

Jacob, Laban, and a Divine Trickster? The Covenantal Framework of God's Deception in the Theology of the Jacob Cycle*

John E. Anderson

Baylor University, Waco TX 76798

Introduction: Establishing the *Theological* "Problem"

The biblical character of Jacob presents the reader with some of the most eclectic and difficult stories in the entire Bible. Perhaps the most pervasively troubling issue within these stories is that of Jacob's character. He is unabashedly portrayed—even named¹—as one who deceives and tricks to gain what he desires, be it a blessing or a birthright, progeny or protection. Scholars have not failed to recognize the presence of these seemingly unflattering traits and have often responded by reducing Jacob to nothing more than a morally corrupt individual.² A problem then naturally presents itself: why would God select such a

*An earlier draft of this article was presented at the Southwest regional meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, March 15, 2008. My thanks to those who offered responses to the paper at this meeting. I wish also to extend my sincerest thanks to Dr. W. H. Bellinger, Jr. for the time he freely devoted to reading the various revisions of this study, as well as his comments and suggestions on how to improve it. I am also grateful for the comments of the two anonymous reviewers, both of whom have helped to add clarity and precision to what follows. These 'extra eyes' and open minds have proven to be invaluable in my desire to offer a fresh and new way of understanding deception in the Jacob cycle.

¹Jacob's name is explained by several etymologies in the Hebrew text of Genesis. The first occurs in 25:26, after he and Esau's birth, in which Jacob emerges grasping his elder brother's "heel." In 27:36 Jacob is labeled a "deceiver," as is evident when Esau laments his stolen blessing: "Is his name not called Jacob, for he has *deceived* me these two times" (all translations mine unless otherwise noted). One final possibility comes from our knowledge of the prevalence of theophoric names in the ancient Near East, of which Jacob may be a shortened form of Jacob-El "may El/God protect." See P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., "The Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," in *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (ed. Hershel Shanks, Washington, DC: Prentice Hall, 1999), 26. No doubt each of these identities—heel-grabber, deceiver, and protected by God—are present and emphasized at various points throughout the Jacob narrative (Genesis 25-36).

²For instance, Henri Gaubert, *Isaac and Jacob, God's Chosen Ones* (New York: Hastings House, 1969), 19, maintains that even in his youth Jacob shows himself to be an egocentric and "disturbing" character who employs "methods which even in those days were hardly to be commended." Similarly, Terence E. Fretheim, "Which Blessing Does Isaac Give Jacob?" in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (ed. A. O. Bellis and J. S. Kaminsky, Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 290, argues that the deceiver Jacob's selection by God reveals that God has little concern to insure His blessing is granted only to the morally upright and that God is thus "not a moralist." The implication in Fretheim, then, is that Jacob is such a degenerate character that it is striking for God to express any interest in him. Fretheim, however, here recognizes quite possibly the core idea expressed in the Jacob cycle (that God maintains a relationship with a figure the likes of Jacob) yet sketches it in overwhelmingly negative terms. What remains lacking in Fretheim's interpretation will form the

figure to be heir to His covenant and a recipient of His blessing, and why would ancient Israel identify the wily Jacob as her namesake, evident in Genesis 32:28 and 35:10?

Based upon the presence of these tensions in the text, one may initially conclude that from the perspective of ancient Israel no problems existed in understanding the God/Jacob relationship. If anything, God's seeming tolerance of Jacob's deceptiveness appears to disclose more about God than many scholars are willing or comfortable to admit, and those choosing to admit at least the plausibility of a deceptive God tend either merely to express how unpalatable such an image is or try to exonerate God.³ I propose, however, that much more than divine tolerance is operative in the Jacob cycle; rather, ancient Israel divulges, through God's intimate association with and concern for Jacob, that God's character also may possess these very same trickster tendencies. In fact, the text of Genesis makes this assertion explicitly in 31:1-16, an episode classically interpreted as the trickster getting tricked.⁴ In this passage, Jacob, speaking to Rachel and Leah, quite candidly attributes the prior deception of Laban in chapter 30 to God. Verse 9 reads: "and God has *caused* to be stripped away the cattle of your father and given [them] to me" (v. 9).⁵ Immediately thereafter in

crux of our study explaining *theologically* this relationship between God and Jacob. Others, such as Susan Niditch and Victor Matthews and Frances Mims, helpfully recognize the presence of the folkloric underdog or trickster motif from the ancient Near East in relation to ancient Israel's shaping of the Jacob stories, but again what remains absent in these studies is a clear notice of God's active role in Jacob's deception. For notes on Niditch's methodology and understanding of the trickster pattern, see Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore Underdogs and Tricksters* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), xv-xix and 71-79. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 209, treads a middle ground between the above two positions of Jacob as degenerate and Jacob as trickster, and also accepts the possibility of God as a troubling character. He writes: "Jacob is a scandalous challenge to his world because the God who calls him is also scandalous." Brueggemann also makes mention of the "dark side of God" as a way of explaining God's subversive tendencies (i.e., preference for one child over another, a theme that pervades Genesis).

³Gunkel, in his classic commentary on Genesis, deems God's complicity in Jacob's deceptions "especially offensive." Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle, Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 300-301. Fretheim attempts to exonerate God by concluding that "God works in and through people of all sorts, people who have both gifts and character deficiencies." Fretheim, "Which Blessing," 284. Neither of these proposals to reckon with God's deception takes the form of a serious theological engagement of Israel's Scriptures, a gap which the present study hopes to begin to fill.

⁴Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 107-108. Niditch offers a typology of Laban's trickery that follows the hero motif, personified in Jacob. The problem (an unattractive daughter, Leah) is remedied by Laban's deception in passing her off as Rachel. As a result, a type of "resolution"—albeit brief—occurs, and subsequently leads to the realization of the deception once morning arrives. The final 'stage' Niditch labels "Reversal" and "Trickster is tricked," an episode in which the "Dupe steals trickster's wealth so that his status increases at trickster's expense." This final stage is our central episode of deception. Scott B. Noegel, "Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster in Gen 30 31-43: A New Look at an Old Crux," *JANES* 25 (1997) 7, also views the episode as one of deception, read through the preliminary report of the incident in 30 31-43.

⁵The *hiphil* הִפְּלָה ("strip away") with God as the subject highlights all the more the causative aspect of what God has done. Likewise, the *qal* form of הָפַח at the end of v. 9 also

31:10-13 God corroborates Jacob's claim in a dream. Ancient Israel depicts God as not only tolerant of but also as complicit in Jacob's deception.⁶ This notice gives rise to a theological "problem."⁷

I have chosen to focus the examination of this "problem" on Gen 31:1-16 and the Jacob/Laban narratives for several reasons. Primary among them, the interactions between Jacob and Laban provide a fertile locus of deceptive activity between these two seminal characters in which the phenomenon of divine deception may also be viewed most fully. In Laban, Jacob appears to have met his match; Laban succeeds in making Jacob the *deceived* rather than the *deceiver* on more than one occasion.⁸ Second, Gen 31:1-16 appears to be the most explicit statement in Genesis of God's activity and complicity in deception. Third, as will become evident in what follows, there exist more broad, general connections between the Jacob and Laban cycle of stories and the rest of the ancestral narratives as a whole. My final, and perhaps most important, reason for concentrating on Jacob and Laban rather than elsewhere in the Jacob cycle is that Jacob's internment with Laban threatens the very particulars of the ancestral promise (Gen 12:1-3) that defines Genesis. Jacob, in a foreign land and in servitude to Laban, is far from reaching the promised *land* of 12:1 and from *blessing all the earth* mentioned in 12:3. Similarly, the "*great nation*" of 12:2 hangs in abeyance both with Laban's trickery in switching Leah for Rachel and also with Rachel's barrenness. I will return in greater detail to these covenantal particulars below. In light of these reasons, it seems fitting that this study of God's complicity in deception should be grounded in the Jacob and Laban narratives.⁹

has God as its subject. He is the one directly causing the stripping away of Laban's flocks and the one who grants them to Jacob. Note also that in v. 16 Rachel and Leah respond, mimicking Jacob's use of the *hiphil*: "for all the riches which God has *caused* to be stripped away (*הצייל*) from our father . . ."

⁶Victor H. Matthews and Frances Mims ("Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation," *PRSt* 12 [1985]: 191) corroborate my reading that God (or a figure speaking for God) accepts divine responsibility for this episode, evident in 31:12-13.

⁷I do not intend to mean, by labeling Gen 31:1-16 a "*problem*," that this text is marred with connections and issues that must no doubt be wrong based merely upon the obstacles they present to a neat and tidy theological interpretation. Rather, I take these verses as a sincere expression of ancient Israel's own experience and understanding of God which Old Testament theology must take seriously.

⁸See, for example, Gen 29:23-27. Laban's statement in v. 26 that "it is not done thus in our place, giving the younger one before the firstborn" (*הבכירה*) likely exhibits a reference—whether Laban was aware or not—to Jacob's deceptive taking of the right of the firstborn from his brother Esau in Gen 27. To a reader well aware of the story thus far, Laban's words here may be seen as foreshadowing that Laban will at times get the better of Jacob. Also, in Gen 30:35-36 Laban attempts again to get the better of Jacob, this time by taking the spotted and speckled animals he had promised to Jacob.

⁹I do not intend through this limitation to imply that my specific study of the four passages below in reference to 31:1-16 should serve as a synecdoche, a part representative of the whole. Instead, I hope this study will serve as a starting point for more prolonged investigations into the theological phenomenon of God's complicity in deception.

Conclusion: Deception as a Covenantal Defense

I have sought in the foregoing analysis to understand theologically the image of God as deceiver in the Jacob narratives—no doubt a difficult task!—by using Gen 31:1-16 to define the theological “problem.” My contention is that deception is not a category utterly alien to God, but rather, when read within the appropriate context of covenant, promise, and blessing established throughout the ancestral narratives, makes a strong theological statement about God’s character, more specifically about His covenantal fidelity. With the intent of bearing out this context, I examined four passages in Genesis from the Jacob/Laban cycle of stories: 28:13-15, 29:31-30:24, 30:27, and 31:24. These four texts revealed that the primary divine concern moving the narratives forward is grounded in the covenant and the ardent desire that God would fulfill His promise and blessing, seemingly at the expense of everything else.

Each passage dealt either specifically or more broadly with a central element or theme from the original promise to Abraham in 12:1-3. First, in 28:13-15 God demonstrates His concern for and fidelity to the promise when He chooses Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, as the heir to the promise, despite Jacob’s well-known deceptive character. Second, in 29:31-30:24 God grants multiple children to Jacob, marking the first time in the ancestral narratives that more than one child will receive *the* covenant and blessing of Abraham. One should note that even Jacob’s sons do not cease to be tricksters and deceivers, despite the passing on of the blessing from their father Jacob. Third, 30:27 highlights exactly what can happen when God’s promise and blessing are realized. Laban increases, but only so long as he permits others to share in this blessing. Laban’s selfishness in this regard stands as a warning to others: do not try to arrogate God’s blessing for yourselves at the expense of another. Lastly, 31:24 sounds the theme of divine protection operative throughout the ancestral narratives. Here it is important to remember that deception functions as one way ancient Israel has chosen to carry the covenant, promise, and blessing forward in the narrative.

Read in this wider context, God’s deception sheds much of its negative and troublesome connotations. I do not wish to say that one cannot and should not trust God. Quite the opposite, for the Jacob narratives reveal God’s trustworthy character in relation to His covenantal fidelity. Where God deceives, it appears warranted, as with the example of Laban given above. God remains steadfast to His original promise to Abraham both *in spite of* and, because of His intimate role behind the scenes, *by means of* deception through His continued interactions with the ancestral lineage. The character of God in Genesis thus no longer presents a theological “problem.” Ancient Israel’s portrait is not that of an aberrant, fickle God, but rather of a constant, compassionate God who will go to any lengths, even deception, for the sake of His covenant.