opposition to his elder brother. In both this episode and in the wider narrative, Jacob overcomes the stronger or older -in one case, God, in the other, Esau.

The problem with Barthes' approach is that it is difficult for the trained exegete to assess fairly. One criticism often levelled at this sort of approach is that it merely states the obvious in a somewhat convoluted and technical jargon. In a sense Barthes may not completely disagree with this since he is claiming to show what is already in the text, and he is simply spelling out explicitly what we might all sense implicitly. He is certainly not aiming to point to hidden truths or meanings in the text, seeing his task as descriptive rather than constructive. It is perhaps for the exegete to use some of the insights of Barthes' method in the constructive task of relating the text to any theological or historical perspective. The extent to which this can be done will enable us to assess Barthes' work.

An initial response to this would suggest that Barthes' work is of variable value. It has already been suggested that he enables us to see in clearer profile how unusual the role of God is in this story, and he confirms views that this text has parallels in this respect, which might encourage us to search for an underlying significance in this.<sup>1</sup> However, in discussing the ambiguity of the description of Jacob's crossing the river (either before or after the

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<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 91.

struggle), the exegete is left feeling dissatisfied. Barthes anticipates this when he writes that the exegete will search for a way of 'solving' what is for the exegete a 'problem' (after all, surely the text cannot say that Jacob both crossed the stream and did not cross the stream!). Barthes is simply content to spell out the ambiguity (contradiction?), and shows how the two possibilities give rise to two ways of seeing the struggle, either as an ordeal or a religious experience. But we are left with the question: can a text simply bear that amount of contradiction? Should we not at least consider whether Barthes has misread the text, and may not some understanding of the conventions of the Hebrew writers help us to read the text in a better way? In this case, Barthes' method is perhaps restricted in refusing to consider the conventions of the writers. It may be that there is no alternative reading (or only a solution on a diachronic level -which still leaves us with having to make sense of the text synchronically), but one wonders whether Barthes is too ready to jump to this conclusion (we do not even know whether he has considered the text in the original Hebrew). Furthermore, it is not absolutely clear whether an ambiguity leads necessarily to two alternative understandings of the struggle in quite the way Barthes suggests.

This leads to another possible objection which is his claim that theologians or exegetes find ambiguity difficult. We have already seen that von Rad is able to find ambiguity in the text without wishing to 'solve' it, and that for him, it is an historical approach which allows this. Certainly, one of the claims of the champions of the historical method is that these methods have freed exegetes from harmonizing approaches to the Bible, and allowed us to see different perspectives in sharper profile, and there is undoubtedly some force in this claim. In a similar fashion, Barthes drives a clear wedge between seeing a text as open ended in its meaning and discovering a kerygmatic (or historical) meaning. Certainly, some approaches could be seen as reductionist, especially those which tie the 'meaning' of a text to some supposed historical setting, but this is something the canonical approach has sought to overcome by showing how the scope or 'meaning' of a text has been widened by being incorporated into a new, less specific context. In addition, a theological approach does not rule out seeing the text as open ended. On this point, Barthes has made a false dichotomy. In short, then, Barthes may be of help in showing more clearly certain features of the text, but it is also clear that his approach does not rule out other methods, and is perhaps an additional tool which needs to be used alongside others and which must not be used uncritically.

Regarding the other approaches, we have seen how the traditional source critical approach has been largely left aside by recent works. This seems correct as it seems that only verses vv23 and 24 are in any sense a doublet. For the rest, there is no compelling case for seeing two parallel stories. It is perhaps true that where source criticism isolated two competing versions -one where Jacob is almost defeated, the other where the divinity is almost defeated -it has thrown into sharper relief the ambiguity of the narrative itself: to say, for instance, with v29 that Jacob is the victor does not do full justice to the whole text, which suggests that the outcome is not so clear cut. The fault of source criticism has been to translate this ambiguity into historical terms, delineating clear sources.

Gunkel and Westermann both show an interest in earlier stages of the text, and indeed make any understanding of the text as it now stands a secondary concern. For Gunkel, interest lies in uncovering the original (oral) saga and identifying legendary or folktale elements. For Westermann, the interest is in finding the (written) narrative as it was first incorporated into the Yahwistic narrative.

These approaches may be criticized on two accounts. Firstly, the search for earlier stages is at the expense of an understanding of the final form, and the choice of a certain stage as the one to be investigated is somewhat arbitrary. On the other hand, the work of Gunkel in particular may be helpful to scholars who want to understand the text as we now have it, as an understanding of the process may help us see the finished result in a better light (so, von Rad). The second criticism is that this sort of approach is always hypothetical and the results can rarely be assumed. In particular, Westermann's approach should be strongly questioned. He is able to reconstruct an earlier version only by seeing those elements of the text which suggest that Jacob's opponent was God himself as much later. This sort of argument is inevitably circular. In particular, he argues that the renaming of Jacob is close (in time and thought -see Gen. 35:10) to the Priestly source, but this ignores that fact that P finds it necessary to include another account of the naming of Jacob. Surely, it is more likely that the Priestly writer or redactor has found it necessary to reinterpret a much older tradition? One also wonders whether a writer so close to P would really have wished to conceive as if from nowhere such a daringly anthropomorphic picture of God who not only wrestles with, but is also defeated by, the patriarch.

I have tried to show how von Rad combines an historical approach with one which seeks to interpret the text as it is. Overall, he exercises a greater restraint in attempting to isolate an original text from later additions, and this means that his exegesis is less dependant on

hypothetical reconstructions. At this point, von Rad is very close to the later canonical approach. There is still the tendency to see ambiguity resulting from the prehistory of the text, but von Rad goes beyond pointing this out by seeing the passage as a literary unit in its own right.

Finally, Blum is able to see things in the text that the other scholars have not, in particular that the passage is embedded into the wider narrative. However, this leads Blum to jump to a diachronic judgement that the text must have been composed for the context and, inversely, judging by Blum's method elsewhere, we can assume that if he had judged that the passage had an independent origin, he would have been less concerned to approach it synchronically. In particular, he forces the question: should links with the wider context immediately bring us to make historical judgements. Is it not feasible that this passage and the surrounding narrative (and wider picture of Jacob) had a mutual effect on each other, and that the writers shaped their material as appropriate? Even Blum accepts that some tradition must have preceded this narrative, and this suggests that the alternative of viewing some passages as old stories incorporated fairly well untouched into the wider context with that of viewing other passages as constructed *de novo* for the context is too clearly made.

## 3.2 A reading of 32:23-33

### 3.2.1 Structure

vv23-24	-Introduction to the scene
v25	-The struggle
v26	-Attempt to break stalemate with 'touch' to the thigh.
vv27-30	-Dialogue, themes of blessing and name.
v31	-Naming of place
v32	-Jacob leaves, bearing the mark of his encounter
v33	-Explanation of food tab.

From this it is clear that the main part of the struggle is hardly described. Instead the emphasis lies on the end and especially on the conversation. Central to the structure of the passage (and indeed, it will be seen, to the interest of the passage) are the demand and giving of a blessing, and the names of the protagonists.

It therefore seems that the passage is built around the giving and non-giving of names, with the struggle itself providing the startling background for this theologically important theme.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It may be that we can go further in detecting a chiasmic structure to the passage: vv23-25 which set the geographical location and the time, and the background to the dialogue.

a -Jacob is injured on the thigh. (v26)  
 b -request to be let go, for the dawn is coming (v27a)  
 c -demand for blessing (as condition) (v27b)  
 d -request for name (and answer) (v28)  
 -giving of new name with explanation.  
 d'-request for name (and refusal) (v30a)  
 c'-blessing is given (v30b)  
 (naming of the place and explanation -v31)  
 b'-sun risen, and Jacob crosses (v32)  
 a'-Jacob limps on thigh (v)

Final etiology (continuation of the thigh motif).

It has to be admitted that some caution has been called for in detecting chiasmic structures, and also that in this case the pattern is not exact. However, there may be several reasons for this: the writer only has a certain amount of freedom, because the plot demands a certain logic in the order, there is always the possibility that the writers were dealing with traditional material and so felt a certain need to preserve some elements, and variations in a pattern may be intended to bring out contrasts, an obvious example being that whereas Jacob answers God by giving his name, his opponent refuses to disclose his.

If it is true that chiasmic patterns tend to emphasize the central elements, then there is no question that here, the requesting and giving (or refusal) of names is central. Around this is placed the theme of blessing.



### 3.2.2 Exegesis

v23-25a clearly present a difficulty. v23 suggests that Jacob crossed the Jabboq with his family, v24 suggests he stayed alone. v25a makes it clear that whichever side Jacob was on, he ended up alone. Few readers will be satisfied with Barthes' suggestion that we let the ambiguity remain. It could be that in this case a diachronic explanation is to be found, for instance that v23 was the original itinerary note and v24 was later added to make a bridge with the Penuel episode. As the text now stands, v23 functions more like a notice over the whole episode, with v24 starting to narrate the actual episode in detail. One effect of the repetition is to emphasize the word עֹבֵר, a frequent motif in ch. 32 and 33.<sup>1</sup> Whatever we are to understand textually, the narrator is silent as to Jacob's motivation for wanting to be alone.

v25b describes the fight very succinctly. There is no clue as to who the שׂוֹנֵא might be, and this remains a mystery until the very end. We are left, with Jacob, to consider various alternatives: a night or river demon, a stranger, an angel, Esau -least of all, perhaps, would we consider God.<sup>2</sup> The phrase עלות השחר means that the day is just beginning to break. It is therefore not a doublet with v32. Instead, v32 is the next stage as the sun rises. This motif of increasing light replacing the darkness reinforces the gradual realization of Jacob as to what has really been taking place. Thus the objective description of night turning to day reflects Jacob's subjective point of view.

v26 brings us to the resolution of the struggle. In the next two verses there follows a sequence of 3ms waw-consecutive verbs, and until the end of v29, it is not always clear who is who. The lack of proper nouns is not unusual in Hebrew narrative but here adds to the tension and the picture of the two combatants being evenly matched. It also increases the confusion over the event and the outcome.

A stalemate is reached, so the combatant tries to break it by playing a trick on Jacob. Whether we are to understand this trick as a magic touch or a strong blow to the thigh is not

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<sup>1</sup> Blum, Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 143.

<sup>2</sup> So Barthes, 'La lutte avec l'ange', 37.

clear.<sup>1</sup> The reader can see an irony in the wider context of Jacob's life as the one who usually plays tricks on others is here on the receiving end.

v27 assumes that the attempt to break the stalemate has failed. It is not immediately clear why the opponent should need releasing with the rising of the sun, though once we realize his divine nature we understand the need to conceal identity. It is probable that behind this lies the ancient motif of demons being active only at night, but to the later reader there may be the hint of the idea that it would be dangerous for a human to see God in broad daylight (see v31). In this case, the paradox would be that the very opponent who is fighting with Jacob is also concerned not to see him perish.

As it is, we still do not know who it is that Jacob is dealing with. Certainly, the demand for a blessing suggests that Jacob has some idea of the divine nature of his opponent, and his demand for a blessing could, from his point of view, represent the idea of trying to extract some power. It is probably wrong to interpret the idea of blessing given solely in pre-Yahwistic terms, but equally, the nature of the struggle suggests that this element is present. Alternatively or additionally, Jacob could have in mind that his opponent is Esau, and that this is some sort of reenactment for the struggle for the blessing.

vv28-29: At the end of v28, we are at last clear about which character is which, although not yet about the identity of Jacob's opponent.

V29, with the giving of the name Israel, is clearly important, but before considering the significance of the verse in this episode, there are several issues to be addressed.

*Excursus: the giving of the name Israel at Peniel*

*i. etymology* -this verse offers a clear etymology for the name יִשְׂרָאֵל, by which the name is linked to the rare verb שָׂרָה, itself generally defined as 'struggle', 'strive', 'persist', 'exert oneself', 'persevere'.<sup>2</sup> Hos.12 seems to reflect this where the verb is used in v4 (שָׂרָה), but the form יִשָּׂר is used in the next verse. Despite the rarity of the verb שָׂרָה, the Biblical

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<sup>1</sup> On a metaphorical level it has been suggested that 'thigh' is a euphemism for sexual organs and that the injury to the thigh could refer to the fate of Jacob's offspring, (e.g. S. Gervitz, 'Of Patriarchs and Puns: Joseph at the Fountain, Jacob at the Ford.' *HUCA* 46 (1975), 52-3; L. M. Eslinger, 'The Case of an Immodest Lady Wrestler in Deut 25: 11-12.' *VT* 31 (1981), 273-4; Hamilton, *Genesis 12-50*, 331.

<sup>2</sup> *BDB*, 975.

account (reflected in Hosea) interprets the name 'Israel' as a compound with a verb with the noun לָא, where v29b suggests that 'God' is the object of the verb.

However, this has been questioned on at least two fronts. First, there is the problem that, when read without the explanation of v29b, grammatically it makes much more sense to see לָא as the subject of the verb, in which case the name would mean 'God strives', and this has been the interpretation of a number of scholars.

There is then the further questioning of whether we can accept the meaning of the verb at face value. Many other suggestions have been made, the most popular of which has been 'reign', 'hold sway'.<sup>1</sup> However, it is difficult to be certain what the verb actually means. There is also the further question of whether it is a jussive or imperfect.

In terms of making sense of the text as it is, this debate is of little consequence. Within the context of Jacob's struggle the verb itself is intended to carry the meaning of 'struggle' or 'contends'.

*ii. significance* -a cursory view of some approaches to this verse shows a wide range of method and presupposition. Of scholars often associated with the historical-critical method, Gunkel claims that לָאֱלֹהִים would have referred to the demon that this incident originally described, and that the phrase יָכֹ... was a way of proudly describing Israel as victorious and invincible.<sup>2</sup> There is however no consideration of how this now refers to God himself. Von Rad also perceives an original reference to a demon of the original saga, but acknowledges that now the reference is to God. As well as marvelling at Jacob's 'suicidal courage', the wonder now shifts to the fact that 'God let himself be coerced in such a way by Jacob's violence.'<sup>3</sup>

Westermann sees v29 as later,<sup>4</sup> since the name יִשְׂרָאֵל presupposes the establishment of Israel with its twelve tribes but he does not really consider the theological significance of this verse.

More emphasis is given by Fokkelman:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For this I am following the review of H.-J. Zobel ('יִשְׂרָאֵל', Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, vol. 6, 397-420).

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 362.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, 322.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12-36, 518.

<sup>5</sup> Narrative Art, 215-6.

V.29 is a monologue, a solemn 'order of baptism', spoken authoritatively. Here we attend the most important baptism of the O.T... A well-established nature, a long-fixed route of life must be turned back radically.... The evil and long-awkward name of Jacob is thrown away and exchanged for a beautiful, theophorous name.

As for the significance of the name **ישראל** itself, Fokkelman refuses to consider this apart from the present context. From the context he sees the verb **יָרָה** as meaning 'fight', but also sees 'God' as the subject. He then applies this understanding to the Jacob narrative -it may mean 'God fights with you, because he is forced to by your stubbornness and pride' [in resisting God's way of blessing Jacob and trying to extract the blessing in his own strength].<sup>1</sup> But the name can also mean 'henceforth God will fight for you, for he appreciates your absolutely sincere and undivided commitment'.

This overview of different approaches to v29 suggests that the more a reader is prepared to consider the verse in its present context, and not simply to seek to identify its original *Sitz im Leben*, the more (s)he will find significant in the verse. Gunkel's and Westermann's view that this verse has a separate origin and reflects a celebration of Jacob's/Israel's strength against any opponent, whether divine or human, may be true as far as it goes, but it hardly begins to do justice to what von Rad sees as the marvel that the reader now feels, once we realize that it is indeed with the God of Israel that Jacob has been struggling.

By contrast, Fokkelman tries to take both the context and the internal structure of the name **ישראל** seriously since he recognizes that **אל** ought properly be regarded as the subject, but he also tries to apply this literal meaning<sup>2</sup> to the story of Jacob. However this interpretation seems forced and does not really do justice to the etiological form of the statement.<sup>3</sup> In fact Fokkelman's interpretation of v29b rests solely on the literal meaning of the word **ישראל**, whereas in reality, the correspondence between a name and its etymology is often imprecise. This means that we are not forced to look for a complete harmony in all the elements of a text in such a way that, as in the case of Fokkelman's reading of v29, we fail to do justice to the literal reading and the genre of each element. Of course, there may be some

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative Art, 217.

<sup>2</sup> Fokkelman accepts that the 'folk-etymological' meaning of Israel might not be the same as the original sense of the name.

<sup>3</sup> The etiological nature of the statement is demonstrable by the giving of a new name, together with the conjunction **כי** + verbal clause, and the root of the new name being repeated in the explanatory clause.

justification in seeing in the name  $\text{יִשְׂרָאֵל}$  some understanding of God who 'fights' for his people,<sup>1</sup> but this element is at the most secondary within the context of the Jacob narrative. A different interpretation is to translate the statement differently, such as suggested by Hamilton<sup>2</sup> who translates the phrase 'because you have struggled with God, and with men have you succeeded' which follows closely the LXX<sup>3</sup> and Vulgate readings. In favour of the more traditional understanding, this alternative does not take account of the structure of the final verb ( $\text{וַתִּכַּל}$ ), where the waw prefix suggests that a new clause starts here and not at the previous waw ( $\text{וַיִּמְאַן-אֱנָשִׁים}$ ) which is best seen in conjunction with the previous words.<sup>4</sup>

To return to the passage, the etymology in v29b does not correspond exactly to the structure of the word  $\text{יִשְׂרָאֵל}$  where  $\text{אֵל}$  would be the subject, but this is not untypical of etymologies and probably indicates that this verse has been introduced in order to relate the episode to a wider perspective. Thus, the explanation of v29b can be understood on various levels. It is clearly a reference to this episode. As we broaden the frame of reference it is not inappropriate to see the reference to 'men' as Esau,<sup>5</sup> whom Jacob is about to meet, and as Laban. The phrase 'with God',<sup>6</sup> although referring to this episode, could also be seen as a

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<sup>1</sup> See B. Jakob (Das erste Buch der Tora, 642-3): on one level, the word  $\text{יִשְׂרָאֵל}$  does refer to Jacob as a 'Gotteskämpfer', fighting against 'einem Übermenschlichen'. However, from a broader perspective, Jacob is fighting a 'Gotteskampf': in other words, the divine is working and fighting in Jacob in his war on the side of God. This relates to the understanding of Israel as fighting a holy war.

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: chapters 18-50, 335. This is also suggested by F. I. Anderson 'Note on Genesis 30:8', JBL, 88 (1969), 200, supported by L. M. Eslinger ('Hos. 12:5a and Gen 32:29: A Study in Inner Biblical Exegesis.' 95). In favour of this, is the resulting chiasmic structure and rhythmic balance.

<sup>3</sup>  $\text{ὅτι ἐνισχυσας μετὰ θεοῦ καὶ μετὰ ἀνθρώπων δυνατὸς ἐση}.$

<sup>4</sup> Anderson tries to solve this problem by referring to this waw as a *waw emphaticum*. The LXX (and Vulgate) variations perhaps reflect the tendency to avoid what might be seen to be crude anthropomorphism, in this case, the depiction of God being not just struggling but being defeated by a human being (see E. Würthwein, Der Text des Alten Testaments, 5th ed., Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1988, 79-80.)

<sup>5</sup> In this way, Dillmann (Die Genesis, 364), seeing a reference to Jacob's conflict with Esau which clearly is still unresolved, reads the phrase  $\text{וַתִּכַּל}$  as a promise that Jacob will indeed overcome his brother. Nevertheless, this reading should be set aside the actual resolution of the conflict with Esau, where any concept of victory seems to be undermined by Jacob's subservient behaviour and Esau's graciousness.

<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding Alter's caution in interpreting the word  $\text{אֱלֹהִים}$ , which he calls a 'high concentration point of lexical ambiguity' with possible meanings of 'divine being' or even 'princes' - although this would be unlikely, given the antithesis of the word with 'men' (Genesis, 182).

reference to Jacob's life and the way he has sought to extract God's blessing by his own means.<sup>1</sup>

But the verse has a wider context still which is that of Israel. This passage has the first mention of the name ישראל in the Biblical story. The giving of the new name of Israel is clearly a turning-point, and is meant to be seen as significant not just for Jacob, but also for his descendants. Any interpretation of this episode needs to take account of this perspective. It is remarkable that Israel, or at least this tradition within Israel, should see its origins in such an incident, indeed far from serving to exalt the patriarch as Gunkel or Westermann suggest, this incident seems to further question his motives and religious attitude.<sup>2</sup>

This approach of seeing the verse as relating first to the entire Jacob narrative, and then to Israel is taken by von Rad:<sup>3</sup>

This event did not simply occur at a definite biographical point in Jacob's life, but as it is now related it is clearly transparent as a type of that which Israel experienced from time to time with God. Israel has here presented its entire history with God almost prophetically as such a struggle until the breaking of the day. The narrative itself makes this extended interpretation probable by equating the names Jacob and Israel.

v30 Jacob now asks his opponent his name. Because of his new name and its explanation, he has no doubt guessed, or is close to guessing, who his opponent is (as is the reader). The importance of names in the ancient Near East is well known, and it is natural for the mortal human to want to know the name of the divinity, especially as possession of a name meant

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Furthermore, argues Alter, the reference to Jacob's struggle with divine beings is not necessarily a reference by Jacob's opponent to himself. Nevertheless, a less than full understanding of the term אלהים does not really do justice to the striking character of this passage, nor to Jacob's own amazement in v31.

<sup>1</sup> So Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 216.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps such a concern contributes to one interpretation of the statement in v29, which does not see the stranger as giving Jacob the new name at this point but as simply announcing that Jacob 'will be called' Israel (i.e. named Israel) at a later point (i.e. in ch. 35) -Rashi in Rosenbaum and Silberman eds, *Pentateuch*, 160; also B. Jakob, *Das erste Buch der Tora*, 639. Thus this statement is a prophetic declaration. In the wider context of the Jacob narrative it is certainly true, as we shall argue, that ch. 35 can be taken as a confirmation of Jacob's new name, and of certain promises, and that this is done in a much less ambiguous manner. However, the distinction between promising that somebody will be given a new name in the future and actually giving that name must be somewhat strained - especially as 35:10 also employs the imperfect tense -see also 17:5.

<sup>3</sup> *Genesis*, 325.

the ability to exert power over a divinity.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of the structure of the passage, vv29 and 30 are pivotal and similar in highlighting the theme of names. However the differences betray the difference between the two combatants. God's question to Jacob is direct, as is the answer. Jacob's question is more polite (למש usually refers to a request), and the wording (הגידה) suggests the divine nature of the name. The other difference from God's question is of course the refusal to give an answer. Thus in this verse there is no doubt that God is not fully letting Jacob control him, and he preserves his freedom.

There is a striking parallel with Ex. 3:13-14 at this point, where God does not refuse to disclose his name in answer to Moses' request, although the explanation of its significance is still open ended. In the case of the Peniel story, the situation is the reverse, as a new name is given in relation to Jacob. Taking the contrast further, Jacob exclaims that he has seen God face to face and lived (v31), whereas Moses hides his face for fear of seeing God (3:6). Indeed, with both Moses and Jacob, the theme of seeing the face of God has a significance. In the case of Moses, there is certainly an ambivalence towards the idea. In Ex. 33 both sides of a polarity are expressed: that it is not permissible to see the face of God and live (v20), but also that Moses' close relationship to God meant that God spoke to him face to face (see also 24:11). In the Jacob story, there is not quite the same ambivalence: YHWH appears to him in a dream (28:13), and now again he sees God at night. As we shall, for Jacob, the theme also relates to the sphere of human relations.<sup>2</sup> Whether deliberate or not, the contrast may be an indication of differences between the patriarchal relationship with God, which in some ways is less mediated but which does not know the name YHWH, and the Mosaic understanding where God reveals his name, but with it comes a new understanding of holiness.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, account also has to be made of Jacob's own

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis*, 336) denies that the passage has any suggestion that Jacob wishes to know the name in order to exert power. However his clear distinction between this passage and 'parallels from primitive religion in which demons and numens played a large part' where such a motive would find its place, does not do justice to the oddity of this passage and the issue of power and force which is already raised in this passage. Whereas we can agree that the request for a name is a natural part of Biblical theophanies, and is in itself a request for information, it would not be inconsistent with Jacob's character to want to use any knowledge of a name for his own benefit.

<sup>2</sup> See below, p. 193.

<sup>3</sup> See above, p. 58-9. See conclusions of Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, also G. Fischer (*Jahwe unser Gott: Sprache, Aufbau und Erzähltechnik in der Berufung des Mose (Ex 3-4)* Freiburg, Schweiz, Universitätsverlag/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), on the

surprise at being able to see God, not to mention his sense of awe and trembling after the Bethel experience.

Finally Jacob is blessed. To repeat the quotation from von Rad:

How far removed from the petition itself is the final fulfilment! Jacob first has to reveal his name and his nature, he has to receive a new name, and he has to give up the question about the unknown assailant's name. Thus it becomes clear that our narrative is far removed from all those sagas which tell of the extortion of a divine nature by man and of the winning of a blessing'.<sup>1</sup>

This distance suggests that, although on the face of it God is forced to respond, this coercion is only apparent, and it is on God's own terms that Jacob is blessed. This impression is even clearer in the next verse.

The last word  $\text{D}\Psi$  prepares the reader for the singling out of the place as special in the next verse.

v37 If Jacob is unable to give a name to God, he is at least able to name the place where he has experienced God (see also 28:19, 35:15). There is an interesting parallel between the explanation clause here and in v29 which has a very similar structure ( $\text{?D} + \text{qtl verb form} + \text{waw impf. consec.}$ ). However, the meaning of the two is opposite: in the one, Jacob has

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understanding of Ex. 3-4 as a turning-point, which picks up much of the patriarchal narratives, and looks forward to a new development towards Mosaic Yahwism.

Calvin (*A Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 2, 201) also makes a contrast at this point although for him the much greater contrast is with the Christian dispensation: 'It is to be observed, that although Jacob piously desires to know God more fully, yet because he is carried beyond the bounds prescribed to the age in which he lived, he suffers a repulse.' For Calvin, Moses stands somewhere between the two, although Calvin bases this on the evidence that Moses also sees God (at least from behind). This of course does not do justice to Jacob's clear claim to have seen God face to face and live!

Reference to Ex. 3:14 is made by Vawter (*On Genesis*, 351), although he sees the answer given to Moses ('I am who I am') as a statement of God's ineffability, and so having the same force as the refusal to Jacob. As stated, there is some truth in this, but nevertheless there is surely some importance in the revealing of the name YHWH to Moses, especially when read alongside Ex. 6.

Another parallel is Jud. 13:17-18. In this case the human being (Manoah) asks for the name (here, it is revealed that the character is an angel), which is again refused. Likewise there is a repetition of the motif of seeing God and dying (v22). Thus the episode is closest to that in Genesis both in the refusal to reveal the name and in the explicit amazement and awe at having seen the 'face of God'. However, vv16 and 21 make it clear that it was not the name YHWH which was withheld but the name of the angel, and thus the refusal to disclose the name is in part to prevent Manoah from honouring the angel rather than YHWH. Furthermore, this incident is not so pivotal or charged with the same theological concentration as the incident at Peniel. Nevertheless the similarities do suggest that the motifs of knowing a divine name and also of seeing a divine being were spread in Israel. In terms of direct dependency little can be claimed.

<sup>1</sup> *Genesis*, 323.



been told that he has struggled and prevailed; in the other, even the act of seeing means that he has barely escaped with his life. Thus the statement that Jacob has prevailed has to be read alongside his own perception. His own amazement<sup>1</sup> reflects the reader's amazement that God could let himself enter into a struggle in this way (von Rad). It could be that the different understandings of the outcome of the struggle betrays some diachronic development but the two statements now stand alongside each other, creating a sense of ambiguity.

v32 The episode is over, and it is daytime. Just as the beginning of dawn marked the beginning of the dialogue, so the daylight marks its end. There is a further inclusio with v23 and the mention of night, which marked the beginning of the episode. The whole episode has been a gradual process from darkness and confusion to light and at least some clarity as to what was going on. This is emphasized by the preposition לו, referring to Jacob. The word עבר takes us back to the beginning of the struggle, where it was used several times, and likewise the reference to Jacob's limp refers back to the v26, where the injury is sustained.

There is no more reference to any confrontation or dialogue, and we do not even read of the disappearance of the mysterious figure. In a sense the conversation and the subsequent realization that Jacob was really dealing with God have overtaken interest in the struggle itself. We might even be tempted to think that Jacob was only dreaming except that in his limp he carries a permanent mark. What matters now is not so much the struggle itself, but the changes that it has brought about: Jacob's limp, his new name, the place name, darkness to light. All of this is underlined by the motif of עבר, as this has been a place of transition. The fact that Jacob is left with a limp again emphasizes that his victory is not as clear cut as we might think.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis*, 337), pointing to the repetition of the verb נציל from v12 -see later comment on 33:10 -denies that Jacob's speech denotes surprise at having seen God and yet surviving. Instead the repeated verb denotes that Jacob sees in his preservation here, the assurance of a preservation against Esau the next day, and so his surprise is at the answered prayer. However, Hamilton seems to contradict this insistence later on (p. 346): 'The surprise in ch. 32 is that Jacob saw God, and yet his life was spared.'

<sup>2</sup> The suggestion that the lameness is to be seen as a tacit judgement on the crafty Jacob is probably overstated (J. L. McKenzie, 'Jacob at Peniel: Gen 32:24-32.', *CBO* 25 (1963), 75).

33 Just as the struggle has left a strong impression on Jacob, so it leaves an impression on his descendants. This actualization of the event (עד היום הזה) again shows how this episode is not just to be seen as an event in Jacob's life, but has a link to the everyday life of Israel. Furthermore, just as the previous verse has the first occurrence of ישראל, so now there is the first occurrence of the phrase בני-ישראל in the Bible. As with other parts of the story, it is likely that this part is a tradition which has been brought in, but the original context has been lost and was not regarded as consequential by the narrator.

### 3.3 Conclusion

#### 3.3.1 Historical-critical summary

As with previous passages already studied, we have seen no justification for a division along traditional source critical lines. Nevertheless, an acknowledgement of some historical development has helped to show some of the depths of this passage, and this study has tried to show that a cautious use of historical tools has helped understand the final form.

Although there is evidence that this passage is embedded in its wider narrative context through various motifs, there is nevertheless something startling about the passage, and its complexity and density, together with a strongly anthropomorphical picture of God, suggest that it has a different origin from the surrounding narrative.

Those origins are now well and truly concealed, but the picture of some sort of divine figure struggling with a human at night and seeming to surrender some sort of blessing, would seem to be residual elements of an original tale. The suggestion that an original wordplay, יבֶּקֶב-אֲבָק, now not so prominent in the text, may have given this a local setting at the Jabbok ford<sup>1</sup> is also plausible. This may also explain the association of the figure of Jacob (יַעֲקֹב) with the place.

However the Israelite writer(s) have shifted the emphasis of the text even more to the theme of blessing and, in particular, interest has moved to the names of the two opponents. In addition, the passage now contains the bewildering idea that it is God himself that Jacob has faced in struggle. Furthermore, the two explicit etiological motifs, one regarding the name יִשְׂרָאֵל, the other regarding the eating customs of the בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל are perhaps best seen as ways of appropriating this ancient story rather than original features.

This development of a once independent, non-Israelite story into an episode in the life of Israel's patriarch, best accounts for why the passage is clearly distinct from its narrative context on the one hand, but is also woven into the narrative fabric on the other hand, being represented as a turning-point for Jacob, and even for Israel. Beyond this, little more about the development of this strange tale can be said.

#### 3.3.2 God

As in the story at Bethel God is depicted in anthropomorphic terms in that God is a

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<sup>1</sup> Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 515.

character in the narrative who stands, speaks, has a form. This anthropomorphism is taken even further in that God wrestles with a human, almost as an equal, and on the face of it is coerced by that human.

However it would be wrong to form from this any conclusion about the lack of theological sophistication on the part of the writer. On the contrary we have seen that behind this simple depiction of a struggle lie all sorts of ambiguity which, even if being part result of historical development, cannot simply be resolved by recourse to tradition history.

Part of the ambiguity centers around the motif of concealment and darkness. Although this passage may be said to represent the presence of God vis-à-vis the polarity of presence-absence within the Jacob narrative as a whole, presence is here ambiguous and partly concealed. Even at the end, when the reader with Jacob realizes that God has been present, there is still a feeling of confusion as to what has really taken place. Thus although on the face of it there is the resolution of the ambiguity of which figure is which, and who the mysterious figure really is, the passage as a whole still raises deeper questions.

One indication of this is the fact that instead of clear-cut a promise (such as given at Bethel) there is the giving of a name, which although of great significance and privilege for Jacob, is complicated by the double-edged etymology: it is a way of praising Jacob in a fashion, but nevertheless a strange way to go about it.

A deeper level of ambiguity is the question of who has really won, as the two statements of vv29 and 31 stand in some tension. Behind this is some suspicion that God has allowed himself to be beaten. Jacob does seem to come away as victor, but we feel that there is more to the story than has been revealed. In particular, the conclusion of von Rad is most appropriate that behind all this, is the wonderment that God should put himself in such a position.<sup>1</sup> For the theologian, this leads to consideration of how God works his will through an apparent position of weakness: on the face of it God has been defeated, but in this display of weakness, his plans not just for Jacob but for his descendants have moved closer to fulfilment.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 322.

<sup>2</sup> From a Christian standpoint, there is some scope for considering the passage from the Pauline idea of God's power revealed in weakness (1 Cor. 1:25). See Brueggemann, Genesis, 271; also, from a devotional perspective, S. Tugwell OP (Prayer: Living with God, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1975), 57-65: 'The obscure hint given in Genesis becomes too appallingly explicit in the New Testament, with the Son of Man literally given over into the hands of men (Mt 17:22), to do with him whatever they please. And somehow -and this is the deepest mystery of all -the contemplation of that

Another level of ambiguity is in the activity of God as made clear by the actantial analysis of Barthes who points to the startling and paradoxical case of the Originator of the quest turning out to be also the Opponent. In terms of the story, Jacob has to cross the stream if he is to return home as commanded by God (31:3), but now he faces a lethal obstacle who turns out to be God himself. This causes us to wonder at the nature of God who both commands but then seems to obstruct.<sup>1</sup> This idea is also taken up by Hermisson<sup>2</sup> who sees the motif of 'das Dämonische in Jahwe' present not just in this story but also in such events as the demand that Abraham should give up his only son (Gen. 22:1ff), the testing of Job (Job 1:6ff) and in some prophetic imagery. To this could be added the strange threat to Moses after his call to return to Egypt (Ex. 4:24ff), the angel standing in the way of Balaam (Nu. 22:22) and the killing of Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:7) among many other such incidents. Such stories and motifs in their own way point to the ultimate freedom of God, and paradoxically, although depicting God in the most anthropomorphic of terms, they actually serve as a corrective against any attempt to limit God to any predictable pattern.<sup>3</sup>

Thus on all these levels there remains a degree of concealment. On the one hand the passage again points to the action of God in Jacob's life, but on the other hand it intensifies the tension felt elsewhere of God's presence and absence. As a result this passage is not a revelatory counter-point to more ambiguous passages, but reflects in itself the tension between the divine and the human felt throughout the narrative. In a way, therefore, it is a

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victory of man over God is what brings countless men, heart-broken, shattered, unmade, humbly seeking forgiveness and new life from the God who made himself known in such weakness...Really to meet the weakness, the poverty, the humility of God, while we are in the full flood of our strength...surely that is what 'disables' us, giving us a new name, leading us into a light so brilliant...and making us incapable, at least to some extent, of simply resuming our career of ambition and way of strength.' (p. 63-4)

See also earlier comments of Elliger ('Der Jakobskampf am Jabbok', 1-31).

<sup>1</sup> This paradoxical picture of God's work lies behind Calvin's reading (A Commentary on Genesis, vol. 2, 195-6): 'It is not said that Satan, or any mortal man, wrestled with Jacob, but God himself: to teach us that our faith is tried by him...Therefore, what was once exhibited under a visible form to our father Jacob, is daily fulfilled in the individual members of the Church; namely, that, in their temptations, it is necessary for them to wrestle with God.' But, continues Calvin, 'we do not fight against him, except by his own power, and with his own weapons...for he, both fights *against* us and *for* us.'

<sup>2</sup> H.-J. Hermisson, 'Jakobs Kampf am Jabbok (Gen 32:22-33).' ZTH 71 (1974), 259.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly de Pury (Promesse Divine, vol. 2, 102). De Pury situates this theological concern with the Yahwist, who has transformed an earlier story of Jacob defeating a river god. In its present form, the story holds together the idea that God cannot be manipulated with the idea that Jacob is nevertheless blessed: 'A Penueil ont été sauvegardées à la fois la souveraineté et la fidélité de Dieu.'

commentary on much of Jacob's life.

This motif of concealment also relates to the refusal of the stranger to disclose his name. As noted in the exegesis, the passage contrasts with Ex. 3, where Moses is given the name YHWH in answer to his request, but where he covers his face for fear of seeing God. In relation to a comparison with the Bethel incident, we noted that part of the contrast is the entrance of the concept of holiness (שקדק) into the life of Israel in the Book of Exodus, and the contrast in this passage further illuminates differences between the relationship with God as portrayed in the patriarchal narratives and as portrayed from the time of Moses.<sup>1</sup>

Finally this concealment and ambiguity gives a certain justification to speculation as to who this figure could represent. Any reading of the passage has to do justice to the literal understanding that the figure is identified with God, but such an identification should not be seen as closing the question. To quote one commentator:

As the text stands, it is clearly none other than YHWH in human form (32:30). But the fact that the story is so suggestive of these other interpretations [i.e. that the figure is a spirit, Esau, a projection of Jacob's subconscious<sup>2</sup>] ...makes it likely that in a sense they are all true, as they all belong to the immediate or wider context of the story. God confronts Jacob not only in human form, but as Esau, whom he fears, as night spirit, belonging to the time when his fears are at their sharpest, as a river spirit because he is crossing a perilous boundary in to the territory of Israel, and as the embodiment of the deepest hopes and fears of his own mind. The writer boldly incorporates these folkloristic motifs in order to try to convey something of the mysterious depth of the occasion.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, both this passage and Ex. 3 mark significant turning-points. In the former case, it is the introduction of the name 'Israel'; in the latter case, the name YHWH. These are both important for the individuals concerned (Jacob and Moses) but also for Israel.

<sup>2</sup> For a psychological understanding of the figure, see also Alter (*Genesis*, 181): the figure is 'the embodiment of portentous antagonism in Jacob's dark night of the soul. He is obviously a doubling of all with whom Jacob has had to contend, and he may equally well be an externalization of all that Jacob has to wrestle with within himself.'

<sup>3</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, *Genesis 12-50*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992, 31. This open-ended approach would therefore allow for the identification of the figure with Esau or an angel of Esau as found in much Jewish commentary -see Scherman and Zlotowitz eds, *Bereishis* vol. 4, 1437; also B. Jakob, *Das erste Buch der Tora*, 643: 'Auch er ist ein 'Satan'...der 'Satan' ist auch ein Gotteskämpfer, er vertritt immer eine gute Sache, ein relatives Recht. Und das war Esaus Sache. Er durfte mit Recht auf den Bruder ergrimmt sein, der ihn betrogen hatte...So ist der Gottesbote der Geist, das Recht Esaus, der Schatten, der Jakob zwanzig Jahre verfolgt hatte und sich jetzt riesengroß erhebt. Mit Einem Worte: es ist die eigene Vergangenheit und Schuld, mit der Jakob 'ringt'.'

In particular the episode is in response to Jacob's prayer for help, where the 'angel' acts in a similar way to Job's 'Satan', testing Jacob's resolve and testing God's plan for Jacob to become Israel. As it is, the outcome of the episode prefigures Jacob's reconciliation with Esau. Furthermore, argues Jakob (p. 642) the injury inflicted upon Jacob by the angel is to be the key to Jacob's salvation from Esau, since it is

The fact that God could appear to Jacob in human form, and indeed in a form which could make him think of some other human or non-human figure, again shows show the human is interwoven with the divine in this incident, and indeed in the whole of his life, since this incident is an indicator of the wider story. This interweaving of the human and divine is, of course, spelt out in the declaration of v29b.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.3.3 Jacob

As noted above, this passage is a commentary on the wider narrative, sharpening the ambiguous nature of the divine presence in Jacob's life. Conversely, as well as providing an illustration of the nature of the divine, this incident also provides a comment on Jacob himself as highlighted in v29.<sup>2</sup> Thus we have already noted how the struggling 'with God and men' can refer to the Laban and especially the Esau episodes, and how Jacob's attaining of both the birthright and the blessing from the eldest son, Esau, is in some sense a rebellion against the prerogative of the first-born, and thus even against God. But there is equally the mystery that God allows Jacob to triumph, both in his struggle for supremacy over Esau and over himself in this episode, and just as Jacob does not come from this episode unscathed, neither does he come from his procurement of the blessing in ch. 27 unscathed. From the perspective of Jacob, the human perspective, it would seem that he has to get his way by his own means and that there is no outside help to rely on. But from a wider perspective, hinted at here, God is using Jacob's very self-assertion to achieve his own ends, and the fact that in this passage an explicitly Israelite perspective is drawn in, shows that these ends reach far beyond the life and fate of the individual Jacob. Indeed for Jacob, in his lifetime, to be the

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the sight of Jacob struggling to bow seven times with his injured leg that will disarm Esau, diffusing his anger.

<sup>1</sup> In the wider context of the Jacob story it is noticeable that YHWH already has revealed his name (28:13). It would therefore seem unusual for Jacob to ask now about the name. One could reconcile the two passages by arguing that in 32:30 Jacob is still not sure who his opponent is, and so he is asking about the identity of the opponent rather than about the name of God per se. No doubt Jacob's ongoing uncertainty is a factor behind the request, but there is also the emphasis on the name itself, and to reduce Jacob's question simply of wanting to know who the person is does not justice to the wording of the request or to the high importance of names themselves, particularly in relation to God. It seems better therefore to see this incongruity as arising from a historical tension.

<sup>2</sup> 'The image of the wrestling has been implicit throughout the Jacob story: in his grabbing Esau's heel as he emerges from the womb, in his striving with Esau for birthright and blessing, in his rolling away the huge stone from the mouth of the well, and in his multiple contendings with Laban. Now, in this culminating moment of his life story, the characterizing image of wrestling is made explicit and literal.' (Alter, Genesis, 180.)

chosen one is indeed a mixed blessing.

But this passage also represents a turning-point. As noted above, this is highlighted by the repetition of the word עֶבֶר, but is especially indicated by the new name which Jacob receives. Fokkelman's comment that this is a 'baptism'<sup>1</sup> where the 'evil' name is exchanged for a 'beautiful, theophorous name' needs some qualification in the light of what has been noted about the double-edged nature of the etymology; yet this passage, and the giving of the name does mark a departure for Jacob, and does represent a great, undeserved privilege.<sup>2</sup> This raises a question as to how much things really do change for Jacob in the light of this incident, and could apply equally to Jacob's fortunes and to his inner character. This is something we shall have to address when we come to look at the wider story. Nevertheless, judged in its own right, there is no doubt that we are meant to see here a deep experience on Jacob that has a lasting effect on him.

Furthermore this passage is both a turning-point and perhaps an exercise in self-understanding for Israel. The fact that the word 'Israel' appears for the first time, and twice in the same passage at that, indicates that something new has occurred, as for the first time Israel as a named, clearly defined entity has appeared. What is surprising -and something which we shall encounter again in the Jacob story -is that it is at such a moment as this that 'Israel' should enter the stage of human history. It comes at a point where Jacob is at his most vulnerable, left alone; and it is given in the context of a struggle with -that is, against -Israel's God. This shows on the part of the bearers and shapers of Israel's traditions an ability to examine its own beginnings in a self-critical way. It could of course be argued -as

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative Art, 215-216, already quoted above. For Fokkelmann, as for many commentators, this episode represents a great conversion experience. S. R. Driver (The Book of Genesis, 8th ed., London: Methuen, 1911, 297) writes, 'The moment marks a great spiritual change in Jacob's character. He feels his carnal weapons become lamed and useless...as the result of his struggle his natural self is left behind, he rises from it an altered man...and so we may notice that from this point in his history we hear no more of him as practising craft and deceit: he is still indeed (chxxxiii.) politic and resourceful; but he becomes more and more...the type of a just and God-fearing Israelite.'

A further spiritual dimension pointed to is that of Jacob's feeling of guilt and his experience of God's grace (so Dillmann, Die Genesis, 364). However, caution needs to be exercised in these applications, especially where concepts such as guilt, forgiveness or even conversion are not explicitly found in the narrative.

<sup>2</sup> The same applies to the idea that this incident represents a cleansing or confession of guilt, a suggestion made, for instance by Wenham (Genesis 16-50, 296) who argues that by making Jacob speak out his own name, the angel is forcing him to make a statement about his cheating nature and that this therefore amounts to a confession of guilt. Terms such as guilt or confession probably go beyond what the text allows, especially as the explanation of Jacob's new name seems almost to make a virtue of Jacob's struggle with Esau and Laban.



Gunkel and Westermann indeed do<sup>1</sup>- that v29 is a proud statement of invincibility, but that does not take account of the mood of the passage as a whole, especially of Jacob's own assessment at the end. Even so, we can perhaps detect some degree of admiration at the hero's tenacity and strength, albeit muted by a strong suspicion that Jacob has indeed been fortunate to escape.

Moreover, the actual etymology for the new name of Israel, that Jacob has striven with God and men, could be said to relate to Israel itself. In this way the passage bears witness to a people, or least the bearers of its traditions, which sees its very origin, and perhaps continued existence, in terms of a struggle against other peoples and even against its own God, that is, of a people fighting against the odds, stubbornly refusing to give in, falling back on its own resources, even faced with what seems to be a hostile God against whom it has to fight for survival, but perhaps also a people which, in spite of itself and appearances, has been spared by God. This comes in part from a recognition of sin on the part of Israel, but more widely, of the mysterious workings of God. As with Jacob, to be chosen is a mixed blessing, to be marked out means to be wounded and to carry a limp.<sup>2</sup> Such an understanding no doubt takes us beyond the confines of the passage itself, but this is the sort of passage which invites just such a reflection.<sup>3</sup> To fail to make such a wide connection is to misunderstand the nature of this strange story.

To conclude this section, the above comments can be taken one step further in drawing a contrast between the human and the divine in this passage. Our considerations have gone in two directions: on the one hand, the divine has been expressed in the terms of concealment and mystery, particularly at the mysterious grace that God should be -or seem

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 362 and Genesis: 12-36, 518. However, both Gunkel and Westermann interpret this verse independently of the passage itself. Compare Elliger ('Der Jakobskampf am Jabbok', 21), who sees the way the name is introduced to show that 'Israel' is 'kein Ehrenname mehr'.

<sup>2</sup> Levenson, The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, 59.

<sup>3</sup> For a reflection on how the passage relates to the experience of the Jewish people: N. Leibowitz, Studies in Bereshit (Genesis), 3rd ed., Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1976, 369-7. H. A. McKay ('Jacob Makes It across the Jabbok: An attempt to solve the Success/Failure Ambivalence in Israel's Self-Consciousness.' JSOT 38 (1987), 3-13) relates the passage to the experience of the exilic community and their anxieties about returning the land of Israel. Certainly this is a valid application of the passage but to translate this 'success/failure ambivalence' into historical terms in order to 'solve' it goes against the whole approach taken in our own reading. Equally questionable is the use of such a reading to ascribe to the passage in its developed form an exilic origin.

to be -defeated or coerced by Jacob. This is expressed in Jacob's own remark (v31). On the other hand, the human is expressed in terms of the courage, strength and persistence of Jacob, expressed in the statement of v29. The first aspect lends itself to considerations about the nature of God, with the motif of concealment but also grace, and the idea of God showing himself weak in the face of human strength. The second aspect lends itself to reflections about human spirituality, where the idea of 'wrestling with God' is often explored in the realm of prayer or life, but also how faith may involve situations where the believer seems to be thrown onto their own resources or even onto fighting against what seems to be the divine plan. The one aspect is a consideration about the working of the divine; the other, about human striving. In broad terms, both of these work in tension through Jacob's life -on the one level, it is the story of human achievement involving human strength, deception, cunning; on the other level, it is the story of divine providence working in the life of this individual, albeit in a hidden way, though where Jacob and the reader occasionally see evidence of the divine at work.

## **PART TWO: THE HUMAN STORY OF JACOB**

### **1 The struggle for blessing -Jacob and Esau part 1 (26:34-28:9)**

The first part of Jacob's life is centred on the struggle with Esau for blessing and supremacy. Although prefigured in the opening scenes which we have already investigated, the struggle reaches its most dramatic climax in the deception by Jacob of his father Isaac.

As well as the usual introductory historical-critical questions, we shall also address the moral question raised by the passage. This is a necessary question to ask as it relates to the genre of the passage, and so affects how we are to read it. As often the case, the work of Gunkel is a useful starting-point for both these aspects. The exegesis will pick up these issues and refine them in the actual reading of the passage, and then the conclusion will draw out salient ideas relevant to the wider thesis.

#### *A note on ch. 26*

Before looking at ch. 27, brief reference should be made to the surprising inclusion of material about Isaac in ch. 26 between the two episodes of story of the conflict between Jacob and Esau. Most commentators coming from a historical-critical perspective simply treat the passage in its own right, passing over its present context. There is little doubt that the passage has been placed in its present context by a redactor of the overall cycle.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the break in subject matter from the fraternal conflict, serves as a break in the plot, providing an interlude before continuing with the intense drama. Wenham<sup>2</sup> develops this idea by pointing out that as well as showing links with other parts of the patriarchal narratives, the episode serves as a foil for what is to come. Ch. 26 depicts a rather timid Isaac, trying where possible to avoid conflict, who nevertheless is the recipient of the divine promise and finds peace.<sup>3</sup> The wealth which he acquires also makes tangible the 'blessing'

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<sup>1</sup> See Fishbane, Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts, New York: Schocken Books, 1979, 42 on how this episode fits into the wider structure.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 16-50, 185ff.

<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Hamilton (Genesis: 18-50, 190) sees a reversal of fortunes for Isaac between ch. 26 and ch. 27: 'Both chs. 26 and 27 are laced with the theme of deception. The difference is that Isaac is the deceiver in ch. 26 but the deceived in ch. 27. The villain becomes a victim, and nemesis is at work in his life as much as it is in the life of his younger son.'

over which the brothers are to fight. This attitude of Isaac also contrasts with the active Jacob who gets what he wants by deception and conflict: 'If Isaac could achieve so much without manipulating people, why do Jacob and Rebekah have to resort to the tactics about to be described?'<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Introduction

### 1.1.1 The limits of the passage

Mainly because of historical-critical questions as seen above, there is no unanimous definition of the limits of this passage. The heart of the passage are the scenes between Isaac-Esau, Rebekah-Jacob, Jacob-Isaac and Esau-Isaac. The subsequent verses spell out the consequences of what has happened with no clear episodic markers. However, it is clear that, literary-historical questions aside, 28:10 marks the next major chapter. Furthermore, 26:34-35 have more in common with what follows them than with the preceding chapter and, as we shall see, act as a framing device with the closing verses of this passage.

Thus we shall be considering 26:34 -28:9.

### 1.1.2 Historical-critical issues

#### *Source criticism*

Gunkel<sup>2</sup> offers a detailed argument for a source critical approach. He starts with the probability that strands of both J and E are present since this episode is presupposed by both sources elsewhere. For him the 'Hauptunterscheidungsmerkmal' is that Jacob uses two methods of disguise (and thus, Gunkel presupposes, they are a doublet). From this, he detects two parallel accounts: in one, Jacob puts on the goat's skin (v16), Isaac tests the identity of the person before him by feeling, and although he recognizes the voice of Jacob, he believes that he is feeling Esau's arms. This act of deception has been thought up by Rebekah. Because Isaac has already heard Jacob's voice, once he realizes he has been tricked, he immediately knows that it is Jacob who has carried out the deception (v35). In the second version, Jacob puts on Esau's best clothes. Isaac tests the identity of the person before him by kissing and by the sense of smell. Consequently, when Isaac learns that he has

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 16-50, 188.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 305-7; among other such attempts: Delitzsch (A New Commentary on Genesis, 147); Procksch (Die Genesis, 2/3rd ed., Leipzig: Deicherische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1924, 166).

been deceived, he does not know who has tricked him at first (v33).

Apart from 26:34-35 and 27:46-28:9 other commentators are far less confident in identifying sources. For instance, von Rad<sup>1</sup> seems undecided, Westermann<sup>2</sup> sees some repetition (vv33-38) but denies that this points to parallel sources, arguing instead for additions to the text. Blum<sup>3</sup> sees the only repetition in v44b and 45a.

Thus the weight of scholarly opinion has very much turned from that reflected by Gunkel.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the presence of doublets, it is far from clear that the different disguises and Isaac's different reactions are genuine repetitions, and what little repetition there may be in the passage (e.g. v44b/45a) is hardly cause for dividing the whole passage into two continuous sources. Furthermore, we shall see that the passage is well structured and flows smoothly. Regarding other traditional criteria for source division, there are hardly enough occurrences of יהוה or אלהים for this criterion to have any weight. In v20, where both terms occur, they are not interchangeable, but אלהיך is appositional and descriptive to יהוה. The other occurrence of both words is in the first blessing (v27 and 28), but it is notable that אלהים has a definite article, and so would not fit neatly into a pattern of other so-called 'Elohistic' texts. There is no reason for supposing that the two terms are not simply a poetic variation, or that they vary for some other, inexplicable reason.

This leaves the question of 26:34-35 and 27:46-28:9. Here there is much more of a case for seeing a separate source. The first set of verses neither follows smoothly from the preceding chapter about Isaac which is closed by the etymology of Beersheba and makes no mention of Esau who is suddenly reintroduced, nor does their theme -that of intermarriage - correspond to the tightly knit narrative that is to follow. However, they do correspond to the final verses which reintroduce the theme of intermarriage, with 27:46 resuming the upset that Esau's marriages are causing to his parents. Furthermore the blessing which Isaac gives to Jacob is of a very different style to his earlier blessing and is more similar to promises

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 276; also J. Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910, 368-9).

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12-36, 436.

<sup>3</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 79ff.

<sup>4</sup> A more recent attempt to apply source critical methods to this passage is undertaken by L. Schmidt, 'Jakob erschleicht sich den väterlichen Segen: Literaturkritik und Redaktion von Genesis 27,1-45.' ZAW 100 (1988), 159-183. The case here is built especially around the repeated mention of Isaac blessing (v23b.27) -see exegesis.

found in the patriarchal narratives.

In particular there is a strong case for regarding these verses as part of the Priestly source in Genesis. This is because of the mention of the proper nouns *בְּתוּרָאֵל*, *פְּדֹן-אֶרֶם* and *הַמֶּרְמֵי*, all concentrated in Gen. 24:19-20. This impression is confirmed especially by 28:1-4 where Isaac's blessing corresponds closely to the divine promise of 35:9-15. Wenham argues against ascribing this passage to P,<sup>1</sup> by claiming that the distinctiveness of the vocabulary is due to the genre of the passage rather than its source. This may have some weight. However, Wenham seems to underestimate the accumulative effect of all the terms, and in particular he passes over the term *אֶל-שָׂדֵי* (v3 -see esp. Gen. 17:1, Gen. 35:11, Ex. 6:3) and underestimates the difference in style and theme between these verses and the main part of ch. 27. As we shall see, it is true that these verses show connections with ch. 27, but to say that they 'echo' or 'are modelled on' them, as Wenham does, certainly is not to say that they originate from the same hand. Thus in all probability these verses belong to the same strand as Gen 35:9-15 which is commonly ascribed to P.

#### *Form criticism and tradition history*

Gunkel's interest is in the characters of Jacob and Esau, and as in ch. 25:21ff he concludes that these characters are based on very old 'Sagen'<sup>2</sup>, representing types of the shepherd and the hunter. He does not attempt to work out who these figures actually were (i.e. whether they actually existed or were thought to have existed as mythical characters), but they are not of a specifically 'Israelite' origin. This can be seen in that the sagas do not match historical details regarding Israel and Edom, where in reality, Israel is supposed to have been not cowardly but warlike and brave, and where Edom was reputed for its wisdom (Jer. 49:7, Bar. 3:22). Gunkel therefore argues that the references to Israel and Edom are much later. In the original tale, the hunter is the first-born and despises herd farming, but the shepherd attains the upper hand through his cleverness, which means that he gains the better land and pasture and consequently dominance over his brother. One can see how this reading reflects a possible tension between the cultures of man as hunter and, perhaps, an emerging culture of man as settled husbandman or farmer -a contrast which is universally valid. But as the text then found its way into Israelite hands, it acquired references to the struggle with

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 16-50, 203.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 316.

Edom: Edom is understood to be the older people, yet Israel has the better land.

Von Rad's<sup>1</sup> historical interest and method is slightly different, although his conclusions are similar to Gunkel. Since the story depicts the characters as tribal ancestors, they can be taken to be tribal recollections. However, the Jacob stories are situated in an area defined by names such as Peniel, Bethel and Shechem, covering central Palestine and a small part east of the River Jordan, whereas Edom was situated much further south. Consequently, the Esau of ch. 27 and 33 is traditionally not Edom, but represents the hunter people whom the people of Jacob (the tribe which saw Jacob as their ancestor) met as they colonized East Jordan and whom they as shepherds recognized as having a different way of life from their own. It is later, when the stories are transferred to the Judean south that the connection was made between Esau and Judah's great rival Edom. For von Rad, therefore, the hunter-shepherd contrast is not general as for Gunkel but rooted in a specific cultural encounter between two tribal groups.

Westermann<sup>2</sup> sees the long traditio-historical development of a single, independent, oral family story from the 'patriarchal period'. With most exegetes he argues that the blessings were added later since they presuppose relations between tribes and peoples rather than within a family. The identification of Esau with Edom is very much secondary (see comment on v40b).

Over and against these views Blum claims that the ethnological meaning of the story is part of the substantial and original meaning, making it a 'Völkergeschichte'. In ch. 25, the understanding of Esau and Jacob as being Israel and Edom respectively is the presupposition not only of v23, but of the whole section, since the description of Esau is aimed at the names Edom and Seir (v25). Blum argues that this is also the case with ch. 27. His evidence not only rests on the blessing (which most would see as later), but is also more securely rooted in the plot. He points to v11b where the description of Esau as 'a man אַדָּוִם' is both vital to the plot but also refers back to 25:25, both of which again should be seen as a reference to Seir.

Blum, however, avoids claiming that the two brothers are straight-forward allegories, and that the meaning of the stories can simply be translated back into ethnological terms. For example, the motif of the younger getting the better of the older should not be seen to mean

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 276.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12-36, 435.



that Edom was an older nation, but is simply a common 'Erzählmotiv'. Thus the ethnological perspective does not exhaust these stories, and the reader can see other dimensions by refocussing to another 'depth of perspective'.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, what these other perspectives might be is not really spelt out, since Blum's main concern seems to be the historical and traditio-historical context.

Some similarity can be found with Van Seters<sup>2</sup> who sees the chapter as being written by the Yahwist himself, with the blessing as an integral part. As well as exploring the content of the blessings, Van Seters is interested in the relationship of ch. 27 to ch. 25:21-34, and he concludes that the former is based upon the latter, developing many of the motifs found in the opening story.

In conclusion, whereas most scholars have played down the national-historical aspect of the text, Blum stresses its importance by attempting to show that it belongs to the earliest part of the text. Irrespective of his historical-critical judgments, he has shown that the ethnological perspective is an important part of the text as it is. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the ethnographic dimension is far from dominant, especially as in itself, the reference to Esau being 'a man אִישׁ' (v11) is not an obvious allusion to Seir. Regarding the view of Van Seters, this depends to some extent on how one sees the relationship between this passage and ch. 25, but also his wider thesis of the pervading Yahwist writer. In respect to ch. 25, I suggested that it may have contained traditional elements which had been shaped by a final redactor of the Jacob story to form an introduction,<sup>3</sup> a view with which Van Seters disagrees. Also to be questioned is the extent to which the influence behind the wording of the blessing can be traced, since Van Seters sees a derivation from royal ideology.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, both Van Seters and Blum have shown that Gunkel's account of the origins of the story can no longer be taken for granted despite its widespread support. It remains open to question whether ch. 27 was originally an ancient tale of two brothers of contrasting lifestyles or whether it was conceived as a literary work deliberately incorporating folkloric

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<sup>1</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 72.

<sup>2</sup> Prologue to History, 282-288.

<sup>3</sup> See above, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Prologue to History, 288. Van Seter's argues for the same influence here as for the promises in the Bethel passage. However it remains to be shown how ch. 27 and the promise and vows in 28:10-22 (see p. 298) are all creations of the same writer (J), despite obvious differences in style and content.



motifs. In either case, we must also take seriously the fact that this family story -whatever its origins -is told in such a way that it also has something to say about the relationship between Israel and its neighbours.

### 1.1.3 The moral question

One of the reasons why Old Testament theology is so complex and problematic is how the above mentioned questions of source and tradition affect any attempt to make theological sense of a passage. This is especially the case with a question which confronts the reader of this passage: how are we to appraise the deception by Jacob (and for that matter, his mother)? Is it to be condemned or praised? The reason why this is complicated by the historical agenda is that it forces us to ask a preliminary question: was it a concern of the original writer(s)?

For *Gunkel*, the answer is that it was not, and thus, by implication, it should not trouble us too much either. He begins by criticizing both those who 'piously' try to justify the moral standpoint of the story on the one hand, and the modern 'Antisemiten'<sup>1</sup> on the other, who feel bound to use such stories to denigrate the people of Israel (and the Bible itself). He feels that both sides are battling in vain. On the one hand, Gunkel agrees that the story shows no moral sense, but even seems to delight in Jacob's action. But on the other hand, he says it is anachronistic for us 'moderns' to judge earlier people by our standards. At this point his own view on the development of religion comes out: 'Es hat auch in Israel eine Zeit gegeben, in der die Sittlichkeit und die Religion noch nicht den engen Bund geschlossen hatten, den wir jetzt als selbstverständlich betrachten.'<sup>2</sup> Consequently it is 'unhistorical' and therefore inappropriate for us to raise moral questions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Gunkel goes on to say that we may see in the ancient Hebrew's pleasure in cleverness or even deceit, hints of a tendency which '-wie jedermann weiß' -has been inherited by their most recent descendants -a view to which Ehrlich (*Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel*, 134) takes great exception. Part of Ehrlich's criticism is of the assumption that later generations are any more moral than earlier ones. This touches on the evolutionary view of religion -assumed also by Driver: 'it may be also, because, as Gunkel observes, the moral sense has been educated gradually,' (*The Book of Genesis*, 255).

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis*, 308.

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann (*Genesis*, 229) holds a position which has some similarity to Gunkel's in that he observes that the narrative makes no attempt to explain or justify, and concludes that it simply tells the story as it is, reflecting a reality of calculation and coveting. The text therefore gives us no cause for reflection on the morality of Jacob's action. However, unlike Gunkel, Brueggemann does not see the text as simply cheering on the side of Jacob in his deception, and, with von Rad, as we shall see,

*Von Rad*<sup>1</sup> is deeply dissatisfied with Gunkel's approach, and characteristically seeks to bring theological fruit out of a historical-critical approach. His own reading of the text brings out the seriousness of the episode, and he states that the crime against the blind man would not only be a crime against humanity, but also against God, citing Lev. 19:14 and Dt. 27:18.20 He also points out that the story does not have a happy ending as Gunkel suggests, but that the family is divided and bankrupt -'None of that would have caused the ancient reader to laugh.'<sup>2</sup> He then goes on to consider the issue of personal guilt, but sees the main concern of the narrator as 'to awaken in the reader a feeling of sympathetic suffering for those who are caught up mysteriously in such a monstrous act of God and are almost destroyed in it.'<sup>3</sup> The passage inevitably makes us consider the idea of guilt, but the ultimate question is how God takes (or even brings about?) such a morally ambiguous human act and incorporates it into his plans. Thus von Rad is concerned not just with the character motivation or questions of personal guilt, but also with the way that God's plan is worked out in the human arena.

However, two later commentators wish to go further in looking at the guilt or innocence of Jacob and Rebekah. *Fokkelman*,<sup>4</sup> like von Rad, argues that the lack of an explicit moral statement does not mean that the passage has no moral interest, but he goes further in seeing Jacob (and Rebekah) as clearly guilty in the eyes of the narrator whose actions lead to the destruction of the whole family. Although the divine plan is known, the characters still have moral responsibility, and, considering ch. 27 with the birth story and the selling of the birthright, each shares some guilt: Esau for despising his birthright (25:34), Isaac for opposing God's will in wanting to bless Esau (he thinks that Isaac will have known from Rebekah that the blessing of Abraham is destined for Jacob.) These moral conclusions are

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he sees above all else, the mystery of the divine choice. Contra Brueggemann we shall see that the question of Jacob's morality is valid.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 279-81.

<sup>2</sup> p. 280-1. So also Procksch (Die Genesis, 170): 'Mit dieser Erzählung hat J ein Kunstwerk von gedrungener Tragik geschaffen.'

<sup>3</sup> Likewise Speiser, Genesis, 213.

<sup>4</sup> Narrative Art, 115ff. Fokkelman is reflecting a more traditional approach of christian commentators -e.g. Keil-Delitzsch, (The Pentateuch, 279-80): 'In this way a higher hand prevailed above the acts of sinful men, bringing the counsel and will of Jehovah to eventual triumph, in opposition to human thought and will.'

not to be found as such within the text, but 'It is one of those insights which the narrator leaves to our own discernment, relying on a wise reader/listener.'<sup>1</sup>

Jacob is most clearly in the wrong, his guilt expressed in Esau's complaint in v36<sup>2</sup> and in the words of Isaac in v35 ('Your brother came with guile..'). But Fokkelman reserves his strongest censure for Rebekah, 'the originator of all the misery and the one responsible in the first place,' since 'she denies her husband and marriage, she contrives to deprive Esau of his being for her darling's benefit, she urges Jacob to his vile deceit. She is the only one guilty with respect to all the others.'<sup>3</sup> If we object that Rebekah and Jacob are merely carrying out God's plan, Fokkelman claims that their guilt is for wanting to carry it out in their own way, even being prepared to use evil means to achieve their purpose. The ends do not justify the means.

If Rebekah is the most guilty party for Fokkelman, she is a saint for *Allen*:

It is my thesis that on the level of spiritual call she can be viewed as handmaiden, vessel, prophet, sacrificial victim, suffering servant -in short, as the point where God's will became known on earth at a certain time in salvation history.<sup>4</sup>

She claims that modern, particularly Protestant, exegesis has been chiefly condemning of Rebekah, because of the need she perceives in some to devalue the writings of the OT, and the strong ethical nature of Protestantism.<sup>5</sup> This contrasts strongly much Jewish<sup>6</sup> or early Catholic commentary, and her own work draws strongly from the influence of these

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative Art, 118.

<sup>2</sup> 'There is no doubt that the narrator shares this view.' Narrative Art, 119.

<sup>3</sup> Narrative Art, 119-20.

<sup>4</sup> 'On Me Be the Curse My Son!', 160.

<sup>5</sup> To be fair, like Gunkel, Allen's criticism on this particular point is only relevant to those commentators who assume that the narrator is sympathetic to Jacob but who nonetheless condemn this standpoint, which, for instance, would not be the case with Fokkelman.

<sup>6</sup> On insights offered by various Jewish commentators, see the main commentary and also comments relating to ch. 25. On the whole Rashi and similar commentators tend to avoid wide-sweeping questions of the morality of Jacob's acts, whilst maintaining a broadly positive view of him. Nevertheless, particular comments on specific phrases do hint at a wider perspective -see for instance Rashi on 32:21: 'It shall no longer be said that the blessings came to you through supplanting and subtlety but through noble conduct and an open manner.' (Rosenbaum and Silberman, Pentateuch, 160). See also M. Maher, 'The Transfer of a Birthright: Justifying the Ancestors.' PIBA 8, 1984, 1-24, who reviews attempts by rabbinic commentaries (and early Christian) to put the action of Jacob in a positive light.

approaches.

The starting-point for regarding Rebekah as a saint is the detail devoted to her in the Bible: she is the first person in the Bible to offer herself in reparation for someone else, ('On me be the curse my son' -v13), her first reported words are the generous offer of water to the servant of Abraham, she then goes on to offer hospitality, and throughout ch. 24 it is emphasized that she is the one chosen by God. Allen offers the possibility that Rebekah had an inner sense of the religious significance of the event. It is also Rebekah who is sensitive to the struggle of the twins in her womb. Allen also wonders whether it is in fact Rebekah who is the necessary link between Abraham and Jacob, since she seems to play a much more active role than Isaac who does not receive a specific call or test from God. She also allowed herself to be passed off as Isaac's sister to save his life (26:8).

Regarding ch. 27, Allen considers the possible moves open to Rebekah, and concludes that she takes the best option open to allow the divine plan to be fulfilled. She also takes seriously the 'fear and trembling' that Rebekah must have felt at this stage, and her words of v13 show that her decision was a courageous and holy act -'Abraham was willing to sacrifice his beloved son, and Rebekah was willing to sacrifice her life'.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion she writes.

Therefore, if we view the complete circumstances of Rebekah's life, her sanctity can stand as a model of profound significance for women and men of today. She serves as a model of courage, immediate acceptance of grace, long-suffering, and willingness to die for God. In her own response to God, she is a mother of the faith. More concretely, she is the mother of Jacob, i.e., of Israel.

#### *Conclusion of the moral question raised by ch.27*

The commentators considered here have taken us through a whole range of opinion -from a refusal to consider the question by regarding it as unhistorical and anachronistic, to moral judgments in favour of or against Jacob/Rebekah, to an acceptance of the moral element but a hesitancy to resolve an ambiguity, preferring to point to the startling way that God works through such situations.

To deal first with the question of historical interpretation, this needs to be tackled on two levels. The one level is whether Gunkel is historically correct in asserting that the original writer and audience had no moral qualms with this story. This is by no means clear, and much recent work has argued that Hebrew narrative is more sophisticated than some

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<sup>1</sup> 'On Me Be the Curse, My Son!' 171.

commentators have acknowledged. The absence of explicit comment should not lead one to suppose that there is no interest. On the other hand, this absence does suggest that it is perhaps equally wrong to give such a strong weight to what might be perceived as hints of moral condemnation. The moral element, if it is there, is unobtrusive and leaves some room for ambiguity.

The second level of this historical concern is the hermeneutical question of whether we can be content with 'discovering' the original intention. This not only assumes a lot more confidence in the results of a form critical approach than we can actually have, it also ignores the concern to see this text as it is, the fruits of a continuous development shaped and reshaped by writers who saw this text as speaking to a community of faith, and as part of a wider literary context in which it now has to be read. It is somewhat arbitrary to pinpoint one (hypothetical) stage in this development and to regard this as the one stage to be interpreted. Thus even if it could be proved that the 'original' form of this story had no moral concern, it now forms part of a collection of religious writings which clearly do have moral concerns.

Where Gunkel may have been helpful is in making us wary of imposing our particular views on the text. As mentioned above, von Rad is helpful in both acknowledging a moral question but also in refusing to resolve what is an ambiguous question. In particular Fokkelman seems too quick in his outright condemnation of Jacob and Rebekah for wanting to force God's plan with their own evil means. This outright moral condemnation does not do justice to a passage which seems more to pose questions than to offer clear-cut answers. One wonders whether Fokkelman's reading does justice to the genre of Biblical narrative which by its nature is ambiguous and cannot be translated into easy moral categories.

The same may be said about Allen, although by focusing on Rebekah's acceptance of any curse (can one say 'guilt?'), she does not play down the ambiguous nature of Rebekah's act or make light of it. What is perhaps less clear is the extent to which Rebekah's particular course of action is to be commended. The text itself is silent and perhaps part of the tension is caused not just by whether Jacob (and Rebekah) will succeed, but also in whether she has chosen the right course. Whereas Allen sees a parallel with the testing of Abraham (ch. 22), at least in that episode the voice of God is clearer; the problem here is that there is no voice from God, just as there is no authorial voice to tell us what to think.

This brings us close to von Rad's interpretation, though Allen has helped us to focus the problem a little more closely. The moral ambiguity can be stated thus: on the one hand,

Rebekah knows the divine will in its general terms, and her dilemma is how she (and, by extension, Jacob) should play a part in its fulfilment. Furthermore, her action does result<sup>1</sup> in the long term in the blessing of Jacob and consequently of Israel, (though that is not to say that this was the only way this could have resulted). On the other hand, she encourages her younger son to trick his brother and father. Given the wider Torah context with its command to respect parents and the protection of the blind (see above), and given the break up of the family which happens in the short term, we are left questioning the conduct of Jacob. We can also see that Rebekah's part in this episode is more than incidental, especially as in the wider narrative context, it is she who carries the knowledge of the divine plan. In the words of Allen, she can be described as 'the mother of the faith' or 'the mother of Israel', but it is a faith full of ambiguities, uncertainties and flaws. That Israel should see in this incident and in the incidents around it, its own beginnings is a testimony to a willingness of itself or at least of the bearers of its religious traditions to be self-critical to the utmost. On top of this we should also note with von Rad that the interest of the passage is as much with the ambiguous nature of God's work, as it is with the conduct of the people drawn into his purpose.<sup>2</sup>

#### 1.1.4 The relation with ch. 24:29-34

One final question to be considered is how this passage should be seen alongside 25:29-34, and about the relation between בכרה and ברכה, whether one implies the other, and if so, then why Jacob needs to repeat his deception? This of course includes a traditio-historical question, but also the synchronic question of how to read the two together.

On the one level, the two episodes fit together as part of the development of the plot, and an explicit link is made at 27:36. In the first case, Esau loses his בכרה, strictly speaking by bargaining.<sup>3</sup> For בכרה, see earlier excursus.<sup>4</sup> The blessing of the second episode is seen as

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<sup>1</sup> Although it might be more accurate to state that her action *was followed* in the long term by God's blessing, since even the causal connection between the two might be unclear.

<sup>2</sup> Mann (*The Book of the Torah*, 51), commenting on the opening scene of the Jacob cycle, notes that, if Jacob appears unscrupulous, then the character of Yahweh appears to be even more so: 'Moreover...the cycle resists any attempt at discerning whether the corresponding inscrutability in the character of *Yahweh* comes as a result of having to deal with such shady people or, on the contrary, it is *Yahweh's* incomprehensible will that invisibly directs the human characters.'

<sup>3</sup> Von Rad (*Genesis*, 266) seems to read too much into the difference.

<sup>4</sup> See above, pp. 18-21.

the transmission of power (note that the blessing comes from Isaac's שׁוֹנֵן -his essential life force).<sup>1</sup> Commentators are divided on how much religious significance the blessing should have, but most who consider this passage in the wider context have no doubt that we should understand it as the blessing of Abraham, containing the divine promise.<sup>2</sup>

As to why there are two seemingly parallel stories of deception, Fokkelman notes that in ch. 27 the term בְּכֹרָה has become a claim, something disputed. It is used only by the son who appears before Isaac to receive the blessing -v19, 32; 33 otherwise the more neutral term בֶּן הַגְּדֹל is used. Thus the struggle for the blessing is based upon the claim of the first-born, which is disputed. Presumably the reason it is disputed is because of the earlier incident. However, this does not really answer the question of whether Esau's selling of the birthright was effective, indicating that he was genuinely giving up any claim to it, and more importantly whether this had any consequences for the paternal blessing.

Overall, it would seem that behind the two episodes are two independent traditions, which have now been to a greater or lesser extent worked together. This does not make it impossible to read them as one story now, but it does explain why they seem to repeat themselves in some ways and why the relation between the birthright and the blessing is not clear. From a historical-critical perspective this seems to make most sense.

## 1.2 A reading of 26:34-28:9

### 1.2.1 Structure

For the most part, the passage is well structured into separate scenes, each with two characters and each narrating a simple development.

However at the end of the passage this tightly-knit scenic structure is loosened.

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<sup>1</sup> Van Seters (Prologue to History, 284) emphasizes this distinction. The legal right of the firstborn has already been decided (25:29-34). What is at stake now is the blessing, dealing with 'such matters as future prosperity, fertility, and prowess over one's foes' which Isaac had meant to bestow upon Esau not because he was the firstborn, but because he was the favourite. It is of course true that the two are not exactly the same, and they can be read together, but it is difficult to hold a clear distinction especially as it is never spelt out what בְּכֹרָה means in terms of the patriarchal story -it would seem to relate to the patriarchal promises in general, as would surely the blessing. Furthermore, in the story itself, oldest-youngest contrast does play a role, both in the narrative (v1), in the words of Jacob (v19) and Esau (v32).

<sup>2</sup> Although see below, p. 118 (footnote).

The basic structure is as follows:

scene 1: Isaac and Esau (vv1-4),

scene 2: Rebekah and Jacob (vv5-17),

scene 3: Isaac and Jacob (vv18-29),

scene 4: Isaac and Esau (vv30-40),

scene 5: Rebekah and Jacob (vv41-45).

Around this are placed 26:34-35 and 27:46-28:9 which present the action in a different perspective.<sup>1</sup> V46 is pivotal in this arrangement in providing a logical link between the main plot and the concluding verses.

### 1.2.2 Exegesis

26:34-35: These verses provide a sudden change of subject from the plots centred around Isaac. The fact that Isaac is also troubled by Esau's behaviour might sit a little uneasily with the fact that he shows no sign of disapproval of Esau in the coming scene and that the old parental preferences (25:28) are still intact. Nevertheless these two verses may also hint at the passivity of Isaac who has not acted to guide Esau's marriage (nor Jacob's for that matter).<sup>2</sup> As they stand these verses, by showing disapproval of Esau, send out a hint to the reader that what is to come should be seen in a wider context.

27:1-4 introduce elements which will be vital to the action: Isaac's blindness,<sup>3</sup> the proximity of his death and the need to pass on the blessing. Although Isaac is near death, the depiction of him and his attitude to his forthcoming death is relaxed. This may be a cultural reflection of a matter-of-fact or solemn approach to death, but it also contributes to the detached authorial voice which will contrast so strongly to the emotions felt by the protagonists. Strictly speaking, the phrase וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנִי is unnecessary since the clause before that

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<sup>1</sup> Fokkelmann (*Narrative Art*, 97) sees 27:46-28:5 as a sixth scene, although the tension is no longer maintained, nor the restriction of two characters to the scene. This also leaves v6ff out of the picture.

<sup>2</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 205.

<sup>3</sup> Among reasons given for Isaac's blindness in Jewish tradition are that it was caused by the incense offered by Esau's wives to idols; it was caused by God to enable Jacob to obtain the blessing; as a punishment for failing to restrain Esau's wicked deeds; so that Isaac would not have to witness these deeds. (All cited in Scherman and Zlotowitz, *Bereishis*, vol. 3, 1114.) Also see Mahler, 'The Transfer of a Birthright: Justifying the Ancestors', who adds a comparison made with the blindness of Eli (1 Sam. 3) and a link with the behaviour of his sons (p. 8).



already tells us that Isaac called Esau. However the use of the word יָבִיחַ introduces the ambiguity which will run throughout the passage about which 'son' is to be blessed and which one Isaac is talking to. It also betrays Isaac's clear favouritism since Esau is simply יָבִיחַ, leaving Jacob out of the reckoning and betraying the intention to give all he can in this one blessing, leaving nothing for the other son. In terms of what is conferred by blessing, there may as well be only one son.

The reply of Esau to Jacob (יָבִיחַ) recalls another significant moment for Isaac (Gen. 22:1,7) -see comment at v18.

It is interesting what is assumed by this situation: commentators point to the ancient idea of blessing and its association here with the word שָׂדֵךְ, containing the idea of the whole of a person's life, including their energy and vitality.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the whole tension of this episode depends upon a common assumption that the family blessing is passed down from one father to one son.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, this is nowhere else spelt out in the patriarchal narratives (see concluding remarks).

The idea of the meal links this passage with the earlier passage where Jacob and Esau conflict over their position. Gunkel<sup>3</sup> also points to what he sees as the original sacrificial context of any such meal -see below.

Thus these opening verses both introduce the factors which will enfold onto the dramatic plot, (and we go along with the social conventions governing this blessing, even though they are unique within the patriarchal narratives)<sup>4</sup>, and they take the reader back to a time associated with this conception of blessing and family relations.

v5-17: The opening scene portrays what we are meant to see as an age old event between

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<sup>1</sup> Although Alter (Genesis, 137) simply sees the use of the word שָׂדֵךְ as intensive synonym for the personal pronoun.

<sup>2</sup> Wenham (Genesis 16-50, 205) thinks that it is unusual that Isaac wants to see only one son and bless him alone. This brings an element of culpability on the part of Isaac who has ignored Esau's unfavourable marriages. Similarly B. Jacob, Das erste Buch der Tora, 577. Certainly Isaac acts with a certain secrecy which may deserve some criticism and which indeed backfires. Nevertheless, some caution is needed since it is not really possible to state what the correct conventions might be.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, 309.

<sup>4</sup> There are of course some similarities with the blessing given by Jacob (ch. 48), which forms an interesting parallel to this story. Nevertheless, the procedure of blessing is not told with the same solemnity or detail.

father and son proceeding according to custom, now the intervention of the mother brings about the drama. Although Rebekah was listening from the outset, the narrator withholds that information until now. We are here reminded of the preferences shown in ch. 25: Isaac and his son (27:5a), and Rebekah and her son (v6a).

Throughout this episode, and indeed in the last episode of the chapter, it is Rebekah who guides the destiny of Jacob. This is particularly marked in the syntax with the structure *w + x + qatal* twice marking a disruption in the events, which until now seemed to be going smoothly. The introduction of Rebekah brings about the complication.<sup>1</sup> As in ch. 25 there is no disclosure of her motives: we know from ch. 25 that Jacob is her favourite son, though with no further explanation. Westermann suggests it is her sense of the injustice at a system in which only the elder son inherits the blessing.<sup>2</sup> Another reason, taking seriously our present literary context, is that she is seeking to put into effect the will of God.<sup>3</sup>

Her speech does not reveal her motives or inner feelings, but they do show an urgency and an authority, to both of which Jacob responds. One feature of biblical narrative which Alter points out is the tendency for one character to repeat the direct speech of another, often almost word for word save for a few differences. These differences seem to be minor but can be revealing about the person who is speaking.<sup>4</sup> In this case, Rebekah recounts to Jacob the words spoken by Isaac to Esau, but the urgency of the situation (note the insistent הֲנֵה) caused by the lack of time is shown in the relative brevity of her description of what Isaac said, compared with the more detailed instructions of Isaac himself. She tells Jacob all he needs to know for him to see the urgency of the situation. There is however one addition: the blessing is to take place לִפְנֵי יְהוָה. Gunkel<sup>5</sup> sees this as the relics of an older custom of the blessing or an oracle being preceded by a sacrificial meal (he points to the meal of Balaam as an example in Nu. 23) to a deity in whose presence the ceremony took place.

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<sup>1</sup> So I. Willi-Plein, 'Gen 27 als Rebekkageschichte: Zu einem historiographischen Kunstgriff der biblischen Vätergeschichten.' *TZ* 45 (1989), 327-8. Through this disruption, the 'Vätergeschichte' becomes the 'Rebkkageschichte'.

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis* 12-36, 444.

<sup>3</sup> So Allen, (see introductory comments); Procksch also points out the similarity between Jacob, 'der kühle Rechner' and his mother: 'Er ist ohne Sympathie geschildert, der echte Sohn seiner Mutter, der Schwester Labans', (*Die Genesis*, 338).

<sup>4</sup> See Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, ch. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Genesis*, 309.

Certainly there is something to be said for the motif of eating before a solemn event which, by its nature, involves YHWH. In fact this may reveal a parallel to the Balaam narrative (see later). However, it seems more likely that this phrase is a deliberate reminder of what is at stake.<sup>1</sup> It takes the reader beyond the confines of a family incident, and the divine name יהוה in particular reminds the reader that it is the God of the people of Israel involved here. Significantly, it is Rebekah rather than the patriarch Isaac who emphasizes this.

The authority of Rebekah is revealed in the words she uses in her commands (see vv8, 13b, 43a). Key words are בָּנִי, קָלִי, שָׁמַע, צוּהָה. To the narrator and his reader, the latter two words would normally apply to the attitude of the people of God to YHWH and the Torah. Rebekah, it seems, is assuming -rightly or wrongly -for herself a similar authority. All that Jacob has to guide him are these insistent words of his mother. Furthermore the urgent and repetitive use of the word בָּנִי, used with these other terms, reflects the way wisdom addresses the reader in the Book of Proverbs.<sup>2</sup>

Rebekah's instruction for Jacob to fetch two kids from the flock is a practical necessity because of the limited time available before Esau's return, but also points to the difference between the two lifestyles described in ch. 25. This contrast is even brought out in the appearance of the twins, with the reference to Esau's hairy appearance also found in 25:25.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> So Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 438: 'I think that the phrase is...intended as a balance between the narrative (Isaac blesses) and the pronouncements (Yahweh blesses).' Certainly, Rebekah's mention of YHWH seems to make Brueggemann's assertion that there is no indication that Rebekah knew what she was doing seem rather puzzling (*Genesis*, 235). Brueggemann makes this point to show how the human actors merely serve to further the divine plan. However true this might be, this assertion by itself tends to flatten the human side of the events.

<sup>2</sup> Other similarities with wisdom motifs might be the connection of the meal (מִטְעָמִים) with deception (Prov. 23:3), and the word חָלָק and its cognates used to describe someone as deceitful (e.g. Prov. 2:16, 7:5, 28:23, 29:5, 20:19, 26:28). The phrase מִטְעָמִים is used three times, with the clause 'such as I/he loves', underlining the statement of 25:28 that Isaac's predispositions are governed by his stomach. Can the addition of wine to the meal (v25b) reflect the same set of ideas?

<sup>3</sup> Hendel (*The Epic of the Patriarch*, 83) points to this contrast, but makes the point that in Israel, it is only domesticated animals that are suitable for sacrifice to God. Here, he comes in close agreement with Gunkel's observations (see above). He also makes the point that by putting on the animal skin, Jacob 'becomes' Esau, but also how in this case, and in other ancient passages, the person becomes the animal being sacrificed. So also S. Ackerman ('The Deception of Isaac, Jacob's Dream at Bethel, and Incubation on an Animal Skin.' G. A. Anderson and S. M. Olyan eds, *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*, Sheffield: JSOT Supp 125 1991, 119. It is not clear how much of this is pertinent to the reading to the text as it stands, though it could be that there is some link between the contrast of domestic and wild and the practice of only sacrificing domestic animals. This would add to the interest which Rebekah and Jacob show in the divine aspect of this episode (see on v7, and also v20) and add another dimension to Jacob's preference for a domestic lifestyle.

Jacob's objection in v12 is more out of fear of the plan failing than because of any moral scruples,<sup>1</sup> and once Rebekah offers to take any consequences he seems to accept. The lack of any explicit moral comment by the narrator does not preclude any moral interest. The reader faces the question of whether Jacob has done the right thing, especially since his father is elderly and blind, and whether he will succeed. The lack of any direct authorial or divine voice makes this question sharper. The nearest we have are those words of Rebekah which seem to claim an urgency and authority paralleled elsewhere only by the commands of God, but we are left wondering whether she is genuinely speaking with a divine authority or whether she is misleading the ancestor of Israel.

In this context Rebekah's offer in v13 is extremely bold and forceful. It seems to be more than just the reflection of an ancient belief that a curse could be 'magically' deflected. If the latter idea is present, it is a motif now used to show the seriousness of Rebekah's plan.

The description of Jacob's action in v14 is brief, emphasizing the speed with which he executes his mother's instructions, and the greater significance of Rebekah's part as her actions are described in greater detail. The taking of Esau's robe in v15, adds to the motif of Jacob taking the place of his elder brother and there is no disturbance to the flow of text with the introduction of this additional means of deception.

v18-29: Isaac's reply to his son is full of irony. There is a parallel to v1b where Isaac opens with the word בְּנִי and Esau responds הֲנָנִי. In this case the parallel to Gen. 22 is even clearer since it is Isaac who is speaking and in both cases where he uses this one word he is unaware of what is to happen. At the beginning of his life and at the end, Isaac is not in control of the circumstances around him and finds himself being misled. The haunting question (כִּי אֵתֶּה בְּנִי) shows that Isaac knows that he has a son before him, but he is not sure if it is Esau. These three words skilfully and ironically underline the tension of this whole section and the doubt tormenting Isaac.

Isaac's question also forces Jacob to lie explicitly. By announcing himself with the word

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<sup>1</sup> Pace Scherman and Zlotowitz, *Bereishit*, vol. 3, 1030-1: 'Deception went against his very grain. Jacob remains the eternal epitome of truth yet he was being asked to deceive.' See also comment on v19. Similarly Leibowitz (*Studies in Bereishit*, 265).

יִצְחָק, he did not have to lie in the strict sense, but now he has to say that he is Esau.<sup>1</sup> Isaac's ongoing uncertainty forces Jacob into an even greater lie: it is יְהוָה who has helped him. On the face of it, this is a lie of even greater seriousness,<sup>2</sup> but there may be an ambiguity: is it perhaps true that God -through the cunning of Rebekah -has indeed helped Jacob?<sup>3</sup> Isaac is still not convinced and so the tension increases. In v23 he seems satisfied enough to bless Jacob. Thus, Isaac, the human agent, who on the face of it, seems to be reversing the divinely inspired oracle uttered at the twins' birth, unwittingly becomes the means by which its words are fulfilled.<sup>4</sup> In this, as in so many ways in the Jacob story, the human is made to fulfill the divine purpose. On the face of it, v23, and especially the last clause may seem to be a doublet as the statement that Isaac blessed Jacob is not followed immediately by the words of the blessing. However the verse can make perfect sense in its context, marking Isaac's decision to bless Jacob, based on his sense of smell. It therefore acts as a summary statement or 'proleptic summary'.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Westermann argues<sup>6</sup> that the phrase יִבְרַכְהוּ indicates the beginning of the blessing ritual involving acts of identification (v24), eating (v25), physical contact (v26), and the words pronounced (v27ff). This seems to make sense of the text as it is, with v23 indicating the point at which Isaac leaves his questions and

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi tries to exonerate Jacob by arguing that the words spoken by Jacob can literally mean 'I am he that brings food to you [=Esau], and Esau is your first-born [=אֶשָׁוִיבְכָךְ]', Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, *Pentateuch*, 124. However, see Ibn Ezra's trenchant dismissal of this, (Strickman and Silver eds, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary*, 262). For Ibn Ezra, Jacob's stratagem must not be taken too seriously.

<sup>2</sup> 'Jacob's second and more horrendous lie, the mawkish, sanctimonious, incredibly hypocritical attribution of his here and now presence to the beneficent designs of Yahweh.' (Vawter, *On Genesis*, 303.)

<sup>3</sup> Note also: 'Such words of [God] were not of the kind likely to have been spoken by the rough Esau. The name God was probably rare on his lips. Hence Jacob's statement arouses his father's suspicions,' Hertz, *The Pentateuch*, 232.

See also Plaut, *The Torah*, 190-2, who quotes the midrashic tradition that Jacob's reference to God gave away his identity, but also suggests that Isaac still let himself be deceived, albeit subconsciously. For Plaut, the deception is only on the surface: Esau knows he is not the chosen one in any case, and Isaac subconsciously wants to be misled. A further indication of Isaac's weakness is in his seeing Rebekah as a mother-substitute to dominate him (see 24:67).

<sup>4</sup> H. E. Ryle (*The Book of Genesis*, Cambridge: University Press, 284) points to this irony.

<sup>5</sup> J. L. Ska, 'Sommaires proleptiques en Gen 27 et dans l'histoire de Joseph.' *Bib* 73 (1992), 518-27.

<sup>6</sup> *Genesis 12-36*, 439. So also Hamilton (*Genesis: 18-50*, 218): 'The imperfect of *barak* here can only be an ingressive perfect'.

begins to bless Jacob. Certainly, the question of v24a seems either like a final attempt to reassure himself or a formality, unlike the earlier, more probing enquiries.<sup>1</sup> There is a contrast throughout of the different senses: Isaac is unable to use the sense of sight, and he puts greater trust in the sensual elements of smell and touch than of hearing.

The blessing itself is fairly unique among the patriarchal narratives and much of its language and imagery is similar to that of Dt. or, in particular Nu. 24. Westermann sees specific parallels to the Balaam narrative in the introduction of the blessing where in both cases the blessing begins with what the speaker can perceive, in one case by sight, in the other by smell; another parallel is the way that a blessing of fertility gives way to a prophecy of dominance over other tribes. Clearly there is a connection between possession of fertile land and military supremacy. Von Rad<sup>2</sup> notes that Isaac is excited by the 'smell of the Promised Land'. The blessing ends with a third parallel to Balaam's prophecy with the so-called 'counter-curse'. A third example of this, though with a slightly different wording, is in Gen. 12:3. These express the irrevocability of God's promise or blessing and express the centrality of the patriarchs and their descendants in the outworking of God's blessing among the nations.

V29 clearly sees Jacob and his descendants as dominant. No doubt Edom would not be far from any application of these words. However the scope of this blessing cannot be reduced to a reference to Israel's subjugation of Edom, since its wording never leaves a more general field: the subjugation is of peoples (v29a), and Jacob's brothers, and so its meaning cannot be exhausted to one specific historical event. This final 'counter-curse' also keeps the scope of the blessing to a more general scope.

vv30-40: This third scene spells out the implications of the blessing of Jacob and the fact that such a blessing cannot be reversed.<sup>3</sup> As Isaac realizes what has happened there is an explosion of emotion. All the words of the first clause in v33 are employed in bringing this out, and the intense description of emotion contrasts strongly with the earlier, and more typical restraint of the author. The same applies to Esau's reaction, and the assonance of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ska, 'Sommaires proleptiques', 521.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 278.

<sup>3</sup> B. Jacob questions this (Das erste Buch der Tora, 568). Instead Isaac is not prepared to call down what would effectively be a curse on Jacob, and he recognizes the hand of God in his error.

'-i' sound at the end of v34 emphasizes the desperation that there should be something left for him.<sup>1</sup>

Because of Esau's insistence, Isaac does what he can. It is wrong to describe v39b-40 as a curse, as no vocabulary associated with this form is used. However, although these lines do have the form of a blessing, and in this sense are a blessing, it is a 'blessing' empty of promise.<sup>2</sup> The first words emphasize this as they are a word for word repetition of the opening words of the first blessing. In this case though the particle at the beginning of  $\text{יִשְׁמַנִּי}$  is privative rather than partitive,<sup>3</sup> meaning that Esau shall live away from the fatness of the land. Again, this description matches how Israel may have perceived Edom, but this historical perspective does not obscure the narrative logic of the episode.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it should also be noted that there is a hint of hope for Esau's descendants and, implicitly, of ominous warning for Israel.

v41-45 are less tightly constructed than the previous scenes. Their function is to spell out the result of Jacob's (and Rebekah's) deception, and to form a link both with the next episode of Jacob's life as he flees to Haran and with the motif of flight and return which finds its conclusion in ch. 33.

The result of Jacob's deception is clear, as the family is hopelessly divided. It is Rebekah in particular who suffers from this, as demonstrated by a rare outburst in v45b. The narrator is silent as to how Rebekah learns of Esau's plan, something he said only בלבב, and the verb used ( $\sqrt{\text{גג}}$ ), with its overtones of divine revelation, may cause to wonder whether

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<sup>1</sup> 'Esau's sobs, which are described as 'bitter' (*mara*), recall the earlier emotions he brought upon his parents..(26:35),' (Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: 18-50, 224). This reaction of Esau contrasts with the deferential tone of Esau when he first approaches his father, not suspecting what has happened (v31). This is unlike Jacob whose speech to his father is more direct, revealing his sense of urgency (Alter, Genesis, 141).

<sup>2</sup> An 'anti-blessing' (G. W. Coats, Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983, 204).

<sup>3</sup> Pace I. Willi-Plein ('Gen 27 als Rebekageschichte.' 321), Alter, (Genesis, 143).

<sup>4</sup> For relations between Israel and Edom, see 2 Sam. 8:12-14; also 1 Ki. 11:14ff, 2 Ki. 8:20, 22.

Rebekah has had divine warning.<sup>1</sup> Her words to Jacob are just as authoritative as they were before, except that there is also a note of personal desperation which may well correspond to the earlier acceptance of any curse from this episode but which also has similarities to Rebekah's exclamation before the birth of the twins.<sup>2</sup> Even so, she does not realize for how long Jacob will be absent, or that she will never see him again (or maybe she does, but wants to hide this painful knowledge from her son, lest he hesitate in leaving her).

The beginning of v45 does seem to be a redundant repetition of the previous clause, and may well be the reflection of some diachronic unevenness or a dittography.

v46-28:9: Without these verses, the story would end with Jacob fleeing without his father's knowledge in order to save his life. V46 introduces another reason for Jacob to leave: the need to find a wife from his own people. This motif is introduced in a very smooth way and is consistent with Rebekah's prominent role as already shown.<sup>3</sup> Finally Isaac is nudged into doing something about one of his son's marriage as his own father had done for him. Thus on the face of it, Jacob's departure is not with quite so much shame.<sup>4</sup>

Another function of these verses is to make more explicit the divine nature of the blessing given.<sup>5</sup> In this sense the blessing given is not a doublet of 27:27ff but more an interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Ezra considers this possibility, but rejects it in favour of the idea that Esau had simply confided in one of his friends (Strickman and Silver eds, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary*, 272).

<sup>2</sup> So Alter, *Genesis*, 145.

<sup>3</sup> 'To save Isaac from the knowledge of the true reason why Jacob was leaving his home, Rebekah pretends that he is going to Haran in search of a wife,' (Herz, *The Pentateuch*, 238). Again, an indication of Isaac's weakness.

Leibowitz (*Studies in Bereishis*, 286-90) points to the explicit remark in v5 that Rebekah is mother of Jacob *and Esau* to show that in sending Jacob away she was not only saving Jacob from becoming a victim of murder but also saving Esau from committing fratricide.

<sup>4</sup> The smooth transition to this conclusion and the way that these verses pick up motifs from the earlier narrative might suggest that these verses, although from a different source, are shaped around the earlier narrative, but this is of course part of the wider, much contested debate.

Certainly it is false to insist either that a consistency between these verses and ch. 27 means that they are from the same hand (so Wenham, *Genesis: 16-50*, 204 -see above); or that marks of a different hand mean that the verses were written 'entirely without reference to xxvii. 1-45', so that 'there can be no question that it forms part of a different representation of the current of events,' (Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 262).

<sup>5</sup> This reading denies the argument made especially by some Jewish scholars that a clear-cut distinction should be made between the blessing given earlier and this blessing. For instance, in Scherman and Zlotowitz (*Bereishis*, vol. 3, 1020-9) it is argued that Isaac had intended to give to Esau the first blessing which concerned material wealth and power, whilst reserving for Jacob the more



of it.<sup>1</sup> These words spoken by Isaac make it unquestionable that it is the patriarchal promise, the blessing of Abraham (v4) which Jacob has gained. Thus a stronger link is made with the wider patriarchal story. Furthermore because of the straits in which Jacob finds himself, there is a strong contrast between the vast scope of the blessing and the reality of Jacob's predicament. This picks up the same contrast of much of the Abraham story where Abraham is promised a vast number of descendants but remains for so long childless.

The verses 28:6ff return to the sorry Esau. Given that he attempts to take a positive step and that he now sees that he might have some cause for blaming himself, we can perhaps detect the germination of a seed of hope that his anger is not so total and that in the cold light of reason he might be more ready to excuse his brother. Again then, these verses show links with the rest of the narrative.

Most importantly, they indicate that Esau's fate is not wholly undeserved. True, there is no attempt to soften Jacob's deceitful behaviour, but by framing the behaviour around this motif of intermarriage, the narrator provides this wider perspective.

Finally, however, this is not done in such a way that Esau is despised or seen as being outside the scope of divine favour. Lamentably he tries to make amends, again without the active guidance of the father who allows him to make his own mistakes, but the narrator continues to show an interest in Esau by recording his marriage: Esau will not be forgotten. Furthermore, the link with Ishmael is more than coincidental, since Ishmael is also a

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spiritual **אברהם**. This is why it is only in the second episode when he is knowingly blessing Jacob that Isaac refers to the patriarchal blessing. Similarly B. Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora*, 574-7, Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereishis*, 275-8.

In practical terms, it is difficult to envisage how Esau's descendants might have had lordship over other nations and the descendants of his brothers (27:29), whilst Jacob enjoyed God's blessing. Furthermore, both blessings involve living in a land of plenty, albeit articulated in differing ways. On a broader level, it is surely false to make a clear distinction between material and spiritual spheres of life. Thus whatever hermeneutical considerations governing the solution offered here, and granted some difference between the more material blessing in ch. 27 and the blessing in 28:3-4, the passages themselves do not allow for such a clear-cut distinction.

See also Mann, *The Book of the Torah*, 54, who considers the above question but, on the basis of Isaac's invocation of God in 27:27b.28a and of the counter-curse (cf. 12:3) is inclined to see here the operation of the patriarchal blessing.

<sup>1</sup> W. Gross ('Jakob, der Mann des Segens. Zu Traditionsgeschichte und Theologie der priesterlichen Jakobsüberlieferungen,' *Bib* 49 (1968), 340-1) sees 28:3 not as a blessing but as an expression of hope that Jacob will be blessed, which finds fulfilment in ch. 35.

'forgotten first-born':<sup>1</sup> pushed aside in the story of divine favour but not beyond all reach of divine providence.

### 1.3 Conclusion

#### 1.3.1 Historical-critical summary

We have seen that most of the passage is a tightly-constructed series of scenes each of two persons. Within this there is little scope for marking out sources, although there may be some suggestion of traditional development behind the well-shaped plot: the blessings stand out as they introduce the motifs of Israel and Edom, and it could be that this ethnological aspect grew out of the story. On the other hand, some form of blessing is necessary to the story and so an argument seeing the blessings as secondary has to accept some earlier version of the blessing. It could just as easily be argued that the story as a whole was composed with the blessings as they are already in mind.

If not necessarily an indication of traditional development, then at least a hint of an original, relative independence of the story may be the way that the narrative takes for granted, and thereby assumes that the reader will, a set of circumstances which the wider context of the patriarchal narratives does not: that is, that the family blessing is passed down by the father to one son. This clearly is not the case if we look to either side of the family tree. In the case of Abraham, we read of no blessing given by him to Isaac. It is true that there is a conflict between Ishmael and Isaac which is similar to this, and also that God blesses Isaac after Abraham's death, but that there has to be such an ordeal as this passage is not self-evident. On the other side, Jacob does also pass on a blessing near his death, but this time it is shared between all his sons. Theologically this is understandable since all the children of Jacob are now inheritors of the patriarchal blessing, and the fact that such divisive family feuds are avoided, or at least avoidable, is to be seen as clearly something positive. Literarily this difference in the assumed conventions of blessing shows the relative independent character of the different parts of the patriarchal narrative. This is particularly the case when compared with the way the transition is made from Abraham to Isaac, since here the difference cannot

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<sup>1</sup> Syrén, The Forgotten First-Born, 121ff.

be accounted for by purely theological or thematic terms.<sup>1</sup>

However we have also seen that there is now a frame around the earlier narrative, most probably from the Priestly source. These verses do not obscure the real force of the passage, but add a different perspective by introducing the matter of Esau's ill-considered marriages and the need for Jacob to marry within the clan. Particularly in the case of 27:46 it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the main story and these verses since Rebekah still has the proactive role and the verse makes most sense in the light of v42a, and so for this reason v46 is sometimes seen as redactional. Rebekah's role might also be hinted at by the phrase *וְרַב־לֵבָנָה* in 28:7, with a possible reference to Rebekah's part in his departure (v43) in parallel to Isaac's formal sending. Furthermore there are links with other parts of the main narrative of the Jacob story -cf. the emotions expressed in 27:46 with 25:22 and 27:13 -in all these cases there is the sense that Rebekah is particularly sensitive to the pain caused by strife. It is also to be noted that by themselves, these verses from the Priestly source give no account for why the younger son should be given the blessing instead of the elder.<sup>2</sup> Note also that the theme of going to Laban, in order to find a wife, is consistent with the bulk of the Jacob-Laban story. Thus these verses provide added cement between the two cycles. All this suggests that a distinction between a final redactor and a separate Priestly source might be unclear.<sup>3</sup>

In addition these verses make more explicit the spiritual significance of the blessing given to Jacob, and how this blessing relates to the wider patriarchal promises. As argued in the commentary, we have seen how the blessing of 28:1ff serves to confirm the earlier blessing and to spell out these themes, whilst also arguing against a clear distinction between different sorts of blessing.

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<sup>1</sup> Even if valid, Speiser's comparison of the blessing scene here and Hurrian texts does little to throw light on the dynamics within the passage as it is, as Speiser himself notes that any reminiscence of an ancient convention is now lost by the Biblical writer (*Genesis*, xli and 212-3).

<sup>2</sup> So Alter, *Genesis*, 147.

<sup>3</sup> See also Alter, *Genesis*, 147, who accepts that these verses come from the P source, but who sees them offering not a contradictory but an alternative explanation. By contrast, see J. A. Emerton 'The Priestly Writer in Genesis.' *JTS* 39 (1988), 397.

For a much more negative appraisal of these verses, see Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 236ff, who sees them as an inappropriate 'intrusion' into the primary narrative, being unrelated to what precedes or follows. He sees the Priestly writer as departing from story to teaching -'and negative at that'. Our reading has attempted to show the contrary, that these verses are related to the 'primary' narrative. Furthermore, Brueggemann's claim that 'this is the only theological criticism of Esau in the Genesis narrative' takes no account of 25:34.

### 1.3.2 The story of Jacob and Esau within Israelite scripture

The story draws on motifs and experiences common to all mankind, such as that of fraternal rivalry, and of the contrast of a more stable, domesticated lifestyle and the hunter lifestyle, especially when read alongside ch. 25:27-34. Furthermore there is a clear emphasis in the blessing given to Jacob (27:27) on the importance of the land.

In addition though, there is also a concern to understand Israel in relation to other peoples and to its God.<sup>1</sup> Much discussion on how this passage relates to the concerns of Israel is centred around its historical relations with Edom. But this debate about the place of Edom in the passage often centres on false premises, with the importance of Edom-Israel being tied in with the question of diachronic precedence. This assumes that what is central to our concern is determined by what is original. It cannot be denied that as it is, there is a clear concern to see in Israel's early history, the beginnings of its relations with its neighbouring peoples, in particular with Edom, and to interpret these relations in theological terms. The narrators saw 'Israel' -whether the united monarchy, the Southern Kingdom or the surviving community -as having a special and privileged place in history because of sense of being God's specially blessed people.

However, this story now forms part of the wider story of promise governing the Pentateuch. This means that as they looked back on this patriarchal period, the Biblical writers were concerned to see a time of promise, looking forward to at least the partial fulfilment that was to come with the Mosaic covenant. On the one hand there is the recognition that things were different, as we have seen in the almost unspoken 'acceptance' by the narrator of the convention of passing the blessing from father to one son in a way that excluded others from this specific divine blessing. On the other hand, it is clear that it is the blessing of YHWH that is being passed on, something made explicit in the inclusion of the divine name at important points: in v7 where Rebekah spells out what is at stake in this blessing, and in v27 in the blessing itself. What happened on Isaac's deathbed was to have consequences for endless generations. This is even more emphasized in the P strand (28:3ff).

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<sup>1</sup> T. E. Fretheim ('The Jacob Traditions: Theological and Hermeneutic', *Int* 26, 1972, 423) sees this as a major aspect of the Yahwist's presentation of the Jacob tradition: 'Israel should see herself in Jacob -recipients of God's grace', especially as Esau is depicted as the better man with the natural claim (also Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 234-5). However, Fretheim's claim that the Yahwist was wanting to show that Jacob/Israel is blessed in order to serve other peoples would seem to go beyond a reading of the Jacob story itself.

### 1.3.3 The divine-human contrast

Given the above, it is surprising that this incident, so important for those who saw themselves as Jacob's descendants, should be told with such frankness. This points to an understanding, as von Rad has sought to emphasize, of God working through incomprehensible ways, in ways where his will prevails even where families are torn apart and fathers deceived. The divine will is worked through human failings. To see that God was involved in even these events, points to a faith which was determined to see God as the determining factor of all history, and it is this which points to a monotheistic faith, the same faith which could see YHWH's work even in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple along with the exile of his people.

On the other hand the human side of the story is not lost as protagonists are never reduced to mere puppets. Just as the work of God is seen as complex so are the workings of our human characters. The structure of the story into episodes of two characters reflects secretiveness and hiddenness of motive. We are often left wondering about the feelings and real motives of each character. Is there scope in the text to see a reluctance on the part of Jacob, based not just on the fear of being caught? Is he simply out for his own gain or aware of some divine purpose? How are we to identify with Esau? How much does Isaac really know and why does he act secretly? Can we really assume that he does not know about the earlier oracle? Or does he know deep down that Jacob is the one to be blessed and is he really deceived so easily in the end? And what about Rebekah, whose role is particularly striking: is she trying to assure that the divine will is being fulfilled, or she simply expressing her favouritism? Perhaps such a clear distinction cannot be made. And has Rebekah got the desired end right (that Jacob should be blessed), but failed to trust that God will himself bring about the fulfilment of the oracle?<sup>1</sup>

What is truly perplexing about this story is that Jacob and the reader never really know. The story sits within an ambiguity: on the face of it, it is a clear deception and attempt to go against the will of the father, but the reader is also aware of the wider context into which the story is now placed, where God has declared through an oracle that Jacob is to receive the blessing. It is certainly difficult to know what weight to place on this oracle when reading this story. Perhaps it would have been so much easier if Isaac had received the divine oracle at the birth of the twins, but as it is Rebekah has to carry the burden of having

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<sup>1</sup> So Calvin, A Commentary on Genesis, 88.

this knowledge without knowing how it is to be fulfilled, or even whether it is her place to play a part. Thus as well as asking whether Jacob will succeed in his deception, we are faced with the even more perplexing and lasting question of whether he has done the right thing. It is wrong to argue that this story does not have a moral concern, since just as it is part of the Pentateuchal story of promise, so it is part of Israel's book of Torah.

It is this lack of a clear voice from God to guide Jacob that makes Rebekah's role so tantalizing: is her voice the voice of the divine, the authority of YHWH<sup>1</sup> (something which the authority and wording of her speech might suggest), or is she a false guide, leading Israel's ancestor astray? However, the frightening consequence of such a possibility is to bring into disrepute the very calling of Jacob and therefore Israel.

In our work on the Bethel and Penuel incidents, we have already had occasion to note certain points of contrast between the religion of the patriarchs as depicted in the story of Jacob and that of later Israel.<sup>2</sup> In this passage, a further possible point of contrast is that we see here a Jacob without the firm guidance of the Torah. However as well as this point of contrast, indications are also that Israel was encouraged to see types for itself in the patriarchal characters. In this text, this can be seen in the etymological motif that Jacob is derived from the root  $\text{כָּרַע}$ , understood to mean 'deceive' or 'supplant' (v35-6). By seeing in Jacob a type for Israel, the narrators were not afraid of showing that 'Israel' had no special merit, that its faith could be just as shot through with ambiguities as was Jacob's, and that their election by God over other nations was truly a mystery. Far from causing jubilation as imagined by Gunkel,<sup>3</sup> this surely would have just as easily led to a sense of humility as demonstrated by the other side of the Jacob/Esau story in ch. 33.

Finally, of course, there is the question of culpability and its consequences -not only whether Jacob has committed a crime against his brother, his father and ultimately his God, but also of what might arise from this, perhaps his fears of v12 coming back to haunt him. We have already hinted that there is no evidence of this at Bethel which comes straight after this, but we shall have to bear the question in mind in the next longer episode of Jacob's life.

Thus this episode shows how difficult it really is for the protagonists to discern the divine

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<sup>1</sup> Willi-Plein even suggests that Rebekah is a *dea ex machina* ('Gen 27 als Rebekkageschichte.', 331.)

<sup>2</sup> pp. 59.85.92.

<sup>3</sup> 'Man kann also in diesen Betrügereien nicht Sünde und Schande, sondern nur lustige, gelungene Streiche gesehen haben.' *Genesis*, 307.

will and act appropriately. Rebekah and Jacob might be aware of the wider plan, but they are left to see its fulfilment through. Isaac and Esau do not even see the wider plan: Isaac's blindness is a metaphor for his lack of insight into God's plan, and Esau's ill-chosen marriages demonstrate his ignorance. Thus, the passage is more than a straight-forward denunciation of Jacob and Rebekah. This is made even clearer by the opening and closing references to Esau and the added motive and circumstances for leaving. Instead the passage shows again that the Jacob story is a complex interplay of the divine will and human fallibility, personality and effort.

## 2 The struggle for justice -Jacob and Laban (29-32:1)

### 2.1 Introduction

This long section dealing with the stay that Jacob makes with his uncle Laban provides a long break between the two main episodes of the Jacob-Esau plot. However, it is to prove far from a relief from the theme of conflict. Furthermore the Jacob-Laban story is both preceded and followed by the divine appearances already discussed which set this very human conflict between these two characters in the context of the divine encounter with Jacob.

In itself the Jacob-Laban narrative forms a fairly coherent and self-contained whole. Nevertheless certain events outside of this section are assumed, such as the family relationship, elements from the divine encounter at Bethel, and there is a certain mirroring of the relationship between Jacob and Esau. Furthermore the Jacob-Esau story forms a bracket around the Jacob-Laban story. This appearance of a self-contained cycle on the one hand, and the connections with the wider Jacob story on the other hand, suggest a rather complex development behind the text. This is something we shall have to address in the conclusion.

For the purposes of this work, I have divided the narrative into the following parts:

- 29:1-14        -scene at the well
- 29:15-30     -the deception of Jacob by Laban
- 29:31-30:24 -the birth of Jacob's children
- 30:25-43     -Jacob's deception of Laban and increased wealth
- 31:1-32:1    -Jacob's flight, the final confrontation and treaty

### 2.2 Ch. 29:1-14 -the scene at the well

#### 2.2.1 Historical-critical issues

There is little enthusiasm for dividing this passage into sources, due to its coherence and unity. Regarding other redactional development, Blum finds the hint of a tension between v1 (בני-קדם) and the place חרן (v4), since elsewhere the former term relates to the people who live in the desert to the east of Transjordan, whereas Haran is located in Northern



Syria.<sup>1</sup>

However, a similarity with other well scenes, particularly in Gen. 24:11-33 and Ex. 2:15-22, has led to some discussion of form. For instance Westermann sees an independent oral narrative form lying behind these separate stories, and suggests that their family context goes back even to the patriarchal period.<sup>2</sup> However he does not attempt to discern an original form, and it is noticeable that even Gunkel<sup>3</sup> satisfies himself with noting a connection between the three passages. Von Rad is even less adventurous.<sup>4</sup> This is a little surprising since it is often held to be axiomatic that where there are such doublets, the task of form criticism is to discern the 'original' form behind the Gattung, and to identify later elements (compare the discussion on the passages narrating the 'endangering of the ancestress') In this case, perhaps little is made of the connection because it does not present what might be seen as the problem of doublets.

A more fruitful approach is suggested by Alter<sup>5</sup> using the idea of 'type scene'. His concern is less to find the one elusive and hypothetical form behind the scenes, as to explore the manifold variations of a pattern. His use of the concept of type scene circumvents the tricky question of history, and is more concerned to do justice to the texts as they stand. He sees the 'betrothal' stories as an example of this, and invites us to see how the variations in the stories, as adaptations of commonly understood conventions, highlight certain themes or motifs. For instance, in the case of ch. 24, the most striking variation is that the future husband, Isaac, is not at all present and that Rebekah plays a significant part. This clearly reflects their portrayal elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> The role of YHWH is also more noticeable in this case. Regarding Ex. 2, Moses responds to the injustice shown to the shepherdesses, and there is

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<sup>1</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 103, also Van Seters Prologue to History, 277. (This is especially reflected in references in Judg. 6:3.33; 7:12; 8:10).

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12-36, 463.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, 324-7.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis, 288-9.

<sup>5</sup> The Art of Biblical Narrative, 51ff, and briefly, Alter, Genesis, 152; also Wenham, Genesis 16-50, 229ff;

<sup>6</sup> See also L. Teugels: "'A Strong Woman Who Can Find?'" A Study of Characterization in Genesis 24, with some Perspectives on the General Presentation of Isaac and Rebekah in the Genesis Narratives.', JSOT 63 (1994), 89-104.

no initial intention of finding a wife.

In this reading of the version in ch. 29, we shall use Alter's model of the type scene to draw attention to what is distinctive here.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.2.2 Exegesis

v1. The journey itself is cheerily<sup>2</sup> passed over by the narrator as the interest is concentrated onto Jacob's arrival.

v2-3 set the scene by describing the sight that greets Jacob, the particle וְהִנֵּה marking a change to the perspective of Jacob.<sup>3</sup> However v3 goes beyond Jacob's point of view as the narrator describes the custom of the local shepherds in using the well. Whereas Moses sees the injustice of the shepherds at the well, here Jacob encounters the complicating conventions and obstacles, just as later he is to find family and social conventions and agreements whilst staying with Laban a key hindering factor. Jacob's flouting of the convention in v10 likewise reflects this aspect.

The mention of the stone reminds us of the stones and the column from the Bethel episode, and perhaps hint that we are already seeing the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promise to Jacob.

v4-8 The question about Laban's שְׁלוֹם perhaps reminds us of Jacob's desire to return to his father's house in peace, expressed in his oath to God at Bethel (28:21).

Jacob's enthusiasm is set off by the reluctance of the shepherds: significantly, it is Jacob who starts the conversation,<sup>4</sup> and his questions are met with very short answers and then the device of deflecting Jacob's attention to Rachel as soon as she arrives on the scene. Their inertia is heightened by the fact that they are unwilling or unable to act before all the flocks

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<sup>1</sup> For Alter's treatment of the same passage: The Art of Biblical Narrative, 54-6.

<sup>2</sup> 'lifting his feet' gives the impression of optimism, briskness or agility (so Rashi -Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, Pentateuch, 134. This expression is paralleled by Jacob 'lifting his voice' in v11 (Alter, Genesis, 151).

<sup>3</sup> Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 54.

<sup>4</sup> S. K. Sherwood points out that, with the exception of this text, the interrogative מַאיִן is always directed to the person arriving on the scene, and that this reversal underlines Jacob's initiative and activity. ('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, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990, 39.

are present.<sup>1</sup>

v9-12 The interest of Jacob seems divided between Rachel (we do not even know what she looks like at this stage), and the sheep. In fact it is interesting that he sees to the sheep before speaking to Rachel. Family ties are also emphasized: Rachel is the daughter of Laban, the brother of Jacob's mother, and the sheep belong to Laban, the brother of his mother. When Jacob waters the sheep, he is doing so because they belong, again, to Laban the brother of his mother.<sup>2</sup> Thus his motivation is family interest (unlike Moses who has no family connection). The unblocking of the well and flowing of the water accompany the sudden warmth of Jacob to his cousin and his tears. The images of the well (important for fertility), flowing water and emotion perhaps have sexual undercurrents.<sup>3</sup> The unblocking of the well is also an indication of how Jacob will bring prosperity to Laban.

Finally, the removal of the large stone is suggestive once more of Jacob's great strength and enthusiasm, again in contrast to the inertia of the other shepherds. This is consistent with the picture we have of the struggling Jacob at Peniel, and of the stones he sets up elsewhere. Fokkelman<sup>4</sup> also points to the symbolic value of Jacob removing the stone as removing an obstacle and it is no doubt significant that of the well-scenes considered, only Jacob has to remove a large stone. This picture of Jacob contrasts with his portrayal in relation to Esau, where Esau seems to be the more powerful and Jacob relies on cunning.

v13-14: Jacob meets Laban. In the patriarchal story this is of course not the first time that we meet Laban. In ch. 24 he seems equally enthusiastic though there is the hint that Laban is as much enamoured by the expensive bracelets given to Rebekah (v30), and we see there also a reluctance to let the servant go immediately. However, on the face of it, there is as

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<sup>1</sup> Note the impersonal form of the verb used to describe the act of unblocking the well (וַיִּלְלוּ -v8), rather than the first person plural we might have expected (cf. v3 where the verb probably does refer to the shepherds). Certainly there is a reluctance to claim responsibility for such heavy work and one wonders whether they were waiting for Rachel to do the job.

<sup>2</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 117.

<sup>3</sup> Hinted at by the pun between 'watered' in v10 (וַיִּשְׁקוּ) and 'kissed' in v11 (וַיִּשְׁקוּ) -Alter, *Genesis*, 152.

<sup>4</sup> *Narrative Art*, 125.

yet no hint of the future troubled relationship between Jacob and Laban.<sup>1</sup> V13b -14a is a little intriguing: what are כל-הדברים האלה? This rather vague phrase could refer to what has just happened or to Jacob's past. Does the vagueness of this phrase hint at a reticence on the part of Jacob to disclose everything about his past? And is Laban's conclusion (cf. Gen. 2:23) simply a recognition of kinship, or of affinity in character, or might he even see the possibility of some covenantal bond based on family relationship?<sup>2</sup> Is there some irony in his reply which we can appreciate once we know that indeed deceit is a family trait?<sup>3</sup>

### 2.2.3 Conclusion

Regarding the origins of this passage, it is difficult to detect any development behind the written form. The passage clearly has in view what is to come, and is intended as an opening scene, lulling us into a false sense of ease and drawing on images which will be significant for the Jacob-Laban narrative. It also presupposes the relationship between Laban and Rebekah, and there are hints of the earlier Jacob story. All this suggests that this passage was never an independent or even self-contained story.

We have seen that in this passage, a comparative study of 'type scene' has proved more fruitful than a traditional 'form critical' study. The use of the well type scene emphasizes the importance of family interest for Jacob. Furthermore, undercurrents of fertility or sexuality look forward to the birth of the sons and the breeding of the flocks, as well as the prosperity Jacob will bring to Laban. In addition, in contrast to ch. 24, there is no mention of the divine. Partly this reflects Jacob's nature which is to rely on his own striving,<sup>4</sup> but may also

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi comments: "He ran towards him', thinking that he was laden with money...'and embraced him' -When he saw that he had nothing with him, he thought, "Perhaps he has brought gold coins and they are *hidden away* in his bosom!"...'He kissed him' -he thought, "Perhaps he has brought pearls (or precious stones in general) and they are in his mouth!" (Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, Pentateuch, 136). Rereading the story with the benefit of hindsight (and also remembering the last meeting of Laban with his distant family in ch. 24), we can no doubt agree that Laban's motives at this stage may well have been self-centred -see also Wenham, Genesis: 16-50, 231.

<sup>2</sup> See W. Brueggemann, 'Of the Same Flesh and Bone (Gen 2:23a).' CBQ 32 (1970), 537-8; also Hamilton, Genesis: 18-50, 256.

<sup>3</sup> With the particle ׀ Wenham detects a possible hint of grudging admission on the part of Laban.

<sup>4</sup> So Vawter (On Genesis, 319). Vawter thinks that the lack of explicit mention of providence is not so much a denial of the work of God but emphasizes Jacob's preference for steering his own course rather than looking for a sign as Abraham's servant. This is true and adds to the theme of human endeavour in the Jacob story, but nevertheless, as we shall see, the 'hand of Yahweh' will prove to be

reflect a greater difficulty in detecting the work of God in the Jacob cycle than in the Abraham cycle.

However, most striking is the absence of a marriage to end this scene.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the wedding is the clear outcome of the well scenes in Gen. 24 and Ex. 2, it is not in sight here. Clearly this should be the outcome since it was Jacob's (ostensible) purpose in travelling and there has been an open expression of affection (with sexual overtones?) between Rachel and Jacob. But the passage finishes not with Jacob achieving his goal, but with a month's stay with his uncle. The removal of a stone will seem easy compared to the barriers Jacob will face before he can reach the goal of marrying Rachel, let alone of returning home in peace. Although the Bethel incident is not mentioned explicitly, there are nevertheless hints of it. We have already seen the recurrence of the stone motif as Jacob's night time vision is followed briefly by this day-time vision, and the omission of journey details emphasizes this connection. It must seem to Jacob (and the reader) that this day-time vision and action is evidence of God's protection and accompaniment. But the lack of a marriage means a delay in the fulfilment of God's promise. Just as it seems God is present with Jacob through the guiding of circumstances (as he was with Abraham's servant), that presence will become more elusive and problematic for Jacob.

Another factor noticeable by its absence at the well is Laban, not to mention his sons. Seen together with the inertia of the shepherds beside Jacob, the impression will develop of the laziness of Laban and his sons, especially as they are next mentioned grumbling (31:1). There is no explanation of why Rachel has the job of shepherding, and what seems insignificant now, will again become more suggestive as Jacob's troubles increase. This sense of laziness, and the contrasting strenuous and rushed activity of Jacob after a long journey contribute to an ongoing portrayal of Jacob as a scrupulous worker<sup>2</sup> and as a man who works hard to make things happen for him -this theme will continue to develop throughout the coming narrative, and will contribute to the divine-human contrast.

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more ambiguous in Jacob's stay in Haran.

<sup>1</sup> Although Alter does not hesitate to call this a 'betrothal' type-scene he neglects to spell out the irony that the actual betrothal is missing.

<sup>2</sup> An important aspect of Jacob's defence in his final confrontation with Laban -Alter, *Genesis*, 152.

## 2.3 Ch. 29:15-30 -marriage and deception

### 2.3.1 Historical-critical issues

There is a sense in which this unit is part of the preceding since it brings to a conclusion the marriage of Jacob and Rachel. In this sense it marks the conclusion of the betrothal type scene, albeit after complication and delay. However the break at v14 also marks a certain independence.

Within the passage itself there is little evidence of different sources or additions, the exception being the references to the maids of Leah and Rachel respectively (vv24 and 29), which prepare for the following episode with the birth of Jacob's sons.

Within the text, v16 with its mention of Rachel as Laban's daughter is often seen as an unnecessary repetition from the earlier episode. However its function is different here as it draws attention to the contrast between the sisters and sets the tone of the ensuing events. Of course it could well be that the opening episode of the Jacob-Laban narrative was composed at a later stage (see above), but v16 in itself does not prove this.

### 2.3.2 Exegesis

vv15-20: On the face of it, the tone of these verses has some similarity to the gentle optimism of the previous episode, even if the length of Jacob's service seems excessive.<sup>1</sup> However, even at this stage Laban's craftiness comes to light. Previously we read of his enthusiasm as he greets Jacob as a relative, then a month passes by. Now the tone has imperceptibly changed as Laban, whilst ostensibly offering something to Jacob (משכרתך), smuggles in the concept of עֹבֵד. Jacob is easily taken in and seems to make things even worse as he suggests not only his payment, but also the length of service! Thus what on the face of it seems to be Laban's plausible suggestion that Jacob should have some reward turns

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<sup>1</sup> It may seem odd that Jacob has to do anything in order to be able to marry Rachel, but it seems to have been customary to pay something over in compensation for the marriage with a daughter (see Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 466-7, and von Rad, Genesis, 290). Thus Isaac had to do nothing to marry Rebekah because the servant was able to offer expensive gifts, whereas the empty-handed Jacob has to pay by work. This contrast between the relative ease for Isaac (who does not even need to travel) and the effort of Jacob further points to the motif of struggle in the life of Jacob. It is also noteworthy that Laban does not waive this custom of offering a gift. Whereas in this whole narrative, custom and social circumstances work in his favour, for Jacob they are an obstacle (as they are indeed in his struggle with Esau).

their relationship into one of employment and service.<sup>1</sup> Laban's self-interest is also revealed as he is obviously pleased at the prospect of his daughter remaining in the family, thus keeping the family wealth together. Furthermore, even now might he be thinking about keeping Jacob indefinitely? His wording in v19 ('I will give *her* to you') leaves open the possibility of the future deception, and, in the light of later events, the narrator's mention of Leah in v16, can be seen as a warning bell.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, to the enamoured Jacob all is well and the seven years are skipped over by the narrator,<sup>3</sup> the reference to ימים ארוכים (v20) pointing back to Rebekah's attempted reassurance (27:44).<sup>4</sup> At this point there is little doubt that our sympathies lie with this young man in love.

The contrasting of the sisters, one גדלה and one קטנה, reminds us of the contrast of Esau and Jacob, and it is significant that Jacob, the younger, should favour the younger of the sisters.

v21-27 The true character of Laban is revealed as Jacob is deceived into marrying Leah and working seven more years. Jacob, forced by Laban's silence to act first, makes his demand in what seems quite a blunt way, especially in the final clause, (וּמְבוֹאָה אֵלַיָּה).<sup>5</sup> Again, Laban insists on social convention and arranges the formal wedding occasion, something which he will again exploit to his advantage. The reference to the guests -the ominous sounding men of the area<sup>6</sup> -reminds us of the shepherds at the well who showed no concern

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<sup>1</sup> So Fokkelman (Narrative Art, 126-7). Von Rad (Genesis, 290) sees in Laban's initial offer a loyal 'paraphrase of the rather unusual legal situation' since Jacob was neither a slave, nor a paid servant but a relative, and so he seeks to reward Jacob for the service he will carry out.

<sup>2</sup> Fokkelman (Narrative Art, 127), although a little overstated.

<sup>3</sup> What Bar-Efrat describes as 'psychological time' (Narrative Art in the Bible, 160).

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: 18-50, 260; Wenham, Genesis 16-50, 235; Alter, Genesis, 154.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton (The Book of Genesis: 18-50, 261) comments that this is the natural request of someone already betrothed. This would mean though that Jacob was already betrothed to the wrong person. Alter seems to capture the sense better by seeing sexual impatience on the part of Jacob, (Genesis, 154). Offended by this idea, Rashi sees Jacob as being motivated by the concern to bear his twelve sons who would be bearers of the religious tradition -Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, Pentateuch, 137-138; also Scherman and Zlotowitz, Bereishis, vol. 4, 1194ff.

<sup>6</sup> See Sherwood, ('Had God Not Been on My Side', 97) on how this phrase brings in an element of threat (cf. Gen. 26:7, Judg. 19:16, Gen. 19:4.22). In this case, the men are useful to Laban in

for the lonely stranger. The actual deception of Jacob by Laban is brought out by the play between the hiphil and qal forms of the verb בּוֹא in v29 and especially v23, where the forms are very similar and where the preposition לָ is repeated in different forms.

Throughout this deception are clear hints of Jacob's deception of Esau. One parallel is the setting of a meal,<sup>1</sup> making the deception easier. The darkness in v23 causes Jacob to mistake one sister for the other, just as his father's blindness caused him to mistake one son for the other. Then, as Jacob's eyes are opened in the daylight, just as his father 'saw' his mistake in ch. 27 and found there was nothing he could do, he finds that neither can he reverse what has been done. The wording of Jacob's accusation (רַמְהוּ) also links back to the earlier deception, and the irony is brought out most clearly in Laban's retort (v26), pointing to the customary precedence of the elder over the younger, with the word הַבְּכִירָה as a reminder of the taking of Esau's birthright.<sup>2</sup>

In v27 we learn the final cost to Jacob. The blunt way that Laban refers to Rachel (גַּם-אֶת-רָחֵל) perhaps indicates his attitude to his daughters. Commentators point out the proscription on marrying two sisters in Lev. 18:18, and certainly this episode does not show such a situation in a favourable light.

v28-30: What was eagerly anticipated by Jacob is now tempered by the deception of his uncle and the knowledge that he has to work seven more years. Thus the marriage is an anticlimax, and is narrated with restraint. Nevertheless, Rachel remains precious to him, emphasized by the redundant preposition לָ in v28b.<sup>3</sup> The final verse not only spells out this preference, but also prepares for the next scene where YHWH intervenes on behalf of the

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enforcing the local custom and making sure that Jacob accepts Leah.

<sup>1</sup> There is also the hint that wine was part of this meal as well, with the idea of drinking implicit in the word מִשְׁתֵּה (שְׁתֵּה) - Scherman and Zlotowitz, *Bereishis*, vol. 4, 273. See also J. A. Diamond, 'The Deception of Jacob: A New Perspective on an Ancient Solution to the Problem.' *VT* 34 (1984), 211-3, who points out the link with Lot's daughters, (also referred to by the pairing בְּכָרָה and צִעִירָה) who also deceived their father by making him drunk and having intercourse with him. (Also Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: 18-50*, 262-3.

<sup>2</sup> 'The nemesis is made all the more pungent by the fact that Jacob is caught in the same device he himself had once used. He pretended to be Esau in front of Isaac. Leah pretends to be Rachel next to Jacob,' Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis: 18-50*, 262). Brueggemann (*Genesis*, 253) sees it quite differently as Laban voices the natural claim of primogeniture, now in conflict with God's will expressed by the blessing.

<sup>3</sup> Omitted in some manuscripts.



unfavoured one.

### 2.3.3 Conclusion

Jacob has got what he deserves. As commentators point out, the deceiver is deceived. Underneath the obvious irony we are left with the question of how to account for this reversal. It could be a simple narrative play, or it could be that we are meant to see some cause and effect between the two deceptions, and even the element of divine punishment. Gunkel<sup>1</sup> denies any sense of this, seeing straightforward humour, with any sense of Jacob being made a victim overshadowed by the reader's knowledge that Jacob will eventually pay Laban back with interest. At the other extreme, Fokkelmann<sup>2</sup> sees the clear motif of crime and punishment.

Certainly it seems that there is an intended parallel with the earlier deception by Jacob, something which Gunkel neglects. However, the case of guilt and retribution is not at all clear-cut. We certainly feel that the tables are turned on Jacob, but to see this as a punishment probably goes too far. It is clear that Jacob's actions, perhaps partly by choice, partly by having no other option, are such that he will both succeed and suffer from such behaviour, as stated by Mann: 'Jacob possesses that rare and dangerous combination of deceitfulness and cunning, a combination that both serves him well and is the source of unending anxiety.'<sup>3</sup> He also argues that the text is 'not interested so much in a doctrine of rewards and punishments as it is in a process of conversion that takes place over the course of Jacob's life, albeit through struggle and setbacks.'

In place of any idea of retribution is the absence of any divine perspective.<sup>4</sup> As is often the case with the Jacob story, we are left with more questions than answers.

Furthermore, any perspective is only complete in the light of the forthcoming birth of twelve sons, the founders of later Israel. Thus, from a retrospective perspective, it could be claimed that the deception by Laban into marrying Leah is a necessary part of God's plan, since Leah

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 327.

<sup>2</sup> Narrative Art, 130.

<sup>3</sup> Mann, The Book of the Torah, 55-6.

<sup>4</sup> A most striking contrast to this are the explicit theological judgements of cause and effect in the Books of Kings and Chronicles. There is hardly any hint of this in the Jacob story. As we shall see, rather than seeing in Laban an instrument of divine retribution, the only hint of explicit judgement regarding this episode will be in favour of Jacob against Laban.

is as much a chosen matriarch as Rachel.<sup>1</sup> Thus the Jacob story presents another example of the divine working through human deception.

A further element in the text is that of service and wages, which will be key words in the Haran phase of Jacob's life.<sup>2</sup> Westermann<sup>3</sup> sees this from a sociological perspective with the introduction of social and economic conflict. Without doubt the entrance of service and wages has soured the family relations in an irreparable way. As a result, uncle and nephew are estranged, sister is set against sister, and daughter resents father (31:15). Contra Gunkel, underlying the humour in this episode is the wider context of the tragedy of breakdown in family relationships caused by the greed of one man. Laban's gain is clear as he marries off his less attractive daughter to a relative and secures his hard work for another seven years; but this is at the clear expense of his daughters and nephew.

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion on this: Scherman and Zlotowitz, Bereishis, vol. 4, 1195ff. Jacob's eventual act of burying Leah at a sacred site can be seen as a tacit acceptance of this (Gen 49:31).

<sup>2</sup> Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 126.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12-36, 468.

## 2.4 Ch. 29:31-30:24 -Jacob's children

### 2.4.1 Historical-critical issues

The question of sources behind this section is difficult. Reasons given for seeing the text as the combination of different sources or elements include the use of both יהוה and אלהים, varying sentence structures and possible doublets. The mandrake story also seems to stand out as does the birth of Dinah. In addition the section as a whole stands out as there is no explicit reference to Laban, and Leah and Rachel come into the fore.

The use of the different terms for God has of course been cause for division between the E and J source, with possible additions from P. However, much is unclear and von Rad<sup>1</sup> comments on the 'extraordinary literary compositeness' of the text, where it is almost impossible to catalogue the small fragments.

Westermann<sup>2</sup> tries a different way by distinguishing different layers: an older layer is marked by the theme of rivalry between Leah and Rachel, consisting of 29:31-32 (the birth of Reuben), 30:1-6 (the heated exchange between Rachel and Jacob, and the birth of Dan), 30:14-18, (the story of the mandrakes), and 30:22-24 (the birth of Joseph, though with later additions). A later writer expanded this to a genealogy of twelve (although, strictly speaking, this would necessarily include Dinah). This in itself can be questioned, since there is no obvious reason, for instance, for separating off the birth of Dan from the birth of Naphtali, Bilhah's second son; and it would seem more likely that an earlier narrative would have mirrored the giving of Bilhah to Jacob with that of Zilpah. Furthermore, it would seem just as likely that a narrator expanded the basic genealogy with the narrative sections. A further point is that Westermann's reconstruction cuts across the scenic development.<sup>3</sup> In short, although it is possible that the story was composed in two or more stages, these are difficult to trace in the text as it is.

On the other hand, Blum argues that we have here 'einen einheitlich konzipierten, wohlstrukturierten Abschnitt'.<sup>4</sup> He sees the consistent outworking of the theme of Leah's fertility being granted by God because she is 'hated', whilst Rachel remains barren. The

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 291.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12-36, 471-2.

<sup>3</sup> So Wenham, Genesis: 16-50, 242.

<sup>4</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 111.

etymologies stem from this. He also criticizes the so-called 'Gottesnamenkriterium'<sup>1</sup> as a means of automatically identifying authorship.

Given the complexity of the text, we will assess Blum's arguments after the exegesis.

#### 2.4.2 Exegesis

29:31-35 *-Leah's earliest children*. V31 is the natural consequence of the previous statement that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, although the familiar biblical idiom in v31 (שָׁנִיאָהָ) is more colourful.<sup>2</sup> Now, the narrator takes us to Leah's own perspective. The theme of God opening the womb is familiar especially in the birth of important people, and in the vindication of those who suffer (cf. the birth of Samuel).<sup>3</sup> Familiar also is the language and idea of YHWH seeing and hearing and then intervening, and the final name, linking the birth of Judah with the praise of YHWH, forms a neat ending to what began with the description of Leah's distress and YHWH's intervention. Thus the thought is not far removed from the piety of Israel, particularly as expressed in the psalms.<sup>4</sup> Given this connection with the praise of Israel, together with the idea of YHWH's intervention, it is not surprising that the divine name should be used at this point as a link to later Israel.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 107.

<sup>2</sup> Some commentators (Keil-Delitzsch, The Pentateuch, 287; Dillmann, Genesis, 342) see the closing of Rachel's womb as a punishment on Jacob for favouring one wife over the other. The force of any punishment, however, is felt by Rachel more than Jacob.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Sam. 1:19-20.

<sup>4</sup> So Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 473.

<sup>5</sup> Keil-Delitzsch, The Pentateuch, 287-90 sees a deliberate contrast in the use of YHWH and אֱלֹהִים: Leah has a clearer reliance on the faithfulness of YHWH, the covenant God. Rachel's conception of God is much lower: she blames Jacob for her lack of children rather than looking to God, and she resorts to the earthly means of procuring children through her maid: 'For such a state of mind the term *Elohim*, God the sovereign ruler, was the only fitting expression,' (p. 289). However this distinction becomes forced in the case of the birth of Joseph, where both titles are used: in one derivation of the name Joseph, אֱלֹהִים is used because Rachel is looking back at the past and the earthly means that had been used to obtain a child; in the second derivation she then remembers the promises of YHWH and prays for another son from his covenantal faithfulness (p. 291). By Delitzsch's later commentary (A New Commentary on Genesis, 173ff), this attempt has been abandoned in favour of a source-critical reading. Our own reading attempts to steer a course between the two poles. Similarly, in Scherman and Zlotowitz, Bereishis, vol. 4, 1280, the view is supported that the specific use of the Divine Name emphasizes God as the dispenser of mercy, whereas the term אֱלֹהִים refers to God as Judge and Ruler of Nature. Regarding the use of both titles with the birth of Joseph, Rashi is cited (p. 1311) to show how God as dispenser of justice now becomes God as attribute of mercy for Rachel.

The name Reuben is associated with the verb ראה and the noun עני. This fits in well with the context of Leah's distress, although the etymology itself is quite free.<sup>1</sup> The structure of this naming also stands out from all the others in that the giving of the name precedes the actual etymology.

The structure of the three other namings is the same, although there is some variation in the final clause.<sup>2</sup> The etymologies of Simeon and Levi are strongly related to the context, and that of Judah makes perfect sense in the context of the narrative.<sup>3</sup>

*30:1-2 -the heated exchange between Jacob and Rachel.* We now see the consequences of Laban's earlier deception as sisters are estranged from each other and even the love between Jacob and Rachel is marred. Their exchange marks a stark contrast to their meeting at the well and the idyllic picture represented there is now in ruins. Rachel in her frustration blames Jacob for her lack of sons, and Jacob becomes angry. His reply underlines the idea already mentioned that it is God who brings fertility, and shows the predicament of those caught up in the will of God where there is privation as well as blessing. Interestingly there is no recourse to prayer (cf. 25:21).<sup>4</sup>

*vv3-8 (Rachel's surrogate children)* As a result of this, Rachel falls back on a common solution (cf. Sarai's use of Hagar in ch. 16), though one which we know from this earlier case is only second best. Bilhah is alternatively called Rachel's אמה and שפחה, words traditionally seen as criteria for source division, but perhaps just used for variation. Certainly

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<sup>1</sup> A link with the noun בן might have been closer to the name. One plausible suggestion is that this would have been the original etymology, and that it has been suppressed to fit into the context of the story. The result as well is that whereas we might expect a note of joy at the birth of the first son, there is the dominant idea of עני.

<sup>2</sup> The form לקרא used for Levi is especially unusual, since with the birth of all the other sons of Jacob, the feminine form is used.

<sup>3</sup> Note the alternative etymology in Gen. 49:8.

<sup>4</sup> So Keil-Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 287-8. Note Rashi (Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, *Pentateuch*, 139) who paraphrases Rachel's demand: 'Give me children -Did, then, not your father act so towards your mother? Did he not pray on her behalf?' Rashi explains Jacob's response to this to mean that since Jacob already has an heir (unlike Isaac when he prayed) it is from Rachel that the children have been withheld and not from him. Certainly, the matriarch's barrenness is focused much more on her own personal distress rather than on the need of the patriarch to have a child to inherit the patriarchal promises.

there is no disturbance in the flow from v3 to v4.

The idea of bearing children on the knees of the mistress, whether or not in some way reflecting a literal practice,<sup>1</sup> seems to denote adoption of some sort.

Throughout these verses (as in vv1-2) the term אלהים is used. Two sons are born of Bilhah, and there is a slight variation in the naming formula, where the stronger על-כך is used for the first child (as with Levi and Judah), rather than the more usual waw-consecutive clause.

The etymologies are again linked to the wider narrative context. In the case of Dan, Westermann<sup>2</sup> argues that the final clause of Rachel's speech (...וּגַם) is a secondary addition, intended to bring out the theological emphasis. In the case of Naphtali, the reference to Rachel wrestling with her sister and prevailing (!יכר) has wider allusions to Jacob's struggle with his brother and more graphically to Peniel. It again emphasizes the close affinity between Rachel and Jacob. The ambiguity of the word אלהים is particularly striking in this connection, indicating on one level the intensity of struggle ('mighty struggles'), but on a deeper level how the fortunes of the two sisters are seen to reflect divine favour, and how their human struggle is the place where God's plan is worked out. It is fitting that Rachel's triumphant statement should finish the section, although we are left wondering whether Rachel is really as confident as she claims given that she only has two (surrogate) sons compared to Leah's four sons.<sup>3</sup>

*vv9-13 (Leah's surrogate children).* We now return to the perspective of Leah, as v9 forms a link with 29:35b. As opposed to the birth of Leah's own children there is no mention of God (and certainly not YHWH), and her own motivation (after all, she already has four of her own sons) comes to the fore. Consequently the namings are more centred on herself and the sibling rivalry.

The naming of Gad is particularly difficult, and the Qere form has גַּד אֲבִי. This textual

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<sup>1</sup> Though compare H.-F. Richter, "'Auf den Knien eines andern gebären'"? (Zur Deutung von Gen 30:3 und 50:23). *ZAW* 91 (1979), 436-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis 12-36*, 474.

<sup>3</sup> This disparity between Rachel's claim and the reality is perhaps also due to the nature of the material here, since it may be that the writer is imposing this narrative link upon a list of names that is already established. Others may see this disparity as evidence of the composite nature of the passage, since in an earlier version, perhaps the claim did match the reality, (so Gunkel, *Genesis*, 334). In either case, the comments made about the effect of the text as it is still stand.

difficulty may indicate how the writer has struggled to find a natural etymology. Certainly the form of this particular birth formula, containing a simple exclamation, is much shorter than the others and somewhat abrupt. The naming of Asher also has a one word exclamation, although this is followed by a longer (secondary?) clause.

*vv14-18 -the selling of the mandrakes.* There is now an extended introduction to the naming of Issachar as Leah gives to Rachel the fruit collected by her son Reuben in exchange for a night with Jacob. The tension is all the greater between the two sisters as this is the only narrated exchange. It seems that the fruit in question was considered an aphrodisiac, and, we may suspect, an aid to fertility,<sup>1</sup> and so behind the demand and giving of the fruit would lie a conflict about sexuality and fertility. The story also gives us to assume that Jacob is giving all his attention at night to Rachel.

Given this, we can appreciate the full force of Leah's accusation to Rachel in v15. Equally revealing of her bitterness are her words to Jacob on his return home. The notion of selling or hiring is emphasized by the repetition of the stem שָׂכַר, and Jacob himself is demeaned by being made an object of reward, to be bartered away ('I have hired you in exchange for my son's mandrakes'). In reality, the exchange is something of a 'creative compromise',<sup>2</sup> since both sisters gain something they need: Rachel the possibility of fertility, and Leah the opportunity to sleep with Jacob. But it is a bitter and sorry compromise, which demeans all parties concerned.<sup>3</sup>

V17 returns to the more standard birth and naming formula. The final etymology is odd in that it has no real basis in the tale that has just been told, but goes back to the giving of her maid to Jacob. Quite why God should regard this giving as something to be rewarded is also unclear. It could of course be that Leah's interpretation of the birth given here expresses more what she would like to put on record, than on the reality itself.

This etymology is all the more unexpected since the story itself, with its repeated use of the verb שָׂכַר, already furnishes its own explanation. It would be wrong to call this a doublet

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<sup>1</sup> Contra B. Jacob (Das erste Buch der Tora, 567-8.)

<sup>2</sup> So Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 137.

<sup>3</sup> Fokkelman (Narrative Art, 140) also points to a parallel between this story and Esau selling his birthright in exchange for the lentil stew. However this does not quite work as the roles are reversed - it is Rachel (the younger) who gives up her privilege, and the fruit itself probably has a greater value to her than the stew did to Esau .

since there is only one standard naming formula as such, but there is some inconsistency, perhaps from a concern to preserve two rather different etymologies. Historically, it could be that vv14-18 were brought into the framework, in which case it would be more probable that the story already existed since it is not unreasonable to suppose that something composed for this purpose would have been made more consistent with the wider context.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this episode serves to offer us a snapshot into those years of conflict and rivalry, demonstrating not only what is true of the two sisters -their mutual jealousy as one has the need of fertility, the other of access to her husband -but also demonstrating the way that Jacob's role is totally passive and he has become an object to be bartered, linking to the wider theme of שכר in the Jacob-Laban story.<sup>2</sup>

v19-20 (*Leah's sixth son, Zebulun*). The etymology again fits into the narrative context. The name is connected formally in the narrative with the verb זבול, but there is a loose connection with the verb and noun זבול.

Blum<sup>3</sup> sees in the naming of Issachar and Zebulun a structural connection. The reason for the 'unnecessary' allusion to Zebulun with the verb זבול is so that a contrast is set up with שכר in v18: Issachar is a reward, but the next son is not just a reward but an additional 'gift'. He sees a chiasmic pattern accounting for the double derivations found in both sons:

a *Jacob* hired by Leah (שכר)

b Leah receives *God's* reward (שכר)

a' Leah receives *God's* gift (זבול)

b' *Jacob* will now live with Leah (זבול)

(Blum follows a traditional understanding of זבול as 'wohnen'.)

However, the chiasm is far from obvious and it fails to explain the difficulty mentioned above of relating this etymology of Issachar to the earlier story of the mandrakes. Nevertheless, it may be possible to see a progression from the idea of Issachar as reward to that of Zebulun as 'gift', over and above the reward.

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<sup>1</sup> Westermann (*Genesis: 12-36*, 476) sees the mandrake story as the more original and vv17-18 as a later interpretation -'this is most inappropriate and is downright theologizing'.

<sup>2</sup> Fokkelman also points to the name יששכר meaning 'man of wages' (יש שכר): 'The name 'taints' the father: Jacob himself, we see now, is no longer anything but 'a man of wages'....It is by far the most important name in the whole Story of Jacob after that of Jacob himself,' (*Narrative Art*, 138).

<sup>3</sup> *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 108-9.



v21. The birth of Dinah clearly stands out. Most obviously she is not one of the sons and founders of the twelve tribes. In addition, there is no attempt to offer an etymology. The most plausible explanation is that the verse is added to the list in preparation for the later story of her rape. The effect of this is that when we come across her in ch. 34, Dinah is already introduced and closely tied to her brothers, especially her full brothers Simeon and Levi (v25).<sup>1</sup>

vv22-24. *The birth of Joseph* marks not just the end of this section but also the climax as Rachel finally bears Jacob a son. The fact that this son has been so eagerly awaited makes him all the more special. זָכַר is commonly used to describe God coming to help after a time of waiting. Why God should 'remember' Rachel now is not spelt out: perhaps so that Joseph is valued all the more as a gift from God, perhaps as an outworking of his favour, or perhaps there is the hint of a reward after Rachel allowed Leah access to her husband.<sup>2</sup> The etymology itself, seeing the child as a result of God's favour, would seem to exclude the idea that Rachel's new found fertility is a result of eating the mandrakes.<sup>3</sup>

Rachel's response is joy but also the desire for another child, and so the passage looks forward to the birth of Benjamin.

The significance of this birth is emphasized by the fact that it comes closest of all to having two formal etymologies. Interestingly the verbs connected with the name have opposite meanings ('take away', and 'add'). The use of two terms for God has led many to see two sources. However, other reasons for the variation should not be ruled out, such as poetic variation or the use of both names to bring the episode to a clear conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A question regarding ch. 34 is why Leah's other sons, Judah and especially Issachar and Zebulun (whose births are closer to her) are not as closely involved. This omission perhaps points to the different origins of ch. 34 and ch. 30.

<sup>2</sup> So Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 140.

<sup>3</sup> Coats (*Genesis*, 215) sees this statement as the work of the Yahwist, although he does not reconcile this attribution with the use of the term אֱלֹהִים in v22. B. Jacob (*Das erste Buch der Tora*, 597) also points out that Leah conceives even without the mandrakes, thus showing that it is not they that give fertility. Nevertheless, the lengths to which the narrator goes to tell about the mandrakes may leave room for a lingering suspicion that there is more than the final statement of v22 indicates.

<sup>4</sup> B. Jacob (*Das erste Buch der Tora*, 600) sees a pattern in the use of divine names through the whole episode. The passage starts with the name YHWH. The change to אֱלֹהִים occurs after Jacob's reply to Rachel where he rhetorically asks whether he is in the position of אֱלֹהִים to grant fertility. Thereafter the name אֱלֹהִים is associated with the struggle for fertility. Only when Rachel's shame has been lifted is the name YHWH used again, bringing the whole episode to a close, with the

Nevertheless, there are other arguments for literary growth. It is noticeable that the form of this naming diverges from all the others (except Reuben), in that it does not end with the name but with the formal etymology. Furthermore, if the final clause (...לאמר) were omitted, the form would match the others, giving the waw-consecutive (וַתִּקְרָא) a resultative meaning ('and so...').

The effect of this final clause is that not only do we see the birth of Joseph as the fulfilment of Rachel's deepest desire, but we also see that fulfilment as incomplete until the birth of the twelfth son. The fact that Rachel's fulfilment will only be met as she dies makes her a tragic character indeed (as the naming of Benjamin indicates). Indeed, we can detect a hidden irony in Rachel's protest to Jacob that she will die if she has no children -she does have children, but also dies in the process.<sup>1</sup> Even in this moment of joy and blessing at Joseph's birth lies the reminder of pain and death, as well as the lack of satisfaction.

### 2.4.3 Conclusion

#### 2.4.3.1 Historical-critical summary

The above reading of the text has suggested that Blum's view of the text being written from the outset as a united passage is false. At several points we have noted evidence of additions or development. How that development happened is difficult to assess: it could be that the names of the twelve were a given tradition for the writers, and that some of the etymologies may precede this narrative. It could also be that the story of the mandrakes was introduced separately.

It is even more difficult to look for the historical basis of the twelve tribes in relation to this passage as much discussion has relied on the hypothesis of the twelve tribe amphictyony in pre-monarchic 'Israel',<sup>2</sup> something now very much called into question.

What is clear is that most of the etymologies in this passage are free and spring more from the context of the narrative than from the tribes, their social origins or the words themselves. This suggests that the etymologies were created or evolved as they found this new context.

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same term used at the end as at the beginning.

<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 270. Alter (*Genesis*, 158) points out this irony in relation to 30:1, where Rebekah demands sons, and it is precisely the birth of the second son which will bring about her death.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. von Rad, *Genesis*, 296-7.

Nevertheless the fragmented nature of the passage has been overemphasized. For instance, there are no formal doublets, even if a second allusion sometimes sits alongside the formal etymology.<sup>1</sup>

It is also noticeable how this passage fits into the wider Jacob-Laban structure, as the births of Jacob's sons in Haran are all told together. This is then followed by the breeding of the flocks. This episodic style changes our focus from one place to another, as in this passage the subject of the flocks, Laban and to an extent even Jacob are filtered out.

Nevertheless, behind this exclusive concentration are allusions to the wider context. Above all the conflict between the sisters presupposes the previous scene. Furthermore, there is the parallel to the conflict between Jacob and Esau, and the birth of Naphtali alludes not just to this but also to the struggle at Peniel.

Historically, it could be that the birth of these sons, who were the ancestors of the twelve tribes, is secondary to the Jacob-Laban story, and it could be that the narrator was building on a wider and common tradition of Jacob as the father of some or all of the tribal ancestors, whatever the particular circumstances in earlier traditions. However, the etymologies and allusions now make it very much part of the wider context.

A further question, raised by Coats,<sup>2</sup> is what to make of the omission of any explicit reference to the promise tradition within the patriarchal story, given that the promise of posterity finds some fulfilment. For Coats this shows that it is not the promise motif but that of family strife that is the main framework of this unit (as it is the whole Jacob plot). We shall return to this issue in considering the wider context.

#### 2.4.3.2 The human and divine

As with other parts of the Jacob narrative, the human and divine stand in a complex relationship with each other. Commentators unite in seeing the 'human' side of this passage,

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<sup>1</sup> By formal etymology, I mean the clear use of a standard formula such as ... ותקרא את-שמו. An allusion is a word-play, where a verb or other word in the speech of either Leah or Rachel is similar or even of the same stem as part of the name given to the child. For any etymology, the actual etymological formula has to be linked to an allusion (thus שמון is linked with the allusion שמע). In some cases however, there are two different allusions (e.g. with Joseph), which may point to some development behind the text, and which some have wrongly called doublets. The most obvious such cases are Issachar and Joseph.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 216. A similar issue will be the lack of any mention of Jacob's sons in the blessing of 35:11. This is not untypical, however, since Isaac is only promised a multitude of descendants after the birth of Jacob and Esau (26:3f.24).

where jealousy provides motivation for the women. This is highlighted in Rachel's outburst to her husband, in the use of maidservants and most especially in the mandrake episode. The impression is of a tense, triangular relationship, with no outside relief. Thus, Rachel makes no recourse to prayer, receives no word of reassurance, and does not even find support from her husband.<sup>1</sup> For her, God indeed is absent. Furthermore, Jacob appears to make no attempt to make things better, and here we have an indication of a similar passivity leading to family strife at Shechem and indeed concerning Joseph.

The references to God are both an additional aspect and a contrast to this human side. They are additional in that references to God are predominantly through the words of the protagonists and coloured by their emotions. God's favour thus becomes a way of securing the favour of their husband over their sister.<sup>2</sup>

But some references go beyond this. Jacob himself reminds Rachel of the involvement of God in the events (30:2 -surely no consolation at all to Rachel in the circumstances), and the narrator refers to God seeing, hearing and remembering. Of particular note in this connection are the births of Leah's first four sons, where the motif of God's intervention on behalf of the underdog (29:31) is in evidence and where the birth of Judah results in the exemplary response of praise, evoking the spirituality of the psalms. This is underlined by the use of the divine name in these verses, so that these verses in particular, present a type for the faith and worship of Israel.

Many have seen this juxtaposition of the human and divine in strongly diachronic terms,<sup>3</sup> and this may be so to some extent, but this observation in itself fails to do justice to the complexity of the relationship or to the text as it stands. For instance, it fails to see that some of the references to God are indeed part of the human side as noted above. Furthermore, even the most human aspects contained in this passage have parallels in the psalms, featuring as they often do, an equal amount of petition, desire for vindication over one's 'enemies', and praise and acknowledgement.

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<sup>1</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 158.

<sup>2</sup> See Calvin's comments on v7 (*A Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 2, 143): 'She [Rachel] pompously announces, that her cause has been undertaken by the Lord... We see, then, that under the pretext of praising God, she rather does him wrong, by rendering him subservient to her desires.' Perhaps this overstates the case, where motives are more mixed and where there are expressions of real pain and hurt as well as triumph.

<sup>3</sup> So Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 471-2.

From a theological perspective, Brueggemann's comments are nearer the mark:

The narrative is a delicate balance. On the one hand, there are mandrakes and handmaidens and names of children which suggest the powers of fertility. There is a suggestion that births can be wrought by careful planning. But at the same time, there is the overriding theological affirmation: God is the only cause of new life.<sup>1</sup>

This balance of the human and divine is especially evident in the realm of the family, where the focus once more rests. In particular, Westermann highlights this, as he shows how the conflict between the women is rooted in their specific concerns: 'Whereas men were basically at strife over living space and means of subsistence, women clashed basically over position and status in the community.'<sup>2</sup> Westermann tries to see this sociologically against the background of a society where there was a conflict between a woman's function as a mother and recognition of her through personal liking. Certain caution needs to be exercised in any picture of society we imagine this passage to be reflecting, but the passage graphically shows the joys and hurts of women in a situation where their own personal standing is so tied up with motherhood. To what extent we can read a critique of this situation or a simple depiction of the way things were depends as much on our perspective as readers as on any intention of the passage.

On the other hand, we can also see how God is active in the realm of the family. One theological theme that does emerge is that of God as judge, arbitrating between different parties and coming to the help of the person in need. As we shall see this theme will become even stronger as the Jacob-Laban plot thickens. But behind this theme is also the realization that cases are rarely clear-cut, that the underdog can easily become the source of oppression, and that divine justice has to operate in a confused and complex web of mixed motives and situations.

Finally we see the reoccurrence of the familiar idea of how the divine plan is worked through human frailties, shortcomings and distress. As one commentator writes:<sup>3</sup>

The same casual observer may read the story of Rachel and Leah and smile as he recalls sibling rivalries and wifely jealousies that are the familiar fare of life and gossip... Of course they were jealous of one another. Of course, they tried to outdo the other. .. But to what purpose did they compete?

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 255.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12-36, 477.

<sup>3</sup> Scherman and Zlotowitz, Bereishis, vol. 4, 1203-4.

The same commentator claims, admittedly a little fancifully, that the two women were jealous for higher ends, knowing that they were building a future nation. Whatever the particular motives of Rachel and Leah, it is certainly true that their jealousy, and indeed the circumstances that forced them and Jacob into this unhappy situation, were used to further the divine plan, and in particular that the very emotions of the women and the resultant competition for as many sons as possible became the driving force which led to the birth of the twelve sons.<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.4.3.3 Israel's self-understanding

As is generally proving to be the case in the Jacob story, the picture of Israel's beginnings that emerges is far from ideal or even complimentary. Without doubt the children born are meant to be identified as the ancestors of the twelve tribes, and once again these origins are seen in the context of struggle, rivalry and, indeed within the wider context of the Torah, polygamy.<sup>2</sup> Although there is divine involvement in the birth of the children, there are also very human factors. Joseph seems to come out best, simply because he is the long awaited son of Jacob's loved wife, Rachel. No doubt this helps to set the scene for the story of Joseph, but whether we are to see any historical significance of his relatively privileged place is unclear.

As a whole, this passage once again testifies to the realistic picture that Israel has of itself and the way it sees God's involvement in its past: the presence of God is no guarantee of harmony.

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<sup>1</sup> Sherwood (*'Had God not Been on My Side'*, 139-40) points to the unresolved nature of the themes within this episode. The one theme is desire-fulfilment marked by Rachel's desire for sons (plural) and by Leah's desire to be loved by her husband. Neither of these are totally fulfilled. The other theme is conflict-resolution, which again is not resolved. It is perhaps this lack of resolution which makes this episode so uncomfortable, and there is a sense in which the matriarchs can be seen in tragic terms: caught up in their own sufferings with no prospect of resolution. For the reader of course, there is the bigger picture and the realization that these things may be happening 'for a higher purpose' and that there is some resolution outside of this episode.

<sup>2</sup> So Calvin (*A Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 2, 133): 'Since Moses sets these crimes before the Israelites in the very commencement of their history, it is not for them to be inflated by the sense of their nobility...'

## 2.5 Ch. 30:25-43: Jacob's flocks

### 2.5.1 Introduction

This is without question an extremely difficult passage because of the intricacies of the negotiated agreement between Jacob and Laban, the description of the animals and the breeding techniques employed. Needless to say this has given rise to discussion of sources and the composite nature of the passage.

The traditional source critical approach is taken by Gunkel<sup>1</sup> who sees in the opening part (vv25-31a) repetitions which point to J and E sources. The repetitions are: Jacob's request to leave (vv25.26a), the composite nature of Laban's speech shown by the repeated introduction וַיֹּאמֶר (vv27.28), Laban's question about what he should give to Jacob (vv28.31), and the repeated sentences of 26b and 29a. More telling is what seems to be evidence of two diverging agreements: v32 seems to contradict the previous assertion of Jacob that he will receive no payment, suggesting with vv33-34 an immediate payment. Thus vv32-34 are part of one agreement farseeing immediate payment (Gunkel ascribes this to E). According to the Yahwistic version, Jacob does indeed receive nothing at this point (v31) and agrees to remain, but Laban will take the marked animals out, and any newly born which have the marks specified will belong to Jacob. This becomes the basis of the narrative. Von Rad also finds 'factual obscurities',<sup>2</sup> and in particular the two conflicting agreements. However, he is also keen to show that 'one cannot on the whole doubt the way in which the narrative should be understood. Therefore even the statements which seem to presuppose another context are to be interpreted from the present understanding.'<sup>3</sup>

Westermann sees much more coherence in the text. Rejecting the presence of doublets or contradictory agreements, he sees the main source of difficulty in the description of the animals to be selected and in the breeding techniques. These he explains as glosses by later interpreters, trying to make sense of an old shepherd's story.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand Blum sees no reason for questioning the original unity of the text, arguing that it makes sense as it is, even though the subject matter is difficult to understand.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 336-7.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 298.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, 299.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12-36, 479-80.

Likewise Fokkelman tries to show that the passage makes perfect sense, though only after very hard and detailed work: 'This difficult text must 'mature' before we can explain the whole by means of the parts in a well-founded literary way'.<sup>1</sup>

Because historical-critical questions are bound up with the narrative logic of the passage which is also affected by the bargaining positions and possible ambiguity of the parties, we shall attempt a reading of the text as it is, and then return to the issue of historical tensions.

### 2.5.2 Exegesis

*vv25-34: the agreement.*

*i) vv25-30.* The beginning of v25 marks the transition from the previous episode to the new. Jacob's reference to Canaan as *מִקְנֵי אֶרֶץ* and *אֶרֶץ* provides a link back to the Bethel episode. Emphasis is placed on Jacob's service as the root *עֲבָד* is used three times in v26 and again in v29. V26a is hardly a doublet (contra Gunkel) since Jacob's requests now focuses onto his wives and children, and the need for Laban to release his claim on them. It thus reminds us again of the advantage enjoyed by Laban because of social conventions at Jacob's expense.<sup>2</sup>

Laban's reply is indirect as he stalls for time and tries to divert Jacob from his purpose. His observation is an odd testimony to YHWH's blessing since the insight is gained through divination.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the rather begrudging source of the testimony makes it all the

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative Art in Genesis, 144.

<sup>2</sup> It is nowhere made explicit what social convention or law is in operation, or what justified claim Laban might have. This could either mean that such a law is presupposed by the narrator or that there is no clear-cut law or convention, in which case Laban is taking advantage of Jacob's weak bargaining position. Wenham (Genesis: 16-50, 254) points to the law of Ex. 21:3-6, but as he also points out, this law is only applicable if Jacob is deemed to be a slave, something which the text does not spell out. This points to a further unclarity in Jacob's situation. However, see also M. A. Morrison ('The Jacob and Laban Narrative in the Light of Near Eastern Sources.' BA 46 (1983) 156-61), who points to illuminative parallels with Babylonian herding contracts. If such a comparison is valid, it would mean that Jacob could be seen as a herdsman attached to the family (but not enjoying the status of a family member), who enters an agreement to care for the flocks in return for some share in the profits. Certainly the way that the sons of Laban set a distinction between Jacob and themselves (31:1) makes such a definition of Jacob's status credible.

<sup>3</sup> Compare the testimony of Balaam (Nu. 22-24). The unusual mention of the name YHWH in the mouth of Laban probably accounts for the preference for the term *θεος* in LXX. B. Jacob (Das erste Buch der Tora, 602): 'Er sagt *יְהוָה*, um sich bei Jakob angenehm zu machen, aber seine eigene religiöse Zweispaltigkeit kommt sogleich in den heidnischen *נְרוֹשְׁתֵי* zum Ausdruck.' A better explanation for the unusual occurrence of the divine name is to emphasize that it is indeed YHWH, the God of Israel, whom even Laban has to recognize. The use of the name YHWH sharpens



more effective, and indeed the reference to פָּרָץ (v30; also v43) may imply a fulfilment of the promise made by God at Bethel (28:14),<sup>1</sup> as may the reference to Laban enjoying YHWH's blessing through Jacob.<sup>2</sup> The offer reintroduces the theme of שָׂכָר, which again is used as a hold on Jacob (assuming, that is, that Laban has in mind some reward for future work or a delayed payment).<sup>3</sup> Fokkelman<sup>4</sup> makes an interesting point about the repetition of וַיֹּאמֶר at the beginning of v28: it marks Laban pausing in the confrontation after the stalling pious recognition of YHWH's blessing, as he thinks feverishly about how he can keep Jacob. Then he comes up with the idea of making a wage offer (as he did earlier in a similar move).

The bartering has now begun. Although Jacob seems to have the advantage since the offer has been made to him, it is really Laban who has the power since he can simply refuse Jacob.<sup>5</sup> Thus Jacob is hesitant to show his hand for fear of being turned down and having his vulnerability exposed. Instead, he plays on the fact that he deserves good treatment and attempts to strengthen his bargaining hand by claiming the credit for Laban's good fortune.

*ii) vv31-34.* Laban is giving nothing away but insists that Jacob declares a price. Jacob, knowing that he is in a weak position, realizes that he has to appeal to Laban's greed, and so his demand is also an acceptance that he will stay. Nevertheless, such is the concealment

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the polemic in a way that the more general term אֱלֹהִים would not and reinforces the polemic also found in the outcome of the teraphim.

<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: 18-50*, 279.284.

<sup>2</sup> 28:14b - וַיְבָרְכוּ בְךָ כָּל-מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה וּבְזָרְעֶךָ.

<sup>3</sup> It is also interesting that the narrator has not chosen to tell us first hand that Jacob's presence has led to blessing for Laban. The information is included here, because it explains Laban's motives in wanting to continue to exploit his nephew, but perhaps also, as indicated, because the source of the observation makes it all the more impressive.

<sup>4</sup> *Narrative Art*, 142-3.

<sup>5</sup> Fokkelman reads the situation differently (*Narrative Art*, 143) in that Jacob has the advantage and, by saying he is demanding nothing he avoids the trap of last time and is putting the acquisition of wages into his own hands. Furthermore, he knows that despite the seemingly unfavourable terms, God will continue to bless him. Laban thus walks into a trap due to the modesty of Jacob's proposal. There may be something in this, but it assumes that Jacob did not really intend to leave straight away, whereas it would seem just as possible that Jacob's original intention of leaving is delayed by Laban, just as his intention of marrying Rachel was delayed.

of motives, that the reader does not know whether Jacob had intended all along to negotiate a new settlement allowing him to receive some reward for his work or whether he had hoped that Laban would simply let him go.

The negotiating proper now begins. V31 could be seen as an opening posture by Jacob, saying that he is really demanding hardly anything, although the phrase that Laban will give him nothing also proves to be literally true in what happens. The details are introduced in v32: by itself v32 seems to say that Jacob will take out the sheep, lambs<sup>1</sup> and goats in question and keep them. That would be the natural understanding of the phrase וְהָיָה שִׂכְרִי.<sup>2</sup> However a literal reading of v31 suggests a different meaning as the animals already marked are not to be included in Jacob's pay. This leaves an incongruity between v31 and v32. To the reader an impression of unclarity is created: is Jacob asking for the animals that are set apart at the outset? Is he leaving room for ambiguity? Or is it clear from the context that he does not expect to be paid with these?

Another interpretation<sup>3</sup> is to see the original offer (at least from Jacob's point of view) as being those animals set apart at the outset, but this reward being frustrated by Laban who removes them first. The difficulty of this reading is that it leaves the meaning of v31bα unclear, and it puts undue weight on the waw at the beginning of v35, treating it as an adversative clause.

Jacob then offers to demonstrate his צדקה, that is his strict compliance with the agreement. This motif of proving innocence will become clearer as the encounter between Jacob and Laban comes to a conclusion. The word מָחָר can mean 'tomorrow', or, less typically, it can

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<sup>1</sup> וְשֵׂה is usually seen as sheep, although the first clause of v32 could be a general description of all the categories -so Westermann (*Genesis 12-36*, 478), who sees what follows as a gloss. Accordingly, Westermann translates כְּשֵׂבִים with 'sheep' rather than 'lambs'. See also Fokkelman (*Narrative Art*, 145) who makes the same identification.

<sup>2</sup> Blum (*Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 114) tries to argue that the phrase in itself points to future payment. In support of this, he points to v31 and its claim that Jacob wants *nothing*, the word הִסֵּר which means 'take away', and the singular form of the verb הָיָה, since a plural form would be more appropriate for referring to the specific animals taken out. This would mean that Jacob is suggesting that the coloured animals be taken away from the flock, but that such as these subsequently born would be his wages.

These arguments have some validity but are probably not enough in themselves to counter the overwhelming impression of the verse that Jacob is indeed referring to those specific animals. Here though, we must distinguish between the force of v32 in itself, and the wider context of which they are part.

<sup>3</sup> See the RSV, NRSV, NEB, REB and TEV translations.

refer to a less specific time in the future.<sup>1</sup> Given the context it has the latter meaning here, though some have seen it as further evidence of the more immediate payment of Jacob. As well as the motif of innocence, that of stealing (גנב) will also reappear as Jacob will be accused of stealing Laban's teraphim.

A remarkable aspect of the passage is the list of the types of animals which qualify as Jacob's reward.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, it is difficult to know how the adjectives are distinguishable from each other. There are also variations in the lists, perhaps due to stylistic variation, glosses or a combination. In any event, the result is to add to the confusion in the mind of the reader.

As Fokkelman notes,<sup>3</sup> Laban's response (v34) is just as vague as his agreement to allow Jacob to marry his daughter (29:19). In Fokkelman's view this leaves room for changing the terms of the agreement (see 31:41).

*vv35-43: breeding techniques.*

Jacob himself had offered to take the step of dividing the animals, but Laban wants to make doubly sure. The description of the sheep taken out is different from the earlier one, with greater detail (the distinction between male and female goats), the new adjective עקד, and the colour white (לבן). This detail perhaps reflects Laban's meticulous care to exclude any possible contender, and the colour white plays on his name. The effort to place a large distance between the flocks is ironic, since the very distance enables Jacob to carry out his experimentations undisturbed and then to escape undetected. It is also worth noting that this is the first mention of any sons of Laban apart from the scene at the well. So far all the work

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<sup>1</sup> So BDB, 563 -see Ex. 13:14 as an example of the latter.

<sup>2</sup> Terms used in the narrative are:  
v32 -every שׂה which is נקד and טלוא;  
among the lambs, every one חום;  
among the goats, every one טלוא and נקד.

v33 -among the goats, as above (in reverse order);  
among the lambs, as above.

v35 -among the he-goats (not before mentioned), הטלואים, העקדים,  
among the (female) goats, הנקדות, הטלואת,  
and all (the goats?) with white (!לבן);  
and the lambs as above.

<sup>3</sup> Narrative Art, 144.

has been done firstly by Laban's daughter Rachel, then by Jacob, forming a contrast with their inactivity.

Jacob now sets about trying to influence the birth of the animals. Several stages are described. First of all, stakes are set up with exposed white streaks.<sup>1</sup> The details of the branches and of the watering-troughs seem repetitive and cumbersome, but the general meaning is clear. At this stage, Jacob is dealing with the צאן. Elsewhere this word is a general term covering the whole flock (vv36, 32). It is however unclear whether this stage includes the lambs/sheep (see below).

The next stage specifies the lambs or sheep (see earlier note). However the meaning is unclear. It seems that Jacob picks out the sheep or lambs, sets them facing the striped and black, and that these latter exercise a similar function to the peeled stakes in the earlier stage. It is not clear what is meant by the צאן לבן, since if these animals are striped and black, they could be counted as Jacob's, unless we are meant to understand those animals separated out by Laban at the outset. However, this does not make sense if they are three days' apart.

Fokkelman tries to make sense of it by suggesting that v40 is describing the process of dividing the coloured sheep from the others just as he does the goats. Thus הפריד refers to Jacob's act of dividing the sheep (just as he has with the goats). He then puts the חום (that is, the sheep -see vv32, 33, 35, where the sheep are always חום) and the עקד (that is, the goats -v35) in the best position. This depends on giving פנים the meaning of 'front' (of the flock - i.e. the best position) rather than the more obvious idea of facing opposite. This latter difficulty, as well as the lack of any earlier explicit mention of the division of the goats makes Fokkelman's reading problematic. In any case, Fokkelman admits that the text is difficult, although he tries to put this down to stylistic reasons. It still seems most likely that this stage is describing the placing of sheep opposite the marked goats, so that the latter influence the colour of the new-born sheep.

The next stage (v41) is more a refinement of what happened in vv37-38, as a distinction is made between the better breeding stock (the vigorous). Jacob's concern is now with the quality of his stock as well as the quantity.

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<sup>1</sup> Can the use of the word לוי (30:37), used only here in the Bible for almond, be a cryptic nod in the direction of Bethel, formerly Luz, and the promises made (28:19) -Sherwood, 'Had God Not Been on My Side', 230?

### 2.5.3 Conclusion

In terms of literary-historical considerations, the above reading suggests mixed conclusions. There is little cause for finding doublets in the opening dialogue, and certainly nothing to point to two parallel accounts. Repetitions pointed out by Gunkel (the request to leave, the composite nature of Laban's speech, the question as to Jacob's reward, the assertion of Jacob about his service) are all part of the bargaining positions adopted, with both Jacob and Laban trying to force the other's hand.

A comparison of vv31 and 32 is different, since, in itself, the latter suggests that the payment is immediate, whereas v31 and what comes later makes it clear that this is impossible. It would seem that the best solution is one along the lines of von Rad where the synchronic reading is clear in seeing the payment in the future rather than immediate, but where the original meaning may have been different. It is difficult to go much further than this, particularly as the whole of the narrative presupposes the information given in v32 regarding the distinction between different types of animal. One solution might be to see v32 as an original description of immediate payment, but then qualified by later additions to the story which delay this payment and assimilate the breeding tricks employed by Jacob.

The description of Jacob's action also presents difficulties, and although attempts can be made to find an underlying unity and logic, they are unconvincing in the detail. The complication is also compounded by the different ways in which the animals are described. Whereas we can point to the general confusing effect of this, reflecting a confusion of Jacob and Laban's motives and intentions, Westermann's suggestion of expanding and explanatory glosses seems to make sense.

Regarding the original context of such a story, although there is much to reveal an interest in the economic and social aspects of the life of a herdsman, it is not possible to say with any degree of certainty whether this was originally a 'herdsman's narrative'.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand the level of technical interest, unusual in itself, suggests a strong element of local colour, and traditions rooted in such a culture cannot be ruled out.

Nevertheless, underneath these difficulties, clear themes emerge. The picture of *Jacob* that emerges is consistent with the wider portrayal, and motifs in this episode resonate with those found elsewhere. Thus there is a parallel between the rather blunt picture of animals

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<sup>1</sup> Contra Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 484.

breeding, itself an example of the fertility that blesses Jacob 'wherever he turns' (30:30), and the crude struggle between Jacob's wives. This impression from this second episode further colours the impression of the first. Furthermore, the piling up of descriptions of different sorts of animals and the vigour of the animals belonging to Jacob add to the impression given elsewhere of his own strength and enthusiasm. This is highlighted by the contrast of v42, reinforcing the contrast felt more generally of the sloth of Laban and his sons with the vigour of Jacob and his **אִיב**, not to mention his cunning. We are left to wonder at the exact nature of the tricks employed which to the modern reader appear more like magic than science, a distinction perhaps false to the culture of the ancient reader. In this way we can also see some reflection of the episode with the mandrakes.

Strictly speaking Jacob of course is not cheating or using deception in the way that Laban did earlier, or in the way he himself did in front of his father, but there is nevertheless the sense of a reversal here, as Laban gets his come-uppance. The impression of confusion in method and motive also pervades the passage, leaving the way open for an alternative interpretation of the events.<sup>1</sup>

For the moment, though, apart from a hint of Laban finally getting his come-uppance,<sup>2</sup> we are left with no attempt to explain, let alone to bring to bear any theological explanation: the divine has retreated into obscurity and Jacob seizes the situation for himself, employing all means to advance his cause. Admittedly, Laban's confession (v27) introduces the divine perspective, but this is lost in the confusion. Indeed, this reference to God is unusual on the lips of Laban (30:27): 'This is one of the strangest confessions of Yahweh and his blessing in the Old Testament, a confession which even Laban had arrived at by the dark process of his superstition!'.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the last word on this episode has not been said, as becomes clear.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Jacob (Das erste Buch der Tora, 607) makes the point that the narrator never explicitly spells out that the animals give birth as a result of seeing the stakes. The action can be seen as demonstrative gesture made to indicate the occurrence of a divine miracle. He also notes that even Laban never accuses Jacob of using tricks.

Alter (Genesis, 165) cites an interesting idea that the peeled rods are used by Jacob as a diversion, a gesture to popular belief -and no doubt Laban's superstition -whilst Jacob is actually relying on the much sounder principle of selective breeding.

<sup>2</sup> Wenham, Genesis: 16-50, 259. Wenham also mentions that this passage shows the fulfilment of promises made to the patriarchs, with a special emphasis on God's blessing. However this can only really be asserted in the light of ch. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Von Rad, Genesis, 300.

## 2.6 Ch. 31:1-32:1 -Jacob's decision to flee and the final parting

### 2.6.1 Introduction

There is much to suggest historical development in this passage: differing perspectives which often follow each other closely (such as the reason for Jacob fleeing), the greatly differing picture of previous events, and, in the case of the treaty, unevenness in the text and repetitions. Questions have also been raised because of geographical descriptions.

Gunkel again finds evidence of J and E in the passage:<sup>1</sup> large parts of the passage are ascribed mostly to E (vv4-16, vv17-25 and vv26-43) because of the term אלהים, the speaking through dreams and the interdependence of these units. However, in these units are also traces of J.

Gunkel also detects two versions of the treaty: one is a family agreement, the other a national boundary agreement; in one case, a column is erected, in the other, a pile of stones; two place names are given: Mizpah and Gilead; there are two sacrificial meals (vv46b, 54); two appeals to God (vv49f, 51f); two divine names: the 'Fear of Isaac' (v53b) and 'the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor' (v53a).

In addition, Gunkel points out that the journey undertaken by Jacob and his family cannot possibly be from Haran (as recounted in 27:43, 28:10, 29:4 -all J texts according to Gunkel) since the distance to the mountains of Gilead is too great for ten days. References to the journey length suggest that E must have considered the home of Laban to be beyond the immediate East Jordan region.

It should however be noted that the source critical approach which Gunkel accepts, does not match with his view of the story evolving from a secular to a 'religious' story,<sup>2</sup> since both sources contain aspects of both. It is for instance odd that the account of E found here, which in Gunkel's view is trying to put forward a more religiously and ethically 'acceptable' Jacob, where Laban has changed Jacob's wages and God has clearly intervened, is not found

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 340ff.

<sup>2</sup> There is of course no textual basis for this assumption. It depends on the view expressed by Gunkel in several places that the ethical perspective in Israel's religion was a relative late-comer. It also assumes that stories such as these were 'secular' and the interests of the later writers became more 'religious'.

anywhere in E's actual version of the event in ch. 30.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, three reasons are given in the narrative for Jacob's decision to flee as we shall see, but only two sources are posited. There is therefore a contradiction between the documentary approach and the tradition-historical approach. A solution to this means rejecting one in favour of the other, or strictly modifying them both.

Von Rad<sup>2</sup> avoids some of the problems of Gunkel by eliminating any elements of E from the earlier account. However, he does not make it clear whether E followed J's version to any extent. Again he sees the hand of E in Jacob's words to his wives: 'This amazing change from the Yahwistic narrative, especially the moral purification... apparently corresponds to the refined demands of a more sensitive group of readers'.<sup>3</sup> In the Elohist's hands Jacob is now 'without moral offence'. E therefore saw the earlier events differently.

In contrast, Westermann sees the narrator as the Yahwist.<sup>4</sup> There are expansions in vv4-16, giving a theologizing thrust similar to the theological expansion of the birth of Jacob's sons and in the treaty. Regarding the blatant difference between the presentation of events in ch. 30 and Jacob's version here, Westermann sees an explanation in the setting and intent of Jacob's address to his wives. Thus Westermann rejects a diachronic solution to the difference between the two accounts and argues for seeing two perspectives on the same event, particularly seeing the interest of ch. 31 in the idea of the  $\text{כִּי}$ , the legal confrontation. It should of course be noted that his conception of the Yahwist as the basic narrative

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<sup>1</sup> The question of how much of E can be found in ch. 30:25-43 is unclear among source critics, (see below on von Rad). From v37, most is ascribed to J (so Gunkel, Genesis, 337), but at least for Gunkel there are also fragments of E, which add to the technical descriptions, but offer a no less 'secular' perspective on the events.

There is also a slight contradiction in Gunkel's judgement on E's ethical stance. In writing about E in ch. 30, he sees that the writers, 'besonders E', emphasize Jacob's honesty by depicting the action not as deception but 'allen Schein des Rechtes aufrecht zu erhalten' (p. 337). However, on commenting on Jacob's speech to his wives in ch. 31, Gunkel sees this as an example of E's 'Entschuldigungsversuche', which are often to be found 'wo die Pietät sich an Stoffe gebunden fühlt, die einer sittlich oder religiös unentwickelteren Zeit entstammen.' (p. 342). Thus in ch. 31 E no longer wholeheartedly endorses the action taken in ch.30, despite Gunkel's earlier comment that E in ch. 30 was showing that the action was not blameworthy.

It would of course have been easier for Gunkel if he saw no traces of E in the first passage. What the difficulties above also show are the dangers in trying to see particular ethical or religious nuances as dependent on an evolutionary progression, or as denoting particular authorship.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 305.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, 307.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12-36, 490.



structure is so totally different here from that of traditional source criticism that it can be questioned to what extent his use of the term is meaningful.<sup>1</sup>

Blum,<sup>2</sup> although rejecting the framework of the documentary hypothesis, agrees with the view that ch. 31 represents a later interpretation of the events of ch. 30. However, its origin was never independent of the previous passage, although he believes that there are remnants of an earlier account in ch. 31. This passage was conceived as a corrective addition, whose purpose is to change the emphasis to God's action and to Laban's continued unfair treatment of Jacob. He also looks closely at 31:13 which refers explicitly to 28:10ff (Bethel) and which is both a compositional element in the wider Jacob narrative and anchored into its present context, especially by v16b where the women refer back to it. Thus this verse is part of a layer which is later than the basic Jacob-Laban story. Regarding the unity of the passage itself, he does see some complexity but is not confident of being able to distinguish different layers of tradition and redaction.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the final treaty, Blum again sees repeated elements but does not go on to posit two accounts of different origins. The family agreement is more linked to the narrative context, and so is original to the story, whereas the border treaty (an independent tradition) has been drawn into the larger context.<sup>4</sup>

Fokkelman also sees the difficulty of reading ch. 30 and 31 together.<sup>5</sup> Ruling out historical-critical questions, he is faced with deciding whether Jacob is telling the truth in ch. 31 or whether he is lying, using the idea of Providence to justify his own means. For Fokkelman it is unthinkable that even Jacob would go so far and he concludes:

In this speech the narrator presents a Jacob who is the pious and grateful interpreter of his own history and who, pointing away from himself, confesses that God is the only decisive factor in his life...Jacob is the keen observer and genuine believer and grateful proclaimer of God's help; his interpretation is profound and authoritative.<sup>6</sup>

From the assumption that this is the authoritative version, Fokkelman reconstructs the

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<sup>1</sup> See Westermann's overall conclusion, Genesis: 12-36, 571-2.

<sup>2</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 118ff.

<sup>3</sup> He singles out vv19-21 which disturb the flow. Furthermore, like Gunkel, he sees a tension in the geographical locations. The river, referring to Euphrates, is part of the D-redaction, also found in 35:1ff where the stolen teraphim are interpreted as gods 'from beyond the river' (thus alluding to the Dtr. passage in Josh. 24.)

<sup>4</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 140; agreeing with Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 499.

<sup>5</sup> Narrative Art, 151ff.

<sup>6</sup> Narrative Art, 162.

earlier events: Laban and Jacob agreed that Jacob should have all the 'abnormal' animals bred from the 'normal', and the latter used his breeding methods to assure successful results. Laban took advantage of the different types of markings to continually reinterpret the terms of the agreement. But then Providence intervened and adapted the breeding to Laban's new conditions. The first account stresses the simple acquisition of wealth and Jacob's part in it; the second gives us the more complete view.

Before looking at the passage, some points need to be drawn out from the above:

- The above survey has shown the obvious problem of relating Jacob's account of the previous episode to the narrator's account in ch. 30.
- This is not just a question of determining sources or different historical backgrounds: it is above all a question of reading the text as it is. The real problem is not how to explain away the difference in the accounts but to read them side by side.
- Only then can we consider whether a diachronic solution fits the criteria. In deciding on what sort of historical-critical pattern -if any -is most appropriate, we need to ask what does most justice to the text as it is.
- Clearly the final treaty is a distinct unit, even though there is no clean break in the text.

### 2.6.2 Exegesis

v1-3 -these verses set out the reasons for Jacob's decision to leave. There is a curious mixture of reasons, but a structure is clearly discernible: first, Jacob hears (שמע), then he sees (ראה), and then YHWH speaks (אמר). Thus each stage is complimentary. There is also a progression of reasons which become more compelling: firstly, Jacob hears the words of Laban's sons, then he sees Laban himself, and then, the most compelling reason of all, YHWH speaks directly. Thus there is no justification for seeing unnecessary repetition here. The reference to Laban's פניו emphasizes the directness with which Jacob sees his uncle, and it also anticipates a motif that will be picked later (e.g. 32:21, 32:30 -MT, 33:10). V3 clearly gives the clinching reason in this progression, and alludes to the Bethel experience, the last time that YHWH spoke to Jacob: the long period of silence is ended and things begin to come to place.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Parallels to ch. 28 are the designation יְהוָה, the theme of returning to the land -first promised, now commanded, the assurance of being עֹמֵךְ. It is also noticeable that the promise of posterity has begun to see fruition. For an explicit link, see v13.

v4-13 -as is usual with Jacob, obstacles have to be overcome before his goal is achieved and we are faced with the question of how he can get away from Laban, who seems to have a total hold over Jacob.

Throughout the following passage we need to bear in mind the different audiences that are involved. On the level of the narrative, Jacob is speaking and seeking to justify himself before his wives and later, Laban; but on a second level, he is explaining himself before the reader. The conclusions of his testimonies will be paralleled by conclusions drawn by the reader.

Jacob first decides that before he can leave he must secure the cooperation of his wives. We are expressly told that he sends for them. This preface to his speech emphasizes the fact that he is working in the fields, that is, that he is dedicated in his work.<sup>1</sup> They may also suggest a symbolic distance that has come between him and his wives, or simply that he is more comfortable away from their mutual jealousy. A further reason may be to ensure greater secrecy from Laban in the fields.

Jacob now states his case. From now until the final agreement between Jacob and Laban this legal aspect will dominate. At various points Jacob and Laban put their cases, and the other human characters watch on and, with us, are invited to make a judgement. This motif is most explicit with Jacob's final onslaught from v36, where the verb יָרַב appears. This in fact describes the whole of the proceedings, as we are judges in a יָרַב.

In this first round, Jacob begins by spelling out the immediate reasons for wanting to leave (v5). He first refers back to v2. It is more likely that the reference to God being with Jacob refers not to v3 but to God's more general intervention as described in what follows.<sup>2</sup> Then Jacob appeals to his wives to agree with him from their own experience, since, claims Jacob, they have seen his hard work. The rare pronoun וְאִתְּנָה has an emphatic effect<sup>3</sup>, emphasizing the role of the wives.

However Jacob's real grievance follows with v7: Laban has cheated and changed his nephew's payment ten times ('ten' perhaps a concrete way of saying many times), and God

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<sup>1</sup> Alter, Genesis, 167.

<sup>2</sup> In favour of this reading is the imprecise description of this presence, and also the syntactical function of the waw, which attached to the noun disrupts the flow of the sentence and so is best translated 'but', meaning that the clause ('God has been with me') is not sequential but contrastive to Laban's cheating.

<sup>3</sup> Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 488.

has been present in the situation on Jacob's behalf. It is unclear what effect this claim would have on Jacob's wives at this stage, as it is unclear whether the clause 'You yourselves know...' might include this part as well. However to the reader the effect is dramatic. Both claims of Jacob -the manipulation of wages and the intervention of God- seem to contradict flatly the narrator's version of events in ch. 30. In case we think that Jacob is talking about a stage in the dispute not covered by ch. 30, v8 with its reference to the different types of marked animals previously mentioned, makes it clear that Jacob and ch. 30 are giving two versions of one and the same thing, and the reference to God in v9 is a complete contrast to the view previously given that the cause of the particular births was Jacob's own scheming.

Jacob then heightens this discordance by appealing to revelation from God in the form of a dream. In this dream, not only does Jacob see the animals, he also hears the words of the angel. The reader is even less sure of what to make of the dream. First there is the rather blunt, if not grotesque, vision of the mating. It could be that Jacob is just describing things as they were, or that he is lying, but to lie on such a matter is no small thing. V13 refers explicitly back to the Bethel experience. The reference to the anointing of the pillar reminds us of the oath to return to the shrine.

Before going on, we need to pause and let the full force of this sink in. We are left wondering whether Jacob is telling the truth or whether he is lying, or whether the truth is somewhere between the two. At this stage it is impossible to tell. If he were telling the truth, that would leave in question the report of ch. 30. This should not be played down, and although Fokkelman may have a point in seeing room for this later reading, especially in 30:34, he tends to play down the difficulty of the reader. After all, are we not more likely to trust the narrator than Jacob and if the dream is genuine, why is it not described directly by the narrator but only secondarily through Jacob at this later stage? As a result we experience even more bewilderment than already felt after trying to make sense of ch. 30 on its own! If Jacob were lying, this would not be totally out of character judging from his past deceptions, but could even he would stoop so low and use God in this way? In the context of the Torah the reader knows full well that Jacob would be breaking the third commandment. The reference to the dream seems to increase the stakes since we are left with either Jacob truthfully recounting a dream from God or parodying divine revelation in a rather grotesque way. The reference to Bethel reinforces and intensifies the issue, as Jacob

is all but swearing by his most sacred experience.

*vv14-16* -Rachel and Leah seem to accept Jacob's version of events, and certainly agree to leave. At last, the two sisters and wives of Jacob, divided through strife, find a point of agreement.<sup>1</sup> Their real concern and motivation is the way Laban has mistreated them. Thus, in terms of coming to a judgement between Laban and Jacob, their response might add a further piece of evidence against Laban, but does not really help us to decide on the truth of Jacob's case.

*vv17-21* -The verb קָם in *vv17* and *21* forms an inclusio. Whereas the first clause (...וַיִּקָּם) is a stereotypical way of describing the start of a long and important journey, the following words highlight what is distinctive about Jacob's position: he has camels, sons, wives, cattle, livestock of his own. The reference to his father Isaac is perhaps odd, since the emphasis later on is with his encounter with Esau, and Isaac's role is minimal (*35:27ff*). It could be argued that this is an insertion from P,<sup>2</sup> but its effect is to stress that Jacob's return is not just to the land of Canaan, but also to his family. A reconciliation with Isaac would also entail some coming to terms with Esau. Perhaps, above all, it refers to the oath made by Jacob at Bethel (*28:21*) about a return to his father's house. *V19* explains how Jacob could get away with the deception, and underlines the irony mentioned earlier in Laban's excessive caution in separating the herds.

The stealing of the תַּרְפִּים by Rachel is paralleled by the stealing of Laban's לֵב (i.e. deception) by Jacob. The former act prepares for the later confrontation. We are nowhere told why Rachel steals the gods. Perhaps it is an attempt by Rachel to compensate herself for the injustice done to her,<sup>3</sup> or she believes that they will secure some blessing for herself or some advantage for Jacob.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively she might simply be reluctant to part with these

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<sup>1</sup> Coats, *Genesis*, 218.

<sup>2</sup> This is assuming that *35:27ff* is part of the priestly source or redaction.

<sup>3</sup> Fokkelmann, *Narrative Art*, 164, and Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 493. Note also the parallel with the Israelite's despoiling of the Egyptians (Ex. *12:31-36* -see Coats, *Genesis*, 218), which would seem to be better grounded -although in this case also there is no explanation for why it should happen.

<sup>4</sup> Speiser and others, bringing to bear Nuzi parallels (*Genesis*, 250-1). Speiser sees behind the text the idea that teraphim denote legal ownership of an estate. Hence to take the teraphim is to effectively make a claim on the property. However, the validity of such parallels has been questioned

familiar objects as she goes to a strange land.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, though, this act also shows that she is acting most like Jacob.<sup>2</sup> Jacob's corresponding act of deception against Laban shows that even in this chapter the writer is not giving us a Jacob without any moral offence.

v22-24 The wording in the dream, that Laban should refrain from saying anything *מטוב עד-רע*, literally means that Laban should say nothing, which does not fit the context where Laban is not afraid to speak to Jacob. Von Rad suggests that we understand the phrase as meaning that Laban is not to influence the events.<sup>3</sup> It could be that the divine intervention means that Laban cannot use the superior power that he has, and so he has to restrict his method to legitimate means, trying to show that Jacob has committed an offence against him. As we shall see, this is indeed the tack that Laban takes. A parallel with Gen. 24 is interesting in that the same words are in the mouth of Laban (v50). Here, Laban and Bethuel see the hand of YHWH in the events leading to the meeting of Abraham's servant with Rebekah. In both cases therefore Laban is forced to recognize the work of God and to refrain from interfering.

v25-30 -Laban's first accusation is that Jacob has deceived him (the phrase refers back to the narrator's conclusion in v20). The deception, claims Laban, is that he has stolen his daughters as if by the sword, and, more realistically, without due formality. He claims that his concern would have been to send off Jacob and his daughters and grandchildren in an

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(e.g. M. Greenberg, 'Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim' *JBL* 81 (1962), 239-48); and as Speiser admits (p. 251) such a custom would be lost on the later Biblical writer. If this were so, his parallel does not really help us in making sense of the action as depicted in the text. To some extent, this objection also applies to the argument of K. Spanier, ('Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim: Her Struggle for Family Primacy.' *VT* 42 (1992), 404-12 that in stealing the teraphim, Rachel is trying to secure a role for Joseph as chief heir after Jacob.

<sup>1</sup> Greenberg, 'Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim', 246.

<sup>2</sup> For E. Fuchs ('"For I have the Way of Women": Deception, Gender, and Ideology in Biblical Narrative.', *Semeia* 42 (1988), 68-83) there are important differences between the way that the parallel acts of Jacob and Rachel are portrayed. She comments that the narrator pulls out all the stops to exonerate Jacob's action but that Rachel is depicted as arbitrary since there is no description of motive, no passing of judgement or closure to the incident. This failure to 'problematize' her behaviour or to understand it means that the moral ambiguity around Rachel's act is not resolved. For Fuchs this is part of the way women are generally depicted, but also by contrasting Rachel with Jacob, Jacob is seen in a better light. Also, we are able to see Laban mocked without Jacob playing an active role in what might be seen as a vindictive action.

<sup>3</sup> *Genesis*, 308.

appropriately festive way. We know that this would have been unlikely, and that the daughters have not been forced to leave, and in these exaggerated claims we see how unsubstantial Laban's case really is. Nevertheless, underneath are hints also of a grieved father. In v29 Laban draws attention to his strength and potential to harm but admits that he cannot use this force.<sup>1</sup>

Even now, Laban grudgingly accepts that Jacob should want to return home (once again, a reference to Jacob's father, this time less direct), so he falls back onto the more concrete and seemingly better grounded accusation: Jacob has stolen the gods. Significantly, the objects are called gods (אלהים) in the mouth of Laban alone.

v31-32 -Jacob's defence. Jacob begins with the first accusation: he does not so much deny that he has acted wrongly by leaving secretly as plead extenuating circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore we know that the wives themselves have fully consented to go with Jacob. But then he moves to the second accusation. Cleverly, Jacob turns the tables around by forcing Laban to prove his case,<sup>3</sup> confident that he has not stolen the teraphim. Here he repeats the word אלהים, although the pronominal suffix gives it a sarcastic force: they are only gods in the sense that Laban affords them that status, and as to the real value of Laban's 'gods', their final position will graphically expose that! The writer explicitly lets us know that Jacob did not know about Rachel's act.<sup>4</sup> This helps to further establish Jacob's innocence and also adds dramatic irony to the tension since the reader knows what Jacob does not.

v33-35 There is a clear rise in tension as Laban leaves Rachel to the end, but the situation

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<sup>1</sup> For a reading of the legal aspect of this episode, see C. Mabee 'Jacob and Laban: The Structure of Judicial Proceedings (Genesis xxx1 25-42)', *VT* 30 (1980), 192-207. Mabee argues that at this point Laban has the authority to 'do harm' (by, for instance, taking the daughters back with him) if Jacob is shown to have done wrong.

<sup>2</sup> Mabee, 'Jacob and Laban: The Structure of Judicial Proceedings', 199.

<sup>3</sup> Thus Laban is forced into the role of plaintiff rather than judge (Mabee, 'Jacob and Laban: The Structure of Judicial Proceedings', 196.)

<sup>4</sup> Note the observation that, although Rachel escapes any execution of Jacob's declaration of v32, she does not long survive this episode, (Rashi -Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, *Pentateuch*, 150 and Ibn Ezra - Strickman and Silver eds, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary*, 303). Such a reading reminds us of Jacob's rashness in making such a declaration. Y. Zakovitch ('Through the Looking Glass: Reflections/Inversions of Genesis Stories in the Bible.' *BI* 1 (1993), 139-52) sees an ironic reflection of this episode in the accusation later levelled against Benjamin of stealing Joseph's goblet (ch. 44) -the sin of the mother is reaped on her son.

is saved by her prompt action. Because we already know about this (v34a), the picture of Laban groping for these objects is made to appear more comic. Note the verb  $\Psi\Psi\Omega$ , used also in the picture of Isaac touching Jacob (27:12, 23), reinforcing the parallel of Jacob's deception of his father and Rachel's deception of her father. There is also the irony of reversal in that Laban is now deceived by the daughter who he himself had in a way deceived.<sup>1</sup> However the parallel here is much less serious and more farcical, and we cannot help but grin at Rachel's words. Her mode of address ('my lord') is ironically set against the situation where she shows no respect for her father's treasured objects. Furthermore, the sitting of a woman upon objects during menstruation renders them unclean (Lev. 15:20).<sup>2</sup> We thereby see their true worth and Laban's attachment to them is ridiculed.

As well as providing a way of ridiculing Laban and also the faith placed by Israel's neighbours in what Israel saw as idols, the episode gives Jacob the opportunity to vent his anger.

vv36-42 The mood changes from buffoonery to anger. Jacob's anger is not just at Laban's false accusation (although that is a convenient target) but at the whole of his treatment. Now that Laban has been made to look a fool with his groping around after worthless objects, he has lost any psychological hold that he had over his nephew, and Jacob feels no barrier in expressing himself. Suddenly, Laban is cut down to size and Jacob releases the tension that has built up over the years.

As with Laban, Jacob's accusation is in the form of questions. He begins with Laban's 'false' accusation and the humiliation of being subjected to a search, but then moves onto more substantial matters. He points to the care which he has shown to Laban's flocks, his honesty in not taking any to eat, the difficult working conditions and Laban's exacting demands. Jacob then moves to more familiar ground for the reader. He recalls having to serve fourteen years for the two daughters, and a further six (the first mention of the duration) for the flock. After this, he repeats the accusation made before his wives, which we had reason to question, namely that his wages have been changed ten times, and he further points to the intervention of God as further proof of his innocence.

The reference to God stands out because of the names to describe him. The phrase

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<sup>1</sup> So B. Jacob, Das erste Buch der Tora, 620.

<sup>2</sup> So von Rad, Genesis, 310.



אלהי אבי is the simplest of the designations and is therefore often seen as the original phrase, later expanded by the references to Abraham and Isaac.<sup>1</sup> In this context it stresses the personal nature of Jacob's God, and perhaps the promise of blessing passed on by Jacob's father. The meaning of the word פחד is not certain but most commentators follow the suggestion 'fear' or 'dread'.<sup>2</sup> As Gunkel remarks,<sup>3</sup> if this is the meaning, its inclusion here is thought out, since God has caused Laban to fear, and so protected Jacob. On the other hand, a case has been made for understanding the word פחד as 'thigh', itself being a euphemism for strength or procreative power.<sup>4</sup>

Westermann points to the wider social perspective of Jacob's accusation within Israel. Throughout the tradition of the Torah and the prophets it is a serious crime for the employer to deprive the employee of his wages. By contrast, God does not stand by but intervenes on behalf of the weaker; and Westermann sees in the (original) phrase 'If the God of my father had not been with me...' echoes of Ps. 124:1.

v43 By now we are made to feel that the version of events given by Jacob to his wives is not fabricated. This is implied if not proven by Laban's response, which makes no attempt to deny what Jacob has just said. Instead, the response is rather half-hearted and hollow. Laban's rhetorical question about whether he would really do any harm to his own family (implying that he could by rights) is really a face-saving ploy: in the circumstances, he recognizes that it is time to let Jacob go, and he makes the best of the situation by proposing a treaty.<sup>5</sup>

We can now return to the question of Jacob's innocence. The reader's judgement is shifted

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<sup>1</sup> So Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 497.

<sup>2</sup> Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 497.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, 349.

<sup>4</sup> K. Koch ('*Pahad jisaq* -eine Gottesbezeichnung?', in R. Albertz et al., Werden und Wirken des Alten Testament, (Festschrift für Claus Westermann zum 70. Geburtstag), Göttingen, 1980, 106-15) who also argues that it is not a term for God, but that Jacob is referring to the procreative power of his father which he believes has accompanied him. This view is supported by M. Malul 'More on *pahad Yishaq* (Genesis xxi 42.53) and the Oath by the Thigh.' VT 35 (1985), 192-200; also E. Puech, "'La crainte d'Isaac" en Gen 31:42 et 53.' VT 34 (1984), 356-61.

<sup>5</sup> By doing this he acknowledges a change in relationship as Jacob is now an equal to be dealt with on equal terms (Mabee, 'Jacob and Laban: The Structure of Judicial Proceedings', 194.)

gently as the action and dispute progresses. At first, there is the complete surprise as we hear Jacob's explanation to his wives. Then our attitude to Jacob is gradually softened. First, he wins over his wives, although we noted that this was not difficult given their own grievance. Next we see for ourselves that God intervenes against Laban in a dream, perhaps adding credence to Jacob's claim to have had a dream himself. Then we hear Laban's unfounded charges against Jacob, and finally we see no attempt by Laban to deny Jacob's version of events. Instead all he does is to look for a compromise in the form of a treaty. However this leaves the question of how this relates to the previous chapter. Hamilton<sup>1</sup> suggests that in this chapter Jacob realizes in retrospect that it was not his tricks which brought prosperity but God's intervention. Nevertheless the force of Jacob's version of events in ch. 31 is not simply to deny the efficacy of the methods used before, instead his silence about them seems to be a denial that he ever tried them in the first place. An alternative is to see this chapter offering a different perspective of the same events. This chapter does not so much deny the cunning methods shown by Jacob as give another perspective. In particular the emphasis has shifted from the human, with detailed interest in Jacob's skill, to the divine, with the intervention of God as the key factor. We have before us two starkly different accounts of the same event where any mention of the divine is absent from ch. 30, and any mention of human methods absent from ch. 31.

However, this does not quite go far enough in doing justice to the disquiet that the reader feels. Already in ch. 30 the reader felt confused by the description of events, now we are even more so, and we are made to wonder whether the narrator is playing tricks. Perhaps all we can say for the moment is that this unclarity points to the complex task of discerning God's part in human affairs. In the wider context, Jacob's innocence is a relative state. If he is innocent, it is not because of his exemplary behaviour, and we are still a little suspicious that we have not quite had the whole truth. However, Jacob is innocent in the sense that he has been more the object than the subject of exploitation. Thus the impression felt by ch. 30 should not be left behind. The Jacob who is pronounced innocent here is the same Jacob

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Genesis: 18-50, 288. Also F. D. Kidner, Genesis, London: Tyndale Press, 1967, 163. On ch. 30 itself, Hamilton writes, 'How does Jacob manage to succeed? ... Jacob's rods function much as do Rachel's mandrakes. It is not the mandrakes that produce fertility, and it is not Jacob's white rods that produce the right kind of offspring for Jacob -although perhaps that is what Jacob wanted Laban to think.' If this is indeed the case, Hamilton still has to account for the version in the previous chapter told by the narrator, which, under normal circumstances, we would expect to be the most reliable.

who has used scheming methods. We are still left, therefore, with a feeling of uncertainty, and on a deeper level, we have lost confidence in the ability or at least the desire of the narrator to give us a impartial and definitive account of how things are.

Regarding traditio-historical development, the plain difference between ch. 30 and ch. 31 seems to demand some sort of conclusion, probably along the lines of Blum who sees a corrective interest. Even so, even assuming that ch. 30 does present an earlier account, there is no surviving evidence of that version of events having its own ending. Instead, there is only one version of the outcome of the Jacob and Laban story, and in itself ch. 31 shows no trace of an earlier strand or of any unevenness. More importantly, a traditio-historical or supplementary model cannot be used to 'solve' the problem by explaining away the paradox. Nor must we set the Jacob of ch. 31 against the Jacob of ch. 30 as von Rad does,<sup>1</sup> since even if the approaches came from different places, the final version forces us to read them as one.

*v44-32:1 (MT)* The prompting for the treaty comes from Laban who now recognizes his weakness in the face of Jacob. As just mentioned, it also witnesses to his ongoing claim over his family's state.

The masculine form of the verb *היה* (v44b) is a little incongruous, disagreeing with the feminine *ברית*, and some have also argued that only a visible object can act as a witness, and that the treaty, far from being a witness, is what a witness should point to.<sup>2</sup>

V45 and 46 describe two acts of Jacob to provide some concrete symbol. For the first, no explanation is given. Although the stone may act as a sign of an agreement with Laban, which is how Laban sees it in v51, to Jacob it is a visible testimony to God's protection promised at Bethel and to the partial fulfilment of promises which were made there. The unexpected reference to *לחם* (v54 -cf. 28:20) may underline this.

V46 presents its own difficulties. It seems to be a doublet with the previous verse, although

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, his comment: 'One must remember that here the blameless Jacob, the Jacob of the Elohist, is speaking, the Jacob who was repeatedly wronged by Laban, whose honor has now been stained and who looks back with righteous indignation.' (*Genesis*, 310).

<sup>2</sup> See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 498, also Wenham, *Genesis: 16-50*, 279. The masculine form could simply be referring to the whole event of setting up the stone (so Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, 196).

it should be noted that the function of this heap of stones is much more related to the treaty. Some follow the old Latin versions in treating Laban as the subject here, an impression reinforced by the reference to אָרְחִי (cf. v23). The reference to a meal seems preemptory at this stage, as the meal described at the end seems more natural to the context. Another reading of this last clause is to see it as describing this heap as the place where the meal took place, without necessarily claiming that it took place at this stage.

The naming of the place described in vv47 and 48 is also difficult. V48 has the longer etymological statement, whereas v47 is more succinct with no accompanying speech. It also shows both parties giving the name in their respective languages, pointing to the cultural separation between them. Since v48 is immediately followed by the continued speech of Laban with no further introduction, it is more likely that v47 was included at a later stage.

The name הַמְצַפָּה, also given by Laban, finally hints at the terms of the treaty. First of all, Laban proposes terms regarding the family, with a guarantee for Jacob's good treatment of his wives, and with YHWH acting as all-seeing witness. No indication is given of Jacob's attitude to this as he just seems to go along with the terms. Indeed, after the previous events, it would seem far from likely that he is going to want to take any more wives.

In addition to this agreement on the level of the family, Laban introduces a national-political perspective, with the guarantee of borders and a non-aggression pact. This is a reminder to the reader that the story of Jacob is not just the story of a family but also of Israel.

After this there is one more invocation of the divine as witness, although this time the god of each of the parties is invoked since the obligation is mutual. The phrase 'the God of their fathers' (or 'gods...') seems to be an explanatory clause. Then Jacob gives his assent, by calling on the אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק of Isaac. Having done this, he seals the treaty with the customary solemn meal.

The next morning, this unhappy episode in Jacob's life is brought to a close as Laban takes his leave. It is more true to say that Laban and Jacob part with a truce rather than fully reconciled, and the omission of any final embrace or word between the two is noticeable, particularly when compared with the warmth of their first meeting. The optimism of the scene at the well when we might have assumed that God's blessing would make things easy for Jacob is long forgotten.

### 2.6.3 Historical-critical conclusion on the treaty

Regarding historical-critical questions, we have seen that there are several repetitions in the passage. Von Rad is typical in seeing two recensions. The doublets he sees as follows: in v45 a landmark is erected as a sign of the covenant, in v46 a heap of stones; v46 and v54 both tell of meals; and the treaty has two meanings -the treatment of Laban's daughters (v50), and the boundary (v51).

However even this does not account for all the difficulties mentioned above.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there is no evidence for these versions corresponding to the wider J and E sources, and von Rad assumes the border treaty is J simply because it seems older.

Evidently there has been some historical development within the passage, although it is far from easy to trace. Regarding the two terms of the treaty, these in themselves are not doublets since it is reasonable to conceive of a treaty with two clauses. However, given the overall unevenness of the passage, it is highly probable that these two elements have been brought together. The family agreement is the logical conclusion to the Jacob-Laban episode, whereas the border agreement has the appearance of an independent tradition joined to the story.<sup>2</sup>

V45 also stands out. However instead of seeing it as part of an earlier source, it is better to see its inclusion (at whatever stage) as a strengthening of the link to Bethel where Jacob also takes a stone (אבן), and sets it up as a מצבה (28:18). Thus the redactor depicts Jacob as independently using this occasion to witness to the faithfulness of YHWH and perhaps to recall the vow he made at that stage. As well as forming a link to Bethel, there is also a reminder of the opening well scene, itself containing hints of the Bethel scene with its reference to the stone at the well. That gave the false hope that things would go easily for Jacob with God's help. However, only now, after these years of hardship and deception, can Jacob feel that the promise at Bethel is any nearer to being fulfilled.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance regarding the earlier comments in the verb הִיָּה in v44b.

<sup>2</sup> So Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 499; Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 140.

## 2.7 Conclusion to the Jacob-Laban story

### 2.7.1 Literary and historical-critical summary

The Jacob-Laban story shows what is often characteristic of Hebrew narrative: on the one hand, it forms a fairly self-contained story, with a simple unilinear plot involving a few main characters. Given this, it has rightly been called by the German term 'Novelle':<sup>1</sup> the hero arrives in a foreign land penniless and without family, enters into a struggle of cunning and counter-cunning with his protagonist, and through his own resourcefulness and the blessing of God, and comes away with large family and wealth.<sup>2</sup> Each episode represents a logical step in this plot. Added to this is what Coats<sup>3</sup> describes as the deep psychological probing of character and relationship.

On the other hand, the Novelle is strongly episodic and contains a wide variety of genre to the extent that it could almost be called a collection of smaller stories. The opening scene is an idyllic scene, whose familiarity leads us to expect an early and easy outcome. Then there is the scene of deception by Laban where we are confronted with the darker side of interhuman relations. This is followed by a genealogical tale, where the two main protagonists of the wider Novelle are hardly mentioned, and where interest shifts to the women in the story. Next comes a tale of shepherd's tricks with the technical and rather crude description of breeding methods. After this, the tone becomes that of a legal dispute where the hero is vindicated, and finally there is the complex and formal description of a treaty bringing a conclusion to the Novelle. There is also the simple narrative of the opening scene contrasted with the obscure description of the shepherd tricks, which leaves the reader baffled, followed by a scene offering a completely different version of the same events.

Furthermore, although each episode within the larger Novelle is distinctive, the episodes play off against each other, inviting us to compare and contrast. For instance, the idyllic

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<sup>1</sup> So Gunkel, Genesis, 324, Coats, Genesis, 222.

<sup>2</sup> cf. the description of Sherwood ('Had God Not Been on My Side, 275-6) of the last episode as a grand finale:

All the characters that have played roles in the previous episodes -Jacob and Laban, Rachel and Leah, the maids, Jacob's children, the 'brothers' (= 'the men of the place?'), Jacob's retainers, and his (formerly Laban's) flocks, and God, of course, who in this episode communicates with Jacob and Laban -return to the stage for a final act which features a daring escape, a secret theft, a chase scene, a frenzied search in which the heroine's life hangs in the balance, a trial scene, a treaty, and a parting of ways.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, 222.

scene of the opening contrasts starkly with what follows, leading us into a false expectation. Then the blunt episode with the birth of the sons and the conflict between the two sisters can be read separately, but it suggestively offers a comparison with the crude breeding of the flocks as well as with the conflict between uncle and nephew.

What has been said of the literary features within the Novelle is even more true of the way the story relates to the wider Jacob narrative. As outlined above, the story contains its own plot, understandable on its own. Indeed one could imagine this story being told this way. However, its fullest significance is only appreciated when we spot certain implicit contrasts. Gunkel misses this by recognizing a story of deception and counter-deception, but by not admitting the obvious parallel with the Jacob-Esau relationship, so that when Jacob is first deceived by Laban, we are invited to see that the 'deceiver is deceived'. We have also seen the influence of the Bethel incident, once explicit, at other times pervasive, and we noted the incompleteness of the narrative of the births, since we still await the birth of Benjamin. In addition, the relationship between Rachel and Leah suggestively reflects the relationship between Jacob and Esau (see especially 29:26), and there are obvious links to the patriarchal family in Laban's relatedness to Rebekah and reminiscences of ch. 24.

On a literary level, this interplay of the self-contained Novelle and the wider Jacob story, as well as the variety of material contained within one simple story line, reflects the wider aspect of biblical narrative, where at each stage we deal with individuals and their stories piecemeal, each with a message and integrity of its own. But then each is part of a whole, each story part of the main story, and the complex web of intertextuality invites the reader to see everything as a whole. On a wider horizon, individual episodes and the cycle as a whole are linked explicitly and implicitly to the life story of Jacob before and after his years in Haran. Wider still, links are made with the earlier generation through Laban at one end, and the story of Jacob's twelve sons at the other end. This then links into the patriarchal story as a whole, which is part of the wider story of Israel, underlined by national allusions within the story itself (see below). These very many levels of connection between particular events and the wider story of Israel witnesses to a tendency within Biblical narrative to create an overall uniting perspective, without smoothing over distinctive features.<sup>1</sup>

Secondarily, this has *literary-historical* implications. As well as the obvious problem of

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<sup>1</sup> On this aspect of biblical narrative, Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature*, 78-79.

doing justice to both synchronic and diachronic approaches, another danger when looking at the Jacob narrative is of going too far in one of two directions within the diachronic approach itself: arguably, source criticism fails to do justice to the distinctiveness of each part of the patriarchal story by cutting across the obvious stages in the story itself; but the danger of form criticism is of not doing justice to the overarching links.<sup>1</sup> One such mistake made by Gunkel, mentioned above, is his failure to see parallels with the Jacob-Esau plot. This is because of his own view of the independence of the two stories from each other. Commentators such as Blum have tried to find a middle way by seeing the main work on the literary level, allowing for a greater overarching unity because of the strong redactional work and by playing down oral tradition. This avoids the false divisions of source criticism. At the other end of the historical-critical time scale, de Pury finds an overarching unity in positing a pre-Yahwistic oral Jacob cycle, with few parts ever having a separate existence.<sup>2</sup> However, against these approaches, as well as against those who want to rule out any historical development behind the text, little justice is done to the distinctiveness of different episodes, to difficulties in reading the text, and to the practical insights that readings by Gunkel and von Rad can bring. In comparison, some more synchronic 'literary' readings in particular can seem dull and squeeze all ambiguity out of the text.

Reading the parts of the Jacob-Laban story, there is strong evidence of a creative hand that has written the *Novelle*, and that has made this *Novelle* part of the wider story. On the other hand, parts of the story have a distinctive background or voice. To some extent, this may simply be due to different genres employed by the narrator at different points. However, in some cases we have seen evidence of the narrator introducing a new perspective over an older narrative, for instance in the way that ch. 31 offers a different picture of the preceding events, and also in different layers of application in the final treaty. Regarding the birth of Jacob's sons, it is conceivable that the figure of Jacob was known and identified as the father of the ancestors of the twelve tribes as well as being known as a relative of Laban, but the precise relation between these two traditions did not reach final form, (although told alongside each other?) until the creation of this work of art which we might call the Jacob-

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<sup>1</sup> This is one of the main criticisms that de Pury brings against the consensus approach established by Gunkel (*Promesse Divine*).

<sup>2</sup> De Pury makes an exception for the story of the birth of Jacob's sons -*Promesse Divine*, vol. 2, 524: besides these verses, 'aucun d'entre eux [the other episodes of the Jacob-Laban cycle] ne peut se comprendre comme un récit isolé.' Likewise, the Jacob-Laban cycle cannot be considered as an entity apart from the wider Jacob cycle.



Laban Novelle.

As for the historical relation of this Novelle to the Jacob-Esau story, could it not equally be the case that they were once both traditions about Jacob, growing up together, assuming elements from each other and exercising a mutual influence, until the final form which links them formally? This process may be called canonical in the sense that they were assumed to be part of a wider story, that the momentum was towards a greater interdependence which found final form in the canonical text, and that these stories were recognized as something worth preserving and developing.

Of course, all this is speculative and begs questions about the *Sitz im Leben* for the telling of such stories,<sup>1</sup> and also about the relation between oral and written.<sup>2</sup> But it seems from reading the Jacob-Laban story, especially as part of the wider Jacob story, that a new historical-critical paradigm must be found that does justice to the overall unity without quashing the distinctiveness of each part and possible development within each part. Such an approach must also be aware of its own limitations and lack of 'assured results' and be seen as the handmaid of a better reading of the text as it is.

Mention should also be made of the question about the original geographical location of the story. There is a case for arguing that the narrative was once about a Laban figure from Aram. For instance, this would account for the difficulty perceived by some in harmonizing Laban's location in Haran in Mesopotamia with the relatively short journey to the land east of the Jordan and the emphasis on Gilead. Blum<sup>3</sup> argues for a 'Haran-redaction' which is part of the same level as the Abraham tradition of Haran. The reference to בני קדם is the most convincing, as he argues that this name normally refers to the Palestinian grazing land at the edge of the deserts of Syria and Arabia, (Judg. 6:3, Jer. 49:28, Ezek. 25:4). Although this view may be correct, the paucity of material warns us against investing too much into this point of view, especially as the relation of the final treaty, which stresses the location of Gilead and is used by Blum as evidence, to the bulk of the Jacob-Laban material is unclear.

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<sup>1</sup> There is also the question about geographical locations of different traditions, and the extent to which these could be judged to have once been separate.

<sup>2</sup> The issue of oral tradition is especially open to debate -R. N. Whybray, The Making of the Pentateuch Sheffield: JSOT Supp 53, 1987, 138-85; P. G. Kirkpatrick, The Old Testament and Folklore Study, Sheffield: JSOT Supp 62, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 164ff.

### 2.7.2 Narrative perspective: individual, national, sociological

As Gunkel writes,<sup>1</sup> this is above all else a story about individuals. It is the story of deceit and counter-deceit between two shepherds, and about how Jacob comes out on top. No doubt we are meant to see all characters involved as definite people of the past. Furthermore Jacob and Laban are met outside this story, and certainly in the case of Jacob, we are meant to see this as one episode in his life.

But the reader is also aware that these are stories about Israel. This is particularly brought out in the birth of the sons who represent the later tribes. It also comes to the fore with the treaty and its border agreement. Nevertheless, it is also noticeable that the tale of the sons' birth is highly influenced by its narrative context, with the etymologies relating to the situation of the two sisters. The question of the identification of Laban with Aram is more difficult and depends on the above discussion regarding the original geographical location of the tradition.

*Sociological perspective:* Westermann and Fokkelman in their different ways show how this is not just the story of individuals but also about the family unit, the economy of service and reward, social conventions, and legal procedures. On the whole, these prove to be of mixed value. There is no romantic view of the family, even in the understanding of Israel's own origins. Instead we see what happens when deceit poisons family relations. Not only is nephew set against uncle, but also daughter against father and sister against sister. In particular, we see the negative side of the introduction of service (עֹבֵד) and reward (שֹׂכֵר). By introducing this, Laban finds a way of keeping a hold over Jacob, and what seems to be granting Jacob a favour becomes a burden. The lowest point is reached where Jacob is 'sold' to Leah by Rachel for some mandrakes. We also see how Laban exploits his social position to his advantage, using customs (such as not giving the young daughter away in marriage before the elder) as a screen for his deception. To the Jacob who has flouted convention (in deceiving his father, and at the opening well scene where he takes matters into his own hands in uncovering the well), he finds that convention has not let him go that easily. But the social fabric also has its positive sides as we see that only an externally ratified treaty can guarantee peace, and Jacob finds justice through the procedure of the גֵּר, to which Laban (thanks also to divine intervention) has to submit. In the end, therefore, right prevails.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 323.

In addition, given the wider context of the Torah, we can see a concern relating to how Jacob is treated. Around Jacob's situation are clustered issues such as the treatment of the foreigner,<sup>1</sup> but also, paradoxically, of the member of the same family group,<sup>2</sup> and also the issue of service and exploitation.<sup>3</sup> In addition, in the marriage of the two sisters we see the difficulties that are brought about by polygamy, although this is countered by the fact that the beginnings of Israel are found in just such a marriage. In relation to ch. 27 we were able to reflect on the extent to which Jacob's dilemma problematized life without the Torah, whilst also recognizing that all the ambiguities of faith are not necessarily solved once the Torah is given. In this chapter, set in a far off country with customs clearly different from his own, Jacob is exploited and finds no protection except from his God and his own guile and hard work. Whereas a connection can -and often is -drawn with Israel's experience in exile, a connection can also be drawn to the way the foreigner and the vulnerable is treated in Israel, and how the Torah seeks to build in a safeguard for such people.

A further perspective is that of the woman in such a society. We see in Rachel a resourceful shepherdess, capable of outwitting her uncle and showing sarcasm at the same time. But we see also the despair of two daughters when treated by their father as objects to be traded. Then we see how their happiness becomes dependant on the number of children that they can give to Jacob. Indeed the episode of the birth of the sons has a claustrophobic effect, where all interest, and all the fortunes of the women are restricted to the small confines of the family. Bitterness takes over, and Jacob no doubt finds refuge in the fields with his sheep! In their own ways, Leah and Rachel (not to mention their maids!) command our sympathy in their struggles, and Rachel, who will die at the moment of her potential fulfilment, has the marks of a tragic heroine.

Nevertheless, this note of bitterness and hurt is relieved by a vein of humour running through the narrative.<sup>4</sup> The humour is emphasized in the depiction of the lazy shepherds at the beginning, the bargaining, Laban's groping around. As well as providing relief in this long chapter of Jacob's struggles, the humour also brings a note of sarcasm and polemic.

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Dt. 10:18-19

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Dt. 15:12-14 -Sherwood 'Had God Not Been on My Side', 219.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Dt. 24:14-15

<sup>4</sup> So Brueggemann, Genesis, 20ff.

This also relates to the depiction of superstition and magic: the use of the mandrakes, Laban's reference to his divination, Jacob's shepherding tricks, the stolen teraphim. We are often not quite sure how seriously to take these elements,<sup>1</sup> but they stand in sharp contrast the several references to the intervention of YHWH (see below).

### 2.7.3 The presence and absence of God

One of the key issues in our reading has been the absence of God for much of the events. In the wider context, after the blessing of Jacob and his dream at Bethel, one expects to find the clear hand of YHWH controlling his destiny. In the opening episode are hints that YHWH's promise at Bethel will be fulfilled easily. The reader familiar with the parallel well scene in ch. 24 knows how YHWH clearly guided Abraham's servant (in that case it could not be plainer!) and we are led to expect the same for Jacob's wife. Indeed the passage confirms this impression, although even at this stage there is no mention of God. But these hopes of God's guiding are dashed as in the ensuing deception and counter-deception, God seems totally absent. For instance, we are not told how to relate the deception by Laban to Jacob's earlier deception of Esau and Isaac. Laban's ironic statement (29:26) indicates some connection (contra Gunkel),<sup>2</sup> but is there the principle of divine retribution in operation (Fokkelmann), or some other natural law of retribution? Or is it just an example of how someone who lives by his own wits sometimes comes out on top, sometimes at the bottom? As well as recognizing an irony on the level of the narrative, our own interpretation comes closest to the last of these options. It seems that Jacob's own way of dealing has now backfired,<sup>3</sup> and there is a sense of reversal and perhaps a hint of justice at work. There may also be a sense of Jacob being chastened through this, although there is certainly no dramatic change in the way he behaves (ch. 30).

The birth of the sons presents this paradox of the human and divine in a concentrated form. As already mentioned, we are not always sure how seriously to take the claims of the women that God is siding with one then with the other, but in the case of the birth of Leah's first sons and the birth of Joseph, one feels that God has indeed shown his favour, and so

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, Genesis, 20ff.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 327.

<sup>3</sup> So Mann, The Book of the Torah, 59: 'What a different Jacob this is from the one who left Canaan, the victim of his own dishonesty and pride.'

it is no coincidence that in these cases the divine name is found on the mothers' lips. As Westermann has shown also, the thoughts of the women is not far from the spirituality of the psalms.<sup>1</sup> However Westermann does not go far enough in one respect, since this passage, as already stated, reflects the psalms in their humanness -the expression of raw emotion -as much as in their confession of YHWH's saving intervention.

This episode also prepares us for another theme that emerges immediately afterwards, which is that of God as judge. At first, it seems that Jacob is getting what he deserves after his deception of Esau and Isaac, but the theme of reversal at the expense of Jacob is subsumed, and a new reversal operates between Jacob and Laban once we have seen how Laban's action affects not just Jacob but also his two daughters.

It has already been seen that from ch. 31 the divine becomes a lot more visible. As with the name of God on the lips of the women, we are not sure at first how sincere Jacob is being in his recall of the dream. However there is no doubt from the start that YHWH has come back onto the scene as he commands Jacob to return. The mention of the land 'of your fathers' (31:3) reminds Jacob of the promise and blessing and brings him back into the mainstream of the history of God and this chosen family. We have not dismissed a diachronic solution to the problem of the differing perspective of ch. 31, but it seems that it is not as easy as that. This is not only because the writer left the earlier account of ch. 30 intact, but there is a feeling that by itself ch. 31 is incomplete. It is as though the writer wants us to see the same events through the perspective of both chapters. In one case, it is Jacob's cunning and skill that brings about success, in the other it is God's blessing. Perhaps, in the end, we are meant to see the two aspects as being two sides to the same coin: just as God worked through the deception of Isaac by Jacob, so here, God works through Jacob's very nature, the divine through the human. This seems to be consistent with much of the Jacob narrative where Jacob's efforts and strength are the means by which he experiences God's blessing. One feels that there is great mystery here which cannot be resolved easily, certainly not by a simple recourse to historical-critical solutions.<sup>2</sup>

This also leads us to the tricky question of Jacob's innocence. As mentioned above, innocence is perhaps best seen as a relative term, where the innocent party is the one who

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12-36, 477.

<sup>2</sup> Likewise attempts to harmonize the incongruity do not really do justice, as discussed above, pp. 167-69.

has been more wronged against, but this fails to do full justice to the discordance between ch. 30 and 31. Perhaps all that we can say is that the implementation of justice is a complex task, and that we are reminded that there is no one, objective way of seeing things.

In the end though God is clearly at work, not just in providing the momentum for Jacob to leave (again, interestingly alongside more natural considerations), but also in warning Laban. Finally, this is recognized by Jacob himself in the way he interprets the treaty. As mentioned, 31:45, which in the simple terms of marking the treaty seems redundant, is Jacob's way of remembering the appearance at Bethel. Furthermore we come across an abundance of divine terms at the end, following the lack of any in the opening scene of the Novelle or in most of the following. Both 31:42 and the invocation of the  $\text{דָּבָר}$  of Isaac followed by the solemn sacrifice are a form of confession of the God, who, in the end, has come to the help of Jacob.<sup>1</sup>

The above mentioned polemic directed at superstitious elements, and especially the episode of the teraphim are a contrast to this, which although threatening to ruin the situation for Jacob, end up being a ridiculing comment upon Laban's misplaced faith in these objects. In the end, the reader can agree with Jacob that, despite the struggle and seeming absence of God, YHWH has brought this long episode of Jacob's life to a conclusion. Laban's begrudging testimonies to the work of YHWH only serve to highlight this.<sup>2</sup> We are left asking why it had to be so difficult, but that is also a question posed by the psalmist and the wisdom tradition of Job and Ecclesiastes, not to mention by faith itself.<sup>3</sup>

The above comments attempt to show how the divine and the human are interwoven in the Jacob-Laban story. This contrasts with Coats,<sup>4</sup> who sees the theme of divine intervention as a theme introduced to resolve the narrative tension set up by the conflict between Jacob and Laban. This is typical of a view which sees the divine-human contrast in diachronical

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<sup>1</sup> Thus also anticipating the fulfilment of the vow made at 28:20-21.

<sup>2</sup> 30:27, 31:29 -cf. Nu. 23:8.

<sup>3</sup> See L. A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, Sheffield: JSOT Supp 96 1990, 121-2. Turner points to the irony in the idea of service in relation to Jacob, since his long period of service stands in contradiction to the words of the oracle at his birth and in Isaac's blessing, both which indicated that Jacob would be on the receiving end of service. The expression of this irony is heightened in the 'hiring' out of Jacob to Leah in exchange for mandrakes, and then in Jacob's statement at 30:26. For Turner this is part of the complex relationship between 'announcements of plot' found at key points in the narrative and the actual plot itself.

<sup>4</sup> *Genesis*, 222.

terms, where one is superimposed in the other and is actually foreign to the story. So, for Coats, the introduction of the divine into the story is a weakness, in comparison, for instance, with what he sees as the more skilfully constructed Joseph novella where there is no equivalent resort to a *deus ex machina* solution.

However, it is difficult to imagine the story without the theme of the divine as described above, especially as there is no evidence of any other resolution than that given. Furthermore, the whole question of what is central and depends on one's own decision about the main theme. Thus for Coats, the theme of the Jacob story is that of family strife without reconciliation. Because of this definition which limits the interest to the 'human' side, anything else is judged to be secondary, especially any reference to the divine. By contrast, I have argued that the divine-human contrast is key to the Jacob story. The motif of family strife is no doubt part of this, but full justice is done only by acknowledging the interest in both the human and the divine.

### **3 The struggle for survival -Jacob and Esau Part 2 (32:2-33:20)**

#### 3.1 Introduction

Having resolved the conflict with his uncle, Jacob has to face his brother Esau. The tension of this next episode builds up to the final face to face encounter. However, this build-up is interspersed with three distinctive episodes: the encounter with the angels at Mahanaim (vv2-3), Jacob's prayer (vv10-13) and the encounter at Peniel (vv23-33), the latter being the most extended and significant.

Thus this section can be divided as follows:

vv2-3: encounter at Mahanaim

vv4-9: Jacob despatches messengers

vv10-13: Jacob's prayer

vv14-22: Jacob despatches more messengers

vv23-33: Jacob's encounter at Peniel

33:1-17: the final encounter with Esau.

The final verses (vv18-20) attach rather loosely onto this episode.

Regarding the Peniel incident, our interest here is confined to how the passage operates within this structure.

It is evident from the structure that a divine-human contrast is in operation, with the stages in the encounter between the brothers balanced by the encounter of Jacob and God or his emissaries. We shall investigate this contrast and see how the two aspects of the human and the divine in Jacob's encounter can be connected.

It is mainly for this reason that we are considering 32:2-3 with the following verses rather than the previous, in spite of the traditional Hebrew setting which sees v4 (וישלח) as the beginning of a new section.

Given the distinctive nature of the different episodes, historical-critical comments will be made within each section before any overarching judgements can be made.

#### 3.2 A reading of ch. 32-33

##### 3.2.1 Jacob's encounter at Mahanaim (32:2-3)

This odd episode is passed over as soon as it is introduced. As it stands it is hardly a passage in its own right, but rather a notice.

Despite its peculiarity there are clear overtones of the incident at Bethel (28:11ff): פגע ב,



מלאכי אלהים,<sup>1</sup> the pairing of הלך and דרך (28:20; 32:2) and the similar images of the heavenly host (cf. 28:17b). Both passages also culminate in an etiology. The placing of the two passages also seems to be deliberate, one on Jacob's departure from the Promised Land on his way to Haran, the other on his departure from Haran on his return to the Promised Land.

The significance of this brief incident is not clear. On the one hand reminders of Bethel suggest an encouragement to Jacob, recalling God's promises made there and indicating his ongoing presence.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the word מַחֲנִים, though not necessarily a military term, often carries that implication and the context of conflict with Esau raises that possibility. Another parallel in this connection is Josh. 5:13-15, where the phrase צבא-יהוה perhaps points to the same motif of the army of angel hosts. In this way these verses contribute to the increasing tension by hinting at a possible conflict and their very ambiguity reflects Jacob's uncertainty.

Regarding the prehistory of this passage, despite the strong links with the episode at Bethel, Blum's suggestion that this incident was perhaps formed from nothing by an editor<sup>3</sup> seems to overstate the case. It would seem more likely that the narrator has incorporated a tradition about the place Mahanaim, albeit whilst shaping it. This better explains the abruptness of the passage and the lack of any explicit connection to Jacob's situation. On the other hand, the implicit connection to Jacob's division of his possessions into two camps (מַחֲנִים) does suggest why it should be incorporated into this context. Regarding the origins of such a note or any original form, that must remain unclear.

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<sup>1</sup>Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis*, 317) notes that whilst the expression מלאכי האלהים is frequent in the Bible, the expression מלאכי אלהים is peculiar to 28:12 and 32:2.

<sup>2</sup>Houtmann, 'Jacob at Mahanaim. Some Remarks on Genesis xxxii 2-3.' *VT* 28 (1978), 37-44; B. Jacob (*Das erste Buch der Tora*, 628) sees the angels as the 'Engel der Heimat' which ascended at Bethel as Jacob left the promised land, and which now descend again to give further protection.

<sup>3</sup>Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 141.

### 3.2.2 Jacob despatches messengers (32:4-9)

The focus now shifts to the human: Jacob sends messengers<sup>1</sup> (again, the word מַלְאָכִים) both to try to pacify Esau and to find out his intentions. These verses contain a classic message formula (כֹּה אָמַר + originator of message), as well as a classic setting for such a formula, reflected in the syntax with several indirect clauses including instructions -it starts with the simple narrative clause ('and he commanded them' -v5), followed by Jacob's words to the messengers ('thus you will say to my lord...'),<sup>2</sup> followed by the message formula ('thus says your servant Jacob'), and finally we hear the actual message ('with Laban...'). This piling up of clauses before Jacob's actual message serves to emphasize the fact that at this point Jacob is not seeing Esau face to face, but is hiding behind his messengers. Furthermore the lack of direct contact between the brothers keeps Jacob ignorant of Esau's thoughts as Jacob with the reader is left to guess at Esau's intentions. The long list of Jacob's acquisitions (v6) also seems to put a distance between Jacob and his brother as Jacob tries to distract Esau's attention from himself and the past, and a final distancing factor between the two brothers is the way Jacob defines their relationship as 'lord' and 'servant'. There is also a clear irony here on which we will comment later.

The reply of the messengers conceals Esau's intentions, and the final clause ('and four hundred men are with him') is indeed ominous, hinting at Isaac's words that Esau would live by the sword (27:40). As a result Jacob takes precautions by dividing the party.<sup>3</sup> V7 contains a rare description of feeling, emphasizing even more the dread that Jacob feels.

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<sup>1</sup> Pace Rashi (Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, Pentateuch, 155) who sees these messengers as the angels that have just encountered Jacob. Houtmann ('Jacob at Mahanaim', 42) sees this sudden switch from the divine to the human meaning of the word מַלְאָכִים as incongruous betraying a historical tension. Whilst there may be historical development, the switch from one meaning of the term to the other is evidence of subtlety and deliberation, pointing to the contrast of the divine and the human.

<sup>2</sup> Another suggested translation is: 'Thus shall you say, 'To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob...' -e.g. Alter, Genesis, 178.

<sup>3</sup> This is often seen as a military precaution. In the Midrash the point is made that Jacob employs all the methods to be used in such situations: gifts, battle and prayer (see especially in Leibowitz, Studies in Berishit, 359ff.) This contrast of methods very much encapsulates how Jacob takes recourse to both human ingenuity and divine help (so Mann, The Book of the Torah, 59-60.)

### 3.2.3 Jacob's prayer (32:10-13)

In desperation Jacob turns to God in prayer. The heart of the prayer is a request for help (v12) as Jacob not only admits his fear but also, by implication, his need of God. However the prayer is far from a simple plea for help as it is framed at the beginning by a reminder of promises made to Jacob, and, at the end, of the promises originally made to Abraham. The result of all this, as well as depicting Jacob admitting his reliance on God, is to test the specific promise of God made in ch. 28 and the wider promise made to Abraham. In this way, Jacob is pointing to the faithfulness of God rather than to his own worthiness.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, v11, if not a confession of guilt in a full or formal sense, at least implies some sense that his conduct has not been fully exemplary.<sup>2</sup> The rest of the Jacob cycle will see how this prayer is answered and consequently fulfilled.

Regarding the origins of the prayer, it has been traditionally allotted to J or a redactor (because of the word יְהוָה), and in particular it has been seen as a creation of the Yahwist himself, intended to give the episode a theological meaning.<sup>3</sup> Blum<sup>4</sup> likewise sees the prayer as the work of a redactor, although he ascribes it to an exilic or post-exilic Deuteronomic

<sup>1</sup> B. Jacob, (Das erste Buch der Tora, 632-3). Jacob describes this prayer as a model in both logic and depth.

<sup>2</sup> Elliger, 'Der Jakobskampf am Jabbok', 18. However he also makes the point that the prayer should be read more as a theological statement from the writer, than a psychological exploration of Jacob's thoughts. Leibowitz, (Studies in Berishit, 364), sees Jacob re-appraising his conduct through prayer. As a result of this change of mind, Jacob sends the gifts, having realized how much God has given him.

By contrast, Brueggemann (Genesis, 265): 'In this brief prayer, Jacob is deferential. But at the same time, he intends to hold God firmly to his promise of 'good'.' In this way, we might see a similar attitude to that detected in his earlier vow (28:20-22). However, in this case, there is a greater sense of self-abasement and admittance of helplessness. It thus reflects a maturer, more modest perspective.

<sup>3</sup>e.g. Elliger, 'Der Jakobskampf am Jabbok', 19-20, who describes the prayer as a 'programmatische Äußerung des jahwistischen Schriftstellers'. Likewise de Pury (Promesse Divine, vol. 1, 102) sees the prayer as expressing the kerygma of the Yahwist that divine blessing operates over and against the unworthiness of the patriarch. For de Pury, this is the theological theme that the Yahwist has imposed on the Jacob cycle.

<sup>4</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 152ff. Similarly, J. Schreiner, 'Das Gebet Jakobs (Gen. 32, 10-13).' in M. Görg ed., Die Väter Israels: Beiträge zur Theologie der Patriarchenüberlieferungen im Alten Testaments, Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989, 287-303.

stage. This is based this on a pattern of self-abasement, request, recalling a past 'Gottesoffenbarung' (cf. 2 Sam. 7:18ff -reckoned also as Dtr.), the plural form **מַסְדִּים**, which is peculiar to exilic or post-exilic literature and a similarity with 1 Ki. 3:5ff, and the phrase **הִירָדָן הַזֶּה** which stands out from the context, but which is found in the Dtr. 'Landnahme' tradition. Westermann<sup>1</sup>, however, claims to find an simple plea (v12) behind the final form, with expansions at vv10 and 13 forming links with the tradition of the patriarchal promises, and v11 to the Jacob-Esau story as a whole. Thus the prayer itself shows different layers of development.

Overall, the prayer does seem to stand out from its context which suggests the possibility that it may originate from a different hand from the surrounding verses. Regarding Westermann's argument that part of the prayer at least is original, this carries some weight, and it could be that the prayer itself has undergone some development (this is particularly possible with the final part beginning **וְאַתָּה**). However, it is difficult to be certain, since there are certainly different levels of reference in the prayer, but there is also a united structure, with the beginning and the end broadening the scope to the wider patriarchal story. More importantly, it is also correct to see this prayer as bringing out the theological emphases of faithfulness to the patriarchal promises and of the unworthiness of the patriarch vis-à-vis divine grace, although whether we are to see this as a specific 'kerygma' of the Yahwist or any other figure is unclear.

#### 3.2.4 Jacob despatches more messengers (32:14-22)

Having divided his group into two **מַחֲנֵים** Jacob decides to take a further, more drastic precaution by sending a series of groups as a **מַנְחָה**, (note the alliteration<sup>2</sup>) in the hope of gradually mollifying his brother. As with the earlier detailed instructions to the messengers (vv5-6), so these precautions and the long inventory of the gift serve to emphasize the buffer that Jacob is setting between himself and his brother, and the delay in having to see him **פְּנִים-אֶל-פְּנִים** (32:31).

An interesting parallel to v21 is Prov. 16:14: 'A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12-36, 508.

<sup>2</sup> Also the word **חָן** (v8) -so Hamilton, (The Book of Genesis: 18-50, 345).

a wise man יִכְפַּרְנָה.<sup>1</sup> A further resonance of the word יִכְפַּרְנָה is that of the cultic language of atonement.<sup>2</sup> In its present context, the fourfold use of פְּנִים must be anticipating the Peniel incident,<sup>3</sup> but it also more broadly underlines the motif of acceptance and forgiveness which Jacob is seeking.

There may be some doubt about Jacob's motive at this point. Is he simply using the presents as a bribe, or are they a genuine expression of contrition? For the moment it does not seem possible to tell, and the action happens so quickly that there is no time to stop and think about motives.

### 3.2.5 Peniel (32:23-33)

From our earlier treatment of this passage, it was clear that the scope of the passage reaches well beyond the immediate context of the Jacob story, drawing on the self-understanding of later Israel and reflections both about the nature of divine self-revelation and human striving. But it is also clear that the passage is understood as a major turning-point for Jacob himself. As indicated, this leads to the question as to how much things really do change for Jacob, both in relation to the events around him and his own character.

One further possibility, is that this encounter is in some way an answer to Jacob's earlier prayer.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not we are to see this episode as a specific answer to prayer, there is some justification for seeing the earlier prayer as casting further light on this passage. For

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<sup>1</sup> A parallel incident to this episode is the meeting between David and Abigail, on behalf of her husband Nabal (1 Sam. 25) where gifts are used as an appeasement -so Hamilton, (The Book of Genesis: 18-50, 325), who also points out the 400 men described in each case. The most significant difference is that of perspective: in Genesis, the story is told from the perspective of Jacob, the non-aggressive party whilst the motives of Esau remain hidden; in the other case, the story is told mainly from the perspective of David, whose violent intentions are quite clear, although also from Abigail who acts as an intermediary. In this latter incident the expression of remorse is much more explicit, at least from Abigail. Thus the Genesis episode has a greater sense of suspense, ambiguity and also irony.

<sup>2</sup> Wenham, Genesis 16-50, 292.

<sup>3</sup> Contra Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 510.

<sup>4</sup> So, for instance, Elliger 'Der Jakobskampf am Jabbok', 26.

instance, de Pury<sup>1</sup> sees the same hand that shaped the prayer evident in the reshaping of the Peniel story. In the case of the Peniel incident, the emphasis has shifted from the hero's valiant defeat of a local god to the sparing of his life by God himself, and so both passages point to the theme of divine grace over Jacob's endeavour: God does remain faithful to Jacob and Jacob receives the fruits of his blessing, but it is despite and not because of his deceptions.

### 3.6.6 The meeting of the brothers (33:1-20)

Ch. 33 describes the meeting and reconciliation of the two brothers. As such it seems to bring to a neat resolution the problems caused by the deception. This in turn brings a conclusion to the Jacob-Esau plot and the question of primacy raised in the opening oracle. However, we shall see that beneath this simple story line lie certain ironies and reservations, and as with the rest of the Jacob narrative, there is a clear relation between the divine -and in particular the Peniel experience -and the human, in the family reconciliation.

#### *Jacob's approach (33:1-11)*

The drama of the meeting of the two brothers has been interrupted by the drama of the meeting of Jacob with the solitary figure. Now, all of a sudden, the former encounter is resumed, leaving the reader no time to pause and weigh up motives of either character: whether Esau is bent on harm, and of the significance of the changed order in Jacob's procession as he now goes at the head.<sup>2</sup>

What is striking about this scene is its underlying irony. This is especially clear when the depictions of Esau and Jacob in ch. 33 are read alongside those in ch. 27 and the birth-scene oracle. On the one hand, Esau seems to behave much more magnanimously than expected towards the brother whom he had sworn to kill (27:41), on the other hand Jacob plays out the role which, according to the oracle given to Rebekah and the blessings by Isaac, properly belongs to Esau: it is Jacob and his family who bow down to Esau -cf. 27:29, also 25:23,

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<sup>1</sup> Promesse Divine, vol. 1, 100ff.

<sup>2</sup> This change is underlined by the emphatic pronoun disrupting the syntax (אני ו-3).

with 33:3, 6-7.<sup>1</sup> There is then the ironic reference to ברכה (v11), where the narrator is playing on the ambiguous meaning of this word which can mean simply a gift, as מנחה (v10), but which also has the meaning of blessing and is so central to ch. 27.

Those who take note of this irony, interpret it in several ways: Jacob is merely pretending to be subservient in order to save his own skin (Gunkel);<sup>2</sup> his action is totally sincere, especially after the life-transforming experience of Peniel (Fokkelman);<sup>3</sup> the irony is not so much concerned with Jacob's character but with the shortcomings of the theme of blessing -either in the way it is used to back up imperialistic claims (Blum)<sup>4</sup> or in its divisiveness in family relations (Westermann).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Turner<sup>6</sup> sees the discord between the oracle and blessing on the one hand and the episode here as part of a wider discord where oracles and other narrative announcements of divine will often fail to find fulfilment in the Genesis narrative. Only the last three of the four interpretations see the full symbolism of the repeated use of the word ברכה in 33:1.

Whereas Jacob's motives might not be totally pure, Gunkel's reading seems unwarranted. In particular his interpretation of v10 is unsatisfactory, since he takes no account of any reference to the Peniel incident, seeing in the verse an example of Jacob's flattery as he compares Esau with God.

On the contrary, it would seem that Jacob's act is a token of admitting his wrong towards his brother -although this is never actually spoken out -and the gift is meant to be a

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<sup>1</sup> This irony is reinforced by the way that the brothers address each other: Jacob calls his brother 'my lord' and refers to himself as 'your servant', whereas Esau calls Jacob 'my brother' -so Hamilton (The Book of Genesis: 18-50, 345.)

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 366.

<sup>3</sup> Narrative Art, 223ff.

<sup>4</sup> Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis, 366.

<sup>6</sup> Announcements of Plot in Genesis, 115-141, 175-183.

restitution for the stolen blessing.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is Jacob who suffers from the irony in the passage, not Esau. Instead, Esau comes out in a much more favourable light, and the irony directed at Jacob tends to prevent us from seeing in him a model, even of repentance. This seems to tell against Fokkelman who sees Jacob's acts after Peniel as exemplary. Just as the picture of Jacob before Peniel is probably not as totally negative as Fokkelman suggests, neither is it as shining as he now portrays. However, this question will have to be resolved as we look at the nature of the reconciliation.

Westermann, Blum and Turner all see the full irony of the incident: for Blum, ch. 33 is a deliberate questioning of the attitude to blessing and to Esau shown in ch. 27. He sees this most clearly against the different historical and political backgrounds of the two passages: ch. 27 is an earlier text written in the Judean South around the time of David, reflecting the 'imperialistic triumphalism' of the time, particularly with regard to the Edomites. Ch. 33, written from the perspective of the northern kingdom, challenges what were perceived as the imperialistic and centralizing tendencies of Judah and the legitimization of its claims through the theological theme of blessing. This challenge is made by putting Esau in a better light and throwing the theme of blessing into question, showing that it is really a 'mixed blessing'.

Westermann also sees a questioning of the theme of blessing and a pointing to its potential divisiveness by contrasting the word ברכה which Jacob is now ready to give back to Esau from whom he stole it, with the word חַן (v5b and v11). Furthermore, the word חַן also has the meaning of divine forgiveness and so Jacob's use of the term carries an implicit acknowledgement of fault.<sup>2</sup> The blessing was the start of the conflict, itself leading to the conflict with Laban, and threatening to lead to war between the two brothers. Now that Jacob has experienced God's favour (חַן), he is prepared to relinquish the troublesome blessing. He goes on:

The Yahwist uses this theological element further to point to the transition from the patriarchal story to the story of the people (from Jacob to the 'sons of Jacob'): the patriarchal story, determined by blessing, passes over into the story of the people

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<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Bar-Efrat (*Narrative Art*, 67) sees Jacob's deliberate use of the address 'my lord' as an admission of guilt (cf. Aaron's address to Moses in Ex. 32:22).

<sup>2</sup> Wenham (*Genesis 16-50*, 299) supports this, and also gives the further interpretation that by avoiding the word ברכה at this stage, Jacob is steering clear of the earlier cause of dispute.



determined by God's gracious, saving action...he points out to his contemporary listeners, state dwellers, that they should never forget the other alternative, rising above political conflicts, of coming to a resolution by reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

Turner rejects any prime appeal to the history of Israel and Edom, as for him the meaning is contained within the narrative itself. His argument is part of a wider thesis about how human and other factors often get in the way of the unfolding of the divine plan. The reader is often surprised to find things do not turn out as they should, and is left to ponder why. Certainly Westermann's reading is worth taking seriously, and it shows a strong theological interest. We might be wary of too forceful an opposition of ברכה with חן but Westermann's reading gains further plausibility in that Jacob is keen to use the term ברכה when it comes to his 'gift' to Esau in v11 where the two terms form a particularly marked contrast. Blum's interpretation relies on a close identification of theological themes with specific national political ends. This contrasts with the open-ended nature of the narrative itself which escapes such precise interpretation.<sup>2</sup> However, as with Westermann, Blum's approach also points to an ambiguous treatment of blessing in this chapter. Finally, Turner avoids dangers of going further than the text warrants in opposing different contexts and in resolving narrative problems by simplistic historical references, and so he allows us to make sense of the text as it is. Nevertheless, some consideration of how themes in the text resonate with the circumstances of Israel is also valid, given the clear references to Israel -as indeed to Edom -in the Jacob story.

#### *Reconciliation and parting (33:12-17)*

On the face of it, as Esau reluctantly receives Jacob's ברכה, there seems to be a full reconciliation, but there are still some doubts as we look at the text more closely. Jacob refuses Esau's suggestion that they travel on together. To be sure, the reason he gives is plausible (v13), but the decline is an anti-climax after what seemed to be a full reconciliation. Esau is still keen to show some sign of solidarity, so he offers to let some men accompany

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12-36, 530.

<sup>2</sup> A similar theological point, but which does not rely so heavily on a particular historical reconstruction is that of Brueggemann: 'The positive presence of Esau warns against claiming too much for the elect one, as though the whole company of God has been committed to him,' (Genesis, 210).

Jacob. This time Jacob is unable to find a reason for declining, but still firmly refuses to agree. Furthermore although Jacob states his intention to go to Seir (v14), we never read of him doing so (cf. v17).

There are two opposing ways of understanding this. One is to read Jacob's motives at face value, judging his reasons for declining Esau's offers to be reasonable and well-founded. We could also point out that it is quite appropriate that Jacob does not go to Seir since the two brothers now represent two peoples. Or it could be argued that the passage simply neglects to tell us of any visit to Seir, or that it has been omitted by some redactor -in any case, to make something of Jacob's failure to go to Seir is to read too much into the text.

The approach of Fokkelman falls into this category.<sup>1</sup> Fokkelman is clear that Jacob's actions to Esau are completely open after Peniel. On seeing Esau, Jacob places himself at the front of the group, rather than hiding behind, and his subservient actions are to be seen as an admission of past guilt and a ready counter-act to the blessing he had received. It is however impossible to the Israelite reader that Jacob who represents Israel should now live with Esau (Edom). Instead the two are to live as peaceable neighbours. For Fokkelman, therefore, Jacob is now a new man, purified by the Peniel experience, with a new name and identity, and the events of ch. 33 bear this out.

An alternative is to perceive an ongoing ambivalence in Jacob's motives. There is no question of the goodwill of Esau. Indeed, his goodwill and unrestrained enthusiasm serve to highlight the cautious measuredness on Jacob's part.<sup>2</sup> Thus we sense that Jacob still does not trust his brother when Esau offers to accompany him to Seir, and that maybe his concern is not reconciliation but survival.

This interpretation is followed by Coats<sup>3</sup> who argues that Jacob's response to Esau is qualified, and that the conclusion is very much an anti-climax: 'Reconciliation should apparently be symbolized by physical community. What good is reconciliation if the brothers

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative Art, 228-30.

<sup>2</sup> Significantly, Jacob still refers to his brother as עֵשָׂו and himself as his יַעֲקֹב in v14 (B. Jacob, Das erste Buch der Tora, 647). Surely Jacob's subservience is wearing thin by now.

<sup>3</sup> G. W. Coats, 'Strife without reconciliation: a narrative theme in the Jacob traditions.' In ed. R. Albertz etc., Werden und Wirken des Alten Testaments, (Festschrift für Claus Westermann zum 70. Geburtstag), Göttingen, 103, and Genesis, 227.

do not live together?' Furthermore, Jacob misleads his brother by letting him believe in a future reunion, and then by going to Succoth.<sup>1</sup> This separation marks a permanent division. Contra Fokkelman, the omission of a reference to Jacob going to Seir is noticeable, and the fact that Jacob has explicitly told Esau that he will rejoin him there suggests that he still does not fully trust his brother, or that if he does, he wants to maintain a certain distance from him. On the level of the story between two brothers, this is far from a perfect solution. However, we should not underestimate the danger from which Jacob has escaped and the change in Esau's feelings from ch. 27. To say that there is 'strife without reconciliation' in particular fails to do justice to this turn-about.<sup>2</sup> Finally, there is no recognition by Coats of the note at 35:29, where the brothers are together for the burial of Isaac.<sup>3</sup>

The final verse (v17), perhaps incorporating a traditional etiological element about Succoth, underlines that Jacob is now settled in the Promised Land, but also that he does not go onto his brother as promised.

### *33:21 -the reconciliation of the brothers and Peniel*

We have seen that both in the Peniel incident and in the preceding verses (especially 32:21) the word פָּנִים or its construct are strongly attested. This continues in 33:1 and especially 33:10 which seems to be a clear reference to 32:21(MT):

33:10	וּתְרַצְנִי	כִּי רָאִיתִי פָּנֶיךָ כִּרְאֵת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים
32:31	וּתְנַצֵּל נַפְשִׁי	כִּי רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים

This indicates a further parallel between Esau and God, at least as far as Jacob is concerned. In terms of 33:10, this is because Esau poses the same dangers. The final verbs are different, one denoting acceptance, the other survival. However, in context, Jacob's survival depends on his being accepted by his brother, something explicitly brought out in Jacob's prayer

<sup>1</sup> In Rabbinic interpretation it is claimed that Jacob is going as far as he can in keeping to the truth and that, indeed, the reference to a journey to Seir can be understood as a messianic prediction that one of his descendants would enter in triumph over Edom, (Scherman and Zlotowitz, Bereishis, 1388.1460; Rashi in Rosenbaum and Silbermann eds, Pentateuch, 163).

<sup>2</sup> Turner prefers the phrase 'separation within reconciliation' (Announcements of Plot in Genesis, 133).

<sup>3</sup> No doubt because this is seen as a Priestly text.

before his encounter at Peniel where again the verb נצַל is used (32:12), but this time with reference to Esau.<sup>1</sup>

There is obviously a parallel between both of Jacob's escapes from death, and between the graciousness of God and the graciousness of Esau towards Jacob. This parallel between the two does not necessarily mean a causal connection, but we are left with the surprise acceptance by Esau, and there is at least a hint that what happened at Peniel has somehow made a difference.

Peniel has clearly marked a change, although it is difficult to say how much this change relates to Jacob's character as opposed to the circumstances around him (contra Fokkelman), given an ongoing ambivalence in Jacob's attitude to his brother.

For the Israelite reader there is the further recognition that Jacob and Esau are now nations, each living in their own place. The atmosphere in their relations is no longer one of intimate fraternity which can easily turn to hostility, but of a respectful distance which needs to be preserved.<sup>2</sup>

Finally the point should be made that, irrespective of how much Jacob might have changed, Esau certainly has, although no reason is given for this. Is it because God has changed Esau's heart? It does not seem to be because of Jacob's ploys. It might be argued that the depiction of Esau in this chapter is inconsistent with that of Esau in the earlier episodes. However the tension of this episode only works because we assume from ch. 27 that Esau is bent on revenge. Furthermore, one might wonder whether Esau's all too ready acceptance of Jacob is just as much an indication of an impulsive character living for the immediate as were his explosion in ch. 27 and his dismissive attitude to the birthright in ch. 25. This might account for Jacob's ongoing reticence towards his brother, knowing how easily his mood might swing back.

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<sup>1</sup> So Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 227.

<sup>2</sup> B. Dicou points to the parallel movement by Esau away from the promised land with his family and herds after Jacob has entered (cf. 36:6 and 31:17-18). As Dicou points out, Gen. 36 is the only place where this movement is applied to a nation or family other than Israel. This marks the transition of family to nation, where Israel's settling in the promised land means that Esau and his family have to leave, (Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist: The Role of Edom in Biblical Prophecy and Story, Sheffield: JSOT Supp 169, 1994, 130-1).

*The move to Shechem and Jacob's final testimony (33:18-20)*

Although v17 is often treated along with v18, it would seem better to see v17 as corresponding to v16. It seems odd that, having settled in one place, Jacob now moves on. There is no mention of how long Jacob was at Succoth, nor as to why he should move. The most obvious function of these verses is to serve as a bridge to the next chapter. As such, the new journey inaugurated by v18 emphasizes that Jacob's journeys are not over, nor are his conflicts, and there is still unfinished business.

Whether *שלום* is a place-name or an adverb, overtones of 'peace', 'in safety', 'intact' are still suggested by the word.<sup>1</sup> Thus there is a further allusion to the oath given by Jacob at Bethel regarding a safe return (28:21).<sup>2</sup>

V19 shows another aspect of settling: commerce with the local population and buying land. As well as pointing to a later settling in the land, there is also a narrative link back to the tradition of Abraham buying land (Gen. 23). On the significance of this land see also Jos. 24:32.

The final verse provides fitting testimony to God's leading of Jacob. Much discussion of this verse centres on the traditio-historical origin of the phrase *אל אלהי ישראל*, and the identity of 'Israel' here. For Westermann<sup>3</sup> it must refer to the tribal group since the motif of

<sup>1</sup> Ehrlich (*Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel*, 172) suggests 'friedlich gesinnt' as the best translation, making a comparison with 34:21 where the same adjective is used to indicate the peaceful attitude of Jacob's family. The mention here of Jacob's peaceful intention, states Ehrlich, will make the rape of Dinah all the more despicable. Also Alter, *Genesis*, 187. Similarly Ibn Ezra, sees the word as adjectival, denoting 'in tact' or 'safely' (Strickman and Silver eds, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary*, 324).

<sup>2</sup> H. Seebass, *Der Erzvater Israel*, 26. Hamilton (*The Book of Genesis*, 349-50) sees other connections with the first Bethel incident: the unusual use of the word *נצב* for the setting up of an altar corresponds to the double use of the this verb in ch. 28, and the naming of the altar is a fulfilment of the vow made Bethel (28:20-21). This latter point however does not account for God's command at 35:1ff which is a more obvious fulfilment of the vow made earlier.

On the use of the word *נצב*, see concluding historical-critical remarks. Alternatively, Leibowitz (*Studies in Bereshit*, 388-393) cites the Rabbinic interpretation that a verb associated with the erection of a pillar with its connotations of pre-Israelite worship is deliberately used alongside the word altar associated with the Mosaic worship of sacrifice. This is to indicate the transition to a new type of worship. Interestingly, this interpretation is not that distant from a literary-historical judgement that a later Israelite writer is editing out of the passage any pre-Israelite worship. Both interpretations see the text as betraying a development in religious practice.

<sup>3</sup> *Genesis 12-36*, 529.

Jacob's change of name to Israel is much later. Whatever the case on that point, in the canonical context, such a distinction between Jacob and Israel is too rigid -Jacob clearly has received the name of Israel and so he also serves as a type for Israel. As it is, the setting up of the altar and accompanying confession is motivated not by the specific locality but by the situation: Jacob has safely returned to the Promised Land, and credits this to his God. In the wider context, the verse surely has a polemic intent, emphasizing that the cult of Jacob/Israel is the legitimate heir to the cult of El. This polemic is driven home by referring to El in a way which would not be achieved if the altar referred to YHWH. On the other hand, of course, this epithet assumes that the God of Israel can be identified with the Canaanite El, and so there is some link between the religion of Jacob and that of a wider El cult.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting translation of v20b is found in the LXX: *καὶ ἐπεκαλεσατο τὸν θεὸν Ἰσραηλ*. This would indeed fit the context, but makes no sense of the pronoun *ὃ*, and the translation could be seen as an avoidance of the associating the god 'El' with the God of Israel.

### 3.3 Conclusion

#### 3.3.1 Historical-critical summary

Our reading of ch. 32 and 33 has revealed a variety of passages and genres. The basic development is that of the anticipation and actual meeting of the two brothers. This forms a continuous development, though divided into scenic episodes by other passages. This development is narrated with no hint of historical tension, and is best seen as written as a deliberate close to the Jacob-Esau plot. Regarding its relation to ch. 27, this passage has a very different character. Most striking is the depiction of Esau, and also, in relation to the oracle of ch. 25, the respective behaviour of Jacob and Esau. Clearly the writer has this earlier depiction in mind, and is writing with deliberate irony. Also lacking are the folkloric motifs of the opening episodes. In these verses the only traditional elements are the association of Esau with Seir, and 33:17-20.

Within this unilinear development, the three episodes show varying historical-critical results. Regarding the central episode at Peniel, the earlier investigations confirmed the impression that this passage has its own origins, independent of the wider context, and that it has undergone a complex development.<sup>1</sup>

The scene of Mahanaim is much more fleeting which would seem to suggest that it was only ever a fluid oral tradition or saying about the place of Mahanaim, or that it has been severely curtailed to fit into the context. Echoes of the Bethel incident suggest a reworking of the tradition, an impression confirmed by its placement on Jacob's return to the Promised Land. The prayer (32:10-13) is much more dependent on the wider Jacob story, a factor which tells against it ever having an independent existence. Given the way that the prayer does stand out, it may seem best to see it as an addition by a redactor or writer, although differing levels of reference within the prayer may suggest supplementary additions, with v12 being the heart of the prayer.

In addition to these three episodes, the closing verses (33:18-20) stand out. In a sense the whole Jacob-Esau plot ends at v17. Even Fokkelman<sup>2</sup> hints that a diachronic perspective better illuminates the text here:

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Narrative Art, 230-1.

However much the conclusion, 33.16-20 may integrate the return to Canaan into the whole of the Story of Jacob, it consists of three or four rather stray travel-notes. Now that the tensions have disappeared and the conflict in Jacob's life has come to an end, the narrator loosens his grip.

The question of the origins of the name אל אלהי ישראל is not easy to answer because it depends so much on the wider religio-historical development in early Israel and the development towards a tribal entity of 'Israel'. Clearly the name reveals a concern to understand the religion of 'Israel' both in contrast to surrounding religious allegiances, but also with an understanding of continuity as here we have a clear equation of Israel's God with El. There is also the possibility that the passage once told of the erecting of a pillar (מצבה) since the verb associated with altar is בנה or עשה, whereas נצב matches מצבה.<sup>1</sup> However, much more fruitful, is to give full weight to the word 'Israel' -something surely required when reading the passage from a canonical perspective -and to relate this short note to the wider context where it functions as a clear testimony from Jacob and an equation of the character's religious practice with that of later Israel.

### 3.3.2 The divine-human contrast in the structure of ch. 32 and 33

The structure of these chapters reflects a clear divine-human contrast. To argue that a later divine perspective has been superimposed over the tension of the human drama is to miss the point. Indeed, the episodes referring to divine presence, only heighten the tension by delaying the encounter and by heightening its significance. Furthermore the motifs of מרחנים, מלאכים and פנים in the action resonate with the scenes at Mahanaim and Peniel. Finally, the building of the altar represents Jacob's response of praise and testimony to the God who has protected him.

On one level, we have seen how recourse to divine help and human resource is combined in the character of Jacob. Just as in his stay at Haran he uses human tricks whilst also seeing God's hand in his blessing, so here he both makes practical preparations to mollify his brother and defend himself and his party, whilst also turning to God in prayer.

However, behind this structure of contrasts in the chapter lies the deeper, theological point that for Jacob, divine and human relationships are inextricably related. Human messengers operate alongside divine messengers, and most important of all, Esau is as God to Jacob.

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<sup>1</sup> So, e.g., Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 529.



This is the meaning behind the idea of Jacob first of all concealing himself from Esau, and then seeing Esau face to face and surviving. At first, Jacob puts a barrier between himself and Esau, then after he has seen God face to face and lived, he has to see his brother face to face. Just as God confronts Jacob, so Esau sweeps aside the envoys and gifts and rushes towards his brother. This is all made explicit in 33:10 which clearly refers back to 32:31. Quite why Esau should be like God to Jacob is not spelt out: perhaps there is the sense that Jacob is very much in Esau's hands at this point. But there is also the theme of reconciliation and acceptance: an open relationship with God includes an open relationship with one's kin, involving reconciliation and forgiveness. As Brueggemann writes: 'In the *holy God*, there is something of the *estranged brother*. And in the *forgiving brother*, there is something of the *blessing God*.<sup>1</sup> Thus Jacob's approach to Esau is expressed in theologically rich language: 'I may appease [אִכְפַּרְהוּ פָּנָיו] him with the present...and afterwards I shall see his face [פָּנָיו]; perhaps he will accept me [יִשָּׂא פָּנָיו]' (32:21). We saw earlier the parallel with Prov. 16:14, but the resonance goes deeper and touches the cultic language of atonement (e.g. Lev. 16:32).<sup>2</sup> In this sense, Jacob's gift to Esau operates as a peace offering or sacrifice for appeasement. Although Esau is not at all concerned with such a gesture, it is somehow necessary for Jacob that such an offering is made and accepted to mark the reconciliation. Given this, it is surprising that the reconciliation does not result in an intimate living together: that this does not happen perhaps reflects a realism from a national perspective that these two peoples cannot live close together, but also it hints at an ongoing reluctance on Jacob's part -the old Jacob lingers on despite Peniel.

Thus in this episode, behind the seeming dialectic structure of the divine-human, the divine and the human are also closely connected. That is not to say that there is no distinction between the two, but that Jacob's relationship with God and his relationship with Esau

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 273.

<sup>2</sup> It may be argued that it is invalid to read a cultic or Priestly use of the term כִּפָּר into a reconciliation on a human level (as used in Prov. 16:14 and also, for instance, Ex. 21:30). However, it is also true that the term is used in pre-Priestly Pentateuchal texts to denote reconciliation with God, even if the theology behind the term is not so developed (B. Janowski, Sühne als Heilsgeschichte: Studien zur Sühnetheologie der Priesterschrift und der Wurzel KPR im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament, WMANT 55, 1982, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 103-14). See also A. Schenker ('Koper et expiation', Bib 63 (1982), 32).

Furthermore, with reference to Gen. 33, the link between human and divine reconciliation is made in the text itself (v10) -a factor often overlooked in considering the use of the term.

impinge on each other. Furthermore, the episode confirms the impression given more generally in the Jacob story: that underneath the very human activities and struggles, the divine plan is unfolding. The more explicit encounters with the divine serve to underline this.

## **4 The closing episodes of the Jacob story**

### **4.1 Introduction**

We have already seen that the plot of the Jacob story comes to a pause with the resolution of the conflict with Esau, and certainly the nature of the narrative changes, with a looser plot and decreased tension and the sense of tying up loose ends. These involve relations with the indigenous population, unfinished business at Bethel and the oath made back at 28:22, the birth of Jacob's twelfth son, and news of Isaac, with Jacob and Esau meeting again, bringing the תולדת יצחק to a formal end.

### **4.2 Jacob and the Shechemites (ch. 34)**

This passage raises many complex questions relating to the passage in itself, independent of any part it plays in the Jacob story. Much of this shall be avoided here, especially the knotty question of prehistory, regarding which there is wide agreement on the text showing signs of development, but little consensus on the exact nature of that development.

There is also the question of how much this passage can be regarded as properly belonging to the story of Jacob.<sup>1</sup> In favour of this, it is observable that this incident serves as a counterpoint to the story of Isaac at Gerar, inserted within the Jacob material, and also recounting troubled relations with the indigenous population. It is also noticeable that Jacob acts very much as a background figure, with his sons being the main players. Nevertheless, all the characters -at least on the 'Israelite' side -are part of the wider Jacob story, and the story does fit into the wider plot, however awkwardly and uniquely.

Regarding the ongoing argument of our thesis, the main concern here is of the very 'human' or 'secular' nature of the passage. This is not just because of the absence of direct intervention from God (apart from the later reference of 35:5), but also the unsavoury nature of the material and the morally ambivalent action of the sons.

#### **4.2.1 Ch. 34 as Israelite scripture.**

Whilst it is true that all of the patriarchal narratives are Israelite scripture, they generally

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Ryle (*The Book of Genesis*, 331) points out that the Jacob family, having been at the mercy of Esau with just 400 men, is now able to sack a major town; also Dinah is already a young woman. Dillmann, *Die Genesis*, 368, noting that this is the first indication of strife between Jacob and his sons, argues that this story belongs more properly to the תולדות יעקב (ch. 37ff).

witness to a 'patriarchal', pre-Mosaic age, which although organically related to the later 'Yahwistic' faith, shows certain distinctive traits.<sup>1</sup> However, there are often indications of the later 'Israelite' or 'Yahwistic' perspective. This passage in particular seems heavily influenced by such a perspective. It is not unique in showing the patriarchs dealing with the people of the land, or even in coming into conflict, but here the conflict is that much sharper, and seen in different terms. This is especially clear when compared with ch. 26 where Isaac encounters the Philistine king.

Noticeable 'Israelite' elements are:

- terminology -in particular, the depiction of the sexual act. The word נָמַט, used three times (vv5, 13, 27), is striking because it is the first use of the root in the Pentateuch, and it is mostly used in Leviticus, and the legal parts of Numbers, as well as, to a lesser degree, in Ezekiel. Thus a key term of the purity laws has been made central to the concerns of this narrative. Another such term is נבלה (v7), which again appears nowhere else in the patriarchal narratives.<sup>2</sup>
- The word 'Israel' to depict not Jacob, but his family as a collective whole. In particular the preposition ב is striking, as it sees 'Israel' as a collective entity, as in Dt. 22:21, Jos. 7:15, Judg. 20:6,10,13.6. Dt. 22:21 is particularly noteworthy because of the reoccurrence of בישראל and נבלה together.
- Circumcision as a way of marking the family as distinctive. Unlike at Gen. 17:11 it is not seen in the theological context of covenant but more as a cultural or ethnic mark.
- The issue of intermarriage as described in Joshua and Judges, as well as Ezra and Nehemiah. It is of course true that the theme of marrying within the clan is part of the patriarchal narratives, but here the theme seems more generalized (see esp. v9-10). Again, there is the omission of any explicit theological perspective.
- The episode does not result in any compromise or agreement (unlike, for instance, 26:30-31). Instead there is the fear of war. This is unlike the generally pervasive note of what Wenham describes as 'ecumenical bonhomie'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. see above, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Dt. 22:21; Jos. 7:15; Judg. 19:23,24, 20:6,10; 1 Sam. 25:25; 2 Sam. 13:12; Job 42:8; Is. 9:17, 32:6; Jer. 29:23.

<sup>3</sup> Wenham, 'The Religion of the Patriarchs.' 184.

The overall effect is to see the story less as a 'patriarchal', and more as an 'Israelite' incident, especially as Jacob plays a weaker role. However it also shows that the story has a deeper dimension than the simple story of rape and revenge as the interests of Israel are reflected back into the story of the patriarchs. So far, it is to be noted that these interests focus on questions of ethnicity and social relations rather than explicit theological issues. Nevertheless, the narrative can take us to a further dimension.

#### 4.2.2 Ch. 34 as Torah

Throughout the thesis, our approach has been to see how a canonical perspective is appropriate to the Jacob story. One outworking of this is to see each episode not just as part of the wider story of Jacob, but of the Torah with its overall concern to be a book of guidance and instruction. Furthermore, in view of the above-mentioned distinctive terminology, references to the 'Torah' are intrinsic to the material itself. Thus any talk of the 'secular' nature of this passage is incomplete without taking account of this other dimension. Blum is particularly useful at this point<sup>1</sup> as he points to two laws alluded to in the passage:

*Laws governing sexual relations (Ex. 22:15ff and especially Dt. 22:28ff)<sup>2</sup>*

We have already noted the similarity of terminology between this passage and Dt. 22, but there is also a similar case study. Here the law prescribes that if a man has sexual intercourse with a virgin, he is to pay a price and marry her. Blum also points to parallels with the story of Amnon and Tamar (2 Sam. 13 -compare especially 2 Sam. 13:12 and Gen. 34:7). In both cases, he argues, the emphasis is not so much on the sexual act itself as on the proper or improper conduct afterwards. What is striking is that Shechem is prepared to more than fulfill the obligations which the Torah was later to lay down (unlike the Israelite Amnon! -cf. also 2 Sam. 13:15 and Gen. 34:3). Indeed the narrator is far from depicting Shechem (or his father) in stereo-typical terms as there seems to be an attempt to understand his feelings and the perspective of the Canaanites as they consider the proposals. Thus v3 in particular is striking in depicting Hamar in a sympathetic light as he falls in love with Dinah, and the final

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<sup>1</sup> Blum, Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 210ff.

<sup>2</sup> Blum calls these 'laws of rape' (Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 211) but for reasons which will become clear below, this may be misleading -see Blum's own comment on Ex. 22, p. 212.

phrase (וידבר על-לב) may imply a degree of reciprocity.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, no account is taken of the feelings of Dinah in the story: her motives for going out in the first place, what she felt about Hamar, and the fact that her brothers 'take' her at the end does not indicate how she might feel about the matter.<sup>2</sup> It has even been argued from a careful examination of the terms used and references to rape in Deuteronomy, that the humiliation indicated by the verb ענה is not so much rape as illicit sex, occurring outside marriage or outside the clan.<sup>3</sup>

In this light, the reaction of Jacob's sons is exaggerated and inappropriate. This may even be reflected in the language used in the passage. Alter<sup>4</sup> sees the plural verb form of v27 (טכמאר) as an example of free indirect discourse, the language of the narrative reflecting the speech or thought of the brothers as they no doubt justified to themselves the killing of all the males. However, there may be a similar ambivalence in some of the earlier language (in particular v7b).

According to this reading, we may indeed be invited to agree with Jacob's conclusion,<sup>5</sup> even if Jacob's motives for condemning his sons seems more based on the desire for survival than on a genuine sense of revulsion at their cruelty. In addition, Blum sees a reference to this reading of the story in Gen. 49:5-7 where the curse uttered on Simeon and Levi is read as a judgement on this incident.

Regarding the relevance of Dt. 22:28ff, it might of course be argued that because Shechem is not an Israelite, the laws of the Torah cannot be applied to him,<sup>6</sup> but as Blum argues, the use of the phrase בישראל puts the episode into the context of Israelite law.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> See esp. D. N. Fewell and D. M. Gunn, 'Tipping the Balance: Sternberg's Reader and the Rape of Dinah.' *JBL* 110 (1991), 193-211.

<sup>2</sup> Fewell and Gunn, 'Tipping the Balance', 210, argue that from Dinah's point of view, the best solution would have been for her to marry Shechem, but that the brother's forcibly take her and are acting only in the interests of their own honour.

<sup>3</sup> L. M. Bechtel, 'What if Dinah is not raped? (Genesis 34)' *JSOT* 62 (1994), 19-36.

<sup>4</sup> *Genesis*, 194.

<sup>5</sup> So Brueggemann (*Genesis*, 278): 'Jacob is the seasoned voice of maturity. He has lived a long time...Now he rebukes such a childish religion which will endanger its own life rather than face realities...His response is not one of great faith, but of clear-headed pragmatism.'

<sup>6</sup> So M. Sternberg, 'Biblical Poetics and Sexual Politics: From Reading to Counter-Reading.' *JBL* 111 (1992), 482.

<sup>7</sup> *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 213. It should also be noted that the phrase וכן לא-יעשה is a stereo-typical legal term (so Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 538), which suggests that

the parallel with 2 Sam. 13 would seem to justify this approach.<sup>1</sup>

*The proscription of intermarriage*

Note especially the correspondence between Hamar's offer and Dt. 7:3:

Gen 34:9 והתחתנו אתנו בנתיכם תתנו-לנו ואת-בנותינו תקחו לכם

Dt 7:3 ולא תתחתן בם בתך לא-תתן לבנו ובתי לא תקח לבנך

Westermann<sup>2</sup> sees this as the main thrust of the final form of the passage. Because of clear echoes of Dt. 7:2-3, he thinks this story may be a later midrash, written at the time of the exile, when intermarriage had become a particular temptation: 'a narrative exemplifying the execution of a command of the Torah. Zeal for the law was the motivating drive.' Blum also argues that the appearance of foreign gods in ch. 35 corresponds to the link made in Deuteronomy between intermarriage and the turning to false gods.<sup>3</sup>

This contributes to a reading which is more sympathetic to the sons of Jacob, even if, there is a recognition of the harshness of their action. In his detailed reading of this passage, Sternberg is aware of this ambivalence, but sees the narrator loading the evidence in favour of the brothers.<sup>4</sup> For instance, he argues that the opening description of Shechem's action (v2) creates maximum sympathy for Jacob's sons, although his reaction in v3 adds to a more complex depiction of his motives. Sternberg also sets Jacob's inactivity in contrast to his sons' readiness to defend family honour and purity in such a way that the former is seen to be cowardly and purely interested in self-survival. Regarding the reasonableness of Hamar's offer, this can be seen as the soft-spoken web of deceit of the negotiator. Furthermore, the crucial point for Sternberg is that Dinah is being held by Shechem all the time.<sup>5</sup> This factor

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we are dealing with a question of the application of Israelite law.

<sup>1</sup> For an investigation of how these passages might be linked, see D. N. Freedman, 'Dinah and Shechem, Tamar and Amnon', 485-95 in ed. J. R. Huddleston, *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: Selected Writings of David Noel Freedman*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1997. For Freedman this passage shows an ambivalence to the action described and points to a malaise foreshadowing the downfall of the monarchy in Israel.

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis 12-36*, 544.

<sup>3</sup> *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 221.

<sup>4</sup> M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, 445-75.

<sup>5</sup> Also Alter, *Genesis*, 193.

is only revealed by the author during the description of bloodshed and carnage (v26) in order to put the action of the brothers in a better light: they had no alternative before than to enter the negotiations and then to use violence to extricate their sister. In particular, for Sternberg, the narrator is keen to distinguish between the idealistic motives of Dinah's two full brothers, Simeon and Levi -only here singled out -from the other brothers. This is achieved not only by leaving the information about Dinah's captivity until now but also by making explicit that they alone are the full brothers of Dinah (v25). By normal standards, we would judge the act of murdering every male as more worthy of condemnation than the subsequent act of pillaging. However in the context of this narrative, argues Sternberg, the reverse is true since the two brothers are simply interested in rescuing their sister and maintaining family honour, whilst the motives of the other brothers move from idealism to material gain in the orgy of plunder. Finally, Jacob's protest at the end is the pathetic appeal of the self-interested: 'the voice of egocentricity and self-preservation finds itself opposed by the voice of idealism'.<sup>1</sup>

We are therefore left with two contradictory readings. For Blum, as for others, the answer is to explain the tension in diachronic terms. An earlier narrative giving a positive view of Shechem and a negative view of Jacob's sons has been overwritten by a Deuteronomic redaction showing the sons of Jacob exercising the correct attitude to threats of assimilation and intermarriage. Interestingly, Sternberg's reading is not as far away from this as might be imagined, as his concept of the narrator altering what would be our natural judgement by narrative touches is akin to that of the redactor reshaping an earlier text.

In terms of the diachronic judgement, the above view may have some plausibility as far as it goes, but it does not help us to make sense of the text as it is in its entirety. Furthermore, as often in such cases, we are left with the question of why a redactor -whether Deuteronomistic or whatever -allowed certain elements to stand in such a way as to create an certain ambiguity: why continue to portray Shechem in a light which is not completely negative? Why allow the ironic statement to stand that the sons acted as their father had done earlier in his life, במרמה (v13 -cf. 27:35)? Why not make the later theological perspective clearer? And finally, why not have the patriarch Jacob congratulating his sons rather than criticizing them?

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<sup>1</sup> The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 474.



Sternberg attempts to do better justice to the complexity of the text by arguing that the narrator is concerned not to paint a black and white picture, in recognition of the complexity of the issues. Even so, argues Sternberg, the narrator's 'rhetorical maneuvers throughout, the final set of oppositions, and above all, his gaining the last word -and what a last word! -to Simeon and Levi, leave no doubt where his sympathy lies.'<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless one wonders whether Sternberg does justice to both sides of the case. Part of his case is that although Biblical narrative reveals ambivalences and ambiguities, the story is told in such a way that it is clear to the 'competent' reader what the overall meaning is. On the one hand, one might question whether this does enough justice to the context of the reader as much as the narrative,<sup>2</sup> but on the other hand, one might argue that the voice of the 'narrator' is much less easy to discern. For instance, there is the obvious gap in failing to address Dinah's viewpoint. It might be true that she was forcibly withheld by Shechem, but it might equally be true that she chose not to return -assuming that she had not returned to Jacob before the negotiations. There is also the suggestiveness in the opening phrase that Dinah 'went forth' to see the daughters of the land, and there may be some question of whether she was really raped: of itself, the verb לקח need not imply violent force and there is no account of struggle or protest (see Dt. 22:23-24)?<sup>3</sup> Sternberg claims that the positive portrayal of Shechem in v3 does not fully cancel out the negative portrayal of v2, but is this really the case, especially as the opposite reaction from Shechem would have been expected? This impression is reinforced if there is indeed in v3b $\beta$  a hint that his affections were received with at least some sympathy by Dinah. Sternberg also admits that the phrase במרמה (v13) tells against the brothers, but argues that the narrator balances this with the last part of v13 and by not spelling out at this stage how they are acting in deceit.<sup>4</sup> We also should bear in mind the vocabulary used by the narrator to describe the 'defilement' 'within Israel', and the scandal of crime committed in the first place, which would lean in favour of

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<sup>1</sup> The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 475.

<sup>2</sup> So N. Segal ('Review of *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, by M. Sternberg', VT 38 (1988), 243-9) who points out that Sternberg takes no account of post-structuralist and reader-response theories. For Sternberg it is self-evident that the reader is comfortable or agrees with what he calls the 'ideology' of the narrator.

<sup>3</sup> Bechtel, 'What if Dinah is not Raped? (Genesis 34)', 25-28. Also C. M. Carmichael, Women, Law, and the Genesis Traditions, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979, 28.

<sup>4</sup> The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 458-59.

Sternberg's reading, but given that such explicit language is so rare in Genesis, one wonders how much of it is coloured by the extreme views of the sons and or is simply borrowed by the narrator to represent one point of view. Finally, why, according to Sternberg, should the narrator make his task so complicated by wanting to point to the complexity of the issue whilst also steering the reader to a final sympathy for Simeon and Levi? Given all the possibilities open to the narrator, he seems to have painted himself into a corner. One feels that Sternberg's reading itself contains the truth, but not the whole truth.

Thus it would seem that this passage contains two standpoints, which are left unreconciled. This is summed up in the final statements by Jacob on the one hand and Simeon and Levi on the other, which both have a validity.

#### 4.2.3 Conclusion

We have seen that this story has more than one dimension. On one level is the very human story of love, rape or illicit sex, deceit, revenge, murder, family strife. On another level, is a continuing tendency to see in the main characters embodiments of nations: just as Jacob becomes Israel in ch. 32, and Esau in Seir and Jacob in Canaan put us in mind of Edom and Israel, so here Shechem seems to embody the people of Canaan, and the Jacob family are 'Israel'. Likewise the parage has a distinct ethnic tone. The difference is that Israel is embodied by the sons of Jacob rather than by Jacob alone. This latter point is part of a more general idea that Jacob and the ideas associated with him (and we may add with Isaac and Abraham) are giving way to his twelve sons who here seem to reflect, at least in part, later Israel. Westermann writes: 'When the sons reject their father's rebuke (34:31) this sounds the end of the patriarchal period when war and killing of enemies were avoided'.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the passing from the patriarchal age to the age of Israel is thematized in the shift from one generation to another. In this chapter, this is seen especially in relations with the surrounding peoples.

However the development is not straightforward, since we have seen above that there is no clear acceptance of one perspective or rejection of the other. Indeed, we have seen how two laws in the Torah come into conflict. Furthermore, the open attitude to foreigners associated

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12-36, 545.

with the patriarchs is not lost in the fully-fledged Yahwistic faith.<sup>1</sup> Thus we can see how this passage raises or reflects questions about the proper attitude of Israel towards other peoples.<sup>2</sup> This brings us to the theological dimension as we see how questions of national identity and integrity relate to the covenant relationship of the Torah. Thus in this episode, dimensions of family and nation, human and divine are intermingled.

#### 4.3 Jacob and God ( 35:1-15)

Thematically, vv1-15 are consistent in marking a shift back to Jacob's explicit relationship with God. However, within these verses, there is a clear break between v8 and v9, where a new episode begins (וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים... עוֹד). Questions of prehistory, and the relation of each episode to the other, are dealt with below.

##### 4.3.1 35:1-8

This passage describes the divine command to go to Bethel and build an altar (v1), Jacob's command to the household, the process of preparation (ridding of foreign gods, changing of clothes), the journey and arrival (vv5-6), and the building of the altar and the naming of the place אל ל בתל (v7), followed by a death notice (v8). Thus internally the passage seems coherent, although v8 seems to fit rather loosely to the structure.

There are certain connections with other parts of the Jacob story. V1 refers clearly to ch. 28 and the dream of Jacob, and the name Bethel is presupposed in God's initial command. Thus this passage is seen as fulfilling an obligation based on God's appearance at Bethel.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As testified in laws in Dt. relating to the stranger (e.g. Dt. 10:19); also the books of Ruth, Jonah, parts of Trito-Isaiah (e.g. Is. 56:4ff).

<sup>2</sup> 'The purpose of this story in the Book of Genesis is not merely to report an incident of Israel's ancient past. First it is pointing to the perils consequent upon the adoption of the Canaanite way of life... But it is also concerned to condemn the kind of deceit and violence which all too often characterized the settlement of nomadic tribes in Canaan. It is the will of God that Israel should retain its integrity; but this must be in God's ways and not through arrogance and violence that disregards moral considerations.' (Herbert, *Genesis 12-50*, London: SCM, 1962, 112). Whilst acknowledging the tension which the text reflects, Herbert's judgement is perhaps too clear-cut for a passage which refuses to give a clear authorial voice.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Ezra ( Strickman and Silver eds, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary*, 332) makes another connection with ch. 28 by translating אֱלֹהִים (v7) with the word 'angels'. He justifies this by pointing to the unusual use of the plural verb form (נגלו).

The reference to foreign gods most likely refers to the stolen gods from Laban, and v3 may refer to the plea for help before Jacob meets his brother again (32:10ff) or to the vow in 28:20-22. This passage therefore forms an inclusio with ch. 28, and serves to bring us back to the promise given by God, but also to the vow made by Jacob.<sup>1</sup>

However, the fulfilment of the vow does not correspond exactly to the vow itself, both in terms of the religious acts described here and the lack of any mention of tithe (28:22). This suggests a certain independence between the two passages, and that beyond the schema of vow-fulfilment, there are other interests.<sup>2</sup>

These other interests are shown especially in the religious activity of Jacob. The following elements stand out:

- the verb עלה to describe Jacob's movement -v1 and especially v3 where the phrase נעלה בית-אל sounds like the call to go on a pilgrimage. The verb is often used in connection with going to Jerusalem (Jer. 31:6, Ps. 24:3, Ps. 122:4).<sup>3</sup>
- the phrase 'The God who answered me in my day of trial' (v3), seen by Westermann<sup>4</sup> as the language of the psalms, who points to Ps. 120:1 which begins the pilgrimage psalms.
- the command of Jacob to dispose of the foreign gods. There is a similar demand made by Joshua (Jos. 24:14), again executed at Shechem.
- the command of Jacob to his family to purify themselves and to change their clothes.

Also significant is the description of the רתנת אלהים experienced by the neighbouring towns, corresponding to the response of the Canaanites in the conquest tradition -see Ex. 23:27,19 although the word רתנת is admittedly a hapax legomenon.

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann (Genesis, 280-3) also sees a connection with the previous incident, in that the purification commanded by Jacob is in response to the defilement described in ch. 34 (especially vv5.13. Also the plunder of v29). For Brueggemann, the action described here is a ritual of renunciation and reclothing, a symbolic distancing from the gods and influences of the Canaanite culture.

<sup>2</sup> See Richter, 'Das Gelübde als theologische Rahmung der Jakobsüberlieferung', 21-52, who sees an independent tradition behind this story, but that the story has now been adapted by the Elohist's vow-fulfilment schema.

<sup>3</sup> As with Jerusalem, the journey to Bethel is also a literal ascent -Ryle (The Book of Genesis, 336).

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12-36, 550.

All these elements give the passage its clear 'Yahwistic' mood, which make it quite unique in the patriarchal narratives. It seems that the writer is wanting to show in this episode of Jacob's life an example of obedience to God<sup>1</sup> and its result on surrounding peoples. Thus there is a typological interest.<sup>2</sup> The avoidance of the name יהוה here helps to maintain some distinction between the patriarchal and Mosaic eras, but the long chronological gap between the two ages seems to have narrowed immensely for a moment.

Furthermore, it could be that the typology is meant to go further in drawing a parallel between Jacob and the later Israelites, who, having escaped from Egypt, receive the commands at Sinai, including rites of purification, and then, as long as they are faithful to YHWH alone, experience protection from the peoples of Canaan. In this case, Jacob is 'delivered' from the threat of destruction, commanded to make the appropriate response, and having done so, is protected from the Canaanites.

Finally, a comparison of these verses to ch. 34 is interesting since both reflect the interests of later readers, and Deuteronomic traces have been discerned in both passages. On the other hand, in ch. 34 the interest is 'Israelite' in a broadly ethnic sense whereas here the interest is 'Yahwistic' in a much more religious sense.

#### 4.3.2 35:9-15

Internally, this passage seems to flow with no breaks or inconsistencies. The only possible additions seen by scholars are v10, where the giving of the name 'Israel' is without firm etiological basis, the repetition of the phrase *במקום אשר-דבר אתו* (seen as a possible dittography), and the setting up of a cultic stone (v14), although this is based on an assumption about what would and would not be acceptable to the (Priestly) writer.

However, most interest has been focused on the relation of this passage to passages elsewhere. On the one hand, there is a clear continuity and consistency with two passages in particular:

-the appearance of God to Abraham in ch. 17, which also includes the divine self-revelation as *אל שדי*, the giving of a new name, promises of nations and land, the verb *פרה*, and the 'ascension' of God (17:22, 35:13). In both episodes this is followed by a cultic response -in

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<sup>1</sup> The word YHWH is never used in the passage (see following comment) but the tone of the passage is nevertheless 'Yahwistic' in the wider sense described here.

<sup>2</sup> B. Jacob, (*Das erste Buch der Tora*, 660): 'Was Jakob jetzt tut, ist eine Wallfahrt, das Vorbild aller späteren.'

one case, the theologically weighty circumcision, directly commanded by God, in the other, the (problematic?) setting up of a stone.

-the blessing given by Isaac to Jacob before he flees to Paddam Aram (28:3-5). The name אֱלֹהֵי שָׂדֵי is used again; also found are the blessing, the stem פָּרַח, the land which had been promised to Abraham (though ch. 35 adds the name of Isaac), and the promise of becoming a קהל of גוים/עמים. The mention of Paddam Aram again in ch. 35:9 seems to form another deliberate link.

Despite minor differences between these passages, it is highly likely that they come from the same hand, and the common view of these passages as part of a Priestly source or redaction seems justified.

On the other hand, this passage has an unclear relation to Gen. 28:11-22, 32:23-33 and 35:1-8, since once again the place Bethel is named and once again Jacob is given the name Israel. It seems that this passage contains genuine repetition and may be described as a doublet.<sup>1</sup> However, it remains to be seen whether this doublet should be seen as a replacement of the earlier episodes or a correction/complement to them, although the ultimate resolution to that question is part of the wider debate about whether P should be regarded as a once separate source or as a deliberate redactional strata.

### *Bethel*

The fact that three passages tell of the importance of Bethel to Jacob demonstrates the centrality of the place in the Jacob tradition, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that the figure of Jacob was linked to this place of pilgrimage at an early stage of the tradition. Furthermore, differences in style and a precise lack in correspondence in the three passage clearly suggest that the passages were not all written by the same writer.

Regarding ch. 35:9ff, the main emphasis is even more on the promise and less on the presence of God than is the case in ch. 28. Indeed the etiological element seems weak and secondary to the purposes of the passage. In particular, v15 does not bear the marks of an etiology as there is little correspondence between the name Bethel and the clause בַּמְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-דָּבַר אֲתוֹ. Although one might simply see this as reflecting the sparseness or

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<sup>1</sup> 'Eine der wenigen 'echten' Dubletten in der Genesis' -Blum, Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte, 267.

restraint of P,<sup>1</sup> von Rad's view does most justice to the passage:

Thus our section limits itself to that which God revealed to Jacob by summarizing in essence what is theologically important from ch28:10ff and ch32:23ff, the promise of land and the change of name.<sup>2</sup>

We shall comment on this later on, as it is quite an important point and obviously relates also to the giving of the name Israel. It would seem then that P summarizes or restates the older passage in order to emphasize certain points.

Blum also sees this, albeit in a more negative way. For him, P is concerned to 'correct' aspects of the Bethel story which were unacceptable to P.<sup>3</sup> In particular, in ch. 28 the central idea is that God is present, and indeed lives, at the place -hence the name בית אלהים, whereas P 'corrects' this (mis)understanding by making it clear that this is the place where God **speaks**, and once God has spoken, he leaves (v13). He also argues that in P the stone is no longer a cultic stone but a memorial stone. This is emphasized by three new elements: the appositional מצבה אבן which prevents an understanding of the column in a technical cultic sense; the phrase במקום אשר-דבר אתו, which interprets the column as a memorial stone (and emphasizes it is the place where God speaks); and the problematic 'pouring of oil' becomes a libation offering rather than the consecration of a stone.

It is certainly true that P wants to emphasize the fact that God speaks, but this aspect is also present in the earlier account. Furthermore the passage does describe God appearing (v9) as well as speaking, and in describing God as 'going up', the passage is implying that God had been somehow present at the place, even if the presence was not permanent. Regarding the libation offering, it is questionable whether such an offering would really be much more acceptable to a writer bent on eliminating any cultic acts before Sinai than would the act of consecrating a stone. Finally the explicit mention of a stone in v14 is best seen positively as a link to ch. 28 where Jacob uses a stone for sleep and then as a pillar.

An aspect which Blum neglects are the words spoken to Jacob -for the giving of the name see below, but the blessing of v11 and v12 are also important. The name אל שדי reminds

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<sup>1</sup> So Gunkel, *Genesis*, 384-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis*, 338-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, 263-70. Also W. Gross ('Jakob, der Mann des Segens.' 342): P is forced by the strong connection of Jacob with Bethel to mention the place but tries to lessen its significance: 'Für P ist Bethel nicht ein Ort dauernder göttlicher Gegenwart, sondern der Schauplatz einer einmaligen Gottesoffenbarung.'

us of the appearance of God to Abraham (ch. 17 -see above), and so emphasizes the persistence of the promise, and it also reminds us of the blessing given to Jacob by his father (28:3). This repetition is especially forceful when seen in the wider context of the (non-Priestly) narrative as it serves as a confirmation of the blessing, as it is God himself who now speaks. Just as the first Bethel appearance was a confirmation for Jacob before he arrived at Paddan Aram, so this appearance is a confirmation now he has returned. It is important in reminding us that Jacob and his descendants are still to see the promise in its totality fulfilled and so it keeps the reader looking forward. In particular the command to be fruitful is now more direct (v11) and reminds us of the command in Gen. 1. It is as though Jacob, safely returned as promised (28:15) is now ready not just to see the survival of his family, but to see the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise of many descendants. It has been pointed out that this command would make more sense before the birth of any of Jacob's sons,<sup>1</sup> and in a strictly chronological account this may be so, but the command has in mind not just the birth of 12 sons, but their expansion into a people. It is indeed 'Israel' that is addressed.

Before considering the reference to Israel, we should briefly consider how this passage follows from 35:1-8. The element of repetition is obvious, and again suggests that P be best taken in the final narrative as a concluding summary of Jacob and Bethel. But it is also important to note that P adds certain aspects to the previous verses. Whereas vv1-7 tend to see Jacob as a type of the later Israel in his paradigmatic response to God and his resulting protection, P stresses that Jacob is still a figure of promise, even if, as with the previous verses, the distance between the patriarchal age of promise and the Yahwistic age of fulfilment is getting very short. The difference between the two ages is also emphasized by the name יִשְׂרָאֵל, which is picked up at Ex. 6. Again there is also the shift in emphasis from the concern for mere survival of Jacob and his family to their expansion.

To summarize so far, in relation to ch. 28, P moves from the etiological aspect of the Bethel tradition to bring out other aspects: Bethel is significant as the place where God speaks as much as the place where God appears, and any idea of God 'residing' here is played down. The contents of the speech relate to God's renewed promise to Abraham, a confirmation of the patriarchal blessing, and a more immediate reference to the promise of many descendants

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<sup>1</sup> von Rad, *Genesis*, 339.



with the related shift from the idea of the survival of the clan, so central to patriarchal story so far.

*The name 'Israel'*

The giving of the name 'Israel' is even less grounded in the passage etiologically than is the name Bethel. This need not mean that it is a secondary addition to the Priestly passage,<sup>1</sup> but again may indicate that it is a deliberate complement to the earlier Peniel story, since in the final form of the narrative, it serves as a confirmation of the name given at Peniel.<sup>2</sup> Here, the giving of the name is much less shrouded in mystery and darkness so that there is no doubt in our mind or in Jacob's about who has blessed Jacob. Furthermore, the emphasis is now on the simple giving of the name, as a gift and not as something which might seem to be extracted from God. In this passage, Jacob's part is much more receptive and God takes the initiative and acts freely.

*35:9-15 as a summary conclusion to Jacob's life*

To return to von Rad's comment that P here summarizes what is theologically important in the Jacob narrative, it is clear that the Bethel and the Peniel encounters were important, and P has chosen to restate the important aspects of them here. From a traditional source critical perspective this fits with his idea of P as a once independent treatment of the earlier patriarchal narrative, but the approach taken above has suggested at several points that P can be seen here as a redactional framework.

In this light, the repetition of Bethel and the name Israel is a reaffirmation of the importance of these incidents in the life of Jacob (as well as offering a new perspective on them) and not just a 'correction' of them as Blum asserts. Thus this passage, although ostensibly represented as a new incident in the story of Jacob, is best understood as a pause, as we

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<sup>1</sup> Neither is there any etymology in the Priestly account of the giving of the divine name in Ex. 6.

<sup>2</sup> As argued in reference to 32:29 (above, p. 84) this is close to the idea in some Jewish commentary that it is not until this passage that Jacob receives the name Israel, whereas at Peniel he is told that he would, subsequently, be called Israel, (see also B. Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora*, 664). As argued earlier, this distinction is overstated and not sufficiently grounded in the text, but nevertheless, at Peniel there is the sense that only when the situation with Esau has been resolved, will he be able to truly say that he has prevailed in his struggles. In that sense the outcome of the Peniel incident (a new name and an escape from danger) still looks forward, whereas now that Jacob has safely returned to Bethel, there is a sense of completion.

look back on Jacob's life, and the important points are rearticulated in a concise way, adding to the Jacob narrative another perspective.

However, not only does this incident look back, but having consolidated what has been achieved in Jacob's life, it looks forward. To quote von Rad again:

A primary concern of our text is to show that the promise to Abraham was renewed completely to Jacob. Indeed it is now expanded by the creative command 'be fruitful and multiply!' Abraham's seed branches out for the first time in Jacob...<sup>1</sup>

#### 4.3.3 The relation of vv9-15 to vv1-8

We have seen that vv1-8 and 9-15 are very different passages. On the one hand, they both depict an encounter with God, and they both show strong links with later Israel. In the first passage this is through a depiction of Jacob's actions and his relationship with surrounding towns in a strongly 'Yahwistic' way, with a strong paradigmatic overtone. In the second passage, the theological theme of promise is highlighted as well as the name 'Israel'. Here the emphasis is less on Jacob's religious actions and more on the work of God.

Although the introduction of v9 allows for a sequential reading of these two passages, the full force of vv9-15 is to be felt as a retrospective summary of the whole of Jacob's experience with God, where the themes of promise and the name 'Israel' are restated without any ambiguity and with full clarity: as von Rad puts it,<sup>2</sup> the subject here is '*Deus revelatus*' rather than the '*Deus absconditus*' of so much of the Jacob story.<sup>3</sup> This in many ways, acts as a final comment on the complex relationship of the human and divine: as the Priestly writer makes it clear that through Jacob's life, it is the sovereign act of God which is the decisive factor, not just in determining the course of Jacob's life, but reaching to his countless descendants.

The human story of Jacob is still not over: the following verses, although somewhat disparate, touch on the important theme of land, reminding us that Jacob's relationship with

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 339.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, 338.

<sup>3</sup> God appeared to him [Jacob] again there [at Bethel]...as He had appeared to him 30 years before on his journey thither, -though it was then in a dream, now by daylight in a visible form...The gloom of that day of fear had now brightened into the clear daylight of salvation.' Keil (The Pentateuch, 316-7).

God does not just affect his relationship with other people but also with the land of Canaan (see also 33:18-20) -it is here that Deborah and Rachel are buried, it is here that Jacob travels and spends most of his life, it is the home of the twelve sons, especially of Benjamin. These verses also complete the family story: the drama of Benjamin's birth and Rachel's death, the serene death of Isaac and solemn reunion of his two sons, and then the character of Jacob carries over into the story of his sons.

#### 4.4 Conclusion to ch. 34 and 35

##### 4.4.1 Historical-critical summary

It has been clear that there is a marked change in the narrative with the resolution of the conflict between Jacob and Esau. This can be seen in different ways. From the point of view of the narrative, the plot is not as tightly knit, and despite the problems in ch. 34, the tension has relaxed. Each incident also seems more complete in itself. From the literary-historical point of view, this is probably because of the nature of the material, where varied material has been brought together and worked into the overall pattern. From a literary point of view, the narrator is happy for each part of the whole to preserve its own distinctive voice within the broad sweep of the plot. The plot itself is much looser once the tension between Jacob and Esau has been resolved.

##### 4.4.2 Jacob and God

Despite the diversity of material an overall impression emerges of a change in Jacob. On one level, this change relates to how he is depicted, as he seems more and more to embody Israel both in his conflicts and his religious expression. It is more difficult to judge how Jacob's character might have changed, particularly in the light of Peniel. Certainly, a new character is not consistently worked through all the material. On the one hand, he does seem to have mellowed, and there are no longer any of the great deceptions, and in ch. 35 there is a closer sense of obeying God and receiving his blessing and promise, without any of the past struggles. However, some of this may be for the reason that Jacob's blessing and survival are now secure. If anything we are given the impression that Jacob is simply getting older. Certainly, any changes never overtake the old Jacob, and the fact that his sons, in ch. 34 and later, act in ways similar to the younger Jacob shows that God's grace does not overcome nature. It is for instance interesting that Jacob still keeps his old name (unlike Abram). It would have been much more consistent to change all references to Israel. We can only make intelligent guesses why this did not happen: there remains a slight ambiguity over who or what is Israel -Jacob himself, or the family of Jacob; the narrator is keen to show that Jacob is still in the patriarchal age of promise; Jacob never ceases to be an individual in his own right, and to use the name Israel exclusively would undermine his individuality in a way that the name Abraham did not for Abram; to consistently use the name Israel now would give the impression that it is only the post-Peniel Jacob who represents Israel, whereas the truth

seems more that it is precisely in that paradox of grace working with (and against) flawed human nature and striving that Jacob represents Israel.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore natural that although Jacob might gradually mellow in his old age as he experiences the grace of God and renewed promises and assurances, the process of change is never complete or permanently overwhelming, and he can never rest in the assurance that all his strivings are over - something that remains true to the end of his life.

Finally, the return to Bethel is a clear testimony to the divine in the Jacob story. It both marks Jacob's response of gratitude to the God who has been with him (35:1-8), and God's unambiguous and unsolicited promise and ongoing blessing (35:9-15). These episodes, each in their own way, work retrospectively by looking back over Jacob's life and making it clear that God has been involved; on the other hand, they both look forward, by pointing to the religious practice of Israel, and especially by restating the patriarchal promise and the blessing and accompanying commission.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The name Israel denoted a spiritual state determined by faith; and in Jacob's life the natural state, determined by flesh and blood, still continued to stand side by side with this.' -Keil-Delitzsch (The Pentateuch, 306-7 -repeated in Delitzsch, A New Commentary on Genesis, 214-5)

## CONCLUSION

### 1. Historical-critical conclusion

As remarked in the introduction the Jacob story forms a substantial unity around the theme of flight and return.<sup>1</sup> This involves the Jacob-Esau plot, sandwiched around the Jacob-Laban plot. Into this structure significant episodes have been placed retelling encounters with the divine: as Jacob flees from Esau on his way to Laban, and as he is about to confront Esau on his return. We have seen how both these episodes reflect older traditions, with pre-Yahwistic roots, but are now adapted and part of the Jacob story, throwing a theological perspective over the wider plot. This perspective is also introduced at the very beginning of the story by the oracle and accompanying verses, constructed as an opening to the Jacob story, and the whole story is brought to a conclusion as Jacob returns to Bethel to fulfill his earlier vow. As he does this, so he receives confirmation of his blessing and new name. Nevertheless, we have also argued for a theological interest in the bulk of the narrative material as there are hints or clear indications of the presence of God at several points. Furthermore, because of expectations raised by such points of revelation, the very absence of God in so much of the story is itself a theological issue, adding to the complex picture of how God is present in the life of Jacob. For this reason, to argue that a theological perspective has been superimposed over the human story misses the point.

Regarding more general observations, from the different conclusions reached, and given the measure of caution adopted, it is not possible to reconstruct any straightforward unilinear development of the Jacob story. Overall, however, two contrasting impressions have emerged: that of several distinctive episodes and that of a coherent narrative. As well as the above-mentioned Bethel and Peniel episodes, other passages with older traditions behind the present form would probably include aspects of the opening scenes (25:19-34), the birth of Jacob's sons, the final treaty with Laban, the short note on Mahanaim, ch. 34, as well as several short notes. In addition to this are several points within passages revealing tradition-historical tensions or redactional expansions. In particular, certain passages seem to be written or included to make a comment on an episode or to bring a different perspective: for instance, the verses placed around the story of Jacob's deception of Isaac (26:34-5 and

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 1.

27:46-28:9) offer a different perspective on Jacob's flight, 31:1-43 stands in contrast to 30:25ff, the meeting of the two brothers (ch. 32 and 33) relates to ch. 27, ch. 35 (both vv1-7 and 9-15) relate to the first Bethel incident. Again, these tend to add to the complexity of theological issues.

Despite these marks of distinctiveness, there is an underlying unity which certainly goes further than any particular narrative strata or theme, and which goes much deeper than the explicit references. For instance, the story of Jacob's deception of Isaac is a well constructed unit, understandable in itself, but it also presupposes certain relationships and propels the reader into the long episode in Haran. Likewise the Jacob-Laban episode, which we have had reason to liken to a *Novelle*, involves a long self-contained plot with its own opening and closing scenes, but certain ironies, family connections, as well as depiction of character, are only fully appreciated in a wider context. Whilst there is certainly no evidence of any underlying written or oral cycle for the whole Jacob story as argued by de Pury,<sup>1</sup> there is nevertheless the impression that these episodes have exercised some mutual influence and grown together.<sup>2</sup> How much can be ascribed directly to the free creation of a later writer is difficult to judge, but such a judgement needs to account for the above-mentioned distinctiveness of texts.

In terms of wider views about Pentateuchal criticism, this gives support to the idea that before considering the relation of the Jacob story to any wider context, it needs to be understood in its own right. Thus, for instance, we have seen little evidence of continuous sources running parallel through the story as we have it. The models of Rendtorff and Blum, seeking to do justice to the organic growth of units as they now stand,<sup>3</sup> seem better suited. However, by comparison with Blum, our own observations have shown caution in tracing out the development of texts, and there is a greater underlying unity to the story than his approach often allows.

Furthermore, it does not seem possible to speculate too much about the historical context of any stage of development. Recently, arguments have been put forward for seeing the

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<sup>1</sup> Promesse Divine

<sup>2</sup> See above, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> Such models, as indeed my own approach, might be said to draw on some of the ideas behind supplementary and fragmentary hypotheses, largely eclipsed by the Documentary hypothesis. It would seem at the moment, that no one model or hypothesis can offer a comprehensive solution.

setting of the Jacob story in an oral, semi nomadic context<sup>1</sup>, during the reign of Jeroboam in the Northern kingdom<sup>2</sup>, or during the exile or early post-exilic era.<sup>3</sup> We have already remarked on the lack of evidence for any oral cycle underlying the present literary form and on the distinctive nature of many of the parts of the Jacob story.<sup>4</sup> In response to Blum and especially Van Seters, I have also argued against looking for meaning and setting in supposed historical situations before giving emphasis to literary function and context.

Thus, it is recognized that behind the present unity of the Jacob story there is evidence of earlier traditions and a growing together of material. In addition, other material has been supplemented to provide new perspectives. This includes ch. 31 and the way in which ch. 32 and 33 treat the theme of blessing; it also includes the texts identified as Priestly. We have also argued at several points in the thesis that some awareness of historical development has sharpened our awareness of theological complexity and literary ambiguity in the text, showing that a historical-critical appreciation and a close reading of the present text need not be seen as mutually exclusive tasks. However, this last conclusion has also been conditional upon using these critical tools with caution and sensitivity towards the natural contours of the text.

## 2. The theme of the presence and absence of God

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that the theme of the presence and absence of God offers a valuable way of reading the Jacob story. It may seem self-evident that this theme -and especially that of the contrast of the divine and human -should be so central to a part of Biblical narrative. However, in the Jacob story it takes on a particular complexity and intensity.

In particular, the idea of divine presence and absence cannot be reduced to one individual stratum in the text nor is it represented in any one uniform way. Instead the paradox is worked out in different episodes in different ways. Thus no claim can be made regarding authorship or the intention of any particular writer or redactor. Instead the complexity seems

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<sup>1</sup> de Pury, Promesse Divine

<sup>2</sup> Blum, Komposition der Vätergeschichte

<sup>3</sup> Van Seters, Prologue to History

<sup>4</sup> Above, p. 55, note 3.



to be rooted in the very figure of Jacob himself and the events surrounding him. Images such as Jacob struggling -whether with Esau, Laban or some supernatural being or God himself -lend themselves to this paradox, as does the cunning of Jacob, the reliance on his own methods and trickery. In addition, because of the close connection made between Jacob and Israel, the figure of Jacob lends itself to a reflection on the nature of faith for Israel and its own struggles and fortunes.

At this stage, a little more precision is needed in our use of the word 'theme'. In his work on the Pentateuch,<sup>1</sup> Clines defines the theme of a narrative work in several ways: the conceptualization of plot, the dominating idea in a work, the rationale of its content, structure and development, or an orientation to approaching the work. All of these definitions could apply to the way we have traced the idea of the presence and absence of God. For clearer definition we might argue that in the story of Jacob are found the opposing extremes of the presence of God and the absence of God, that the driving force behind the events concerning Jacob are at times depicted in terms of the divine (guidance and intervention) and at times in terms of the human (physical endeavour, resourcefulness, deception). Clines goes on that 'the best statement of the theme of a work is the statement that most adequately accounts for the content, structure and development of the work.'<sup>2</sup> So far, no claim has been made that the idea of divine presence and absence is the only theme of the Jacob story, and it would be rash to do so, especially as it may well depend upon a wider context, which as Clines points out, includes the Pentateuch as a whole. Nevertheless some brief comparison with other proposed themes may be of help.

To start with the work of Clines, his own proposal for the Pentateuch is as follows: 'The theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfilment -which implies also the partial non-fulfilment -of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs.'<sup>3</sup> Despite the inclusion of the idea of blessing in this definition, it should be noted that to all intents and purposes, Clines concentrates on the idea of promise, especially in the three-fold elements of descendants, relationship and land. Regarding the Jacob story, in an extensive list of formulations he is able to point to 28:13ff and 35:11 for the promise of descendants, 28:13.15 and 35:9ff for the promise of relationship (though he also adds the promise of 'being with' and guidance -28:15, 31:3), and

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<sup>1</sup> The Theme of the Pentateuch, ch. 2.

<sup>2</sup> The Theme of the Pentateuch, 21.

<sup>3</sup> The Theme of the Pentateuch, 29.

28:13.15 and 35:12 for the promise of land. In addition are allusions to the promise (28:3.13ff, 31:5, 31:42, 32:10.13, 35:3, 35:12). In the patriarchal narratives he sees the main focus on the promise of descendants, which is also implied in the motifs of the barrenness of the matriarch (e.g. Rebekah and Rachel) and of endangerment to the life of the heir of promise through fraternal rivalry.<sup>1</sup> In addition we might add references to Jacob dwelling and moving about in the land.

In the Jacob story, the promise clearly is a motif, but it is noticeable that explicit references are limited to the Bethel episodes (ch. 28 and 35). Clines' list makes no mention even of Peniel or the opening scene, despite their importance in the plot. More importantly, Clines' articulation of the theme does not really do justice to the depiction of events in very human terms and to the seeming absence of God, except insofar as these bring into question the fulfilment of the promise and so create a tension. However, in our own reading, we found that this was not the ultimate question raised in the stories themselves. Promise is indeed a motif which helps us to see the Jacob story in the wider patriarchal and even Pentateuchal story, but it does not do justice by itself to the Jacob story in its own right.<sup>2</sup>

A similar but more frequently mentioned motif is that of blessing, and so, for instance, Gross<sup>3</sup> sees Jacob as depicted as a man of blessing more than a man of promise. It is certainly true that this theme is more central to the plot in the Jacob story in its own right, but again the particular twist to the plot is in how the blessing itself leads to conflict, and also how divine blessing is set alongside human machinations and effort (compare ch. 30 and 31): blessing is accompanied by struggle and division.

One further suggestion, made by Coats, is that the theme should be considered to be 'family strife without reconciliation'.<sup>4</sup> Noting that the promise tradition is secondary to the Jacob tradition, Coats sees the above mentioned theme as much more rooted in the plot, both in terms of Jacob-Laban and Jacob-Esau. Certainly, this definition takes account of the plot

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<sup>1</sup> The Theme of the Pentateuch, 45.

<sup>2</sup> Even in terms of the divine side of the Jacob story, account has also to be made of the idea of blessing (see below) and of vow-fulfilment (Richter, 'Das Gelübde als theologische Rahmung.')

<sup>3</sup> 'Jakob, der Mann des Segens'. Gross' work is centred on the Priestly tradition of Jacob. He argues that even P, who generally emphasizes the covenant as the focus of the divine-human relation (Gen. 17, Ex. 6), places the accent on blessing in the case of Jacob. However, in doing this, P is simply reflecting an association already found in the Jacob tradition. Likewise, Westermann, Die Verheißungen an die Väter. Studien zur Vätergeschichte, FRLANT 116, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976, 89.

<sup>4</sup> See especially, 'Strife without reconciliation: a narrative theme in the Jacob traditions.'

itself, and Coats' readings have already been noted<sup>1</sup>, but it was also felt that phrase 'without reconciliation' overstates the case. More importantly, although Coats acknowledges the importance of the theme of blessing,<sup>2</sup> it is left out of his definition of theme. Similarly the incidents at Bethel and Peniel are not really drawn in, and Coats tends to negate the theme of the divine.<sup>3</sup> It would seem therefore that Coats' definition gives expression to a significant part of the human side of our story, but does not consider how this interacts with the divine.<sup>4</sup>

### 3 The presence and absence of God in the Jacob narrative

Returning to the theme offered in this thesis, the reading has tried to do justice to the full scope of the material. In terms of the three episodes considered first, these clearly serve to throw a divine perspective over the whole Jacob story. However, we noted that they also involve the human side of the paradox: in the opening episode, this is expressed in the picture of Jacob grasping at his brother's heel, and in the juxtaposing of the oracle -itself giving rise to as many questions as answers to Rebekah's enquiry -with Jacob's attempt to wrest the birthright by deception. Bethel contains a clear, unambiguous divine revelation, but the incident sharpens in significance when seen in the context of Jacob's situation and in the expectations it raises for the next episode. Furthermore the vow made by Jacob in response arguably reveals his own bargaining nature. Peniel is full of ambiguity and makes the connection between human and divine in a very explicit way, offering a commentary on the wider story and making a link to Israel.

After this, a reading of the wider story showed how these above incidents shed light on the other events but also how the story itself raises the issue of divine presence and absence. For

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 180-1 and p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance his concluding remarks, ('Strife without reconciliation', 106).

<sup>3</sup> See above, p. 180-1.

<sup>4</sup> A similar definition to that of Coats which takes account of the divine is that of T. W. Mann ('"All the Families of the Earth" The Theological Unity of Genesis.' *Int* 45 (1991), 341): 'Genesis is a book about dysfunctional families and the way in which God seeks to use those families as agents of divine grace to "all the families of the earth". ' My own definition is close to this, except that interest is in the person of Jacob as an individual as well as in his family relations. Furthermore, it is not so much the family as a whole which is used by God but an individual within it. Mann's reading seems to suggest that if the family members all got on together, then there would be no problem. It does not account for the tricky question of how much the divine vocation contributes to the problems of the family and the individual.

instance, the whole drama of ch. 27 revolves around how Jacob is to know what he should do in the absence of any divine guidance and around the very human circumstances in which divine blessing is communicated. Whilst Jacob goes on to Laban, God seems to have remained at Bethel and the two cunning protagonists are left to out-trick each other. When Jacob finds himself on the receiving end of a deception, we are also left to wonder what sort of law may be in operation. Moreover, it is now, in the bleakest of circumstances, that Israel's descendants are born, with God evoked by both mothers in very ambivalent terms. But then, out of the blue, God speaks, recalling Bethel (31:3), and effecting the turning point: events are brought to a swift conclusion and we are even forced to reassess the previous events in a very puzzling way. Jacob's return to his homeland and to his estranged brother is a masterpiece of tension but also of balance of the human and the divine, so that when Jacob sees Esau and is spared, he can indeed say that it is like seeing God face to face. The following episode in ch. 34 may sit a little uneasily in its context but we can see a questioning of appropriate behaviour in the light of the Torah and Israel's exclusive covenant. Again we see how divine guidance and the story of promise are worked out amidst human shortcomings and difficult choices. Finally, Jacob returns to Bethel, the place of divine promise and human vow. As in the previous chapter, we see how Jacob and his family are moving into the age of later Israel, and in the final verses (vv9-15) God's blessing and the giving of a new name are confirmed in an unambiguous light: to repeat the observation of von Rad, *Deus absconditus* is now *Deus revelatus*.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, this theme of divine presence and absence does justice to the context of the story of Jacob within the Pentateuch and as Israel's story. It enables us to read the text theologically without having to resort to appending theological conclusions or homiletic reflections to the more scholarly respectable historical or literary exegesis. The text itself has proved to be the result of a process of profound theological reflection, and so to evoke the term of 'canonical' or 'final form' is not to somehow impose a foreign concept onto this material. In particular, we have seen how we are encouraged to make connections with the life and faith of Israel. That this should be so, is evident since it is to Jacob that the name Israel is given, and that it is in the very manner of the giving of the name that Israel can see its own struggles and questions, and its own experience of divine presence and absence.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 388.

Thus, we have often noted how Jacob is both a figure of promise and a type for Israel. We have also noted that for all the recognition of a difference between the religious expression of the patriarch and that of later Israel, it is indeed YHWH, the God of Israel, that Jacob has encountered.

To conclude: the Jacob story is the story of divine presence and absence, God's prompting and guidance working through, and sometimes counter to, human striving and effort. To read the story in this light does justice to the text in its historical depth, in its final form, and in its place in the canon of Christian and Jewish scriptures.

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