



Inner-Biblical Interpretation

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INTRODUCTION

Inner-biblical interpretation is the light that one biblical text casts onto another – whether to solve a problem within the interpreted text or to adapt the interpreted text to the beliefs and ideas of the interpreter. The interpreting text may stand far from the interpreted text, or be next to it, or may even be incorporated within it. Not always does a text function solely as the interpreting or as the interpreted one: sometimes the two will mutually interpret one another. In this chapter, we look at the phenomenon of inner-biblical interpretation through the example of one story, Genesis 27, the tale of Jacob deceiving his father, Isaac, in order to receive the blessing that Isaac had intended for Esau, Jacob's brother and Isaac's firstborn – and the many interpretations of that story that we find inside the Hebrew Bible.

Before turning our attention to the story and its interpretations, let us consider more fully the phenomenon of inner-biblical interpretation. There are both *overt* and *covert* types of inner-biblical interpretation. Examples of overt interpretation, in which a text openly refers to another well-known text, are found – to name a few examples – in Chronicles' paraphrase of the historiographic literature; in the way in which the writer of the historical psalm, Psalm 78, treats its Pentateuchal sources; and even in the way the law of the Hebrew slave in the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21:2–11) is interpreted in Deuteronomy 15:12–18.¹ The covert type of inner-biblical interpretation is more difficult to discern. To detect this type of interpretation, the reader must be alert and sensitive to allusions planted by writers, editors, compilers, and annotators who embedded a literary unit in a certain place or who placed it within or juxtaposed it to another unit in order to cast the latter in new light.

¹ See Y. Zakovitch, *Introduction to Inner-Biblical Interpretation* [in Hebrew] (Even-Yehuda: Reches Publishing, 1992).

That the Bible is embedded with interpretation was not unrecognized by previous generations of scholars (even when they did not use the term *inner-biblical interpretation*). Usually, however, these researchers limited themselves to observations about particular aspects, their focus denying them the scope necessary to present the entire picture.² Biblical scholarship waited for the insightful architect who might raise the edifice of inner-biblical interpretation in all its manifestations, who would determine its various divisions and categories. Such a scholar was Michael Fishbane, in his book, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*.³ The book is divided into four parts: "Scribal Comments and Corrections," "Legal Exegesis," "Aggadic Exegesis," and "Mantological Exegesis." Each part describes one realm of overt and covert interpretation and points to sociohistorical forces that characterized the types of interpretation in the different periods. Fishbane's book is important for the threads that run through all four of the parts.⁴

The book equips readers with tools for identifying typical forms of inner-biblical exegesis, a welcome outcome because objectivity must always be striven for in this matter. When we are able to isolate exegetical elements – whether they are opening formulae or terms that are typical of interpretation, techniques of citation, or insertions or allusions to interpreted texts within the interpreting texts – we are better able to understand the interpretative process. Fishbane does not view the exegetical work as a purely literary phenomenon but rather as reflecting and expressing history and ideology. Interpretation is always relevant and current – an expression of the needs and problems of a generation. Fishbane tries to determine the *Sitz im Leben* of each interpretative type, identifying who created it and in what sociohistorical circumstances it was created.

Fishbane's book is significant for its exploration of the relationship between inner-biblical interpretation and postbiblical interpretation that appears at

² See, e.g., H. W. Hertzberg, "Die Nachgeschichte alttestamentlicher Texte in nerhalb des Alten Testament," in *Werden und Wesen des Alten Testaments*, eds. P. Volz, F. Stummer, and J. Hempel (Berlin: Töpelman, 1936), 110–21; I. L. Seeligmann, "Voraussetzungen der Midraschexegese" and "Anfänge der Midraschexegese in der Chronik," in *Gesammelte Studien zur Hebräischen Bibel*, ed. E. Blum (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 1–54; H. L. Ginzberg, "Daniel" (addition to entry) [in Hebrew], *Encyclopaedia Miqra'it*, 2.949–52; M. Z. Segal, *The Interpretation of the Bible* [in Hebrew] (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1971), 5–7; N. Sarna, "Psalm 89: A Study in Inner Biblical Exegesis," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 29–46, 37–52; F. F. Bruce, "The Earliest Old Testament Interpretation," in *The Witness of Tradition*, ed. M. A. Beek (Oudtestamentische Studien 17; Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1972), 37–52; and J. Weingreen, *From Bible to Mishna: The Continuity of Tradition* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1976).

³ Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.

⁴ On the strengths and weaknesses of Fishbane's book, see Y. Zakovitch, "The Variegated Faces of Inner-Biblical Interpretation" [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 56 (1987), 136–43.

Qumran (in the *pesharim* literature) and in the various formulations of rabbinic literature, both in *halakha* and *aggadah*. Recognition of this relationship leads to a better understanding of biblical literature: the clear and visible path of interpretation in rabbinic literature helps uncover the covert beginnings of the interpretative process in the Bible. An awareness of this relationship helps us to better understand postbiblical literature and its history as well: exegetical techniques that formerly were perhaps viewed as having been borrowed from the philological schools of Alexandria indeed can be found in the basement of our own home, in the Bible. The biblical corpus contains parallels both to forms of *halakhic* Midrash (e.g., in instances of harmonizations within biblical law codes) and to the ways in which the writers of the Mishnah worked (e.g., the pledge in Nehemiah 10). In writings composed in the period between the Bible and rabbinic literature, one finds correspondences with these two types of *halakhic* interpretation, as can be seen in a comparison of the methods employed in the Temple Scroll on the one hand and the Damascus Document on the other.

Likewise, the Bible was not fashioned *ex nihilo*, and Fishbane emphasizes the relationships between biblical literature and the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East. This relationship is apparent in both the smallest details (e.g., glosses of scribes) as well as larger matters (e.g., datings of prophecies).

In my book, *Introduction to Inner-Biblical Interpretation*,⁵ I further widened the scope, addressing the following topics: the beginnings of inner-biblical interpretation; interpretative comments and interpolations; juxtaposition as a tool for interpretation; double stories interpreting one another; interpretation within the redactional work; stories in circles of interpretation; biblical poetry interpreting biblical narrative; biblical speeches interpreting biblical narrative; the interpretation of biblical law within the law itself; the interpretation of a law within other biblical law codes; the interpretation of biblical law in nonlegalistic material; the interpretation of biblical sayings in biblical narratives and prophecies; the interpretation of biblical sayings within the book of Proverbs; the book of Chronicles as a commentary; and motives for interpretation. The book's final chapter provides readers with an "appetizer" for the volume that I recently published, *Inner-Biblical and Extra-Biblical Midrash and the Relationship between Them*.⁶

⁵ See n. 1.

⁶ Y. Zakovitch, *Inner-Biblical and Extra-Biblical Midrash and the Relationship between Them* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2009). Important contributions that broaden the discussion on the world of inner-biblical interpretation have been made in recent decades, including G. Vermes, "Bible and Midrash: Early Old Testament Exegesis," in idem, *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies*, 59–91 (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1975); J. L. Kugel and R. A. Grier, *Early Biblical*

Interpretation is a creative act in the fullest sense, which makes the distinction among writers, editors, compilers, and interpreters difficult and artificial. The editor is an interpreter; so also is the writer who interprets one story by writing another and placing it next to the one it interprets. A writer who adds to an already existent work is a writer–interpreter. These titles do not preclude the writer–interpreter from also being an editor (or one of a series of editors) of a story cycle or a biblical book.

The Bible's profusion of interpretative strategies testifies to its being a branching network of relationships that connect distant texts, binding them to one another. Writings from different historical periods and a variety of literary genres call out and interpret one another, with the interpreted texts being reflected back – somewhat altered – from a multitude of mirrors. Poets interpret stories, storytellers interpret poetry, and prophets interpret the Pentateuch. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration when I propose that no literary unit in the Bible stands alone, isolated and independent, with no other text drawing from its reservoir and casting it in a new light. When we turn our attention to the interpretative relationships among different literary units, we actually address issues of intertextuality, a topic much dealt with in modern literary criticism.⁷ In a similar way, it is worthwhile to view our approach also as an expression of canonical interpretation.⁸ The relationships that are revealed push the reader to understand the meaning and strength of the conversations that exist among different literary units, conversations that cross the boundaries between books included in the biblical canon, which – despite its comprising elements of various genres and types – is perceived as a unified whole.

CANON, CONTEXT, AND MIDRASHIC INTERPRETATION

It is worth reflecting on the meaning of *canon*, a term used already by the *rhetors* of Alexandria to refer to a list of classical, authoritative writings.⁹

Interpretation (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986); B. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture, Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986).

⁷ For expressions of this phenomenon in the Bible, see, e.g., the following collections: *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Iersel*, ed. S. Draisma (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok, 1989); *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. D. N. Fewell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992); and *Intertextuality and the Bible*, eds. G. Aichele and G. A. Phillips (*Semeia* 69/70; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995).

⁸ The champion of canonical interpretation is B. S. Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), esp. pp. 46–106. Childs gave expression to this approach in his commentary on Isaiah: B. S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

⁹ See M. Haran, *The Biblical Collection. Its Consolidation to the End of the Second Temple Times and Changes of Form to the End of the Middle Ages*, Part 1 [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1996), 25.

First and foremost, *canon* signifies a community's set of classical books, a collection that crystallized over time and became fixed.¹⁰ *Canon* signifies a body of literature toward which its readers are not ambivalent; literature that people will be ashamed to admit that they have not read or studied; literature that has left its imprint on other writings that were written within the same community; literature that its readers read also through the eyes of others who interpreted it, directly or indirectly, in their own writings. It is a literature that attained its status slowly, in an extended process that, for the most part, was hidden and that functions as a shared cultural platform for the members of the community and as the foundation of its historical-cultural memory. In Descartes' well-known dictum, "I think, therefore I am," we make a slight change: "I remember, therefore I am." A society's literary canon is what secures it from oblivion; it is what protects it against erosion and loss.

When a canon consists of the sacred writings of a group of believers, it becomes fortified with recognized boundaries: the identities of the texts' authors are obscured or the texts are attributed to ideal figures from the distant past, whereas the text derives its particular validation from its comprising a divine truth. Hence, its authority in the eyes of the believers is absolute.¹¹ It was in this way that the term functioned in the early Church; it is a term that binds together the authoritative collection that is Scripture.¹²

Readers who have knowledge of the canon, who are well versed in its writings and sensitive enough to recognize the network of connections that crisscrosses within it, will be aware of the exegetical role of the connections between a unit and the allusions to it, whether they are in the same book or in other biblical books. This brings up the important issue of identifying the micro-environments within the canon.

Whenever we want to interpret a biblical narrative, we find ourselves facing the challenge of determining its borders and context: is the narrative an independent literary unit that should be understood without connection to its literary context, or was it written, from the start, as part of a larger cycle of stories onto which it casts its light and from which it receives light? This question must be asked in the course of analyzing each and every biblical narrative. No single answer exists for all.

In addition to these possibilities – of an independent narrative and one dependent on others – there is a third that lies somewhere between the two: a story that was originally independent but that at some point in its transmission, whether still in an oral stage or already in the written stage,

¹⁰ Seeligmann, "Voraussetzungen der Midrashexegese," 151.

¹¹ Haran, *Biblical Collection*, 23.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

became embedded into a broader literary complex that promotes a different idea than the isolated story. In this way, the story comes to hold two meanings. Its effect as an isolated stone is not its effect as part of the multijeweled necklace. In such a case, the meaning of the story that is imparted by the redactor may seem to depart from what we call *peshat* and enter more into the realm of *midrash*. Let us examine these terms.

Peshat, as Sarah Kamin explained, is "the elucidation of a verse by way of its language, syntax, context, literary genre and structure, while taking into account the reciprocal relations between the various elements. In other words, an interpretation following the *peshat* is one that takes into consideration the mix of linguistic elements and grants to each one a meaning according to the whole."¹³ An important component was added to the definition by Yonah Fraenkel, who determined that the interpreter of the *peshat* "does not wish to be novel, but to reveal the original, that which was in the past."¹⁴

What is the meaning of *midrash*? The noun appears twice in the Bible, both in Chronicles: "The other events of Abijah's reign, his conduct and his acts, are recorded in the story [*midrash*] of the prophet Iddo" (2 Chronicles 13:22); and "As to his sons, and the many pronouncements against him, and his rebuilding of the House of God, they are recorded in the story [*midrash*] in the book of the kings . . ." (2 Chronicles 24:27). The Septuagint to Chronicles translated the term *midrash* in the first case with *bibliōn* (book) and in the second with *graphēi* (writing). Several manuscripts of the Hexapla, however, translate the word in 2 Chronicles 13:22 with *enzeiteisis* (inquiry, study), exactly as *lidroś* (the verb from the same root as *midrash*) was translated in the Septuagint to Ezra 7:10: "For Ezra had dedicated himself to study the Teaching of the LORD and to observe it, and to teach laws and rules to Israel."¹⁵

The root *d-r-š*, Avi Hurvitz has shown, was increasingly used in the Second Temple period for the study and investigation of the Torah, such as in the late Psalm 119 where one finds the expressions: "for I have *studied* your precepts" (vv. 45, 94), "for they have not *studied* your laws" (v. 155).¹⁶ This contrasts with the earlier use of the root, which conveyed the sense "to seek," as we find in prophetic literature: "They have not *sought* the LORD" (Isaiah 31:1; Jeremiah

¹³ S. Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization in Respect to the Distinction between Peshat and Derash* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), 14.

¹⁴ Y. Fraenkel, *The Ways of the Aggadah and the Midrash* [in Hebrew] (Givatayim, Israel: Yad la-Talmud, 1991).

¹⁵ S. Liebermann, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), 15.

¹⁶ A. Hurvitz, *The Transition Period in Biblical Hebrew* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1972), 131–4.

10:21). The noun *midrash* appears also in Ben Sira (“in my house of *study*”; 51:23).¹⁷

In its paraphrase of the verse in Deuteronomy 6:17 (“Be sure to observe [*šamor tišm^erun*] the commandments . . . of the LORD your God”), 1 Chronicles 28:8 states: “Observe and study [*šimru w^ediršu*] all the commandments of the LORD your God.” In contrast to Joshua 1:8, “Let not this Book of the Law cease from your lips but recite it day and night,” Qumran’s Community Rule 6:6 reads: “Let not cease . . . a man from studying [*doreš*] the Law day and night” – that is, a man who is studying, inquiring, and interpreting the Torah. Also the noun *midrash*, in the sense of “the study of the law,” appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls. This meaning of *d-r-š* seems also to appear in Isaiah 34:16: “*Study* the Book of the LORD and read.”

How should *midrash* be defined? Shinan and I wrote:¹⁸

Midrash is a mode of approaching a text – derived from a religious world view and motivated by various needs (historical, moral, literary, etc.) – which enables and encourages multiple and even contradictory meanings to be discovered in the text, while the intention of its author(s) is perceived as elusive. . . .

Midrash became of particular significance when all channels of direct communication with God were considered blocked. In the rabbinic period, it was believed that prophecy had ceased,¹⁹ the Urim and Thummim were hidden and even a heavenly voice [*bat-qol*] was not to be relied upon.²⁰ The text, then, becomes the only avenue to knowledge about God’s will and demands upon man. Reading and rereading this text in many different ways, and revealing its innumerable twists and turns, became a religious task of central importance to one’s life. The well-known saying regarding the Torah (*m. ’Abot* 5:22), “turn it and turn it again,” expresses this task in its essence. “For everything is in it,” the second half of this maxim, emphasizes that Scripture always has relevance for the present; hence, to give but a few examples, midrashic interpretations even claim that Christianity and the fall of Byzantium are mentioned in the Bible. . . .

[In midrash] it is believed that everything one reveals in the text is true and has been valid from the text’s inception. This is why midrash does not involve any drive toward finding the one original meaning of the text. The interpreter never invents new truths, he only finds existing ones. Moses at

¹⁷ M. Z. Segal, *The Book of Ben Sira* [in Hebrew] (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Bialik, 1958), 362.

¹⁸ A. Shinan and Y. Zakovitch, “Midrash on Scripture and Midrash within Scripture,” in *Studies in Bible*, ed. S. Japhet (*Scripta Hierosolymitana* 31; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), 258–61. On rabbinic midrash, see Chapter 6 by Dina Stein in this volume.

¹⁹ See E. E. Urbach, “When Did Prophecy Cease?” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 17 (1945), 1–11.

²⁰ See Liebermann, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 194–9.

Sinai was told all that students of Scripture will ever learn: “And even what a faithful disciple would in the future say in the presence of his master, was communicated to Moses in Sinai” (*Leviticus Rabbah* 22:1). . . .

Midrash has boundaries of tolerance which change with shifts in religious or philosophical values. The kabbalist midrashist, for instance, finds his conception of the upper *sefirot* in the word *bereshit* in Genesis 1:1 (by dividing it into two: *bara’* and *šit* = “created the six [*sefirot*]”),²¹ while the Christian midrashist finds in the very same sentence, “the Son” (*bara’*).²²

Let me be clear: the midrashic dimensions of inner-biblical interpretation do not make it irrelevant to modern practitioners of biblical criticism. On the contrary, it is critical that modern scholars of the Bible are familiar with the modes of inner-biblical interpretation – modes that we detect in the very formation and compilation of biblical literature. Indeed, the skills of biblical criticism, a field based on the rules of philology, are a prerequisite for determining the boundaries of literary units and for detecting additions and sorting out duplications, contradictions, and all the other difficulties that arise.

When applied to ancient interpretation, either biblical or extrabiblical, the distinction between *peshat* and *midrash* is anachronistic. Even when one finds in the vast “ocean” of ancient exegesis interpretations that agree with the concept of *peshat*, they are but one “drop,” and their authors did not intend to confer on these interpretations exclusive or primary status.

A word about source criticism and its relationship to inner-biblical interpretation is in order.²³ Philological–historical research discerned the different sources from which the Torah was constructed. In the book of Genesis in general and in the Jacob cycle in particular, one may trace three sources, J, E, and P, which sometimes duplicate and sometimes contradict one another. Some source critics wrongly ignore the interrelationships among the sources. These sources are not autistic writings, existing in splendid isolation one from the other, but rather relate to, polemicize against, and interpret one another. In this chapter, we see how – more than once – E interprets J and how P interprets both J and E.

Separating the combined whole into the basic elements makes it possible to view and evaluate the character and sense of each part, yet we have an interest in the mixture as it is because that is the finished product, the real

²¹ See M. M. Kasher, *Torah Shelemah* (Jerusalem: Bet Torah Shelemah, 1927), 1.14 nos. 57, 59, 60, 61, and 62 (all quoted from the *Zohar*).

²² For an interesting example, see A. Diez Macho, *Neophyti 1* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1968), 3.

²³ On source criticism, see Chapter 3 by Robert Kawashima in this volume.

and the certain. This wondrous, artistic mosaic was not created accidentally, like cards randomly dealt. Biblical criticism, therefore, may not excuse itself from examining the creative–exegetical process by which texts became fused together or from following the process by which the whole complex came into being.

To conclude this introduction, I add that it is hardly surprising to find that a story from Genesis, in particular, has multiple echoes and interpretations in biblical literature, because the book of Genesis is a sort of “table of contents” or “genetic code” for the Bible. Many of the Bible’s writers were drawn almost magnetically to the Genesis stories, as though to a prototype from which they could mold their stories and thereby make possible and encourage comparisons between their newly created text and this already well-known work.

CIRCLES OF INTERPRETATION: JACOB’S DECEPTION OF ISAAC (GENESIS 27)

Genesis 27:1–45 provoked a surfeit of interpretations due to its discomfiting storyline. One cannot help but acknowledge Jacob’s deceitfulness in the blatant lie with which he answers his father’s request to identify himself: “Which of my sons are you? . . . I am Esau, your firstborn” (vv. 18–19). Isaac later confesses to Esau, his firstborn, that “your brother came with guile and took away your blessing” (v. 35).

Already in the chapter, we detect two distinct and conflicting forces at work: on the one hand, Jacob’s transgression is openly recognized (as in the verses just quoted); on the other hand, we find attempts to justify Jacob, to find extenuating circumstances that will ease our judgment of him. These tendencies can also be traced in the circles of interpretation that radiate out from the story.

We can point to two reasons that the Bible admits Jacob’s sin. First, oral tales of Jacob’s trickery and fraud were already well known. As mentioned previously, biblical stories were not created *ex nihilo* from the imaginations of writers. Most biblical stories represent adaptations of oral traditions, traditions that were modified to suit the interests of the writers. Yet, motifs appropriate for tales told in secular contexts do not necessarily fit a religious context that seeks to engage readers with a writer’s beliefs and ideas. Indeed, the beginnings of interpretation lie in this process of coping with prior oral traditions. That said, writers tended to adapt popular traditions by making only minimal changes and interpretations. On the one hand, they wanted to elevate the traditions to their own religious worldview. On the other hand, they tried to preserve the maximal resemblance to the source story to gain the

trust of the reader, who was familiar with the original story. The balance struck by these writers as they carefully tread between preservation and innovation is an interpretative process that imparted new meaning to the old traditions.

The method followed by these writers was one of covert polemics. Avoiding any overt opposition to the popular traditions, they wrote the stories in a way that both expressed their disagreement with them and offered an alternative that would be accepted by readers.²⁴ In our case, Jacob of the oral traditions represented the archetypal trickster – cunning and wise – whose exploits produced endless laughter among listeners. Any attempt to completely alter that image by denying Jacob’s trickery would have been pointless. Readers aware of the oral tradition about Jacob the trickster would not have accepted a story that erased that dimension of the patriarch’s character.

The second reason for admitting Jacob’s misdeeds has to do with the character of biblical literature from the First Temple period. That literature, we find, avoids providing readers with perfect heroes: what can we mortals learn from heroes who possess no speck of wrongdoing? On the contrary: only characters that have sinned, atoned for their mistakes, and changed their behavior can provide models for us. Only from the experiences of such imperfect, human heroes can we comprehend the moral fallibility of humans and the mysterious workings of God in human affairs. Moreover, characters who transgress, make amends, and learn from their sins provide more depth and interest than those who tread only the virtuous path. We are able to identify and empathize with flawed, complex figures.

Some of the classical rabbis emphasized that the Bible neither suppresses unpleasant stories about its heroes nor tries to beautify their image:

Two good leaders stood for Israel: Moses and David, King of Israel. Moses said before the Holy One, blessed be He: “Master of the world, Let the transgression that I committed be recorded [in the Torah], so that people will not say it seems that Moses wrote falsely in the Torah or that he said something that he was not commanded. . . .” David spoke before [God], “A transgression that I have committed should not be written.” God said to him: “It is not worthy of you that people will say, ‘because He loved him He forgave him.’” (*Sifre Deuteronomy Va-²ethanan 26*)²⁵

With this text, the rabbis wanted to make clear that the Bible always revealed a hero’s transgressions – even when describing the greatest of heroes, David,

²⁴ For examples of covert polemics and ways for reconstructing the ancient traditions against which the biblical stories polemicalized, see A. Shinan and Y. Zakovitch, *When Women Seduced the Gods and Other Stories the Bible Doesn’t Want Us to Know* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, in press).

²⁵ Cf. *b. Sanhedrin 97a*.

who himself wished to hide them. The origin of this idea, I think, must be explained against the backdrop of skeptics, who assumed that the Bible sometimes stifled unflattering traditions.

Evidence for the existence of these skeptics is found in the argument between Rabbi Yossi ben Halafta and a Roman matron:²⁶

One matron asked Rabbi Yossi and she said to him: "Joseph was seventeen years old and was in full heat [i.e., was filled with youthful desires] and he would have done this thing [i.e., run from the house of the Potiphar's wife]?" He brought before her the book of Genesis and began reading to her the story of Reuben and Bilhah, the story of Judah and Tamar; he said to her, "Regarding those who were already adults and under the authority of their father, the Bible doesn't cover what they have done, all the more so one who is young and on his own." (*Genesis Rabbah* 87:8).²⁷

The significance of this dispute is clear: coverups meant untruths on the part of the Pentateuch.

An opposite tendency in the Bible's narration and interpretation of Genesis 27 was to cleanse Jacob's image of wrongdoing. This tendency stemmed from the need to relate the well-known tale while discouraging readers from identifying with the hero's deceitful acts, to tell an entertaining story but not imply that cheating is tolerated or that disingenuous behavior would be rewarded. Let us turn to this second tendency.

JUSTIFYING JACOB

Chapter 27:1–45 (attributed to J) presents a Jacob who has been partially vindicated. The reason for Isaac's desire to bless the firstborn Esau is his craving for meat: "Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing" (v. 4). Isaac is ready to seal the fate of his sons and descendants for generations (as becomes apparent from the blessing, vv. 28–29), all for the satisfaction of his most basic physical needs: taste and smell (v. 27).

A further way in which the writer absolves Jacob from responsibility is to focus on Rebekah, Jacob's mother. The storyteller emphasizes that it was Rebekah – and not Jacob – who initiates the deception. It is Rebekah who loves Jacob (v. 6ff) and who commands him to listen to her and obey her words (v. 8). Just as Esau must carry out the bidding of their father, who loves him, so must Jacob carry out the requests of their mother. When Jacob hesitates

²⁶ See J. Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), 18.

²⁷ Cf. *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Genesis, p. 665.

(vv. 11–12), Rebekah urges him on, expressing her readiness to take her husband's curse onto herself if he discovers the duplicity. She presses Jacob, "Just do as I say and go fetch them for me" – "for me," she says, not "for you" (v. 13)! Rebekah plans the stratagem and plays an active role in carrying it out:

... and his mother prepared a dish. . . . Rebekah then took the best clothes of her older son Esau, which were there in the house, and had her younger son Jacob put them on; and she covered his hands and the hairless part of his neck with the skins of the kids. Then she put in the hands of her son Jacob the dish and the bread that she had prepared. (vv. 13–17)

Rebekah leaves no room for Jacob to falter. She dresses him (!) in his disguise and places into his hands the food that he will take to his father as part of the impersonation. The reader is left with the impression that if only she could, Rebekah would have gone to Isaac instead of her son. The writer refers to Jacob as "her younger son," reminding us of Jacob's powerlessness and dependence on his mother, who made all the decisions and who performed all the necessary preparations.²⁸

At the story's end, Rebekah tries to disassociate herself from the scheme when she instructs Jacob to stay away until Esau "forgets what you have done to him" (v. 45) – "you" and not "I"! However, the reader is already aware of the degree to which Rebekah is responsible, and Rebekah will be punished for her scheming: when Jacob later returns from Haran, he will not meet his mother. She who thought that the separation from her son would last "a few days" (v. 44) will never see him again, and it is certainly ironic that Isaac, the father who is certain that he will soon die (v. 4), will still be alive to meet Jacob when he returns (35:27).

The words "a few days" return in chapter 29: "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him *like a few days* because of his love for her" (v. 20). But Jacob's servitude in Laban's house will extend even beyond those seven years, to twenty. The repetition of Rebekah's words, "a few days," again inserts irony: her "few days" have now become seven years and will indeed turn out to be many more.

Another way that Jacob is made acceptable to the reader is by discrediting Esau, thereby presenting Esau as undeserving of the blessing. This method can be found at the end of chapter 26 in verses 34–35, which derive from a different literary document (P) and were added as a prelude to our story specifically to appraise readers of Esau's having taken two Canaanite wives who "were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah." In marrying these women, the

²⁸ See M. Buber, *The Way of the Bible* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1964), 291.

author of these verses asserts, Esau proved himself to be an unworthy successor of his forefathers. These two verses, together with ten others (also from P) that were added at the end of our story (Genesis 27:46–28:9), effectively create a frame around the story of the stealing of the blessing. In the verses added at the end of the story, Rebekah expresses her fear that Jacob will follow in Esau's footsteps and take Canaanite wives as well: "I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?" (Genesis 27:46). Isaac now sends his younger son to Paddan-aram to find a wife from among the daughters of Laban (Genesis 28:1–2). Jacob's departure from the land of Canaan, according to these verses, no longer results from a need to escape his brother's wrath but rather from the praiseworthy desire to find a wife from among his family – the same family from which his father and grandfather had found their wives.

In fact, the additional ten verses do even more to change our reading of Jacob's behavior. Whereas in the main narrative, it is through trickery that Jacob receives the blessing that was meant for his brother, in these verses, Isaac intentionally blesses his younger son:

Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. . . . May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which God assigned to Abraham. (Genesis 28:1–4)

This time, Isaac blesses Jacob with the most supreme blessing, "the blessing of Abraham" – undoubtedly superior to the blessing that had been meant for Esau (and which Isaac only accidentally gave to Jacob). These verses firmly assert that in any case, Isaac intended the more important blessing for Jacob, that which contains the blessing of the inheritance of the land of Israel.

For other ways in which Jacob is vindicated, we must leave the story and move outward to the broader circle, back to the preceding story about Jacob's buying the birthright from Esau (Genesis 25:27–34; J). Here, we find Isaac paying the price of Jacob's vindication. At the story's beginning, we find an asymmetry in the characterization of the brothers:

Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. (25:28)

The verse foreshadows our story because it explains the parents' subsequent behavior toward their sons. It gives no reason for Rebekah's love for Jacob,

which is unrestricted and unqualified, whereas Isaac's love for Esau is conditional, depending on the substantial food supplies that Esau brings him. In this way, the narrator succeeds in heightening our esteem for Jacob (and Rebekah); lowering our estimation of Esau (and Isaac); and putting the subsequent scene, Genesis 27, in a broader context.

The story of the selling of the birthright also relates to the etymology of Jacob's name that is voiced by Esau in our story, when he complains about the stealing of both the birthright and the blessing: "Was he, then, named Jacob that he might cheat me these two times? First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing!" (Genesis 27:36). The reader, of course, recalls how in the story of the birthright, Esau expressed no interest whatsoever in his future, or even in what would follow the immediate moment, when he said, "I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?" (Genesis 25:32). The biblical narrator closes the birthright story with an unambiguous declaration of Esau's contempt for his birthright: "Thus did Esau spurn the birthright" (Genesis 25:34). The reader cannot help but appreciate the significance of these two expressions of Esau's scorn: we do not so easily disregard Esau's derision of his birthright, now that he has satisfied his hunger and thirst and is no longer reacting only to his bodily needs. As a result of this small story, Esau's complaint in Genesis 27:36 sounds more like that of a whiny boy: because he already completely renounced his birthright in chapter 25, we are not particularly sympathetic to his complaint about Jacob after the stealing of the blessing.

Moreover, in the story of the birthright, Esau is depicted like his father, as a materialistic man whose sole interest lies in the immediate satisfaction of his most earthly needs and physical desires: "Stuff me with that red stuff, for I am famished" (v. 30). The imperative "stuff me [*hal'itēni*]" is a *hapax legomenon*. In rabbinic literature, the word is used in reference to feeding animals (*m. Shabbat* 24:3); Esau's use of it in reference to himself betrays his animal nature. Even after Jacob satisfies his brother's physical needs by feeding him, Esau's crude behavior is still emphasized by the quick succession of verbs that describe his impulsivity and proclivity to act without forethought: "he ate and drank and rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright."²⁹

TAMING THE NAME

Esau's etymology of the name Jacob (Genesis 27:36), which is interpreted as deriving from 'aqob ("deceitful, treacherous"), differs from the official

²⁹ See R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 42–5.

name derivation that is given in the birth story, which relates the name to 'aqeb, "heel": "his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau" (Genesis 25:26). In fact, Esau's explanation of Jacob's name may reflect its original interpretation. Other echoes of this same derivation can be found in the Bible's peripheral books, which often preserve traditions that were rejected from the center. Such is the birth tradition in Hosea: "In the womb he cheated ('aqab) his brother" (Hosea 12:5).³⁰

Another prophecy in the periphery, this one in Jeremiah 9:3–5, also preserves this ancient interpretation of Jacob's name:

Beware, every man of his friend!
Trust not even a brother!
For every brother cheats ('aqob ya'aqob)
Every friend is base in his dealings
One man deceives the other,
They will not speak truth;
They have taught themselves to lie
They wear themselves out working iniquity
You dwell in the midst of deceit
In their deceit, they refuse to heed Me, declares the LORD.

Wanting to show the extent to which iniquity has become widespread among the people, Jeremiah calls forth the memory of the story of Jacob and Esau. It is not enough to protect yourself from friends, he warns: even brothers cannot be trusted. In these verses, which have a chiastic structure, it is the brother and not the friend who cheats the other, just like the nation's forefather did when he cheated his brother.³¹

Another verse in Jeremiah proves that the tradition about Jacob cheating his brother was known to both the prophet and his audience (because he would not allude to a story that did not awaken associations among his listeners): "Most devious ['aqob] is the heart; it is perverse – who can fathom it? I the LORD probe the heart, search the mind – to repay every man for his conduct according to his deeds" (Jeremiah 17:9–10). Although Jeremiah does not speak about Jacob, the use of the root 'q-b is no coincidence. It is clear that he wrote

³⁰ Hosea also may preserve the more ancient tradition of the birth, according to which Jacob cheats Esau already inside their mother's womb, and he emerges first (similar to the story about Perez and Zerah in Genesis 38:27–30). See Shinan and Zakovitch, *When Women Seduced the Gods*. Hosea 12 preserves a number of ancient traditions about the patriarch Jacob.

³¹ N. Leibowitz, *Studies in the Book of Genesis* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1967), 186, insisted that in these verses the prophet recalls the story of Jacob and Esau and reveals a disapproving attitude toward Jacob. See also Buber, *Way of the Bible*, and J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen, the Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1975), 291.

with the archetype deceiver, Jacob, in mind because of the last words, "to repay every man for his *conduct according to his deeds*," which are taken from Hosea: "and punished Jacob for his *conduct*, requited him *for his deeds*" (Hosea 12:3), where they follow immediately after the prophet's name derivation of Jacob's name, which we mentioned previously, "In the womb he cheated ['aqab] his brother" (v. 5).³²

A different strategy for fighting the unflattering association of the name Jacob was changing the name in a way that would express an antonym of "deceit" and "cheating." This is how the name Yeshurun, which means "honest, upright," was created.³³ The success of the name Yeshurun was quite limited, however, and it appears only in Deuteronomy (32:15; 33:5, 26) and Deutero-Isaiah (44:2). In Deutero-Isaiah's consoling prophecy, we find evidence also of the polemic against the notion that Jacob cheated already in his mother's womb:

Thus said the LORD, your Maker,
Your Creator who has helped you from the womb:
"Fear not, My servant Jacob,
Yeshurun, whom I have chosen."

The prophet emphasizes that God's choosing Jacob and His giving him the name Yeshurun are complementary acts, occurring already in his mother's womb prior to (or simultaneous with) Jacob's rivalry with Esau.

Although the name "Yeshurun" did not find broad acceptance in the Bible, we find a similar attempt to ascribe the meaning of the root *y-š-r*, the antonym of 'q-b, to the name Israel, in which also appear the consonants of *y-š-r*; see Numbers 23:10: "Who can count the dust of Jacob, Number the dust-cloud of Israel? May I die the death of the upright [*y'šarim*], May my fate be like theirs!"³⁴ The prophet Micah knew well that this meaning was related to the name Israel, and he uses it in his argument with his people: "The one who is said to be the House of Jacob [*he'amur bet ya'aqob*], Is the LORD's patience short? Is such His practice? To be sure, My words are friendly to those who walk in rectitude [*hayyašar holek*]" (Micah 2:7). In his addressing "the one who is said to be the House of Jacob," the prophet alludes to the story of the changing of Jacob's name to Israel in Genesis 32:29: "Said he, "Your name shall no longer *be said Jacob*, but Israel." Micah disagrees with what is written

³² For the influence of Hosea on Jeremiah, see K. Gross, *Die literarische Verwandtschaft Jeremias mit Hosea* (Leipzig, Germany: Noske, 1930).

³³ See W. Bacher, "ישרון," *ZAW* 5 (1885), 161–3.

³⁴ Also Buber (*Way of the Bible*, 292) argued that the change of the name Jacob to Israel was meant to cancel the shame inherent in the former.

in Genesis: the people's name remains Jacob because they are still cheaters and they do not deserve the name Israel, which befits only "those who walk in rectitude (*yašar*)."

The prophet Micah plays one further time with these two names that are so loaded with antithetical meanings:

Hear this, you rulers of the House of Jacob,
You chiefs of the House of Israel,
Who detest justice.
And make crooked what is straight (*hayšarah y^c aqešu*). (Micah 3:9)

The nation's principal name, which reflects its essence, is "House of Jacob," and the prophet initially gives that name in the first hemistich. Then he immediately explains why they are undeserving of the second name, Israel: because all that is straight they make crooked. The verb "make crooked" plays on the sound and sense of the name "Jacob": the root ^c-q-š is similar in meaning to ^c-q-b and shares two of its consonants.³⁵

AN INNOCENT MAN

At the beginning of the birthright story, the narrator reports Jacob's innocence, when Jacob's disposition is presented as antithetical to that of Esau: "And the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was an innocent man, who dwelled in tents" (Genesis 25:27).³⁶ The description of the two brothers is stylistically symmetrical. Each characterization contains three elements in which the first is the name of the brother and the third identifies his work-sphere: Esau the hunter is "a man of the outdoors," whereas Jacob "dwelled in tents." Conversely, there is no symmetry between the contents of the descriptions. About Esau we learn of his profession as "a skillful hunter," whereas about Jacob we learn that he was "innocent" (*tam*): a direct assertion that his nature is not that of a liar.

Jacob's birth story in Genesis 25:19–26 also affects our reading of Genesis 27. The divine oracle in Genesis 25:23 represents an effort to extricate Jacob from any blame in the story of the blessing. This may be a secondary insertion because the exclamation, "And behold! There were twins in her womb" (v. 24) seems to indicate surprise, even though there is no reason for surprise

³⁵ This is not the place to discuss the other interpretations of the name Israel from "king" (*š-r-r* associated with its synonym *m-l-k*; Genesis 35:11); "dominion" (*š-r-r* and *m-š-l*; Psalm 114:2); "one who has striven" with God (*š-r-h*; Genesis 32:29; Hosea 12:4); "strove against" (*yašar 'eš*; Hosea 12:5).

³⁶ For a discussion of this antithesis, see L. Frankel, *Studies in the Bible* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1981), 136–9.

because, in the previous verse, God had already revealed to Rebekah that "two separate peoples shall issue from your body . . . and the older shall serve the younger." The secondary nature of Rebekah's request for an oracle also may be indicated by its uniqueness in Genesis. An "inquiry" of God (i.e., a request for knowledge of the future or of guidance direct from God) is found in descriptions of Israelite religion in the era of the monarchy (e.g., 1 Samuel 9:9; 1 Kings 22:8; 2 Kings 3:1, 8:8, 22:13, 18) but is not found elsewhere in Genesis. It is anachronistic in the patriarchal narratives, in which God speaks to the characters without cultic intervention.

The divine oracle in Genesis 25:23 was meant to defend Jacob by depicting his ascent to power not as the result of any treachery on his part, but rather as part of God's initial plan. According to this interpretative clue, the determining factor in Jacob's future was not Isaac's blessing, because that future had already been determined before birth, by God.³⁷ There is even a defense of Rebekah in these verses: each of her actions, it seems, only pushes Jacob closer to his promised role, thereby bringing God's plan to fulfillment. Rebekah, of course, commits a transgression when she tries to hurry the fulfillment of God's promise (God is not interested in human help),³⁸ but Jacob does not achieve anything that would not have fallen into his hands anyway.

We now move from efforts to justify Jacob's character in the stories that precede the story of the blessing to those in the stories that follow it. When the time comes for Jacob to return to Canaan, we read of Rachel's stealing Laban's household idols in a story attributed to J: "Rachel stole her father's household idols. Jacob stole the heart of Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he was fleeing, and he fled" (Genesis 31:19–20). The storyteller makes a partial admission in order to rescue Jacob from the guilt of stealing: he did not take anything from Laban. Rachel was the thief; if Jacob became stuck with the reputation of one, it is because he stole Laban's heart when he "stole

³⁷ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 86–94, sees the function of verses 22–23 as part of the divine plan, although he does not sense their secondary nature.

³⁸ On the phenomenon of characters who provide assistance to God and are then punished for it – a prominent theme in Genesis – see, e.g., Sarah and her treatment of her Egyptian servant, Hagar, whom she offers to Abraham (Genesis 16:1–2). Hagar becomes pregnant and scorns her mistress (v. 4) who, in turn, maltreats her, providing one of the contributing factors in the Israelites' future enslavement in Egypt. See Zakovitch, "And You Shall Tell Your Son . . .": *The Concept of the Exodus in the Bible* (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1991), 27–30. Another example: when Rachel presses Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die" (Genesis 30:1), she precipitates her own death: in her having "children," plural (i.e., in giving birth to her second son), she will die (Genesis 35:16–20). And again Rachel: when Rachel seeks to purchase her sister's mandrakes – out of the belief that through them she will conceive – Leah sells them to her in exchange for one night with Jacob. It is Leah who then conceives two sons – Issachar and Zebulun – before God remembers Rachel and causes her to conceive (30:14–18).

away” without first notifying him. Laban, we find, blames Jacob, first, for stealing his heart: “What did you mean by stealing my heart and carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee in secrecy and steal (mislead?) me?” (Genesis 31:26–27). The expression “and steal me” is vague. Laban is accusing Jacob of theft, although he is clearly not referring to the idols because he specifically speaks of them a few lines later, at the end of verse 30.

The phrases “stealing my heart” and “and steal me” were intended to remove any impression that Jacob stole something material from Laban. Jacob’s alleged crime – the writer is telling his readers – was nothing but a verbal expression, a turn of phrase; all he is blamed for is “stealing” away. Concerning that crime, Jacob is not even guilty because he had no other choice, as he explains to Laban. Laban presented himself as one who, first and foremost, worried about his daughters (Genesis 31:26–29), and to this Jacob defends himself: “I was afraid because I thought you would take your daughters from me by force” (Genesis 31:31).

Laban’s second accusation against Jacob, “but why did you steal my gods?” (Genesis 31:30), is also baseless because it was Rachel who stole and hid them. Jacob knew nothing of Rachel’s act, as is clear from his declaration about the man with whom the idols would be found: “but anyone with whom you find your gods shall not remain alive.” Had he known it was Rachel, his beloved wife, who took the idols, he would never have made such a perilous promise.³⁹ Moreover, the accusation of theft makes it possible for Jacob to address the issue directly and to come to his own defense, making clear that not only did he not steal but also when Laban’s property had been stolen, Jacob paid for the lost property from his own money: “that which was torn by beasts I never brought to you; I myself made good the loss; you exacted it of me, whether stolen by day or stolen by night” (v. 39).

Clear evidence that the story about the stealing of the household idols and Rachel’s deception of her father is brought in order to balance the story of Jacob’s deceiving his father, Isaac, is found in the repeated use of the verbs *mašaš/muš*, “to feel, touch,” in both. In chapter 27, Isaac “feels” Jacob: “So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who *felt* him” (v. 22; see also vv. 12 and 21); in chapter 31, Laban rummages through Rachel’s tent in an attempt to find the stolen idols: “and Laban rummaged [literally, “felt”] through the tent without finding them” (v. 34; see also v. 37). These verbs appear in both stories at the most dramatically heightened moment, when the deception might

³⁹ According to the Midrash, Rachel’s death was caused by Jacob’s curse when he inadvertently and unknowingly prophesied the thief’s death: “In the opinion of Rabbi Yosi she died because of the curse of an old man, like an error committed by a ruler (Ecclesiastes 10:5), ‘and Rachel stole,’ ‘and Rachel died’” (*Genesis Rabbah* 4:3); see also Rashi’s commentary.

be – but is not – discovered. In both stories, this act of touching fails to help the father discover the truth.⁴⁰

The story of Rachel’s stealing the idols is brought, I believe, in order to clear Jacob’s name of any accusation of stealing. Because a partial admission is necessary, the storyteller grants that Jacob did steal Laban’s heart – a consequence of Laban’s character and behavior – and also that an actual act of thievery did occur during the escape from Haran – but of that Rachel was guilty, not Jacob.⁴¹ The depiction of Jacob as an “innocent man” is achieved, therefore, at the expense of Rachel, the thief.

After returning from Haran, Jacob no longer engages in deception. True, he still desires blessings and is even ready to fight for them – this time with no less than a divine being – but he will no longer deceive. In the story of the name change from Jacob to Israel that follows his wrestling with a divine being at the Jabbok crossing, he is ready to consent to the request, “let me go, for dawn is breaking” (Genesis 32:27), only if the divine being blesses him: “He answered, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me,’” and the divine being does so: “and he blessed him there” (v. 30).

In a different telling of the changing of Jacob’s name to Israel, this time in Bethel (in P), there is no longer any wrestling. On the contrary, it is repeated three times that God only spoke with Jacob at that place (see Genesis 35:13–15). This time, it is God who blesses Jacob, willingly and on his own initiative:

⁴⁰ On Rachel’s being a bigger “deceiver” than Jacob, with her behavior in the story of the household idols, see Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 163.

⁴¹ R. S. Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 42; Atlanta, GA, 1987), 95–7. For stealing the household idols, Rachel is punished with a measure-for-measure punishment. Following the principle of “Parents have eaten sour grapes and children’s teeth are blunted” (Jeremiah 31:28): the story of the pursuit after Jacob and his household is similar to the story of the pursuit of Jacob’s sons, which leads to the discovery of Joseph’s goblet in Benjamin’s bag (Genesis 44):

a. The departure of Jacob’s family from a foreign land for Canaan.

b. A holy object is stolen (or appears to have been stolen) – Laban’s household idols and the goblet with which Joseph divines the future (what is more, the household idols have an oracular function, as becomes clear, e.g., from Ezekiel 21:26 and Zechariah 10:2).

c. The pursuit ends with the pursuers catching up to the others (31:23; 44:4).

d. The accusation of theft (31:30; 44:4–6).

e. The innocent are vindicated: Jacob (31:32); Joseph’s brothers (44:7–9).

f. The vindicated are willing to hand over the guilty one – if such a one is found – to die (31:32; 44:9).

The two stories are also antithetical and deliberately so: Rachel steals and is not caught, whereas her son Benjamin does not steal but is caught. The rabbinic sages were aware of the relationship between the stories; Benjamin, who is suspected of stealing from Joseph, is blamed by his brothers who call him “a thief, son of a thief [*ganevet*]” (*Midrash Tanhuma, Miqqeš* 13).

“God appeared again to Jacob on his arrival from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him” (Genesis 35:9).⁴²

One more effort that is made to soften our judgment of Jacob can be detected in the reconciliation scene between Jacob and his brother, when Jacob expresses his desire to atone for his actions. On his return from Haran, Jacob meets Esau and offers him a gift. The term Jacob uses is *birkati* (literally, “my blessing”): “Please accept my gift/blessing which has been brought to you, for God has favored me and I have plenty” (Genesis 33:11). Once Jacob has given Esau a “blessing” in place of the blessing that he stole from him, the brothers are even, and the account between them is clear.⁴³

A justification of the younger son taking the blessing that was intended for his firstborn brother can be found in the Joseph story, when Jacob is already an old man and he knowingly grants the better blessing to Ephraim, Joseph’s younger son, instead of to the firstborn Manasseh (Genesis 48; E). Jacob is blind, just as his father had been: about Isaac, it was said, “When Isaac was *old* and his *eyes were too dim to see*” (Genesis 27:1); and about Jacob: “Israel’s eyes were *dimmed* because of his *old* age; he could not *see*” (Genesis 48:10). When Joseph sees his father placing his right hand onto the younger son’s head, he tries to correct the error and remove it (v. 17), but Jacob reassures him that he is well aware of his action: “I know, my son, I know. He too shall become a people, and he too shall be great. Yet his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall be plentiful enough for nations” (v. 19). In his subsequent blessing, Jacob indeed blesses Ephraim before Manasseh: “So he blessed them that day, saying, ‘By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.’ Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh” (v. 20). Ephraim’s blessing and his being granted precedence over his elder brother is meant to show how the divine plan does not always correspond with the rights of the firstborn son. Just as Ephraim was chosen, so also was Jacob, and so also was he preferred over his firstborn brother by God.

CONDEMNING JACOB

Now that we have found the justifications of Jacob’s behavior in the different sources that form the Jacob story cycle and beyond, let us look for the work of the other force: the disapproving voice that acknowledges and condemns Jacob for stealing the birthright and shows how he was punished for it. First

⁴² Regarding Jacob’s name change at Bethel, see also Hosea 12:4b-5.

⁴³ See Hendel, *Epic of the Patriarch*, 130.

and foremost, Jacob was punished by having to flee from Canaan and by being enslaved to his uncle, Laban, for twenty years – a heavy penalty indeed. The narration of Jacob’s flight, enslavement, and release from Laban’s control (chapters 30–31) echoes the paradigm of the Israelites’ enslavement and flight from Egypt, both of which occurred under God’s guidance.⁴⁴ The molding of the story according to that model demonstrates its plain intention to punish and purge Jacob prior to his return to Israel.

Jacob is further punished with the switching of the daughters of Laban on his wedding night (Genesis 29:21–27; J). Despite Laban’s promise to give his daughter Rachel to Jacob as wife, he switches Rachel with her sister, the firstborn Leah, and so manages to marry off the less attractive daughter and keep the hardworking and faithful Jacob indebted to him for seven more years. The switch is performed under the cover of darkness: “When morning came, behold, there was Leah” (v. 25). Jacob blames Laban for treachery: “Why did you deceive me?” In his defense, Laban does not deny the act but rather declares, “It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older” (v. 26).⁴⁵ Laban’s words, “it is not the practice in our place,” contain a thinly veiled taunt that recall Jacob’s own behavior toward his brother, Esau. In the words of the commentator R. Eleazar Ashkenazi, “in our place the rights of a first born will not be passed on to the younger one, as was done in your place, that the younger took the firstborn [rights] from his brother – measure for measure.”⁴⁶

The story of switching the daughters plainly corresponds with Jacob’s own behavior in the story of the stolen blessing: hidden by his father’s blindness, the younger brother (Jacob), directed by his mother, impersonates his elder brother; likewise – but conversely – the elder sister (Leah), hidden by darkness and directed by her father (who is the brother of Jacob’s mother), impersonates her younger sister. This purposeful – and perfect – symmetry is noted in the Midrash, which claims that the substitution of Leah represents Jacob’s “measure-for-measure” punishment.⁴⁷

Moreover, if the penalties of enslavement and the switching of the daughters (which leads to further enslavement) are not sufficient, one more measure-for-measure punishment is found outside the boundaries of the Jacob story cycle in the Joseph story, where another deception is played on Jacob – this

⁴⁴ See D. Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 62–72; Zakovitch, *And You Shall Tell Your Son*, 46–8.

⁴⁵ Among the scholars who have noted how the sisters’ behavior reflects Jacob’s just rewards, see Fokkeman, *Narrative Art*, 291, and Hendel, *Epic of the Patriarch*, 95.

⁴⁶ According to Leibowitz, *Studies*, 187.

⁴⁷ *Genesis Rabbah* 70:17.

time by his sons who bring him the tunic that belonged to his beloved son Joseph:

Then they took Joseph's tunic, slaughtered a kid, and dipped the tunic in the blood. They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, "We found this. Please examine it; is it your son's tunic or not?" He recognized it and said, "My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!" (Genesis 37:31–33; J).

Just as Jacob deceived his father by using the clothes of the father's favorite son, so his own sons now deceive him with the clothes of his favorite son.⁴⁸

EDOM AS ENEMY

We have seen how the prophets did not hesitate from offering reproving interpretations of Jacob's name when they wished to criticize the Israelites – the patriarch's descendants who continue in his crooked ways. At the same time, Jacob was fully rehabilitated in other prophecies that dealt with the relations between Israel and Edom and looked on Edom as Israel's enemy. In the Jacob cycle, a notable balance is struck between the characterizations of Jacob and Esau, with Esau's portrayal – despite his initial depiction as a dumb creature with poor table manners – as increasingly sympathetic. In

⁴⁸ After Jacob is punished with Joseph's bloodstained clothes, the chain of disguises and punishments continues with Judah in Genesis 38: Judah is punished for the pivotal role he played in the sale of Joseph and for lying to their father. He lied to his father with a piece of clothing, and his daughter-in-law now deceives him with clothing when she disguises herself as a prostitute (Genesis 38:14–15). The story of Judah and Tamar has a number of elements that identify it as Judah's measure-for-measure punishment. Just as Jacob's sons tell their father about the tunic, "Examine it: is it your son's tunic or not?" (37:32), so will Tamar shame Judah when she presents him with the objects he had left with her: "Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?" (38:25). The expression "examine these/it" appears nowhere else in the Bible. The rabbis noted the purposeful connection between the sin and the punishment (e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* 85:1).

The chain of transgressions and penalties continues with the punishment of all the brothers for their part in the disguising of Joseph's tunic. This time, Joseph appears before his brothers dressed splendidly as the vizier of the King of Egypt and they do not recognize him. The father identified his son's tunic, just as the brothers had planned (37:33), but the brothers do not recognize Joseph in his new clothes. Joseph's punishment of his brothers, to a certain extent, is also Jacob's punishment for his sins – his sin of disguising himself as his brother and his more recent sin of favoring Joseph with the ornamented tunic. Joseph's disguise now inspires great fear in Jacob about the fate of his sons Simeon, who is imprisoned by Joseph, and particularly Benjamin, Joseph's younger brother.

At the story's end, when Joseph's brothers will withstand the test and not abandon their brother to imprisonment or death, it becomes apparent that the chain of disguises portends life for Jacob's house, as revealed by Joseph to his brothers (45:5–7). On the chain of knowledge, deception, and revelation, see also Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 159–77.

the prophecies that we look at now, Jacob is depicted as entirely virtuous, whereas Edom is portrayed as being utterly bad, the brutal enemy of Israel who deserves vengeance: a result of the blood-filled history of wars between Israel and Edom throughout the generations.

Amos's prophecy about Edom (Amos 1:11–12) – one of Amos's prophecies about foreign nations (Amos 1:2–2:16) – blames Esau "because he pursued his brother with the sword and repressed all pity" (v. 11). Although it is true that in the blessing Esau receives from his father it is said that "by your sword you shall live" (Genesis 27:40), it adds "you shall serve your brother." Esau was forbidden to turn his sword against his brother. Yet, over the course of history, Esau did threaten Israel with the sword. During Israel's journey to the land of Canaan, when Israel turned to Edom for mercy and requested that they be allowed to pass through Edom's borders – "thus says *your brother* Israel, You know all the hardships that have befallen us" (Numbers 20:14) – Edom answered: "You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with *the sword*" (v. 18). Edom, we see, did "repress all pity."⁴⁹

Amos's portrayal of Edom's hatred for Jacob, "because his *anger* raged unceasing and his *fury* stormed unchecked," returns us to Rebekah's command to Jacob to flee to Laban's house "until your brother's *fury* subsides – until your brother's *anger* against you subsides and he forgets what you have done to him" (Genesis 27:44–45). Although the book of Genesis tells of the conciliatory reunion between the brothers, Amos makes the claim that Esau's hatred for his brother continued unabated and that Rebekah's hope that Esau's anger would diminish was disappointed.

Hatred toward Edom increased with the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, in which the Edomites participated (see, e.g., Psalm 137:7 and Lamentations 4:21–22). Ezekiel 35 speaks of Edom's "eternal hatred" for Israel and how Esau sought to inherit Israel, even saying, "the two nations and the two lands shall be mine" (v. 10). Of course, "the two nations" return to the oracle in Genesis 25:23: "two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body." Esau denies the divine plan voiced in the oracle and dreams of prevailing over his brother, and for this God will have vengeance. Esau hates Israel and God will take retribution: "I will act with the same anger and passion that you acted with in your hatred of them" (Ezekiel 35:11), one more reminder of Esau's anger toward Jacob (Genesis 27:44–45). God's retribution for Edom's anger against Israel is expressed also in Ezekiel 25: "I will wreak My vengeance on Edom through My people Israel, and they

⁴⁹ Rashi and Abarbanel understood Amos's words as referring to Numbers 20:18. N. H. Tur-Sinai (*The Language and the Book. Vol. 1: Language* [in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik, 1954], 84) observed that the blame of Edom returns to Genesis 27.

shall take action against Edom in accordance with My blazing anger and fury and they shall know My vengeance" (v. 14).

The first prophecy in the book of Malachi also emphasizes that God "loved Jacob and hated Esau":

I have shown you love, said the LORD. But you ask, "How have You shown us love?" After all, declares the LORD, Esau is Jacob's brother; yet I have loved Jacob and hated Esau. I have made his hills a desolation, his territory a home for beasts of the desert. If Edom says, "Though crushed, we can build the ruins again," thus says the LORD of Hosts: "They may build, but I will tear down. And so they shall be known as the region of wickedness, the people damned forever of the LORD. Your eyes shall behold it, and you shall declare, 'Great is the LORD beyond the borders of Israel!'" (Malachi 1:2-5)

In Genesis, it is Rebekah, Jacob's mother, who loves him, while Isaac, the father, loves Esau (25:28). Yet, in the prophecy, it is not the parents' love that is spoken of but rather divine love and hate, and God's unambiguous choice of Jacob. In Genesis, Esau hates Jacob for stealing his blessing: "Now Esau loathed Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him" (Genesis 27:41) whereas in Malachi, God takes revenge and hates Esau. In Genesis, Isaac yielded to Esau's insistent pleas to grant him a blessing of plenty (although it would be poorer than that granted Jacob): "See, your abode shall enjoy the fat of the earth and the dew of heaven above" (Genesis 27:39). However, in Malachi, God curses him with a desolation that will not desist: "and so they shall be known as the region of wickedness, the people damned forever of the LORD" (vv. 3-4).⁵⁰

The story in Genesis served as raw material for the prophets, who pushed and prodded, separating it from its most simple and obvious sense. The prophets' hatred for Edom reilluminates and reinterprets the story in Genesis. In this new prophetic light, Esau is no longer the blameless, duped brother but rather has become a villain who deserves vengeance and who must be punished, measure for measure.

JUSTIFYING JACOB IN POSTBIBLICAL LITERATURE

Before we conclude, it is worth noting that justifying Jacob became the rule in postbiblical literature. The writer of *Jubilees*, for example, deleted Jacob's lie to Isaac. Jacob does not say, "I am Esau your firstborn" (Genesis 27:19) but rather "I am your son. I have done according to your words" (*Jubilees*

⁵⁰ See also God's bloody "day of vengeance" against Edom in Isaiah 63:1-6; and Y. Zakovitch, *Through the Looking Glass: Reflection Stories in the Bible* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 96-7.

26:13). Some rabbinic sages tried to hide Jacob's lie in another way by dividing his answer – "I am Esau your firstborn" – in half. According to a tradition attributed to Rabbi Levi, Jacob's response actually comprised two distinct parts: "I am destined to receive the Ten Commandments, but Esau is *your firstborn*" (*Genesis Rabbah* 65:18). A different tactic was taken in the Aramaic translation of *Targum Onqelos*. There, the sting of Isaac's accusation that "your brother came with guile and took away your blessing" (v. 36) is weakened by replacing "with guile [*b^emirmah*]" with "with wisdom [*b^ehokmah*]" (so also in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, and cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 66:4: "in the wisdom of His Torah").

Yet another way to justify Jacob's actions in postbiblical literature was to trace the younger son's rightful claim to the blessing to a superior authority: Abraham. In *Jubilees*, Abraham identifies Jacob as deserving the blessing: "And Abraham saw the deeds of Esau, and he knew that in Jacob should his name and seed be called" (*Jubilees* 19:16). Furthermore, Rebekah's preferential treatment of Jacob receives Abraham's full approval:

And he said unto her: My daughter, watch over my son Jacob, for he shall be in my stead on the earth, and for a blessing in the midst of the children of men, and for the glory of the whole seed of Shem. For I know that the LORD will choose him to be a people for possession unto Himself. . . . And behold, Isaac my son loves Esau more than Jacob, but I see that you truly love Jacob. (*Jubilees* 19:17-19)

Abraham even blesses Jacob in Rebekah's presence:

And he called Jacob before the eyes of Rebekah his mother, and kissed him, and blessed him, and said: "Jacob, my beloved son, whom my soul loves, may God bless you from above the firmament, and may He give you all the blessings." (*Jubilees* 19:26-27; see also 22:10-30)

In *Jubilees*, even Isaac (who, in our story, blames Jacob for deceiving him) distinguishes Jacob for his uprightness. After the latter is sent to Paddan-aram, Isaac reassures Rebekah:

For I know that his ways will be prosperous in all things, wherever he goes, until he returns in peace to us, and we see him in peace. Fear not on his account, my sister, for he is on the upright path and he is a perfect man. (*Jubilees* 27:16-17)

God's blessing to Jacob, given on His own initiative (Genesis 28:13-15), provided later sources with the justification to view Isaac's blessing as part of a divine plan and not the result of a fraudulent act.

In the Midrash, emphasis is placed on the divine plan that stands behind Jacob's lies and on the fact that God sent His angels to help Jacob in his deception:

When Esau was hunting and tying [his catch], the angel was untying and setting it free . . . and why? In order to prolong the hours until Jacob will go and do [what he needs] and goes in to his father and his father will eat and Jacob will take the blessing. (*Tanḥuma Buber, Tol^e dot 10*)

Other examples of acts of divine intervention clear Jacob's name of accusations of deceit. *Genesis Rabbah* 65:19 contains the following:

When Israel told Jacob, "Come closer that I may feel you, my son" (Genesis 27:21), Jacob urinated onto his calves, and his heart became as soft as wax, and God assigned to him two angels, one on his right and one on his left, in order to hold him up by his elbows.

Here, the climactic moment of Jacob's deception is interpreted differently: the upright Jacob was overcome with fear, and it was God's angels who held him steady so that he could fulfill God's plan. The book of *Jubilees* describes a similar act of intervention: "and [Isaac] discerned him not, because it was a dispensation from heaven to remove his power of perception" (*Jubilees* 26:18).

CONCLUSION

We have seen how different forces were at work in the formation and interpretation of the story of Isaac's blessing: on the one hand, Jacob's transgression is admitted and his subsequent punishment (measure for measure) is described; on the other hand, Jacob is vindicated, if only partially. We saw how both forces left their mark on the Jacob cycle in its various sources and in the Joseph story. J is not reluctant to admit Jacob's deceit – even as it also indicates positive traits – whereas E and P interpret Jacob's behavior favorably. Prophecies about the two brother-nations, Israel and Edom, were generally guided by the inclination to vindicate Jacob, with some variation among the pre-exilic prophets. Different genres of postbiblical interpretation – biblical translations, rewritten Bibles, and Midrash – continued the trend that began with the later biblical writers: clearing the names of biblical heroes of any wrongdoings, thereby presenting them as morally perfect exemplars, worthy of our imitation.



Rabbinic Interpretation

Dina Stein

MIDRASH AND ITS PRECURSORS

Rabbinic interpretations of Scripture – unlike the creation of the world (at least according to some ancient exegetes) – were not a creation *ex nihilo*. They were preceded by a long and varied chain of tradition that, in turn, was adapted by the rabbis to suit their own cultural needs. To fully appreciate the rabbinic exegetical enterprise, we must pay attention to the legacy (at times hidden) that informed their practice and, at the same time, recognize the astonishing novelty of their project. The novelty lies not only in the thematic plan but also, as I argue, predominantly in the formal–rhetorical aspect of their writings. That is, what we see in rabbinic interpretation of Scripture is a new epistemology, one that situates the text itself as an *explicit* locus of knowledge. This epistemological shift is implicated in the self-reflexive character of rabbinic texts themselves, which in turn render the characters they embody – whether they are the projected biblical protagonists or the implied rabbinic subjects – self-reflective. Before addressing this epistemological shift, we must first turn to the beginning.

The book of Genesis begins with a seemingly simple, although grammatically awkward, statement: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." Yet, already in Scripture itself we find that imagining the very moment of creation did not end (nor did it begin) in Genesis 1. When Wisdom, the speaker in Proverbs 8, announces, "The LORD made me *the beginning* of his course, the first of his acts of old" (8:22), it inscribes itself as a transformative force in the primordial moment. Here and elsewhere, the first traces of the retelling of the Genesis story are to be found within the Bible. Whether imagined in the conceptual framework of *Sophia-Ḥokmah* (as in Proverbs), or as God's battle with mythological beasts (as in Psalms or Job), or in the creation language of the building of the tabernacle (as in Exodus), these texts tell a different story

Reading Genesis

Ten Methods

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A book like this, a problem like this, is in no hurry; we both, I just as much
as my book, are friends of *slowness*. It is not for nothing that I have been a
philologist, perhaps I am a philologist still, that is to say, a teacher of slow
reading. . . . For philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries
one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow –
it is a goldsmith's art and connoisseurship of the *word* which has nothing but
delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it
slowly. . . . [T]his art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read
well, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft,
with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*

It is indeed this greater sense of possibility that moves us so deeply when we
listen to those old and strangely simple stories.

Franz Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog"