# Genesis Part Three: Isaac’s Lines of Descent, Focusing on Jacob (25:12—35:29)

While Part Two of Genesis was formally the story of “Terah’s lines of descent,” it was substantially the story of Terah’s son and daughter-in-law, Abraham and Sarah. Part Three is formally the story of “Isaac’s lines of descent,” but it is substantially the story of Isaac and Rebekah’s two sons, especially the younger of the two. The entire story of Genesis revolves around God’s working through the generations; in Parts Two, Three, and Four in particular, God is working through a promise which has progeny at its center.

But there is a difference in the way the three Parts unfold. Even more than Part One, Part Two comprised a series of separate units which make sense on their own, though they gain extra significance through their relationship to the larger whole of which they have become part. Part Three is dominated by a long continuous narrative in 26:34—33:20, most of whose elements make less sense out of their individual context. This continuous narrative transports Jacob from Canaan to Harran and back again, and it reflects the shape of this plot by taking the form of a palistrophe.[[1]](#footnote-1) Either side of this tightly-woven central narrative, there are some shorter units that could stand on their own and are less closely integrated with the central narrative. But in the context of Part Three as a whole they relate closely in substance to the central narrative, providing it with a framework and with introductions and conclusions.

The following is then an outline of Part Three:

25:12-18 Preamble: Ishmael’s lines of descent

25:19-34 Introduction: the birth of Esau and Jacob

26:1-33 Prelude: Conflict between Isaac and Abimelek

26:34—28:9 (Scene 1) Jacob flees from Esau

28:10-22 (Scene 2) God’s envoys appear to Jacob

29:1–14 (Scene 3) Jacob arrives in Harran

29:15–30 (Scene 4) Laban pulls one over Jacob

29:31–30:24 (Scene 5) Jacob’s wives have children

30:25—31:2 (Scene 6) Jacob pulls one over Laban

31:3–54 (Scene 7) Jacob leaves Harran

31:55—32:32 (Scene 8) God’s envoys appear to Jacob

33:1-20 (Scene 9) Jacob reunites with Esau

34:1-31 Postlude: Conflict between Jacob and Shechem

35:1-26 Conclusion: Jacob returns home; Esau and Jacob bury Isaac

Whereas there was lots of movement in the series of relatively short stories in Part Two not only comprised a series of relatively short stories with lots of movement, the motif of flight and return forms the “arc of tension”[[2]](#footnote-2) in Part Three’s more coherent sequence of episodes within one story. Throughout, it is also a narrative about conflict within the family—between brothers, between relatives, between wives. Whereas Part Two was especially concerned with the vertical relationship between one generation and the next within the family as the promise is passed on, and with the problematic nature of that vertical relationship, Part Three is especially concerned with the horizontal relationship between members of the same generation within the family, and with the problematic nature of that relationship. Accounts of God’s appearing and speaking interweave with the accounts of human conflict: “*human extremity* and *divine intrusion* are correlated with each other.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Overlaps between some of the sections, jumpiness in the opening and closing sections, and different ways of speaking (e.g., different ways of referring to God) suggest that Part Three again brings together materials with an earlier history. I assume that a key feature of that history was the existence of at least a Yahwist and a Priestly version of the Isaac/Rebekah/Esau/Jacob story, though it may be that one version has simply been amplified by material with another perspective. Either way, an author has then worked creatively to produce the version that we have, and continuing scholarly disagreement over analyzing the material’s origin and development again suggests that we cannot establish this earlier history, or the date of the material, or the extent to which it relates historical events, though we can imagine what it would signify to an Israelite audience. The significance would vary in different periods, though in Part Three particular implications attach to the fact that the implied audience of Genesis is the entity which the First Testament commonly refers to as “Israel.” In poetic parallelism the First Testament often also refers to Israel as Jacob (e.g., Ps 14:7; Isa 40:27; Jer 30:10), and Part Three of Genesis focuses on the Jacob who is renamed Israel. Perhaps the people Jacob-Israel was expected to find itself in the person of Jacob-Israel and thus to read his story with “self-critical realism.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Genesis 25:12-18—Ishmael’s Lines of Descent**

**Overview**

The preamble to the story of Isaac’s family line is a brief account of Ishmael’s family line, an “in-between text”[[5]](#footnote-5) which in isolation one might see as a postscript to the Abraham story. The data about Ishmael’s descendants add to the information in 25:1-11, and this link could provide a rationale for connecting 25:12-18 with those verses as MT does, with only a paragraph break between vv. 1-11 and 12-18. Reading the account of Ishmael and his descendants in connection with what precedes has the makes Ishmael the person who concludes the Abraham story.[[6]](#footnote-6) But vv. 12-18 also relate to what follows in closing off Ishmael’s story before opening Isaac’s.[[7]](#footnote-7)

## Translation

12These are the lines of descent of Yišma’e’l, Abraham’s son, to whom Hagar the Miṣrite, Śarah’s maidservant, gave birth for Abraham. 13These are the names of Yišma’e’l’s sons, by their names according to their lines of descent. Yišma’e’l’s firstborn, Nebayot, Qedar, Adbe’el, Mibsam, 14Mišma, Dumah, Maśśa, 15Hadad, Tema, Yetur, Napiš, and Qedemah. 16These are Yišma’e’l’s sons and these are their names, by their villages and by their enclosures, twelve leaders for their peoples. 17These are the years of Yišma’e’l’s life: 137 years. So he breathed out and died, and joined his kin.[[8]](#footnote-8) 18They dwelt[[9]](#footnote-9) from Hawilah as far as Šur, which is close to Miṣrayim, as you come to Aššur; in the face of all his brothers he fell.[[10]](#footnote-10)

## Interpretation

In keeping with the pattern elsewhere in Genesis, 25:12-18 gives a brief account of the line on which it will not concentrate before turning to the line on which it will focus.

Ishmael’s descendants (vv. 13-16), like other figures in the lines of descent in Genesis, include ancestors of peoples the Israelites knew and with whom they were involved in trading relationships, who are shown to be their relatives. As is the case with many of those other figures, we know nothing else about most of the peoples who are implicitly seen as descended from these figures. The links that we do have suggest they are peoples to the east and south of Canaan, in northern and southern Arabia; Jer 2:10 perhaps locates Nebayot and Qedar in the far east, as Cyprus is in the far west. The twelve leaders (v. 16) invite comparison with the twelve sons of Jacob.

Jumping forward some while (v. 17), Genesis then reports the passing of Ishmael himself, in terms overlapping the ones used of Abraham, though without the reference to a good age, old and full (he lived, after all, a mere 137 years) or to his burial.

Then (v. 18), the section returns to Ishmael’s offspring. Here they are associated with the area to the south and even southwest, the region with which the story connects Hagar, though the Ashshur referred to here is presumably the Arabian group mentioned in v. 3. For Shur, see 16:7, and for Havilah, see 10:7. Here it is most explicit that the story of Abraham’s descendants who are born from Ishmael implies the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promise to Hagar (see 16:10-12) and not just to Sarah, to Ishmael and not just to Isaac (as in due course to Edom and not just to Israel).[[11]](#footnote-11) “Ishmael was a great theologian who carefully unfolded the force and the grandeur of the promises.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Genesis 25:19-34—Twin Sons and the Position of Firstborn**

**Overview**

The introduction to Isaac’s own story immediately establishes its major theme, the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah’s twin sons. This relationship will hinge on the fact that Esau is the firstborn and therefore should have the major responsibilities and privileges in the family, while Jacob is marginally the younger and resents it, and is the one through whom Yahweh will fulfill his promises to their grandfather and father. The introduction reports two incidents relating to this dynamic, from the twins’ birth and their manhood.

## Translation

19These are the lines of descent of Yiṣḥaq, Abraham’s son.

Abraham fathered Yiṣḥaq, 20and Yiṣḥaq was a man of forty years when he got for himself as wife Ribqah daughter of Betu’el the Aramite of Paddan Aram, sister of Laban the Aramite.

21Yiṣḥaq entreated Yahweh on behalf of his wife, because she was infertile. Yahweh let himself be entreated by him,[[13]](#footnote-13) and Ribqah his wife got pregnant. 22The children pressed on one another[[14]](#footnote-14) inside her, and she said, “If this is how it is, why is it that I…?”[[15]](#footnote-15) She went to inquire of Yahweh 23and Yahweh said to her,

Two nations are in your womb,

two peoples will divide from your body.

One people will be stronger than the other people,

and the greater one will serve the younger one.[[16]](#footnote-16)

24Her time became full for giving birth, and there, twins were in her womb. 25The first went out tanned, all of him, like a garment of hair. So they named him Esaw. 26After that, his brother went out, his hand grasping Esaw’s heel. He was named[[17]](#footnote-17) Ya‘aqob. Yiṣḥaq was a man of sixty years at their birthing.

27The boys grew up and Esaw became a man who knew about hunting, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a resolute[[18]](#footnote-18) man, living with tents.[[19]](#footnote-19) 28Yiṣḥaq loved Esaw because there was game in his mouth,[[20]](#footnote-20) while Ribqah loved Ya‘aqob.[[21]](#footnote-21)

29Ya‘aqob cooked stew.[[22]](#footnote-22) Esaw came in from the open country; he was tired. 30Esaw said to Ya‘aqob, “Please let me guzzle some of the red stuff, this red stuff, because I’m tired” (that’s why they named him Edom). 31Ya‘aqob said, “Sell your position as firstborn[[23]](#footnote-23) today,[[24]](#footnote-24) to me.” 32Esaw said, “Here, I’m about to die. What use is a position as firstborn to me?” 33Ya‘aqob said, “Swear to me today.” So he swore to him, and sold his position as firstborn to Ya‘aqob. 34Ya‘aqob gave Esaw bread and lentil stew and he ate and drank, and got up and went. So Esaw despised the position as firstborn.

## Interpretation

Gen 25:19—32:3 is one unit in MT (though two synagogue lections), with 25:19-34 the first section relating how Esau had the position of firstborn but surrendered it to Jacob. Jacob will thus come to be key to the future of Isaac and Rebekah’s family and thereby of Abraham and Sarah’s family and thereby of Yahweh’s promise—but that consequence is not explicit at this point. The section outlines as follows:

V. 19a Heading

Vv. 19b-20 How Isaac came to marry Rebekah: a resumptive summary of Isaac’s story so far

Vv. 21-23 How Rebekah got pregnant

Vv. 24-26 How she gave birth to two sons, Esau then Jacob

Vv. 27-28 How they differed

Vv. 29-34 How Esau gave up the position of firstborn.

The section compares and contrasts with 11:27—12:8 as the introduction to Part Two. It has the same kind of heading and the same kind of resumptive summary which lead into a story introducing the theme of the part as a whole and incorporating a declaration from Yahweh about how the future is going to work out for the central figures in the story. Indeed, “in these sixteen verses, we have their future lives in a nutshell.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Admittedly the singular word “story” gives a misleading impression even of vv. 21-34, which comprises an episodic series of snapshots, strung together.[[26]](#footnote-26) Whereas the accounts of the pregnancy and birth and of the transfer of the position as firstborn are stories that could have existed on their own as self-contained units, the linking account of the different ways Esau and Jacob grew up could hardly stand alone. It looks like a passage designed to connect those two little stories, its information derived from the chapters that will follow.[[27]](#footnote-27) The section is puckish and scandalous in what it says about both Jacob and Esau. The boys are fighting in the womb? Jacob is grabbing Esau’s heel? “Esau” means hairy (no it doesn’t, everyone would know) and “Jacob” means grabber (no it doesn’t, everyone would know)?[[28]](#footnote-28) Either Isaac or Esau has game in his mouth? Father and mother (who were initially impressive and touching in their prayer and inquiring) are divided in who they like or love? Jacob is seething? Esau wants to guzzle like an animal? Jacob wants to buy the position of firstborn? Esau doesn’t care about it, says he is dying, and lets him buy it with some stew?

**25:19-20.** The heading corresponds in significance to the ones at 11:27 and 37:2 and in form to others that have recurred at less significant points such as 25:12. It makes clear that we are not really going to be reading Isaac’s story but the story of his descendants. As happened in 11:27-30, the heading leads into a summary of material from preceding chapters, specifically Gen 21—24, though Aram Two-rivers (24:10) becomes Paddan Aram, which may mean Aram Garden or Aram Road; Vg not inappropriately speaks of it as “Syrian Mesopotamia" (see 28:2). In the ensuing story Paddan Aram and Harran will function as alternative titles for the place where Laban lives. Possibly they go back to two different versions of the Jacob story, from circles where one or other of the titles was used.[[29]](#footnote-29)

**25:21-23**. The chapters’ focus on Isaac’s progeny rather than Isaac himself receives expression as they simply presuppose the story of his own birth, growing up, and marriage (about which we know from Gen 21—24) and leap straight forward to the birth of Isaac and Rebekah’s offspring. Both Yahweh’s insistence on prosecuting his purpose through Isaac, not Ishmael, and the clarity with which Yahweh indicates that Rebekah was the right wife for Isaac, the sparkling account of her, and specifically her family’s blessing of her (24:60), have not prepared us for the news that she can’t get pregnant. But Isaac and Rebekah’s troublesome and sad situation as an ordinary couple, as well as their plight as the bearers of God’s promise, parallels that of Isaac’s parents and of other couples in Genesis and elsewhere in the First Testament. At one level it reflects the realities of life in a traditional society where nutrition may be poor, medical problems common, and resources for healing non-existent. Yet the sadness of being unable to have children is a real enough reality in Western society, and once more it could seem to raise questions about the true humanity or adulthood of a man and a woman.[[30]](#footnote-30) Theologically it reflects how nothing can be taken for granted even when God has apparently made all the preparations for a straightforward implementing of his intentions. “Nothing seems less accordant with reason, than that the propagation of the Church should be so small and slow”; but God is just not in a hurry, and the increase that will eventually follow thereby testifies more forcibly to its origin as in God’s power and grace.[[31]](#footnote-31)

This little paragraph opens (v. 21) not with the problem but with Isaac’s response to it. Once again Genesis achieves a dramatic effect by working in a non-chronological order. Isaac’s action stands out as it makes for a contrast with that of his parents: when Sarah was long infertile, Abraham did nothing and Sarah eventually looked for a surrogate.[[32]](#footnote-32) It also makes for a contrast with stories where it is the childless woman who prays (30:1; 1 Sam 1); here it is Isaac not Rebekah.[[33]](#footnote-33) Compared with those other stories the account of the prayer is “shockingly brief” and lacks the usual sense of frustration and grief and years of waiting,[[34]](#footnote-34) or in Sarah’s case the long suspense as we read through chapter after chapter and story after story following on the information about her inability to conceive which was followed by the promise given to Abraham.[[35]](#footnote-35) “Entreat” (*‘ātar*) is a First Testament technical term for intercession or supplication—that is, for soliciting something (perhaps slightly outlandish) for oneself or for someone else. It most commonly denotes Moses praying for Pharaoh (e.g., Exod 8:8-9, 28-30 [4-5, 24-26]; 9:28; 10:17, 18). There and here the occurrences come in pairs: someone entreats Yahweh (qal or hiphil), then Yahweh lets himself be entreated (niphal): as we put it, he answers the prayer, in the affirmative. Here, the verse proceeds with a simple sequential logic: Isaac prays, because Rebekah is infertile; Yahweh answers; Rebekah gets pregnant. The reuse of the verb makes clear that Isaac’s prayer makes all the difference. God does something he would not otherwise have done. Yet maybe God “so looked forward to the prayers of the patriarchs that he quasi provoked them into praying for the gift of children.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Presumably Isaac and Rebekah make love (cf. 16:4), but Genesis leaves that bit out (cf. 21:2), which puts the emphasis on Yahweh’s making things happen. Apparently it’s the only time Rebekah gets pregnant, and she is Isaac’s only wife, which all makes for contrast with his father, his half-brother, and his sons, though not with his mother. Rebekah is now the “complete woman” among the matriarchs: she alone has no shadow figure.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Again the story leaps forward (v. 22a), though this time only a few months. “At breathtaking pace, this text moves through barrenness, answered prayer, conception, and troubled pregnancy.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Not surprisingly, having two babies grow inside you is more painful than having one. “Isaac’s problem is getting Rebekah pregnant. Rebekah’s problem is being pregnant.”[[39]](#footnote-39) It could make you wish you were not pregnant at all (why didn’t I stop Isaac praying?).[[40]](#footnote-40) You could think the twins are fighting over who would get out first (the verb is a violent one, elsewhere denoting crushing or breaking—TgPsJ compares the babies to men doing battle), though it will turn out that only one of them would be interested in such a question. As the information about Sarah’s infertility and Yahweh’s promise to Abraham set up the arc of tension for their story, the information about this conflict between Jacob and Esau sets up the arc of tension for their story. Brothers living as one is good, indeed lovely (Ps 133:1), but these brothers are beginning the way they will go on. While the narrator knows this fact, and knows that Rebekah’s pain comes from having conceived twins, it’s not explicit that Rebekah has worked out the latter fact. She may only know about the pain. Her cry is pardonably incoherent, reflecting her agony and her fear; pregnancy is a dangerous business. But “why” is a cry that people utter in all sorts of situations; Rebekah will ask the question again in 27:45. And “why” is commonly more a rhetorical question than a prayer addressed to someone.

But like Isaac, Rebekah also knows how to pray (v. 22b), in the sense that she knows how to ask Yahweh about things. Through this little paragraph the focus lies on the way Isaac and Rebekah are relating to God. As is the case in the Hagar story, Genesis assumes the reality of the relationship between God and a woman as well as God and a man. Further, this story is the first account of someone “inquiring” of Yahweh (*dāra*š). As Hagar is the Bible’s first person to make a theological statement, Rebekah is the first to ask a theological question. To do so, she “went” somewhere, perhaps to the worship site at Beer Sheba or the nearby Ḥay Ro’i Well where God had appeared to Hagar and spoken to her (16:7-14). But Genesis says nothing about how she did it when she got there. In Israel, if you have a question open to a yes/no answer, you can resort to the Urim and Tummim in the possession of a priest (e.g., 1 Sam 22:10), in order to inquire of Yahweh. If you have a more open question and you need a message from Yahweh, you can resort to a prophet (e.g., 2 Kings 3:11). In the context of Saul’s abandonment by Yahweh, 1 Sam 28:6-7 mentions dreams and a medium. Gideon seems to have simply talked to Yahweh where he was (Judg 6:36-40). It thus would not be necessary for Rebekah to consult a person in order to inquire of God; she can simply talk to him.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Genesis relates matter-of-factly that she gets a response (v. 23a), as happened with Isaac’s entreaty. Again it does not tell us who the response came through, and if anything it implies that God spoke to her direct as he did to Hagar and as he will to Jacob. Of course God answers when a person asks a question! Perhaps Rebekah gets a straight answer to a straight question because of the importance of this birth; and perhaps in general people get straight answers to straight questions when their questions relate to God’s purpose. But the revelation that comes to Rebekah need not have indicated that she was going to have twins; it might have indicated only that she would have a baby whose own offspring would eventually became two peoples. This understanding would fit the link between this declaration and the motif of women such as Sarah and Hagar becoming the mothers of many nations; it did not mean that they themselves had more than one baby. Either way, the revelation from Yahweh concerns the significance of Rebekah’s offspring. Ultimately, she will give birth to two peoples (the audience knows they will be Israel and Edom, as Abraham’s sons will be the ancestors of the Israelites and the Ishmaelites). The explanation comes in metrical lines, as Yahweh’s words often do. They are not just ordinary, prosaic words. They comprise two lines which are internally parallel, with the second line also parallel to the first. As regularly happens with parallelism, within each line the second colon goes beyond the opening one. So the first line declares that there will be two nations/peoples, and what is more they will divide.

The second line (v. 23b) goes beyond the first in speaking of the nations/peoples’ inequality, and within this line the second colon goes beyond the opening one in speaking of the greater serving the lesser or younger. Thus throughout the two lines Yahweh’s words work towards a climax in the last colon. It is a scandalous climax. It’s maybe not surprising that one people should be stronger than the other people. It’s more shocking that the greater should serve the younger, which turns upside down the way things regularly work. Yahweh does not say he will make it happen, only that it will happen. In the event, in the short term Esau will be greater, but a reversal will come about through Jacob’s action, and then another reversal (see Gen 33:1-15). Subsequently within Genesis, Edom will become a growing nation with kings, but in the much longer term (and within Genesis—2 Kings) a reversal will come about through David’s action in defeating the Edomites. It will turn out that Yahweh has accepted or been committed to Jacob and has repudiated or rejected Esau (Mal 1:2), though Genesis does not make explicit that he himself had done so before they were born, as Paul infers (Rom 9:10-13).[[42]](#footnote-42) Much of the message’s significance will emerge only in light of events, as often happens with prophecies; Rebekah “must have returned from the prophet little the wiser.”[[43]](#footnote-43) The declaration is not a promise. Nor does it relate to the theme of God’s promise to Israel’s ancestors. And in this respect the declaration and the entire unit advertise something about the nature of Part Three, which makes little reference to that theme even though its context in Genesis and in the Torah gives it significance in that connection.

**25:24-26.** A woman waits, and she knows that the time for giving birth is approximately fixed and will reach its goal. And she may suspect she is going to have twins, but she will not be sure until the birth: but it turns out, yes, there, twins really were in her womb. As is often the case, the “there” (traditionally, “behold”) draws us into the story and “makes us share the surprise which the parents experience when their offspring is born”[[44]](#footnote-44) (for other examples of “there” pulling us into the story, see e.g., 1:31; 6:12; 8:13; 15:4, 17; 22:13; 24:15, 30, 63). In light of what will follow, it is worth noting that both Esau and Jacob are an answer to prayer.

The comment on the first baby (v. 25) is complicated—it implies links that it does not make explicit. He comes out tanned, as if he is already a man of the open country (see v. 27); the only other person so described is David (1 Sam 16:12; 17:42). The word (*’admôni*) also anticipates the fact that he will be the ancestor of Edom—though v. 30 will make a different link between the name Edom and something brownish-red. Perhaps the Edomites were notoriously tanned, not to say hairy.[[45]](#footnote-45) The reference to hair also anticipates both the fact that Esau will be a man who has a lot of hair (27:22), with the implication of being a bit wild, and the fact that he will live in the country of Se‘ir (hair is *śē’ār*), which will be Edom’s region (32:3). Further, the sound of that word for hair also overlaps with the name Esau itself (*‘ēśāw*). We don’t know this name’s actual etymology, and perhaps neither did the narrator, which might be why we get the sequence of convoluted comments on the name when something needs to be said to balance the more straightforward comment on Jacob’s name which will follow.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Because that comment on the second baby (v. 26) is simpler. It too will give people something to think about later—not least Esau (27:36; Hos 12:3 [4]; cf. also Jer 9:4 [3]). The name compares with other Middle Eastern names that link with a verb meaning “protect,” and etymologically it would mean “May he [God] protect,”[[47]](#footnote-47) but Genesis takes the name in a different direction in having Jacob (*ya’ăqōb*) grasp Esau’s heel (*‘āqēb*). Only at the end of the pregnancy/birth story do we learn that in Genesis’s counting, twenty years have passed since Isaac and Rebekah married (in our terms we could think of Isaac as marrying at twenty with Rebekah being a teenager, and of Isaac as now thirty and Rebekah not much younger).

**25:27-28.** The story leaps forward another twenty years, in our way of counting. Like Cain and Abel, the boys grow up with different instincts, which their being twins would make more surprising unless the comment about Esau’s appearance means they were not identical. The revelation about their dividing already begins to find fulfillment.[[48]](#footnote-48) Further, both shepherding and farming were recognized occupations in settled Israel, but being a hunter over against being a shepherd or farmer was not; the First Testament makes virtually no references to game except in lists of animals you may or may not eat. Here Esau recalls Nimrod the great hunter (10:9). He is the kind of man who brings home deer or antelope or gazelle such as will feed the family for quite a long time. Jacob has the more regular role of the shepherd, who stays with tents or lives in tents (cf. 4:20), looking after the sheep and cattle.[[49]](#footnote-49) Esau’s being a hunter will be significant in Gen 27; Jacob’s being resolute in his pursuit of Esau’s primacy will soon receive further expression.

It’s perhaps not surprising that Isaac likes Esau (v. 28), who brings home the barbecue that costs nothing (unlike the calf his grandfather sacrificed for his visitors). Does Rebekah like Jacob because he is the stay-at-home-boy or because she knows he is the one who will win out? *Jub* 19 has Abraham (who is still alive on a literal interpretation of the Genesis chronology) encouraging Rebekah in this love because he knows that the future lies with Jacob. Genesis apparently doesn’t know the reason for Rebekah’s preference; the point about the information lies in the background it provides to Gen 27. Whatever the reason, one will not be surprised if the parental attitudes issue in favoritism and in trouble. “Parents are carried with blind affection.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

**25:29-34**. If food wins father’s favor, however, Jacob can play at that game.[[51]](#footnote-51) For breakfast and lunch the average family might be quite happy to have some bread with some olive oil for dipping, and perhaps some vegetable stew for dinner. Jacob’s being more of a homeboy perhaps also makes it not surprising that he cooks, and Esau’s having been out hunting makes it not surprising that he is starving when he gets home.

The stew with its rich color (v. 30) might suggest to Esau that Jacob had been in a position to cook up some meat left over from one of Esau’s previous hunting expeditions. Reference to its red color (*’ādōm*)makes for a more evident link with the name Edom, the country where he eventually lives (32:3), which perhaps actually got its name from the reddish-brown color of it soil or rock.

Jacob’s response to Esau’s request (v. 31) comes out of left field, though it fits the comment about the manner of his birth in v. 26, and even the comment about the conflict in Rebekah’s womb. From the beginning Jacob wanted to be first and he will do anything to overtake his brother. Being the firstborn(*bᵉkôr*: it was the term for the firstborn animal that Abel sacrificed in 4:4) is more a matter of status than of rights. The only First Testament reference to the firstborn having “rights” comes in Deut 21:15-17, and it relates rather theoretically to an odd marginal situation. In general, “the law of the firstborn is nothing but an expression of the exceedingly high esteem in which the first child was held…. The first is the best.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Reuben as Jacob’s own firstborn was Jacob’s vigor, the first-fruit of his energy (49:3). Israel is Yahweh’s firstborn (Exod 4:22)—the one to whom he is supremely attached. One might compare the way a man in the United States may give his firstborn son the same name as him, and he may pass it on to the firstborn of the next generation, and so on (John Goldingay, John Goldingay Jr., John Goldingay III—though as far as I know there are no such people). It is that status that Jacob covets.

Status doesn’t matter much to Esau (v. 32). He’s more concerned with the fact that he’s starving. He’ll be dead soon, he jokes: what use will the position of firstborn be?

It means everything to Jacob (v. 33), who insists that Esau give him the status of firstborn in return for a helping of stew. Naturally, the transfer needs to be confirmed by an oath which will call down divine judgment on Esau if someday he tries to re-claim that position.

So Esau gets his stew (v. 34). Maybe it’s a disappointment because it turns out to be lentil-based (which could also give it a reddish brown color), though lentils are a staple in the Middle East, not least for stew.[[53]](#footnote-53) Maybe Esau has been cheated.[[54]](#footnote-54) But he eats and drinks, then gets up and goes. It’s a very matter-of-fact event. But the narrator’s last comment recognizes what a shocking event it was. Even if no rights attach to being the firstborn, the honor is huge, and in this case, the listeners know, we are talking about being the one in whom Yahweh’s promise to Abraham will be fulfilled. Esau has shrugged his shoulders and surrendered it, as Yahweh knew he would: see v. 23.

## Jacob I Loved

Esau’s indifference and Jacob’s obsession are keys to the way the future will work out in Part Three of Genesis. There isn’t much to be said for either of the young men. “If Jacob is ruthless here, Esau is feckless.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Thus “it’s hard to know who’s the bigger jerk, Esau or Jacob,”[[56]](#footnote-56) which makes even clearer that God’s working via one and not the other issues not from their deserving but from God’s sovereignty and grace.[[57]](#footnote-57) “The first will be last and the last first” (Matt 19:30).[[58]](#footnote-58) So “why Jacob instead of Esau?” Morally, there’s not much to choose between them. But if God was to choose someone who deserved to be chosen, he would choose nobody.[[59]](#footnote-59) In commenting on God’s choice of Jacob rather than Esau in Rom 9:10-18, Paul judiciously quotes Exod 33:19, though he slants it in an amusingly different direction from the one that obtains in Exodus. There it magnifies God’s mercy (applied to this story, the mercy to Jacob), whereas for Paul it magnifies God’s sovereignty (God has the power not to show mercy to Esau).

Paul incorporates words from 25:18 (“the older one will serve the younger one”) in his argument in Rom 9 which gives his theological account of the puzzling fact that the bulk of God’s chosen people have not come to trust in Jesus and thus found themselves right with God. It reflects a consistent pattern in God’s working out his purpose. God had a “purpose based on a choice” (Rom 9:11) which took effect through his insistence on Isaac rather than Ishmael (Gen 21:12; cf. Rom 9:7-9). The ultimate aim of this purpose based on choice was inclusive not exclusive—it was to bring in a huge number of Gentiles and also the entirety of Israel (Rom 11:25-26). But in the meantime, it excluded in order ultimately to include. At this point, the older serving the younger constitutes the next stage in putting this purpose into effect.

Rebecca being pregnant through one man, Isaac our ancestor (because they hadn’t yet been born nor done anything good or bad), so that God’s purpose based on a choice would continue not on the basis of deeds but on the basis of the one who called, it was said to her: *The older will serve the younger*.As it is written, *Jacob I loved, but Esau* *I hated*. (Rom 9:10-13)

At the Reformation, theological commentary on Gen 25:19-34 focused on the theme of divine election (earlier commentators such as Ephrem, Chrysostom, Origen, and Andrew of Saint Victor do not put the focus there). Calvin focuses on the contrast between the choice of one national group over against another in Genesis, and the choice of particular group within the larger nation in Romans.[[60]](#footnote-60) Luther notes that Paul treats this passage “in a rather sublime manner… by establishing a twofold birth, namely of the flesh and of the promise.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Willet emphasizes that election is based on grace not works and that the passage works against the views of the Pelagians.[[62]](#footnote-62)

This Genesis story is part of a long narrative that indeed describes how God operates by choosing particular groups for reasons that are nothing to do with their worth. But Gen 25:19-34 does not make that point. It tells us two things about God and his relationship with the world and with what happens in the world. The first is that God let himself be entreated by Isaac; the birth of children to Isaac and Rebekah resulted from this prayer. Possibly God had decided to act in this way ahead of time; but Genesis does not say so. It says his action was a reaction to Isaac’s prayer. The second is that he told Rebekah something about the destiny of the children she would bear. Possibly God intends to make things work out this way—to divide the boys and make one stronger than the other and make one serve the other. But he doesn’t say so. He says only that he knows things will work out this way.

In the story that follows, Jacob makes stew, Esau insists on having some, Jacob insists on his surrendering the status of firstborn, Esau despises it. Possible Yahweh intends these things to happen and inspires them, but Genesis does not say so. It says only that human beings made some decisions and acted. The broader Genesis narrative gives no basis for inferring that Yahweh intended these things to happen or inspired them. It tells us that Yahweh “acknowledged” Abraham and that he stipulated that Isaac should be the one through whom his purpose was put into effect. It makes no such statement about Jacob and Esau. Mal 1:2-3 makes such a statement, and Paul lets Malachi interpret Genesis. Paul is inspired by God and his interpretation is inspired. But it doesn’t override what the Holy Spirit inspired within Gen 25:19-34 itself, which speaks of human beings making decisions (to pray, to reach, to cook, to barter), of God knowing what will happen, and of his working their actions into the carpet he is weaving.

Yahweh also tells Israel that he indeed acknowledged Israel alone out of all the earth’s families, but that this acknowledging means he will attend to them because of their waywardness (Amos 3:2), and he reminds them that his getting Israel up from Egypt was no different from his getting the Philistines up from Kaphtor or the Syrians from Qir (Amos 9:7). Grace is the way you get into a relationship with God, but obedience is required if you are to stay in it.[[63]](#footnote-63) Paul’s argument in Rom 9—11 is not so different. If God didn’t spare the branches of the Israelite vine when they failed to respond to him, neither will he spare Gentiles who get grafted into the vine and then turn back from Jesus.

**Genesis 26:1-33—Isaac and Abimelek**

**Overview**

Genesis backtracks to recount how Isaac and Rebekah go through similar experiences to Abraham and Sarah but how God reaffirms his promises and brings about some fulfilment of them. The distinctive focus of the section in this connection is the conflict they experience with their neighbors over water supply and the way Isaac’s people find water. The narrative is distinctive in being just about Isaac and Rebekah. It shows how Isaac’s life “is not that of a wanderer like Abraham's; Hebron, Beer-sheba, Beer-lahai-roi, and Gerar—all in the South of Palestine, being the places at which he is exclusively found. He lived in fact, on the borderland of the two peoples (Edom and Israel), who afterwards boasted their descent from him.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

## Translation

1There was a famine in the region, apart from the first famine that happened in Abraham’s time, and Yiṣḥaq went to Abimelek,[[65]](#footnote-65) king of the Pelištites, to Gerar.

2Yahweh appeared to him and said, “Don’t go down to Miṣrayim. Dwell in the region that I’m telling you about. 3Reside as an alien[[66]](#footnote-66) in this region, and I will be with you and bless you,[[67]](#footnote-67) because[[68]](#footnote-68) to you and to your offspring I will give all these regions and implement the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. 4I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars in the heavens, and I will give your offspring all these regions, and all the nations on earth will bless themselves by your offspring, 5on account of the fact that Abraham listened to my voice and kept my charge, my orders, my decrees, and my instructions.”

6So Yiṣḥaq lived in Gerar. 7The people in the place asked about his wife, and he said “She’s my sister,” because he was afraid to say “My wife”[[69]](#footnote-69) in case “the people in the place kill me because of Ribqah, because she’s good-looking.” 8But when he’d been there some time, Abimelek king of the Pelištites looked out through the window and saw: there was Yiṣḥaq playing around with Ribqah his wife. 9Abimelek called for Yiṣḥaq and said, “Here, really she’s your wife! How did you come to say ‘She’s my sister’?” Yiṣḥaq said to him, “Because I said, ‘So I don’t die because of her.’” 10Abimelek said, “What is this that you’ve done to us? Almost, someone from the people could have slept with your wife and brought liability upon us.” 11Abimelek ordered the entire people: “Anyone who touches this man or his wife will absolutely be put to death.”[[70]](#footnote-70)

12Yiṣḥaq sowed in that region, and that year reaped a hundred-fold.[[71]](#footnote-71) Yahweh blessed him 13and the man got big. He went on doing so, until he got very big indeed. 14He had livestock, flock and herd, and a large body of servants, and the Pelištites were jealous of him. 15All the wells that his father’s servants had dug in the time of Abraham his father, the Pelištites stopped up and filled with dirt.

16Abimelek said to Yiṣḥaq, “Go away from us, because you’re much too numerous for us.” 17So Yiṣḥaq went from there, camped in Wadi Gerar, and lived there. 18Yiṣḥaq again dug the water wells that they[[72]](#footnote-72) had dug in the time of Abraham his father and that the Pelištites had stopped up after Abraham’s death. He named them by the same names as his father had named them. 19And Yiṣḥaq’s servants dug in the wadi and found there a well of spring water.[[73]](#footnote-73) 20But the Gerar shepherds got into an argument with Yiṣḥaq’s shepherds, saying “The water’s ours.” He named the well Eśeq because they quarrelled with him. 21They dug another well and got into an argument over it, too, and he named it Śiṭnah. 22He went on from there and dug another well, and they didn’t argue over it, so he named it Reḥobot and said, “Now Yahweh has made it wide for us and we’ll be fruitful in the region.”

23From there he went up[[74]](#footnote-74) to Be’er Šeba. 24Yahweh appeared to him that night and said, “I am the God of Abraham your father. Don’t be afraid, because I am with you, and I will bless you and make your offspring numerous on account of Abraham my servant.” 25He built an altar there and called in Yahweh’s name, and spread his tents there. Yiṣḥaq’s servants excavated a well there.

26Meanwhile Abimelek[[75]](#footnote-75) went to him from Gerar with Aḥuzzat his aide and Pikol his army officer. 27Yiṣḥaq said to them, “Why have you come to me, when you were hostile to me and you sent me off from being with you?” 28They said, “We’ve seen clearly that Yahweh is with you, so we said, ‘There should please be an imprecation[[76]](#footnote-76) between us’, between us and you, so we may solemnize a pact with you.[[77]](#footnote-77) 29If you act badly with us….![[78]](#footnote-78) –as we haven’t touched you and as we’ve done only good with you, and sent you off in peace. You’re now someone blessed by Yahweh.” 30So Yiṣḥaq made a banquet for them, and they ate and drank. 31They started early in the morning and swore, each to the other. And Yiṣḥaq sent them off and they went from being with him, in peace. 32That day, Yiṣḥaq’s servants came and told him about the matter of the well that they’d dug, and said to him, “We’ve found water.” 33So he called it Šib‘ah. That’s why the name of the town is Be’er Šeba until this day.

## Interpretation

Whereas the medieval chapter division associates the note about Esau in vv. 34-35 with vv. 1-33, MT recognizes that 26:1-33 is a complete section, about Isaac, Rebekah, and Abimelek.[[79]](#footnote-79) It comprises a reprise of a sequence of episodes in Abraham’s story with their associated promises, though the Isaac version has features that give it its individual character. Its concrete focus lies on wells; wells are a crucial feature of the work and life of a shepherding people, especially in the Negev. The section thus tells of tension between the chief of a local people and his staff on one hand, and Isaac and his staff on the other, tension over the adequacy of water resources in the area to support both groups and over the rights to different wells. The tension leads to some sabotaging of wells but also to some discovery of new wells.

This distinctive story is then set in a context which systematically aligns it with the Abraham chapters in a variety of ways. There is a famine in the region which makes Isaac move to Gerar, to Abimelek’s area, from a location elsewhere in the Negev (cf. 12:9, 20:1). The background to this move is Yahweh’s appearing to Isaac to tell him not to go down to Egypt because of the famine but to continue dwelling/residing as an alien in the region (compare and contrast 12:10; 14:13; 20:1; 21:23-24). Yahweh will be with him there, will bless him, and will give all these regions to him and his offspring (cf. 12:2; 17:8; 21:22). On account of the fact that Abraham listened to Yahweh’s voice and kept his charge, decrees, and instructions, Yahweh will thus implement the oath he swore to Abraham. He will make his offspring as numerous as the stars in the heavens, so that all the nations on the earth will bless themselves by his offspring (cf. 22:16-18). On his arrival in Gerar, Isaac tells people that his wife is his sister because he is afraid they will kill him because she is good-looking (cf. 12:11-13; 20:1-13), though the exposure of his ploy comes about in a fashion that distinguishes it from the occasions in the Abraham story.

While another distinctive note is Isaac’s sowing in that region and reaping abundantly, the further description of his prospering in terms of Yahweh’s blessing him, and his getting to be a big man with flocks, herds, and servants, follows the description of Abraham by his servant (cf. 24:35). In the midst of the consequent disputes over the wells, Yahweh’s further promise of blessing and of numerous offspring comes “on account of Abraham my servant” (cf. 22:17) and leads into his building an altar, calling in Yahweh’s name, and spreading his tents (cf. 12:7-8). In the context of Abimelek’s hostility (cf. 24:60), there follows a conciliatory visit from Abimelek and his senior staff which issues in the solemnizing of a pact and eventually in the naming of Beer Sheba (cf. 21:22-32). Yahweh thus relates to Isaac in the way he had related to Abraham, and Isaac’s story shows itself to be in continuity with Abraham’s.

The section as a whole breaks into two parts: vv. 1-11 concern the move to Gerar, while vv. 12-33 concern subsequent events, with a focus on the key question of wells. Like some previous stories, the chapter involves some internal backtracking. Key to understanding the sequence of both parts is the way each begins with a summary and then goes back to give a more detailed account—again like some previous stories.

v. 1 The famine and Isaac’s move

vv. 2-5 Yahweh’s instructions in connection with the famine

vv. 6-11 Consequences of the move

vv. 12-15 Isaac’s flourishing, the jealousy, and the problem over water

vv. 16-19 The departure from Gerar and the discovery of water

vv. 20-22 The arguments and the discovery of more water

vv. 23-25 The move to Beer Sheba and the discovery of more water

vv. 26-33 The visit, the pact, and the discovery of more water

The two main parts of the chapter proceed by setting up questions and problems and showing how they get resolved or where they lead, though each time the resolution or result leads into the next question or problem:

v. 1 Question: There’s a famine: what will Isaac do?

vv. 2-5 Response: Yahweh tells him what to do and promises to bless him

v. 6 Result: He lives in Gerar

v. 7a Question: What will he do about Rebekah?

v. 7b Response: Say she’s his sister

v. 8-11 Result: He gets in trouble with Abimelek

vv. 9-10 Question: What will Abimelek to do?

v. 11 Response: Set up a law to protect Isaac and Rebekah

vv. 12-14a Question: When Isaac flourishes, what will the Philistines do?

vv. 14b-16 Response: Get jealous, stop up his wells, ask him to leave

vv. 17 Result: Isaac leaves

vv. 18-19 Question: When they dig more wells, what will happen?

vv. 20-21 Response: The Gerar shepherds will dispute them

vv. 22-25 Result: They dig yet more, and Yahweh promises to bless Isaac

vv. 26-27 Question: What does Abimelek want now?

vv. 28-29 Response: A pact, because he sees that Yahweh is with Isaac

vv. 30-33 Result: They make a pact, and Isaac finds more water

The chapter has a noteworthy relationship with the chapters on either side. In its backtracking, the absence of Esau and Jacob from this story suggests that chronologically it belongs in the earlier years of Isaac and Rebekah’s marriage and before the boys’ birth, between 25:20 and 25:21.[[80]](#footnote-80) In the other direction, if “one wonders what the editors are seeking to achieve” in incorporating a third story about someone trying to pass off his wife as his sister,[[81]](#footnote-81) then a possible answer is that it makes for a dramatic pause between the first announcement of the conflict between Esau and Jacob in 25:18-24 and the development of this theme in Gen 27—33, analogous to the role of Gen 38 in the Joseph story.[[82]](#footnote-82) The second part of the section then shows how Yahweh affirmed and maintained a commitment to Isaac in his own right, a theme that would not appear if the narrative proceeded straight from Gen 25 to Gen 27. In other words, the chapter establishes that Yahweh really is “the God of Isaac” (28:13).[[83]](#footnote-83)

In traditional source-critical terms, the section belongs to J. Comparison of the three wife-sister stories has generated several possible views of the tradition history of their relationship.[[84]](#footnote-84)

**26:1.** The chapter begins, then with a summary to introduce vv. 1-11. Genesis distinguishes this famine from the earlier one, but reports it in similar terms. Isaac is presumably still living somewhere in the Negev; the last two concrete references have located him in the Ḥay Ro’i Well area (24:62; 25:11). He moves to Gerar—presumably again the southern Gerar, which was also in the Negev.[[85]](#footnote-85) Yet this move would likely not solve the problem of the famine; if there was a famine in Isaac’s region, it would affect Gerar, too.[[86]](#footnote-86) Maybe Isaac would not know how things were in Gerar until he got there (when there is a famine, you have to do something), and/or maybe we should think of his going to the Gerar area as simply an aspect of the way shepherding peoples do move around. Given that Abraham’s own dealings with Abimelek and Phikol (who appears later in this chapter) took place before Isaac was born, one might ask whether the incorporation of their names, and of the reference to Gerar itself, is a way of making the story more concrete rather than a piece of historical information, and a way of enhancing the parallel with the Abraham story, unless the earlier Abimelek and had Phikol named their sons after themselves. In any context, it’s hard to imagine a sense in which Abimelek is king of (all) the Philistines; he will be “the Philistine king” in the sense of being chief or sheikh of the local people in this area.

**26:2-5**. The narrator now gives the background to v. 1b, explaining how it was that Isaac didn’t follow the example set by Abraham in connection with the first famine by going to Egypt, though he did follow his example in moving to Gerar; indeed, perhaps Isaac was on the way to Egypt when the revelation came.[[87]](#footnote-87) As Isaac was not to leave the country to find a wife, he is not to leave the country to find food. He is to “dwell” there.

He is to do so (vv. 3-4) even though he will continue to be one who only “resides” as an alien in a land that is not his own; Yahweh sustains him in this connection by reaffirming to him the promises he made to Abraham.[[88]](#footnote-88) He adds that he will be with him: it is the “I will be with you” with its practical implications[[89]](#footnote-89) that enables Yahweh to tell Isaac not to go to Egypt.[[90]](#footnote-90) Genesis finds it easier to shrug its shoulders about what happens between the patriarch and the foreign people than to shrug its shoulders about leaving the area that Yahweh intends to give to him and his offspring. The point is not an aversion to Egypt in particular but an aversion to leaving the promised land, of which both the Ḥay Ro’i Well and Gerar evidently count. They are within the regions that Yahweh intends to give to Isaac’s offspring. The plural “regions” parallels Yahweh’s promise and oath in 15:18-21 which refers to the territory of a whole series of peoples, though that territory may not stretch this far south into the Negev;[[91]](#footnote-91) the plural reappears later to refer to wider Israel as a whole (1 Chron 13:2). Yahweh thus comprehensively restates and perhaps extends his promises to Isaac’s father

Yahweh does so on the basis of his father’s responsiveness to Yahweh (v. 5). Abraham had listened to Yahweh’s voice (22:18). Vv. 1-5 then conclude with their most eyebrow-raising words that expand on that commendation. If Abraham kept Yahweh’s charge, orders, and decrees, he did what Moses will expect of Israel (Deut 11:1) and what David will expect of Solomon (1 Kings 2:3) (cf. also Josh 22:3; Mal 3:14). Using the terms that apply to the later revelation implies that the latter “does not emerge as a new reality; it stands in basic continuity with earlier articulations of God’s will” which actually go back behind Abraham to creation.[[92]](#footnote-92) But Genesis itself does not otherwise refer to a charge, orders, decrees, or instructions. In speaking thus of Abraham’s total obedience, Yahweh indulges in a magnificent hyperbole to inspire the audience (and not least its leaders) to emulate him. In the context of Genesis, Yahweh’s affirmation may have in mind the way Abraham did as Yahweh specifically “said” at various points (not least 22:3). Yahweh might have seen Abraham as keeping his charge by having his clan circumcised; Yahweh there spoke of “keeping” his pact (17:9-10), and “charge” (*mišmeret*) comes from the same root as that verb. In the same connection Genesis spoke of Abraham circumcising Isaac as God “ordered” (21:4). It would thus not be a stretch to see the requirement of circumcision as a decree or an instruction, though Ibn Ezra adds that it was by leaving Harran and by offering Isaac that Abraham did as Yahweh said.[[93]](#footnote-93) Qimchi adds reference to the Noahide commandments;[[94]](#footnote-94) *Jub* 21 had already looked behind Noah to Enoch as the source of instructions that Abraham obeyed.[[95]](#footnote-95)

The logic of vv. 2-5 works as follows:

you are to do as I say, and then

I will bless you

because I intend to give you this region

because I promised it to Abraham

so I will make you numerous and give you these regions

on account of the fact that Abraham did as I said.

The concentric shape of Yahweh’s statement points to the fact that logic is actually the wrong word. The verses do not work linearly. Like the account of circumcision in Gen 17,[[96]](#footnote-96) they magnificently expound the impossibility of seeing the relationship between God and people (or relationships between human beings) in a rationalistically logical way. Isaac’s obedience is a logical condition but not a quasi-legal condition of his receiving Yahweh’s blessing; it is a logical condition in the sense that in its absence his life will fall apart. Yahweh intends to bless him because he intends to give him the land on the basis that he had promised it to Abraham. Yet his intention also reflects the fact that Abraham did as Yahweh said. Abraham’s, obedience, too, was not a quasi-legal condition of ensuring that Yahweh would fulfill his promises, but it was a logical condition. Yahweh is thus logically dependent on the obedience of Abraham and Isaac if he is to fulfill his intentions, though no doubt he would find other ways of fulfilling his intentions if that obedience was not forthcoming. The dynamic relationship between God’s intention and Isaac’s responsibility overlaps with the narrative account of the dynamic relationship between God’s intention to make Pharaoh stubborn and Pharaoh’s self-willed stubbornness in Exod 4—14.[[97]](#footnote-97)

**26:6-11**. After vv. 2-5 have given the background to v. 1, Genesis goes on to give the foreground. It now speaks of Isaac “living” in Gerar, as Abimelek had invited his father to do (20:15). Isaac’s description of Rebekah offers further comparison and contrast with Abraham in Gerar (20:1-18). Like his father, Isaac could say he was merely being economical with the truth, since Rebekah came from his extended family. His exposure comes in a different way from his father’s. To explain how Isaac got caught out following his father’s unwise example, and recalling earlier occurrences of the verb *ṣaḥaq* which lies behind Isaac’s name, the narrator imagines Abimelek from his sheikhly tent able to see inside Isaac’s tent, or seeing Isaac and Rebekah out in the open somewhere, and mines further the potential of that verb with its capacity to refer to amusement in various senses (cf. 17:17;18:12-15; 19:14; 21:6, 9). Here the problem is that Isaac is Isaac-ing with Rebekah: the euphemism implies that they are having fun or amusing themselves in a way that indicates that they are more lovers than siblings.

Isaac had taken a risk (v. 10). As was the case in 20:1-18, Abimelek is concerned about the adultery that could have resulted from Isaac’s giving the Gerarites the impression that Rebekah was “available” (does Genesis presuppose that she was privy to the pretext, as Abraham says Sarah was?). It would have brought “liability” on Gerar. Genesis introduces another technical term from later in the Torah, *’āšām;* the related adjective *’āšēm* will come in 42:21, but otherwise words from this root are characteristic of Leviticus. The term refers to the objective liability that attaches to us when we do something that is objectively wrong. It does not work with the notion of a conscious decision to do something that one knows is wrong but with the fact that we have put the world out of kilter by wrongdoing, whether or not we knew what we were doing. Ignorance of a law does not deliver us from liability for breaking it. Adultery would have that significance whether or not the man who committed adultery knew he was doing so, and it would have that implication not only for the individual who got involved with Rebekah (cf. 12:17; 20:17-18). TgOnq and TgPsJ take the “someone” to refer specifically to someone such as the king himself, as in the other wife-sister stories, which would be a more regular way for a community to be affected by the right or wrong action of an individual.

Abimelek further expresses his honor (v. 11) by taking action to ensure that Isaac’s fear of the Gerarites is not realized. As happens in all three wife-sister narratives “and climactically in this third one, one moral hero emerges: Abimelek.”[[98]](#footnote-98) The word “touching” is nicely ambiguous; it would have different implications in respect of Isaac and of Rebekah. The formula “will absolutely be put to death” marks Abimelek’s words as a legal prescription (e.g., Exod 21:12-17).

**26:12-15**. There is a second, possibly more understandable potential for conflict between Abimelek’s people and Isaac’s people; again the dynamics parallel those of the Abraham story (see 21:22-32).

Perhaps Isaac’s ability to sow seed (v. 12a), which might be wheat, results from his freedom to “live” in Gerar. There is no need to assume that he sowed in vast quantities. Although Genesis refers only occasionally to the ancestors growing things (30:14; 37:7), it is a normal if subordinate aspect of the life of a shepherding people; references to bread and lentils in Genesis have implied as much. The term “a hundred-fold (cf. Vg) comes only here; it might imply that a handful of seed produces a hundred handfuls of seed, or a hundred measures, or a hundred times Isaac’s estimate (Tg, Aq). Whichever is the right understanding, Isaac might have been happy with a ten-fold crop; it is evidently a spectacular yield one way or another, and it makes for a spectacular contrast with the famine conditions referred to in v. 1.

Genesis goes on (vv. 12b-13) to describe Isaac’s flourishing in general terms such as make clear that Yahweh is treating him the same as he treated Abraham. Yahweh has fulfilled his promise that things would work out okay without Isaac’s leaving the regions that were the object of Yahweh’s promise—indeed, things have worked out more than okay. Isaac anticipatorily experiences the truth of Psalm 37.[[99]](#footnote-99) God’s relationship with Isaac in the tough experiences through which he takes him covers the down-to-earth and the “spiritual.”[[100]](#footnote-100) If God was involved only in the earthly it might be tempting to think of this involvement as really just a matter of Isaac’s interpreting things that could be matters of chance. If God was involved only in the speaking within Isaac’s spirit, it might be tempting to think of this involvement as a figment of Isaac’s imagination. And the correspondence between God’s dealings with Isaac and with his father also reinforces the assumption that the same one God is involved with both of them.[[101]](#footnote-101)

The Philistines’ jealousy in reaction to Isaac’s all-round flourishing (vv. 14-15) is another new note in Genesis. The previous Abimelek story had involved wells, one of which Abraham swore he dug near Beer Sheba (21:30). Here, the wells would be key to Isaac’s success in growing a crop as well as in sustaining his livestock. Filling in the wells might not seem a very logical expression of spite but it was “a practice frequently resorted to in desert warfare” (2 Kings 3:25)[[102]](#footnote-102) and here it was presumably calculated to induce unwanted aliens to move off somewhere else, after which the Gerarites could re-dig the wells.

**26:16-19**. Once again Genesis follows up the summary statement in vv. 12-15 with a fuller account, detailing the conflict that issued from Isaac’s flourishing. Stopping up the wells was perhaps an unofficial Philistine action; v. 29 implies as much (cf. 21:26). If so, it is now complemented by some official action. Isaac’s staff re-dig the blocked up wells, and also find another well.

**26:20-25**. Camping in Wadi Gerar would not mean moving far from Gerar itself, and it is not surprising that more conflict follows. The conflict is reflected in the names of the wells, as the audience might be able to see: Eseq would apparently mean quarrel (though noun and verb come only here), Sitnah would mean opposition (the name is related to the word for an opponent, *śāṭān*). The good news was that the next well could be given a name that meant “wide places”; there is a town in the Negev called Ruhaibeh which might be Isaac’s Rehobot.[[103]](#footnote-103)

Otherwise (vv. 24-25), the verses again reaffirm that Yahweh dealt with and spoke to Isaac as he had to Abraham, “on account of Abraham” and as “the God of Abraham your father.” It is the first occurrence of a title for God of a kind that then recurs through Genesis and comes occasionally in Exodus as a transition is made to a more consistent use of the name Yahweh (e.g., Gen 28:13; 31:5, 29, 42, 53; 43:23; 46:1, 3; 50:17; Exod 3:6). The title reflects God’s having made a distinctive commitment to Abraham in connection with issuing his promises to him as an aspect of involving him in the fulfillment of an intention to bless his offspring and bless the nations He renews the commitment to Isaac and to Jacob, so that eventually he becomes “the God of your/our/their fathers” (e.g., Exod 3:13; Deut 12:1; 1 Chron 29:18). The implication of the title is not that God enters into a personal relationship with Abraham that is distinctive of and confined to him, but that he enters into a commitment to Abraham of which his wider family is also the beneficiary. In this passage the converse of Yahweh’s being Abraham’s God in that connection is Abraham’s being Yahweh’s servant. Yahweh’s appearing to him and making this commitment to him gives Isaac reason to build an altar at Beer Sheba, as Abraham did not.

**26:26-33.** Yet again the pattern follows that in 21:26-32. As Abraham had complained about Abimelek’s staff taking over a well, so Isaac complains about Abimelek’s withdrawing his green card. Abimelek wants to smooth things over, and he has come to see Isaac for this reason. With him and Phikol (who appeared in Gen 21) he brings Ahuzzat his “aide,” etymologically his “friend,” presumably an adviser.

The new note in Abimelek’s thinking (v. 28) reflects the emphasis of the chapter as a whole. Abimelek and Phikol had greeted Abraham with the blessing, “God be with you” (21:22). In v. 3 Yahweh has promised to be with Isaac, and they have now seen the fulfillment of that promise, which means God has protected him and blessed him (again, cf. 21:20).[[104]](#footnote-104) It would therefore be wise for them to be on good terms with Isaac, as they were with Abraham as a result of that earlier meeting.

As commonly happens and as he did to Abraham (21:23), Abimelek leaves the sanctions attached to the oath unstated (v. 29); God can be trusted to see that consequences follow. Abimelek’s claim about his own stance in relation to Isaac puts a positive spin on this stance. Even if Abimelek knew nothing about stopping up wells, Isaac can point out that Abimelek had invited him to leave the area, which looks like an expression of hostility. But Abimelek speaks of taking this action “in peace,” and he had indeed seen that nobody “touched” Isaac: see v. 11.

A state banquet follows (vv. 30-31), as it surely must (cf. 31:54); eating together expresses and seals relationships. Next day everyone gets up early because there is serious formal business that they are committed to concluding, and Isaac sends them off in the peace with which Abimelek claimed to have sent off Isaac. The peaceful relationship is now guaranteed by the pact-making, though the agreement may be more a non-aggression pact than a peaceful relationship in a fuller sense.

There is more good news (vv. 32-33). Possibly this well is the one whose initial “excavating” v. 25 had described (hence the use of a different verb there);[[105]](#footnote-105) the good news is that in the course of the excavation they had found an actual spring. The section as a whole underscores how there is hardly anything more important than water supplies; it “spans a movement from *famine* (v. 1) to *water*.”[[106]](#footnote-106) Because of its water resources, there is nowhere more important in the region than Beer Sheba, in whose area yet another well is now found (see 21:31 and the comment). So the place gets a third basis for its name from now on—or rather, this third significance will so attach when there is a town there (which there is not in the ancestors’ day). The name Beer Sheba will be appropriate because Isaac and Abimelek swore their oath here (*šāba‘* ); in the context, the implication is that *šib*‘*āh* means “oath.”

**Genesis 26:34—28:9—Why Jacob Had to Move to Harran**

## Overview

There now begins the long palistrophic account of Jacob’s move to Harran, his stay there, and his eventual return. This narrative dominates the story of Isaac and his family but it focuses especially on Jacob and his relationships with Esau and with the wider extended family. It opens (26:34-35) by recounting how Esau married two Hittite women, which led in due course to Rebekah’s urging that Jacob should marry women from back in Paddan Aram (27:46—28:9). The intervening story (27:1-45) relates how Rebekah got Jacob to cheat Esau of the blessing that belongs to the elder son. That action explains why Jacob needs to flee from Esau’s wrath and thus why Isaac did not simply send someone to get a bride for Jacob, as Abraham did for Isaac himself.

## Translation

26:34Esaw was a man of forty years; he got as wife Yehudit[[107]](#footnote-107) daughter of Be’eri the Ḥittite, and Ba’semat daughter of Elon the Ḥittite,[[108]](#footnote-108) 35and they became a source of bitterness[[109]](#footnote-109) in spirit to Yiṣḥaq and Ribqah.

27:1Yiṣḥaq was old and his eyes had become too dim to see. He called Esaw his older son and said to him, “Son!” He said to him, “I’m here.” 2He said, “Here, please: I’m old; I don’t know the day of my death. 3So now, pick up your equipment, please, your quiver[[110]](#footnote-110) and your bow, and go out to the open country and hunt game for me. 4Make me a dish the way I like and bring it to me so I can eat,[[111]](#footnote-111) and I will give you my personal blessing[[112]](#footnote-112) before I die.” 5Ribqah was listening when Yiṣḥaq was speaking to Esaw his son.

So Esaw went into the open country to hunt game to bring,[[113]](#footnote-113) 6and Ribqah said to Ya‘aqob her son: “Here, I heard your father speaking to Esaw your brother, saying 7‘Bring me game and make me a dish so I can eat, and I will bless you before Yahweh before I die.’ 8So now, son, listen to my voice, to what I’m ordering you. 9Go to the flock, please, and get me two choice kid goats from there so I can make them into a dish for your father, the way he likes, 10and you can bring it to your father so he can eat, so he may bless you before he dies.”

11Ya‘aqob said to Ribqah his mother, “Here, my brother Esaw is a hairy man and I’m a smooth-skinned man. 12Maybe my father will feel me and in his eyes I will be like someone being scornful,[[114]](#footnote-114) and I will bring on myself diminishing,[[115]](#footnote-115) not blessing.” 13His mother said to him, “Your diminishing be on me, son. Just listen to what I say. Go and get them for me.” 14So he went and got them and brought them to his mother, and his mother made a dish the way his father liked. 15And Ribqah got herself the clothes of Esaw her older son, the best ones, which were with her in the house, and she placed them on Ya‘aqob her younger son. 16The skin of the kid goats she placed on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck, 17and she put the dish and the bread that she had made into the hand of Ya‘aqob her son.

18So he came[[116]](#footnote-116) to his father and said, “Father!” He said, “I’m here—who are you, son?” 19Ya‘aqob said to his father, “I’m Esaw your firstborn. I’ve done as you spoke to me. Please get up, sit and eat some of my game, so you may give me your personal blessing.” 20Yiṣḥaq said to his son, “How is it that you were so quick in finding it, son?” He said, “Because Yahweh your God made it happen for me.” 21Yiṣḥaq said to Ya‘aqob, ‘Please come up so I can feel you, son, whether you’re really Esaw my son or not.” 22Ya‘aqob came up to Yiṣḥaq his father, and he felt him and said, “The voice is Ya‘aqob’s voice, but the hands are Esaw’s hands.” 23He didn’t recognize him because his hands were like the hands of Esaw his brother, hairy. So he blessed him.

24He said, “You’re really my son Esaw?”[[117]](#footnote-117) He said, “I am.” 25He said, “Bring it up to me so I can eat some of my son’s game, in order that I can give you my personal blessing.” He brought it up to him and he ate, and he brought him wine and he drank. 26His father Yiṣḥaq said to him, “Please come up and kiss me, son.” 27He came up and kissed him. He smelled his clothes, and he blessed him: “See:[[118]](#footnote-118) my son’s smell is like the smell of the open country that Yahweh has blessed.

28God give you from the dew of the heavens

and the manifold richness[[119]](#footnote-119) of the earth,

yes, a large quantity of grain and new wine.

29Peoples are to serve you,

nations to bow low to you.

Be[[120]](#footnote-120) lord to your brothers;[[121]](#footnote-121)

may your mother’s sons bow low to you.

Those who curse you—may he be cursed;

those who bless you—may he be blessed.[[122]](#footnote-122)

30As Yiṣḥaq finished blessing Ya‘aqob, and scarcely had Ya‘aqob gone right out[[123]](#footnote-123) from the presence of Yiṣḥaq his father, when Esaw his brother came from his hunting. 31He, too, made a dish and brought it to his father and said to his father, “May my father get up and eat some of his son’s game, in order that you may give me your personal blessing.” 32Yiṣḥaq his father said to him, “Who are you?” He said, “I’m your son, your firstborn, Esaw.” 33Yiṣḥaq trembled, trembled with much force,[[124]](#footnote-124) and said, “Then who was that who was hunting game, and brought it to me and I ate of it all before you came, and I blessed him? Yes, he will come to be blessed.”

34When Esaw heard his father’s words, he cried out with a very loud and bitter cry. He said to his father, “Bless me, me as well, father!” 35He said, “Your brother came with guile[[125]](#footnote-125) and got your blessing.” 36He said, “They named him ‘Ya‘aqob,’ didn’t they? He’s grabbed me by the heel, indeed[[126]](#footnote-126) twice. He got my position as firstborn, and there, he’s got my blessing now.” But he said, “Haven’t you saved a blessing for me?” 37Yiṣḥaq answered Esaw, “There: lord in relation to you I’ve made him, all his brothers I’ve given him as servants, and with grain and new wine I’ve sustained him. For you, then, what can I do, son?” 38Esaw said to his father, “Do you have one blessing, father? Bless me, me as well, father!”[[127]](#footnote-127) Esaw lifted up his voice and cried. 39Yiṣḥaq his father answered him: there,

While the places where you live will be away from the manifold richness of the earth[[128]](#footnote-128)

and away from the dew of the heavens above,

40And you will live by your sword,

and serve your brother,

As you wander[[129]](#footnote-129)

You will break his yoke from your neck.

41Esaw was hostile to Ya‘aqob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him. Esaw said to himself, “The time for grieving over my father will arrive, and I will kill Ya‘aqob my brother.” 42Ribqah was told the words of Esaw her older son,[[130]](#footnote-130) and she sent and called for Ya‘aqob her younger son, and said to him, “Here, Esaw your brother is going to console himself by killing you. 43Now, son, listen to my voice. Set off, take flight, take yourself[[131]](#footnote-131) to Ḥarran to Laban my brother 44and stay with him for a short time until your brother’s wrath turns away, 45until your brother’s anger with you turns away and he puts out of mind what you’ve done to him, then I’ll send and get you from there. Why should I be bereaved of the two of you together[[132]](#footnote-132) in one day?”

46And Ribqah said to Yiṣḥaq, “I’m dismayed about my life because of the Ḥētite women. If Ya‘aqob gets a wife from among the Ḥēttite women like these, from the women of this country, what good will life be for me?” 28:1So Yiṣḥaq called for Ya‘aqob, blessed him, and ordered him, “You will not[[133]](#footnote-133) get a wife from among the Kena‘anite women. 2Set off, take yourself to Paddan Aram to the house of Betu’el, your mother’s father, and get yourself a wife from there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother. 3May El Šadday himself[[134]](#footnote-134) bless you and enable you to be fruitful and numerous, so you become a congregation[[135]](#footnote-135) of peoples.[[136]](#footnote-136) 4May he give you Abraham’s blessing, you and your offspring with you, so you take possession of the country where you’re residing as aliens, which God gave Abraham.” 5So Yiṣḥaq sent Ya‘aqob off and he went to Paddan Aram to Laban ben Betu’el, the Aramite, the brother of Ribqah, the mother of Ya‘aqob and Esaw.

6Esaw saw that his father Yiṣḥaq had blessed Ya‘aqob and sent him off to Paddan Aram to get himself a wife from there, and in blessing him had ordered him,[[137]](#footnote-137) “You will not get a wife from among the Kena‘anite women,” 7and Ya‘aqob had listened to his father and mother and gone to Paddan Aram. 8Esaw saw that the Kena‘anite women were bad in the eyes of Yiṣḥaq his father. 9So Esaw went to Yišma’e’l and got for himself as wife Mahalat daughter of Yišma’e’l Abraham’s son, sister of Nebayot, as an addition to his wives.

## Interpretation

MT makes 26:34-35 and then 27:1—28:9 two paragraphs within its larger unit which extends from 25:18 to 32:3 and thus stretches to cover the whole of Jacob’s time in Paddan Aram/Harran. But 26:34-35 seems brief to stand on its own, unconnected to the material on either side: thus the medieval chapter division makes it an unrelated footnote to the story of Isaac and Abimelek. In addition, 27:46 does not follow straight on from 27:1-45 but does lead straight into 28:1-9, so that the medieval chapter division which separates 28:1-9 from 27:46 is also odd. It is when we get towards the end of 26:34—28:9 that we discover how 26:34-35 relates to what follows: it provides the background to Rebekah’s action in 27:46—28:9. So 26:34—28:9 forms one interwoven unit,[[138]](#footnote-138) the whole explaining why Jacob moved to Paddan Aram/Harran.

Gen 26:34-35, 27:46—28:9 on one hand and Gen 27:1-45 on the other are complementary accounts of the background to Jacob’s move. It wouldn’t be surprising if these two accounts had earlier existed as separate self-contained units.[[139]](#footnote-139) In the terms of traditional source criticism, 27:34-35 and 27:46—28:9 was part of the Priestly version of the Genesis story, 27:1-45 was part of the Jahwist version or issues from a combination of J and E. Gen 27:1-45 was then inserted into its new framework (even though the narrative would read more smoothly if it were not there) because its insertion provides the answer to a question raised within 26:34-35, 27:46—28:9: why didn’t Isaac simply send for a bride from Paddan Aram, as his father had for him? So the two interwoven stories provide different explanations for Jacob’s move. It would be quite possible for both to be factual—that is, some time after the act of deception in 27:1-45 Rebekah provided Isaac with this alternative rationale for the move, and Isaac gave Jacob a different blessing from that in 27:1-45, one which relates more specifically to the Abrahamic blessing. But in the drama of Genesis, the two accounts tell different, complementary stories, each with its own message.

On one hand, then, 26:34-35; 27:46—28:9 shows the listeners that Isaac and Rebekah made sure that Jacob followed the principle that Abraham applied to Isaac in ensuring that he got his wife from the extended family and not from among the Canaanites (24:3). Part of its message would thus be that Israelite listeners to Genesis should ensure that their children do the same. It recounts how Isaac passed on the Abrahamic blessing to Jacob, and it locates Esau and his family on the edge of the Abrahamic family (not outside it but not at the center of it), like Ishmael. And on the other hand, 27:1-45 takes forward the wider story begun in 25:18-33. It “intensifies” that earlier story, which retrospectively becomes a prelude to this one.[[140]](#footnote-140) It picks up the implications of the revelation to Rebekah, the naming of Jacob, the description of the physical difference between the boys and their different personalities as hunter and shepherd, and the note about their parents’ different feelings about them. It also takes up the theme of Yahweh’s blessing, though not in terms of the Abrahamic blessing. In its own fashion it prepares the way for the account of Jacob’s journey to Harran, for his stay there, and for his eventual return when Esau has mellowed. Reading from the end of 27:1-45 we can see how the plot of the story works and what is the question it answers

Why did Jacob decide to move to Harran?

Because Rebekah urged him to.

Why did Rebekah urge him to?

Because she had heard that Esau was going to kill him.

Why was Esau going to kill him?

Because Jacob had defrauded him of his blessing.

How had Jacob defrauded him?

By pretending to be Esau.

What was this blessing?

That he should enjoy abundance of provision.

How did he pretend to be Esau?

By dressing as Esau and cooking like Esau.

How did he come to do so?

Rebekah’s suggested it.

How did Rebekah know Jacob intended to bless Esau in this way?

She heard Isaac say so.

(Why did Isaac and Rebekah act in this way?

Because Rebekah was fond of Jacob, whereas Isaac was fond of Esau)

In keeping with a convention of folk narrative,[[141]](#footnote-141) each scene in 27:1-45 involves only two of the story’s four characters. Jacob and Esau never appear together, and neither do Isaac and Rebekah, which symbolizes the frictions within the family.[[142]](#footnote-142) It’s ironic that the one monogamous marriage in Gen 12—50 is so dysfunctional![[143]](#footnote-143) Even here, “stability does not appear to be a feature of typical family life” in Genesis.[[144]](#footnote-144) While 27:1-45 can be seen as a complete story, it cries for continuance. It makes us want to know what happened next. “It does not develop a proper ending” such as resolves the tension it opens up.[[145]](#footnote-145) Even when 26:34—28:9 comes to an end, it still does not come to a conclusion. What will happen to Jacob (and to Esau and to their relationship)? “The story is ‘open to the front’; even by its ending it shows that it is only part of a larger whole.[[146]](#footnote-146)

Why did Israel tell the story and hold onto it? Why did it gain entry to the Scriptures? What is its significance for Jewish and Christian readers?

1. It was entertaining.
2. It could articulate for Israelites who they were and who the Edomites were. It could confirm or explain for Israelites their being the objects of Yahweh’s special blessing and the Edomites not being so. It could explain Israel’s sovereignty over Edom in some periods but discourage Israel from taking that sovereignty for granted, and/or explain the loss of that sovereignty. More ironically, it could make Israelites reflect on the deceptive character of their eponymous ancestor, and on the Edomites’ reputation for being smart (e.g., Jer 49:7).[[147]](#footnote-147) It relates an event that plays a key role in determining how the future will turn out for Jacob’s descendants.
3. It could function theologically to confirm the special place of Israel in God’s purpose, which God was willing to ensure if necessary by devious means. Isaac’s blessing of Jacob was God’s way of putting “the grace of election” into effect.[[148]](#footnote-148)
4. It could provide allegories of theological truth. For Philo, Jacob is a picture of contemplation or wisdom, Esau of folly.[[149]](#footnote-149) For Augustine, “The blessing of Jacob is… a proclamation of Christ to all nations…. The world like a field is filled with the odor of Christ’s name: His is the blessing of the dew of heaven, that is, of the showers of divine words; and of the fruitfulness of the earth, that is, of the gathering together of the peoples: His is the plenty of grain and wine, that is, the multitude that gathers bread and wine in the sacrament of His body and blood.”[[150]](#footnote-150)
5. It could provide positive or negative models of behavior, of a bad example of deception or a good example of shrewdness. Ironically, great expositors who stress the grace and freedom of God put in great effort to show that the people who count (Rebekah, Jacob) deserve to do so.[[151]](#footnote-151)
6. It could simply describe how things sometimes work out in the human story. Blessing is gained through deception! It is the way life is.[[152]](#footnote-152)

**26:34-35**. The information about Esau’s marriages (but see further 28:9; 36:2-3) forms significant background to 27:46—28:9. The Hittites will be the people of that name who appear in Gen 23 and who live in Hebron, with which 35:27-29 still associates Isaac, Esau, and Jacob. Esau’s marrying Hittite women contrasts with the instructions his grandfather gave in respect of Esau’s father (24:3-4) which Esau’s brother will also follow, though perhaps “Esau married the one woman in the world who was suitable for him, namely, a Hittite woman.”[[153]](#footnote-153) Presumably it was their Hittite and thus broadly Canaanite ethnicity that offended Isaac and Rebekah; 27:46—28:9 will pick up the point.

**27:1-5a**. The description of Isaac underscores the narrowness of Genesis’s focus on him. We have moved from incidents fairly early in his life, the early years of his and Rebekah’s marriage, to a scene when he is an old man and he can talk about his death. There need be no implication that the author knew fewer stories about Isaac. The wider narrative’s dramatic or rhetorical or theological priorities make for a focus on Jacob and Esau rather than on different aspects of Isaac’s life.

Isaac is old and poor-sighted (vv. 1-2), and aware that the time has come when he has to pass on to the next generation responsibility for the family’s future. The head of a family needs to take such responsibility for determining what will happen in the family after his death (in our terms, by making a will) in order to discourage family strife after his death—though Isaac succeeds only in encouraging such strife. The story compares with the near-death scenes involving Jacob, Joseph, Joshua, Moses, and David (Gen 48—49; 50:24—25; Deut 31—33; Josh 23—24; 1 Kings 2:1-9) and the “Testaments” from the late Second Temple period. But it is not your typical such scene. First, the description of Isaac in his old age must be somewhat formulaic. In Genesis’s chronology, Isaac was sixty when Esau and Jacob were born (25:26), and Esau was forty when he married (26:34), so Isaac is at least a centenarian. But before his eventual death Jacob will have spent about twenty years in Paddan Aram and enough time back in Canaan for his children to grow to adulthood; and Isaac will live until he’s 180 (35:28).[[154]](#footnote-154) The language in vv. 1-2 thus compares with the earlier description of Abraham and Sarah as very old (18:11) when they have 75 and 37 years to live, respectively. “To paraphrase Mark Twain, the account of Isaac’s fast-approaching demise is greatly exaggerated.”[[155]](#footnote-155) In our terms and more literally, we can imagine Isaac as a middle-aged man. But he is of course right that he doesn’t know when he may die and that the passing on needs to be done earlier rather than later. The motif of failing eyesight in association with old age recurs in Jacob’s own story (48:10). Its frequency as a feature of advancing age is implied in the comment that Moses did not suffer from it (Deut 34:7). In this story, it plays a necessary role as a plot device, but in the Isaac story as a whole it parallels the focus on wells and the mention of sowing in the previous chapter in being a motif unique to Isaac in Genesis. It thus reflects either authorial creativity or historical reality. In addition, it anticipates the comment on Eli (1 Sam 3:2) whose failing physical eyesight is a symbol of his failing inner insight, and Isaac seems shortsighted in this way, too: he doesn’t see the trouble he and Rebekah are about to cause.[[156]](#footnote-156) The quasi-testamentary scene has a second un-typical aspect. Such occasions properly involve the whole family. This scene involves only one son. As his father Abraham assumed that the future should lie with his first son Ishmael, so Jacob assumes that the future lies with his first son Esau. But whereas God took action to direct Abraham to focus on his second son, in this story the fulfillment of Yahweh’s revelation (25:23), which Genesis has not told us Isaac knew about, will come through a human initiative of which he will also be unaware or half-aware.

There are several backgrounds to Isaac’s specific plan for exercising his responsibility (vv. 3-4): his treating Esau as the family’s firstborn, his fondness for Esau over against Jacob, his fondness for game, and Esau’s being gifted as a hunter. Is Isaac to be critiqued in this connection?[[157]](#footnote-157) Isaac is going to put his whole being into this blessing. Like the making of a pact with Abimelek, the conveying of his blessing is not merely a political or commercial transaction but a personal one, so it is naturally to be set in the context of a meal, though this makes the exclusion of the rest of the family even odder; apparently both boys have learned to cook.[[158]](#footnote-158) While the listeners know that Esau has forfeited the position of firstborn and has presumably therefore forfeited the blessing that belongs to the firstborn, the narrative also has not made explicit whether Isaac knows this fact (and anyway, he is in his dotage, and anyway he still favors Esau).

Rebekah hears of the plan (v. 5a). Perhaps one is to picture them living in a group of tents that are close to one another so that people would hear other members of the family saying things without trying and would have to put in some effort to keep anything secret. But it perhaps does not occur to Isaac to keep his intention a secret, even if he knows that Rebekah favors Jacob rather than Esau.

**27:5b-17.** So Esau sets off; the family is apparently still based near Beer Sheba, to judge from 28:10. And Rebekah formulates her own plan regarding “her son” (v. 6) which contrasts with Isaac’s plan for “his son” (v. 5a). Whereas Isaac had not mentioned Yahweh but simply assumed the authority to transmit the blessing, Rebekah adds the expression “before Yahweh.” What does she mean? To imply a recognition that transmitting the blessing depends on Yahweh, one would expect a phrase such as the one Melkizedeq used (14:19). “Before Yahweh” rather suggests speaking with Yahweh’s awareness, and thus really meaning what one says. Either way, her words are a chilling addition to Isaac’s.

There is no “please” in her bidding to Jacob (vv. 8-10), as there was in Isaac’s to Esau. She speaks with urgency, simply telling Jacob what to do. Only here does the participle “ordering” come with a feminine subject.[[159]](#footnote-159) No, Rebekah is not a woman you can mess with. And although we know Jacob can cook (25:29), she is going to do the cooking to make sure it comes out to Isaac’s liking. She is the one person we know to be aware of the declaration in 25:23, and she is going to see it comes true. “Divine will concerning the inheritance of God’s promise made to Abraham and then to Isaac comes to fruition through trickery.”[[160]](#footnote-160)

The background to Jacob’s objection (vv. 11-17) lies in the original description of the boys when they were born: see 25:25-27. Whereas Esau is hairy, Jacob is smooth-skinned: the word (*hālāq*) comes to mean metaphorically smooth and slippery and thus deceptive in speech (e.g., Prov 26:28), which is what Jacob will be. But Jacob fears giving Isaac the impression he is not taking seriously the fact that the blessing will happen “before Yahweh”; the rare verb for scorning (*tā‘a‘*) suggests scornfulness in relation to God (cf. 2 Chron 36:16)[[161]](#footnote-161) not merely a mocking of Isaac, though the reference to Isaac’s eyes suggests another irony in that they are Isaac’s weak point. Jacob is not concerned about the wrongness of being scornful, only about its consequences. But Rebekah (who knows what is destined) has an answer: “it becomes quite clear from Jacob’s timorous objection that the mother had really thought of everything”[[162]](#footnote-162) (actually she has not: see vv. 42-45). Really, the story is not about Jacob cheating Esau. It’s about Rebekah cheating Esau.[[163]](#footnote-163) Her conviction that goat skin will do to give the impression of hairy arms, alongside the conviction that goat meat will do as well as game, implies some further assumptions about Isaac’s dotage.[[164]](#footnote-164) And if there is a problem, she will take the rap. “This really is a mother's love, readily accepting everything for her child's sake.”[[165]](#footnote-165)

**27:18-23.** Isaac’s question is understandable. He has no reason to be expecting Jacob, and it’s surely too soon for Esau to have completed his task. With irony, Jacob claims as Esau to be the firstborn, perhaps implying that Isaac indeed doesn’t know about the event related in 25:29-34, or maybe that he would not have taken the boys’ transaction too seriously. He urges the apparently bed-ridden old man to get up and then chillingly associates Yahweh with the success he claims in having been able to fulfill Isaac’s instructions so quickly. Chillingly, too, he uses the verb “make happen” (*qārāh* hiphil) which Abraham’s servant used without irony in connection with finding a bride for Isaac himself (24:12). It is the first time Yahweh has been described as “your [Isaac’s] God,” and the expression will recur in Genesis only at 43:23, again with some irony: there and subsequently on the lips of Pharaoh, it denotes Yahweh as “your God” as opposed to “my God.” It does signify that Yahweh is “the God of Isaac” as well as “the God of Abraham” (26:24), though not yet “the God of Jacob” (see 28:21).

**27:24-29.** After the summary statement “so he blessed him” in v. 23b, the narrative again backtracks to give us more detail on the process whereby Isaac came to bless Jacob. It looks as if Isaac can smell a rat, but he lets himself be deceived. Maybe Isaac is the trickster.[[166]](#footnote-166) He starts from the memory evoked by Esau’s clothes. Their smell reminds him of the way Yahweh blesses the open country by making it rich with the animals of the wild.

Perhaps surprisingly, his actual blessing (v. 28) then relates first to the life of a farmer rather than that of a hunter or shepherd, though it will be appropriate to the people who trace their descent back to Isaac and who also lie behind the later part of the blessing; many of them will be farmers. The opening verb applies to all three cola, then “the heavens” and “the earth” form a pair in the parallelism of the first two cola, as do “dew” (from above) and “richness” (from below). Dew will be both literal (dew is especially important in areas like the Negev, and elsewhere in the dry season when there is little rain)[[167]](#footnote-167) and synecdoche (it stands for all the moisture that comes from the heavens). The reference to “richness” raises the question what the richness consists of, and the line’s unexpected third colon gives the answer. This third colon also implies another synecdoche (for which cf. Deut 33:28; Hos 7:14):[[168]](#footnote-168) grain stands for crops in general (but wheat is most important) and new wine makes one think of the fruit of trees (of which the grapes that generate wine would again be most important).

The blessing goes on to widen further (v. 29), in three ways. The first two cola balance serving (a practical action) and bowing low (a symbolic action); they refer in a distinctive way to the subservience of nations and peoples to Abraham’s line and thus to the Abrahamic blessing, though they do not speak of it in those terms. In 25:23 the nations and peoples were the descendants of Esau and Jacob (the unusual word for “peoples,” *lᵉummîm*, comes in Genesis only in these two passages, and that verse also referred to one people “serving” the other). But Isaac’s blessing envisages a wider group of nations and peoples. The middle two cola offer hints as to who they are. The verbs take up the earlier ones (“be lord” restates “are to serve”; “bow low” is a simple repetition), which retrospectively suggests that the peoples and nations are Esau’s (but Jacob’s!) brothers and mother’s sons—that is, peoples such as the Ishmaelites, Ammonites, Moabites, and Arameans, and the descendants of Qeturah (cf. TgNeoph, TgPsJ). The significance of the third pair of cola overlaps with that of the first two pairs. There will be occasions when such peoples, the neighbors of Isaac’s descendants, will wish evil for them; Isaac’s declaration promises that their wish will be reversed. On the other hand, when they bless them, Isaac’s declaration promises that the blessing will rebound in a positive way on them, too. The participles naturally replace the cohortatives of 12:3, where Yahweh speaks; they reappear (though in reverse order) in Balaam’s blessing in Num 24:9.

**27:30-33.** The drama of the story continues as Esau immediately arrives, just too late to stop the fraudulent act. Reacting with horror, Isaac asks a question that needs no answer, and cries out bitterly. One might have thought that this performative act of blessing would turn out to be “unhappy” (to use the technical terminology of the concept of “performative action”).[[169]](#footnote-169) But Isaac and Esau (and Jacob and Rebekah?) presuppose that a blessing once given has inevitable effect. Their assumption anticipates the assumption of Jephtah and his daughter that someone who has made a pledge to Yahweh can’t come back to Yahweh and say, “We made a mistake” (Judg 11). Saul will think the same way, though his men will imply that Yahweh is more flexible than this assumption implies (1 Sam 14:41-42). The story arouses our sympathy for two people who are “beside the point…. The blessing will work in spite of human character… and whether we are attracted to or repelled by the object of the blessing.”[[170]](#footnote-170)

**27:34-40.** In expressing his grief and anger Isaac indulges in a double paronomasia, in connection with Jacob’s name (see 25:26 and the comment) and in speaking of the position as firstborn and of blessing (*bᵉkōrāh*/*bᵉrākāh*).[[171]](#footnote-171) Yes, Jacob has lived up to his name, though life will get its own back on him when Laban treats him with the same guile (29:25).Is there any room for a blessing for Esau? Does Isaac have only one blessing to give?

Isaac finds three more lines of verse for him (v. 39-40), though they are thin on good news. Indeed they are more like a “modified curse”[[172]](#footnote-172) or an “anti-blessing.”[[173]](#footnote-173) No, he will not enjoy what Jacob enjoys (Edom’s territory, much of it at least, will not be a land flowing with milk and honey).[[174]](#footnote-174) Isaac has unwittingly initiated the fulfillment of Yahweh’s declaration to Rebekah about the two boys (25:23). Ironically, Jacob also will be the victim of a parallel unwitting fulfillment of Joseph’s dreams, through the action of Joseph’s brothers which are designed to frustrate them. And Esau will have to fight for his life instead of finding that peoples bow down to serve him. He will be the servant rather than the served. Joshua and David will eventually defeat the Edomites, though the Edomites will not stay subservient to the Israelites (see e.g., 1 Kings 11:14; 2 Kings 8:20-22).

**27:41-45.** Esau’s ongoing reaction is not surprising, though his determination to kill his brother (compare Cain, 4:5-8; Absalom, 2 Sam 13) might be more than Jacob and Rebekah had anticipated. Jacob “has achieved nothing by his deception. His father’s blessing is of no help in face of his brother’s hate; blessing can thrive only in a community at peace (Gen. 37—50).”[[175]](#footnote-175) From here on, “the great rule of Jacob’s life – and a profound expression of its existential realism – is that he gets everything he aspired to have but not in the way he imagined and at a great cost to himself.”[[176]](#footnote-176) He will sum up the span of his years as “bad” (47:9). And in the meantime, if Esau kills Jacob, Esau will have to flee like Cain or Absalom or be liable to execution (cf. TgPsJ). Rebekah hears of it; Esau’s having said it to himself does not exclude his saying it out loud. So the ever-decisive Rebekah makes a plan and “communicates her counterplan to her son Jacob with the same authority as she did her previous plan.”[[177]](#footnote-177) She is right that Esau’s wrath will subside, though “some time” is much longer than she imagines.

**27:46—28:5.** There was no conversation between Isaac and Rebekah in 27:1-45 and the story recorded no reaction on Isaac’s part to Jacob’s fraud or to Rebekah’s action. Now Rebekah speaks to Isaac, but on a different basis.

The allusion to the Hittite women (27:46) picks up the information in 26:34-35, including the reference to them becoming a source of bitternessof spirit to Isaac and Rebekah, but restates that reaction in terms of dismay or disgust. The term invites the inference that the problem was not that as Hittites and thus in the broad sense Canaanites they were simply foreigners and that Rebekah as a more recent immigrant felt this foreignness even more strongly than Esau or Jacob or Isaac. The word for dismay or disgust (*qûṣ*) is rare, and on one significant occurrence it describes Yahweh’s attitude to Canaanite religious practices (Lev 20:23), which suggests that Rebekah feels a religious revulsion, which the story’s listeners are encouraged to share. The story undergirds the principle that Israelite parents should not facilitate their children marrying Canaanites, the principle that led to Rebekah’s being sought out to marry Isaac! As in Gen 24, the issue is the achievement of God’s purpose through his people and thus their religious identity, not merely their ethnic or cultural identity.[[178]](#footnote-178)

Isaac can take a hint (28:1-2), or—to put it another way—he knows how to be manipulated, how to be obsequious.[[179]](#footnote-179) With “godly shrewdness”[[180]](#footnote-180) Rebekah has not suggested what Isaac needs to do; she has allowed Isaac to fill in the gaps, creating the illusion that Isaac has the agency.[[181]](#footnote-181) The medieval chapter division collaborates with her. Isaac’s initiative then corresponds to the one Abraham took (24:1-2), except that Isaac sends Jacob himself—which fits the circumstances as we read 27:46—28:9 after 27:1-45. While the narrative does not indicate that Isaac himself makes this link, the result of placing 27:1-45 between 26:34-35 and 27:46—28:9 is anticipatorily to explain this question raised by 28:1-2: we know from 27:46 why Rebekah wanted to make sure that Jacob didn’t marry a Canaanite wife, but 27:1-45 explains why he had to go and find one for himself rather than having Isaac take the same action as his father. So whereas Abraham’s servant was sent off to Aram Two Rivers (24:10), Jacob himself is sent off to Paddan Aram (cf. 25:20).

Isaac’s blessing of Jacob (vv. 3-5) is different in form from the unequivocal declaration in 27:1-45; this blessing is a third-person prayer. It is also different in content. It begins by referring to Shadday as the one who must bring about the blessing, which initiates a link with the blessing in Gen 17. It asks for Jacob to experience a fulfillment of the Abrahamic blessing of which that chapter speaks, using the words “be fruitful” and “be numerous,” and talking about “peoples” (plural) and about “the country where you are residing” and about God “giving” this country to Abraham (17:1, 2, 6, 8, 16, 20). These verses make explicit for the first time that the Abrahamic blessing belongs to Jacob rather than Esau.[[182]](#footnote-182) In addition, Jacob makes Genesis’s first reference to a “congregation” (*qāhāl*; cf. 35:11; 48:4, in contexts where the other terms will also recur, each time in connection with Jacob). The multitude that will issue from Abraham and Sarah’s line (17:4-6, 16) will not be merely a horde of nations (17:4-5) but a community gathered in Yahweh’s name (e.g., Exod 12:6; Lev 16:17; Ps 22:22, 25 [23, 26]). The talk of taking possession of the country (*yāraš*) also recalls the earlier story of covenant-making with Abraham (15:7). While he must have been thrilled at the prospect of getting out of the family situation in Beer Sheba, he was being sent off on a venture with its own insecurity.[[183]](#footnote-183) The blessing should surely make him more enthusiastic about it.[[184]](#footnote-184)

**28:6-8**. The unit closes with Esau’s wives, as it began with them. These verses also thus close off the story of Jacob and Esau until 32:3, which will be the next time Esau is mentioned. A marriage between Ishmael’s family and Esau has a certain appropriateness. Esau like Ishmael was the older brother whom God passed over in favor of the younger brother. Whereas the Edomites and Ishmaelites do appear elsewhere together in a list of peoples allied against Israel (Ps 83:6), both have their own place within God’s blessing even if they are not means of God’s bringing his blessing to the world. While 25:13 mentioned Nebayot, his sister Mahalat comes only here, though the names of Esau’s wives are confusing.[[185]](#footnote-185)

## Blessing

“Bless” and “blessing” are the key words in 26:34—28:9; they come twenty-eight times. In Genesis so far, more often than not the agent of blessing has been God: see especially 1:22, 28; 9:1; 12:2-3. In the Scriptures as a whole, God’s blessing conveys fullness of life in all its aspects.

The idea that a human being can convey blessing also recurs through the Scriptures (e.g., Num 6:23-27; 22:6, 12; 1 Sam 2:20; 1 Kings 8:14, 55, 56; Job 29:13; Luke 2:34; 6:28; Rom 12:14; 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Peter 3:9). Within Genesis, the agent of blessing is a human being on three instructive occasions so far, and now on a fourth. In 12:3 Yahweh envisages people blessing Abraham. In 14:18-20 Melkizedeq blesses Abraham. In 24:60 Rebekah’s family bless Rebekah. Now in 27:28-29 and 28:1-4 Isaac blesses Jacob.

Each passage implies that the people giving the blessing have power thereby to make a difference to the lives of the people they bless. Uttering a blessing works in a way that compares with procedures in Western culture such as bequeathing, marrying, ordaining, or divorcing, unfrocking, or declaring war. When I bequeath property to someone, this action changes their position and/or changes who they are. When as a minister I marry someone, by saying “I declare that you are man and wife” I change who they are. When a man and a woman say “I will” to each other in the marriage service, they themselves change who they are. When a bishop says “I ordain you” to someone, he or she changes that person from lay to clergy. When a president declares war against another nation, the words turn his or her people into its enemies.[[186]](#footnote-186) In each case the procedure involves formal solemnity and/or celebration with a shared meal. Philosophically, these actions involve performative language, language that does more than communicate something; it does something. In each case, the procedure works on the basis of the position of the person who is taking the action. I can only bequeath what I own; only as a bishop can I ordain. If I do not have the position in question, my action cannot work. The background to Gen 27 is Isaac’s position as head of the family (and in particular of the Abrahamic family) which gives him the authority to bestow blessing on the members of the family, and specifically on his sons. This bestowal is like the bequeathing of property. Isaac is treating Jacob as the senior son and in light of his own imminent death is bestowing on him the blessing that goes with that position (it carries responsibilities, too, but that’s another story).

The wider background to the Genesis passages, to the other scriptural passages, and to some Western practices, is (to connect some dots) the assumption that human beings have a capacity to convey blessing and diminishing to other human beings by virtue of God’s having made them in his image and given them a commission to rule the earth. This dynamic works via interrelationships written into humanity. Priests have power to bless (14:18-20), families have power to bless (24:60), and ordinary people also have power to bless (12:3).

There need be no assumption that the head of the family or the priest or the bishop or the ordinary person exercises their power in the right way. Balaam recognizes that he is morally and religiously obliged to bless the right people, but he is not compelled to do so (see Num 22—24). Gen 27 indicates how the dynamic of blessing works out in this family, but it doesn’t necessarily indicate how it was supposed to work out. Yet if someone makes a mistake in the course of their action, it may not annul the action’s effectiveness; Andrew of Saint Victor notes in connection with Gen 27 that if a bishop ordains someone and is deceived about who he is ordaining, “the one who received the ordination fraudulently would still be ordained.”[[187]](#footnote-187) Rebekah and Jacob deceived Isaac and cheated Esau, but neither Isaac nor Esau asked the question whether Isaac might go back to God and ask God to withdraw the blessing (see v. 33). And God lets the underdog gain blessing through deceit.[[188]](#footnote-188) People have the power to bless only because God gives it to them, and in a sense it remains God’s power. The dynamic works because God lets or makes it work. The blessing in Gen 28:1-4 and some blessings elsewhere make this point especially clear when they express themselves in the form of a wish that God has to make happen. God remains the ultimate source of the blessing, even though he has delegated some of the power of blessing (cf. the logic in Num 6:24-26). Even Isaac’s blessing in Gen 27 “was akin to a prayer, and God accepted his prayer”;[[189]](#footnote-189) Josephus makes it a prayer (*Antiquities* I, 18:6). It was by faith that Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau (Heb 11:20).

The same framework applies to cursing or diminishing, which denotes the withdrawing of full life in some way. God is also the agent of such cursing or diminishing (3:14, 17; 4:11; 12:3), but human beings can exercise this capacity (9:25; 12:3; Luke 6:28; Rom 12:14; James 3:9-10). God has the power to overrule the exercise of that power, though he may not too often intervene unasked to do so, because he would then imperil the entire arrangement. He does not micromanage. But he is perhaps more inclined to overrule curses than blessings, as 12:3 may imply,[[190]](#footnote-190) as he is more inclined to change his mind about fulfilling threats than about fulfilling promises.

**Genesis 28:10-22—The Stairway to Heaven**

## Overview

In Scene 2 of the drama of Jacob’s journey to Harran, he is on his way and Yahweh appears to him in a dream. Yahweh’s envoys are walking up and down a stairway between the heavens and the earth. Yahweh himself makes promises to Jacob that amount to affirming for him the promises to Abraham and Isaac and also looking after him when he goes to Harran. Jacob commits himself to Yahweh and sets up a pillar at the place he renames Beth El.

## Translation

10So Ya‘aqob left Be’er Šeba and went to Ḥarran. 11But he came upon[[191]](#footnote-191) a certain site[[192]](#footnote-192) and stayed the night there because the sun had gone. He got some[[193]](#footnote-193) of the rocks from the site and put them at his head place[[194]](#footnote-194) and lay down in that site. 12And he had a dream. There – a ramp[[195]](#footnote-195) stood on the earth with its top reaching to the heavens, and there – God’s envoys going up and down by means of it,[[196]](#footnote-196) 13and there – Yahweh standing by it.[[197]](#footnote-197) He said, “I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your ancestor and the God of Isaac. The earth that you’re lying on, I will give to you and to your offspring. 14Your offspring will be like the earth’s dirt. You’ll explode to the west, to the east, to the north, and to the south. All the kin-groups on the land will gain blessing through you, and through your offspring. 15There, I am with you: I will keep you wherever you go and bring you back to this piece of land,[[198]](#footnote-198) because I won’t abandon you until[[199]](#footnote-199) I’ve done what I’ve spoken to you of.”

16Ya‘aqob woke up from his sleep and said, “Yahweh is definitely here in this site, whereas I myself didn’t acknowledge it,” 17and he was in awe.[[200]](#footnote-200) He said, “How awe-inspiring[[201]](#footnote-201) is this site! This is nothing other than the house of God, and this is [nothing other than] the gateway into the heavens!”[[202]](#footnote-202) 18Ya‘aqob started early in the morning, got the rock[[203]](#footnote-203) which he had put at his head place, put it up as a standing stone, and poured oil on the top of it. 19He named the site Bet-’el —Luz was the town’s name at first, however. 20And Ya‘aqob made a pledge: “If God will be with me, and will keep me on this journey that I’m going on, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, 21and I will come back[[204]](#footnote-204) to my father’s household with things being well, and Yahweh will be God for me,[[205]](#footnote-205) 22then this rock that I’ve put up as a standing stone—it will be God’s house, and everything that you give me—I will conscientiously pass on a tenth[[206]](#footnote-206) to you.”

## Interpretation

Genesis again backtracks in order to go forward—that is, whereas 28:5 had briefly closed off the story that began at 26:34 by relating how Jacob went to the land where the family once came from, v. 10 now repeats that information before telling us about something that happened on the journey. MT’s section extends all the way from 28:10 to 32:1 [2], the entirety of Jacob’s time in Aram, which is framed by the two similar events in 28:10-22 and 32:1-2 [2-3].[[207]](#footnote-207) Its reference to Harran as opposed to Paddan Aram suggests that it more directly relates to 27:1-45—that is, in traditional source-critical terms it continues the Yahwist story, or combines elements from J and E.[[208]](#footnote-208) While the story comprises Scene 2 in the account of the time Jacob spends away from Canaan, one aspect of its significance is to explain why Beth El has its unusual name and why people make pledges and bring tithes there (see Amos 4:4): it gives an account of the founding of the Beth El sanctuary.[[209]](#footnote-209)

Question: How did Beth El come to be a sanctuary?

Answer: Jacob set up a standing stone there.

Question: Why a standing stone?

Answer: Because it was a stone near which he slept.

Question: Why was he sleeping there?

Answer: It was where he happened to be when night fell.

Question: How did Beth El come to have its unusual name?

Answer: Jacob named it.

Question: Why did he give it this name?

Answer: Because Yahweh appeared in a dream and spoke to him there.

Question: How did Yahweh appear?

Answer: By a ramp on which his envoys moved up and down.

Question: What did Yahweh say?

Answer: He made promises to which pledging and tithing was Jacob’s response.

Typically, the story combines some exposition of the way Yahweh was effecting his purpose in the sequence of Israel’s ancestors, some indication of the way Yahweh was meeting with the specifics of this particular person’s situation, and some information about a place that was important to Israelites. “When worshipers entered the sacred site of Bethel, they saw the standing stone and the place where Jacob slept, dreamt, and vowed. Through the material landscape, invested with sacred memory, the experience of Jacob at Bethel… became part of the Israelite experienceand practice of worship.”[[210]](#footnote-210)

**28:10-11**. We are presumably to assume that Isaac and his family have been settled in the Beer Sheba region since the last reference to Beer Sheba (or to any concrete place) in 26:23, 33. Once again, Genesis summarizes where the story is going, on a journey of several hundred miles which would take him several weeks, before telling us about something that happened on the way.[[211]](#footnote-211)

In fact Jacob is hardly beginning his journey (v. 11), though he must have stopped for a night already on the way from Beer Sheba to Beth El. His route would involve traveling up onto the Judahite mountain crest and going back through territory that was familiar to the family, past his grandparents’ birthplace at Mamre, and on to the area of his grandfather’s stop on his first journey in the opposite direction and of Yahweh’s making a spectacular promise concerning the land (12:8-9; 13:14-17), a key crossroads where the north-south route meets an east-west route from the coastal plain to the Jordan valley.[[212]](#footnote-212) By naming the place in due course as Beth El, the story will invite the inference that Jacob stops for the night where Abraham had called out with Yahweh’s name (12:8), but Jacob seems ignorant of any such associations and the narrative does not directly make the link. It is in any case a big coincidence that Jacob ends up setting up a memorial column so close to where his grandfather set up an altar. While the statement that he “came upon it” might mean he stumbled across it by accident, this verb more often denotes a deliberate meeting, as it will in 32:1 [2], though Jacob is not making a point of sleeping in a sanctuary in the hope of receiving a revelation. Nothing we have read of Jacob so far would make us envisage he would do so. Even if it is simply a “place” to Jacob, the narrative expects the listeners to recognize that it is more, by its threefold repetition of the word “place/site” (*māqôm*): the word will recur three more times with even clearer implications in vv. 16-19. It might be seen as the keyword in the story, pointing to its “central theme.”[[213]](#footnote-213) Jacob’s reference in v. 17 to this place/site being the house of God suggests that there is something that could be called a house there, but a building need form only part of a sanctuary site: consider the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, or the traditional English church surrounded by a “churchyard.” So one could imagine Jacob bedding down in the sanctuary yard, which might be a safer location to spend the night than some places, and safer than seeking a bed with the local people (see Gen 19; Judg 19).[[214]](#footnote-214) When he puts some rocks around his head, however, they are perhaps designed to be a kind of protective arc to make him less exposed to animals—or maybe they would be something to throw at such attackers.[[215]](#footnote-215) But the narrative doesn’t make that point clear, because its interest in the rocks lies in what Jacob will do with one of them in v. 18.

**28:12-15**. Jacob is the first ancestor explicitly to have a significant dream, though Yahweh’s appearances to Abraham and Isaac (12:7; 15:1-20; 17:1-22; 26:2-5, 24) may implicitly have taken place in dreams. But so far, Abimelek (oddly?) is the one person in Genesis explicitly to have God speak to him in a dream (20:3, 6). There will be many more dreams to follow in Genesis. In Israel and elsewhere, dreams were a familiar means whereby God spoke to people. Genesis recounts the dream in the vivid fashion that often obtains in accounts of dreams (“there… there… there…”), inviting the audience to use its imagination and share the dream (cf. 37:7, 9) by putting itself alongside Jacob and seeing the scene through his eyes as it unfolds.[[216]](#footnote-216)

The presupposition of the dream (v. 12) is that the relationship between the physical earth and the physical heavens provides a way of picturing the relationship between the human realm and the realm where God is—not implying that if one literally flew high enough one would come to that realm. The heavenly realm is the location of Yahweh and his administration, as the high point of a town is the location of the earthly king and his administration. Divine aides thus scuttle between earth and the heavens; Genesis refers to their ascent before their descent. They are bringing information from earth to the heavens, as the smoke from Israel’s daily sacrifices rises to God[[217]](#footnote-217) and thus as the prayers of the faithful reach the heavens.[[218]](#footnote-218) They also journey to earth to investigate what is happening there and to implement God’s purpose there (cf. Gen 18—19; Zech 1:8-17). The word for ramp (*sullāh*) comes only here, though related words denote a mound or highway or causeway. The ramp is needed because the “angels” do not have wings—that idea comes from confusion with hybrid creatures of the kind that appear in passages such as Ezek 1.[[219]](#footnote-219) If one is to picture the ramp as a stairway, it would need to be wide to accommodate the two-way traffic which Jacob sees. When Jesus takes up the idea of the ramp or stairway in John 1:51, it illumines and is illumined by Jacob’s dream. Both presuppose that the heavens and the earth are not just two separate places. In John, Jesus is a link between the two; believers in him live in the heavens as well as on the earth (Eph 1:3; 2:6). In Christian spirituality the image of Jacob’s ladder has suggested the movement of the human spirit towards God,[[220]](#footnote-220) most famously in the work of John Climacus, “John of the Ladder,” who died in 606 AD.[[221]](#footnote-221)This understanding also finds expression in the slave spiritual “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” which could hint at a reaching and striving toward both an inward and an outward freedom through Jesus. The contrasting distinctive implication of Jacob’s dream is that God’s envoys are involved in moving between earth and heaven independently of any such human movement, in a way that may be both occasional and ongoing though generally invisible to humanity.

Yahweh’s standing by the ramp (v. 13) corresponds (but in a dream) to Yahweh’s standing by Abraham in 18:2. It is his appearing and speaking that counts, more than the ramp and the envoys; as soon as they appear, they disappear, like Moses’s burning bush, having fulfilled their function as attention-getter.[[222]](#footnote-222) Yahweh’s self-introduction combines his self-introduction to Abraham in 15:7, “I am Yahweh,” and that to Isaac in 26:24, “I am the God of Abraham your father.” To the latter Yahweh can now add “and the God of Isaac” without the shivery irony that attached to the idea that Yahweh was Isaac’s God in 27:20. The implication with such phrases is regularly not that Yahweh is “his God but not your God”; it is that Yahweh is “his God and therefore your God.” In effect the promise that follows makes that point, and in effect Yahweh affirms his answer to the prayer/wish that Isaac uttered in v. 4. Like Isaac in vv. 1-4, Yahweh makes no comment on Jacob’s act of deception. The beginning of the promise in v. 13b localizes it in a way parallel to 13:4-17, also set at Beth El. Yahweh is talking about this stretch of earth that Jacob is lying on.

Yahweh goes on to apply to Jacob the version of that promise in 13:14-15 (v. 14) with its comparison with dirt and its talk of the four points of the compass, though the vivid picture of Jacob’s offspring “exploding” or “breaking out” in all these directions is new (Isa 54:2 takes it up). God is going to “force his way” into the entire world.[[223]](#footnote-223) In the context, the dirt of the earth will refer to the dirt with which Jacob is surrounded in Beth El. The promise about blessing exactly repeats the promise in 12:3 except that the clauses come in the more regular order with the verb first, and the promise adds “and through your offspring,” as in 13:14-15. The addition would be especially significant for Jacob as a man on a quest for the bride through whom the promise of offspring will need to be fulfilled; “offspring” come three times in vv. 13-14 as they did in 13:15-16 and in 22:17-18 (even more in the promises in 17:7-10; 26:3-4). And the promise that people will gain blessing through Jacob recalibrates the point about blessing as Jacob has understood it; in Jacob’s life, it has been something to be got for oneself.[[224]](#footnote-224)

“I am with you” (v. 15) in turn applies to Jacob the commitment made to his father in 26:24. In both these passages the reminder comes in the form of a noun clause; it differs in form from the earlier promise to Isaac, “I will be with you” (26:3), though the implications are similar. “I am with you” is now “a promise for the road.”[[225]](#footnote-225) The declaration is spelled out in the two further undertakings that relate to Jacob’s particular situation. “I will keep you” is a new promise for Jacob in his vulnerable position, and “I will bring you back” and “not abandon you” are further nuances on the promise that he uniquely needs. The last phrase presumably refers to protecting him and keeping him safe. While Yahweh’s words do not make any explicit connection with the vision in v. 12, we might connect the dots and infer that the envoys are the agents through whom these promises will find fulfillment. An interest in horizontal movement complements the focus on vertical movement.[[226]](#footnote-226)

**28:16-19.** Like Pharaoh and Solomon waking up and realizing that they have had a momentous dream (41:7; 1 Kings 3:15), Jacob wakes up and realizes what an important thing has just happened; dreams are a significant means of God giving a revelation of great consequence (cf. Matt 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22; Acts 2:17). A dream may issue from and relate to the dreamer’s inner questioning at a time of fear or anxiety, but it may nevertheless signify God’s response to the need of the moment. If Jacob realized that it was a local sanctuary where he had stopped for the night, he hadn’t assumed that it was anything to do with Yahweh (anything to do with “the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac” or with “the God Shadday,” he would actually say). Yet it evidently is a place where Yahweh can be present and active. How could Jacob have known? (compare the “now I know/acknowledge” of 22:12; Exod 18:11; 1 Kings 17:24). While God is present everywhere, he is present in different places in different ways: working, saving, refreshing, punishing, reproving, forbearing.[[227]](#footnote-227) “When Jacob had gone to sleep, he thought he was sleeping in a place that was very remote from God”; actually he had been sleeping in God’s house, reclining before heaven’s gate.[[228]](#footnote-228) Jacob has not left Yahweh’s realm. It is not that he meets Yahweh here. Yahweh meets him. “Jacob’s expectations of encountering Yahweh somewhere between Beer-sheba and Harran were about as great as Saul's expectations of meeting the Christ somewhere between Jerusalem and Damascus.”[[229]](#footnote-229) But he has proved that Psalm 121 is true (*GenR* 68:2); Psalms 23 and 91, also.[[230]](#footnote-230)

Awe (v. 17) suggests an emotion but also a submission of the will. It was the response of Abimelek’s servants to the report of his dream; it’s not a surprising or unreasonable response to a revelation from Yahweh whose form is unprecedented and whose content speaks so weightily yet also so encouragingly. But Jacob’s pair of inferences are remarkable. The first is the only reference to a house of God before Sinai, and even there (Exod 23:19; 34:26) the references are prospective—they relate to a house of Yahweh that will eventually come into being. Yet evidently “Yahweh was present, that is, at home, in this place.”[[231]](#footnote-231) A sanctuary such as that at Beth El or at Jerusalem is “God’s house” by virtue of being an earthly embodiment of God’s dwelling in the heavens. Heaven is not merely or not at all a place separate from earth but a fourth dimension closely related to earth. Yet it is not particularly logical to infer from God’s appearing and speaking that the place is a house of God, a place where God lives. It is not the first place where Yahweh has appeared and spoken, and the others have not been so designated. But places where God has appeared and spoken such as Beer Sheba had no buildings in the time of Israel’s ancestors, whereas places such as Shechem and Beth El were long-established towns with sanctuaries.[[232]](#footnote-232) So one might more easily imagine Jacob talking in terms of a house of God if he was in the shadow of a building at the Beth El sanctuary. If “house of God” does not link closely with the content of the dream, then, “gateway to the heavens” does so link. The dream has indicated that this site is a portal, a place where earth and heaven are open to one another. If Jacob is recognizing that Yahweh has appeared to him in a Canaanite sanctuary which has such significance, this recognition might link with his calling it “house of God” rather than “house of Yahweh,” which would be suggested by vv. 13 and 16 and is the more common First Testament phrase. The phrase “gateway to the heavens” appears only here, but the idea that certain places are portals spells out the implications of other passages that tell of God appearing, such as Shechem (e.g., 12:7-8)—though in that passage Genesis spoke of God appearing at Shechem but not at Beth El, only of Abraham’s building his altar there. The image of God’s house and of a ramp between earth and the heavens complement each other, for Genesis and for Jesus, even while they formally clash. The image of God’s home affirms the reality of God’s presence; the image of a ramp affirms the distinction between God’s realm and the human realm.

Once again the description of Jacob getting going early (v. 18) suggests a commitment to a task that is thus undertaken without delay. Now we see the point about the earlier reference to rocks, one of which Jacob sets up as a *maṣṣēbāh*. It need not have been gigantic; Jacob could maneuver it, though he is no wimp (29:10; 32:25). Whereas one might have expected him to build an altar, like his father and grandfather and like Jacob himself later (e.g., 12:7-8; 26:25; 35:1), here the “standing stone” commemorates the ramp that “stood” there and the God who “stood” there (all three words come from the root *nāṣab*). In general, setting up such a stone marks a place as significant; something happened here (cf. 35:14, 20), and this stone which was at his head when he had his dream is appropriate as a marker of that revelation. It memorializes the ramp and affirms that it was not just a passing phenomenon in a dream but a permanent reality.[[233]](#footnote-233) While pouring oil on it anticipates the anointing of everything in the wilderness sanctuary to make it sacred (Exod 40:9), Genesis does not call this pouring an anointing (contrast 31:13).[[234]](#footnote-234) The Torah later outlaws standing stones (e.g., Lev 26:1), which are tainted because of their association with the traditional religion of the country. But Jacob’s standing stone antedates such problems.

Jacob’s naming the place Beth El, “house of El” (v. 19), links with and in a sense issues from his recognizing this place as a house of God (*bêt ’ĕlōhîm*, his expression in vv. 17 and 22).[[235]](#footnote-235) But the name Beth El implies that the expression refers to God as the local people would speak of him, as Melkizedeq spoke of *’ēl ‘elyôn*; Jacob’s recognition then has similar theological implications to the perspective on Melkizedeq in 14:18-20. Jacob is consciously or unconsciously confirming the place’s existent name, rather than devising a new one (as in 19:22; 26:33); indeed, he will again name this place Beth El in 35:15. At the same time, he is seeing new significance in it or attaching new significance to it in affirming that it is Yahweh who has appeared here and who can thus be identified with El (see the references to Yahweh in vv. 16 and 21—and again cf. 14:22).

**28:20-22.** It logically follows that Jacob responds to Yahweh’s commitment with his pledge or promise, though Jacob is the only person who makes a pledge or promise in Genesis.

What kind of “if” does Jacob utter (v. 20b)? Since Yahweh has taken the initiative in his act of commitment, one should hardly call Jacob’s commitment conditional; contrast the “if” clauses in Num 21:2; Judg 11:30-31; 1 Sam 1:11; 2 Sam 15:8, where the human beings take the initiative. Rather, the “if” has the connotation of “given that,” though it might still imply a somewhat contractual understanding of Yahweh’s relationship with him. Jacob begins near the end of where Yahweh ended, with the final commitments that Yahweh made. He takes up the promise of a presence that will issue in keeping, and he nuances it with a reference to food and clothes—quite a basic hope.

He then nuances the promise about coming back (v. 21) with a reference to his family and to *šālôm*. In the context of v. 20 one might take *šālôm* to denote safety on his journey (cf. LXX), while in the broader context one might take it to refer to peace between him and Esau. In the event, however, he will have done really well by the time he comes back home, and v. 22b also suggests this connotation of *šālôm* here (cf. Vg, and 29:6). The final aspect of God’s commitment that Jacob takes up is the promise that he will be God for Jacob. In v. 13 Yahweh has spoken of himself as Abraham’s and Isaac’s God; as Jacob leaves home and thus leaves the ambit where Yahweh keeps watch over Isaac’s family, his promises to Jacob imply that he will now become Jacob’s God, too, in fulfillment of his father’s blessing and prayer. The promise corresponds to God’s declaration that he will be God for Abraham and his offspring (17:7, 8; cf. Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; Ezek 36:28).

Jacob’s response (v. 22) is twofold. It first involves a synecdoche or metonymy:[[236]](#footnote-236) the standing stone and its environs will be God’s house, a place that warrants an attitude of reverence and awe and also of confidence that God can meet with people here. His second declaration again recalls Gen 14, where Abraham gives Melkizedeq a tenth of what he gained through his venture to liberate Lot. Here “the text is intriguingly silent on who is to receive the tithe and what is to be done with it.”[[237]](#footnote-237) But the logic of the passage is that Yahweh is somehow the recipient of the tithes. Tithes function in a similar way to Sabbaths and first fruits: one gives a tenth to God as an acknowledgment that the whole really belongs to him, and God is then willing for one to treat the rest as one’s own. “There is a ‘must’ for God in this text”; there is also a ‘must’ for Jacob.[[238]](#footnote-238) Here at the close of the pledge Jacob directly addresses Yahweh, as Yahweh had directly addressed him.

**Genesis 29:1-14—Jacob Finds His Extended Family**

## Overview

In Scene 3 of the account of Jacob’s flight to Harran, Jacob continues his journey there, reaches a well near the town, meets Rachel, and goes to stay with Laban’s family.

## Translation

1Ya‘aqob set off,[[239]](#footnote-239) and went to the country of the Easterners.[[240]](#footnote-240) 2He looked, and there – a well in the open country, and there—three herds of sheep lying there by it, because people used to water the herds from that well. The rock on the well’s mouth was big;[[241]](#footnote-241) 3all the herds would gather there, and people would roll the rock off the well’s mouth and water the sheep, and put the rock back in its place on the well’s mouth.

4Ya‘aqob said to them, “Brothers, where are you from?” They said, “We’re from Ḥarran.” 5He said to them, “Do you know Laban ben Nahor?” They said, “We know him.” 6He said to them, “Are things well with him?” They said, “They’re well. There – Rahelhis daughter is coming with the sheep.” 7He said, “Here, the day is still long.[[242]](#footnote-242) It’s not time for the livestock to gather. Water the sheep and go pasture them.” 8They said, “We can’t, till all the herds gather and people roll the rock from on the well’s mouth and we water the sheep.”

9While he was still speaking with them, Raḥel came with the sheep that belonged to her father, because she was a shepherd. 10When Ya‘aqob saw Raḥel the daughter of Laban, his mother’s brother, and the flock of Laban, his mother’s brother, Ya‘aqob came up, rolled the rock from on the well’s mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother; 11and Ya‘aqob kissed Raḥel and lifted his voice and cried. 12Ya‘aqob told Raḥel that he was her father’s brother[[243]](#footnote-243) and that he was Ribqah’s son, and she ran and told her father. 13When Laban heard the news of Ya‘aqob, his sister’s son, he ran to meet him, hugged him and kissed him,[[244]](#footnote-244) and brought him into his house. He told Laban all these things, 14and Laban said to him, “You are indeed my own bone and flesh.” He[[245]](#footnote-245) stayed with him for a whole month.[[246]](#footnote-246)

## Interpretation

In its own right, Scene 3 in the account of the time Jacob spends away from Canaan describes

* how Jacob discovered where his extended family lived in Harran
* how he met up with Rachel
* how he found acceptance into Laban’s family.

The story comprises a reprise of the account of the journey undertaken by his grandfather’s servant (Gen 24). It is one of several stories about how someone meets at the well the girl whom he will marry (cf. Exod 2:15-20; the meeting is vicarious in Gen 24). While the story reaches its goal with Jacob’s acceptance into Laban’s household, the larger amount of space it gives to his meeting with Rachel hints at where the Scene 4 will take us. It is an idyllic picture, though the idyll will fairly soon be shattered.[[247]](#footnote-247)

**29:1-6.** The story begins with a unique expression to describe Jacob resuming his journey; he “lifted his feet,” which perhaps suggests that there was a spring in his step after Yahweh appeared to him and gave him his promises (TgPsJ; cf. *GenR* 70:8). “His heart lifted his feet.”[[248]](#footnote-248) As usual, Genesis skips over the long journey, which would have taken two or three weeks, though mentioning the Easterners hints at how far he has to go. They come only here in the Torah. The expression can apparently cover anyone living east of the Jordan; Harran is NNE of Beer Sheba. Here the term’s connotation is that Jacob is in distant, alien, foreign territory; it “might reflect Jacob’s perspective that he is going backwards.”[[249]](#footnote-249) And it could suggest that looking for his extended family might be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

But he has the same luck as his grandfather’s servant (vv. 2-3). While Genesis does not refer to his praying, as the servant did, Jacob has made his implicit profession of trust in Yahweh in light of Yahweh’s promises (28:20-22), and his trust has been vindicated. Yahweh has kept his promises. The circumstances are similar to the ones that applied the servant, though Jacob does not come with camels needing watering. But arriving at a well in the open country where herds of sheep were gathered ready to be watered could make him feel quite at home. Apparently he was not afraid of the well becoming a place of conflict as it did for his father (25:19-33), though the words and actions he is about to indulge in might imperil that assumption.[[250]](#footnote-250) But as happened there, it will become a place where Yahweh provides. Further, Jacob would know about the usefulness of a big rock to stop the well getting filled with dirt, accidentally/on purpose (25:15, 18), or to stop animals falling in. He would also know the schedule that shepherds should work by.

Like the servant (vv. 4-6), Jacob finds that “coincidence” works in his favor. The narrator does not tell us exactly where the well is; it is through the shepherds that we discover. A well is usually somewhere outside its town. Towns like to be in an elevated place, and wells by their nature are on lower ground. Maybe this well is a little further from the town than the one in 24:11. But the local town is still—Harran. Not only so, but Laban still lives there. Strictly, he is Laban ben Bethuel, the son of Nahor, but Bethuel tended to get sidelined in Gen 24, and later Laban’s God is “the God of Nahor,” as Jacob’s God is “the God of Abraham” (31:53). Not only does Laban live in the nearby town, but the shepherds know him, and know he is doing well; and lo and behold, here comes his daughter. Once again the dynamics of the story in Gen 24 recur. The way things will turn out may suggest that the reference to *šālôm* trades on the word’s ambiguity, as was the case at 28:21, though in a diiferent direction; Jacob will enter into friendly relationships with his extended family, but they will not last.[[251]](#footnote-251)

The shepherds apparently hang about at the well for a good part of the day (vv. 7-8) when they could have been pasturing the sheep and then watering them in the evening, or watering them and then pasturing them. Jacob knows about shepherding and he is not afraid to share his expertise. Perhaps Rachel is doing the right thing—either she is watering the sheep before pasturing them, or she has been pasturing them and she is only now bringing them to the well. Either way, she is not just hanging about at the well like some people. Maybe the other shepherds’ excuse is that rolling the rock off the mouth of the well takes the strength of a number of people, or maybe it’s that no one is allowed to do it on their own lest there should be some kind of wrongdoing like that of Abimelek’s shepherds who put dirt in the well.

**29:9-14.** Meanwhile Rachel arrives. Like Reuel’s daughters (Exod 2:15-22), she is a shepherd. Once again the story makes clear how mythical is the idea that women could not mix with men and could not have responsible jobs. In each case one should perhaps see the girls as under-shepherds who are looking after the family flocks on their father’s behalf, though evidently they have real responsibility for them.

Anticipating Moses’s action in Exod 2:15-22, Jacob shows he is a real man (v. 10), not like these other pathetic Harran shepherds; he reverses the roles in Gen 24 where Rebekah shows herself a real woman in watering the servant’s camels. Either he does what it would take several of them to do, or he ignores the local custom that all the shepherds draw from the well together.

And he kisses Rachel (v. 11). Although the listeners may know where this story is going, there is no suggestion at this point that Jacob fancies Rachel; kissing is an intra-familial gesture with no sexual connotation (e.g., 27:26-27; 29:13; 31:28; 31:55 [32:1]; 33:4). His bursting into tears reflects how the focus in his heroic action had laid on his excitement at finding his uncle Laban’s family. Three times the narrator refers to Laban as “his mother’s brother,” an unnecessary repetition as a means of conveying information about Laban to the listeners but one conveying to them the importance of this fact to Jacob and to the story.

Rachel deserves some explanation for his excitement and emotion (v. 12), though maybe Genesis again deviates from chronological order here—perhaps Jacob identifies himself first and kisses later.[[252]](#footnote-252) Rachel’s running then mirrors her aunt’s running in 24:17, 20.

In turn Laban’s running (v. 13) repeats his own running in 24:29, notwithstanding his being now the family’s patriarch. There is more kissing and hugging, and welcoming, and Jacob tells Laban his story as the servant had told his—though Genesis omits to repeat the story itself as it did in Gen 24. Did he really tell him “all these things?” The story of how things have been with the family? And/or the story of his having the blessing of the firstborn, minus the way he obtained it? And/or the story of how his parents have commissioned him to find a wife from “back east”? And/or the story of the way Yahweh had appeared to him and made commitments to him? Some of these aspects of his story would commend him as a potential son-in-law, like his father.

Laban welcomes him as indeed a member of the family (v. 14). He is the same bone and flesh, a similar expression to 2:23, and one that implies a commitment (Judg 9:2; 2 Sam 5:1; 19:12-13 [13-14]). The recognition might imply an acknowledgment that Laban’s family is indeed a proper place for Jacob to find a wife. Events will also reveal that Jacob and Laban are “cut from the same cloth” in a more specific sense; they are both tricksters.[[253]](#footnote-253) Laban’s welcome is expressed in Jacob’s being given a whole month’s hospitality, though the next scene will suggest he has been earning his keep.

**Genesis 29:15-30—Jacob Acquires A Wife or Two**

## Overview

In Scene 4 of the account of Jacob’s time in Harran, Jacob works for Laban to earn the right to marry his younger daughter but Laban deceives him into marrying his older daughter first. Jacob does also marry Rachel, and it continues to be really Rachel not Leah of whom he is fond.

## Translation

15Laban said to Ya‘aqob, “Because you’re my brother,[[254]](#footnote-254) are you to serve me for nothing? Tell me what your wages are to be.” 16Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the elder was Le’ah and the name of the younger Raḥel. 17Le’ah’s eyes were soft,[[255]](#footnote-255) but Raḥel was attractive in shape and attractive in appearance, 18and Ya‘aqob liked Raḥel. So he said, “I’ll serve you seven years for Raḥel, your younger daughter.” 19Laban said, “My giving her to you will be better than my giving her to another man. Stay with me.” 20So Ya‘aqob served seven years for Raḥel, but in his eyes they were like a short time because of his liking for her. 21Then Ya‘aqob said to Laban, “Give me my wife, since my time is complete, so I can be with her.”[[256]](#footnote-256) 22So Laban gathered all the people of the place and made a banquet. 23But in the evening he got Le’ah his daughter and brought her to him, and he was with her (24and Laban gave to her Zilpah his maidservant—to Le’ah his daughter as maidservant).

25So in the morning: there, it was Le’ah! He said to Laban, “What’s this that you’ve done to me? It was for Raḥel that I served with you, wasn’t it? So why have you beguiled me?” 26Laban said, “It’s not done like that in our place, giving the younger one before the firstborn. 27Complete the week for the one, and the other will be given you as well,[[257]](#footnote-257) for the service that you’ll give with me for another seven years more.” 28Ya‘aqob did so. He completed the week for the one, then he gave him Raḥel his daughter as wife (29and Laban gave to Raḥel his daughter Bilḥah his maidservant to her as maidservant). 30So Ya‘aqob both was with Raḥel and also liked Raḥel rather than Le’ah,[[258]](#footnote-258) and served with him another seven years more.

## Interpretation

We know that Jacob had ambitions from birth and that he has learned trickery from his mother. He now discovers that trickery is built into the family’s genes. Scene 4 answers the question “How did Jacob come to marry two sisters, with two maidservants?” (the significance of mentioning the maidservants will become apparent in Scene 5). Or better, how did Jacob come to marry Leah as well as Rachel when it was Rachel that he really liked? The plot of the story thus works as follows.

1. Laban initiates a negotiation with Jacob (v. 15)
2. Jacob thinks he has made the negotiation work his way (vv. 16-22)
3. His plan is put on hold through Laban’s deception (vv. 23-25)
4. Laban initiates another negotiation (vv. 26-27)
5. Jacob achieves his aim, though we wonder how the dynamics will work out in the future (vv. 28-30).

**29:15**. The implication is perhaps that Jacob has been earning his keep in an informal way over the first month; he has not just been sitting around while other people worked. But the arrangement needs regularizing. Wages will now be a key word through Gen 29—31: related nouns and verbs come eleven times.[[259]](#footnote-259) Jacob is in an ambiguous position. The members of a family do not receive wages—there is no such thing as money and there is nothing to spend it on. Ideally, a shepherding family (for instance) will grow some things, as well as looking after flocks (cf. 26:12), and will aim to be more or less self-sufficient but also to be in a position to barter with its wool to get whatever else it needs. The head of the family will no doubt control the disbursement of assets. But Jacob doesn’t really belong to this family, and when he told his story after his arrival, he will surely have revealed that he isn’t committed to it in the long term. He will also have made clear why he has come to Harran. So both parties know why Jacob is here, and it’s quite appropriate for Laban to raise his question.

**29:16-22.** ButLaban may be acting ingenuous or speaking euphemistically. He will have in the back (or the front) of his mind his two daughters who will eventually need husbands. They are perhaps teenagers and rather younger than Jacob, though they are evidently old enough to be entrusted with the sheep. We don’t know how many years Leah was older than Rachel.

Both girls have their alluring features (vv. 17-19) but Rachel has a broader attractiveness and Jacob fancies her. Is the basis for his preference (not confirmed by God) to be questioned?[[260]](#footnote-260) The context does not suggest that at this stage he “loves” her; for him as for his father (24:67), love would more likely follow marriage. But whereas Isaac did not have to work for years for Rebekah, when his father’s servant had come with those camels and their loads, Jacob is more like the servant in a household who is envisaged later in the Torah, to whom the master of the house may give one of his daughters in marriage as part of the arrangement for his service (Exod 21:2-11). While Laban would not know that marriage between cousins has slight genetic disadvantages, he will know that it has significant advantages in family and community relationships and thus in overall human well-being. On the other hand, there is no reference to Laban consulting (e.g.) Leah or her mother (let alone Rachel herself), and maybe he would be in a lot of trouble when he got home and told them about the deal (hence perhaps the ploy that follows).[[261]](#footnote-261)

The seven-year period (v. 20) also compares with conventions in Israel, where servitude (in theory) came to an end after six years. Possibly that difference between six and seven years in itself suggests the high price Jacob is prepared to pay for Rachel’s hand. Rebekah had envisaged him staying in Harran for just a short time (literally, “a few days”; 27:44); a short time is all it seems to Jacob.[[262]](#footnote-262) The seven years would be a betrothal period, implying a quasi-legal marriage commitment: thus Rachel is already “my wife” in v. 21 even though the marriage has not been consummated. Genesis makes no reference to Rachel’s having an opinion about the match, though her mother’s story (and common practice in societies where the family arranges a marriage) may imply that she would have the chance to say yes or no. Other women in the First Testament do get the chance to express an opinion about whom they marry, and there are no stories about women being married off against their expressed will.

Eventually the “time” is completed (vv. 21-22)—the word “days” recurs again. It’s easy to imagine that Jacob can’t wait, for all his happiness with the seven years for which he’s been killing time. So Laban organizes the first of the only two wedding banquets in the First Testament; the other comes in Judges 14. Like most other banquets in the First Testament, both these wedding banquets are occasions when things go wrong.

**29:23-25.** Leah will have been wearing a veil (cf. 24:65), so even those soft eyes have been invisible to Jacob, as Tamar’s face will be to his son Judah (38:13-16). Jacob has never set his own eyes on any other parts of either of these two women nor had physical contact with them beyond a familial kiss, and it’s dark now, and Jacob is well-fed and well-drunk, like his great uncle Lot (cf. 19:30-35).[[263]](#footnote-263) So deception is not so hard. Just as we have not been told whether Rachel had any opinion about the match, so we are not told whether Leah had any opinion about the deception, or whether she knew about it, nor how Laban kept Rachel out of the way that night.

The note about Zilpah (v. 24) keeps the listeners on their toes as they wait to hear what happens next. A maidservant would be another member of the household who had been put into servitude there by her father, perhaps because he was in debt to Laban. She will have been involved in household management for Laban (we hear nothing about Laban’s wife or wives), but she will now be so involved in the household of Jacob and Leah—though it will turn out to be not her only role. Genesis mentions no dowry that Laban gave Rachel or Leah,[[264]](#footnote-264) another marker of the brevity of this story compared with Gen 24. It focuses on matters that provide background to what follows.

What immediately follows (v. 25) is the First Testament scene that one would most like to have witnessed. The narrator draws us into that wish with the “there” which invites us to imagine we look at the scene through Jacob’s eyes. Jacob’s first indignant question repeats the one in 3:13; 12:18; and 26:10. The verb “beguile” (*rāmāh* piel) comes eight times in the First Testament, and four of them ask Jacob’s question (cf. Josh 9:22; 1 Sam 9:17; 28:12). Ironically, “guile” (*mirmāh*)is the word Isaac used of Jacob’s trickery (27:35). Yes, Jacob has swallowed a dose of his own medicine, and without irony he asks why.

**29:26-27.** Did Jacob really think Laban would do something that is not done? With audacity Laban speaks of Jacob expecting to engage in an action that is equivalent to gross sexual impropriety (cf. 20:9; 34:7). With further irony, Laban is working with the principle that Jacob resisted in his own life and has ignored in connection with Leah and Rachel. Once again with irony Genesis takes up terms from Gen 25—27, the references to Esau and Jacob as the “firstborn” and the “younger.” It was strangely appropriate that Jacob should seek to displace Leah by her little sister, he being the younger brother who two or three times set about displacing his big brother. But what he succeeded in doing in relation to Esau and Isaac he has failed to do with Leah. In Laban he has met his match. And anyway, Laban had said that Jacob could have Rachel, but he hadn’t said that she could come first (“Jacob, of all people, should know to be careful when negotiating for something of value”).[[265]](#footnote-265) How could Laban act in that way?!

Nor is Laban finished with his cunning (v. 27). He needed to find husbands for two daughters, and he has done so. A wedding takes a week to celebrate; Judg 14 again provides a parallel. When the week is over, Jacob may also marry Rachel on the basis of committing himself to work for Laban for a further seven years. Laban has no unease about two sisters marrying the same man, and Jacob has no unease about the idea, though the Torah will later prohibit such a practice (Lev 18:18). Perhaps rather, no wonder the Torah later prohibits such a practice; there are a number of rules in the Torah that one might see as ruling out a recurrence of events in Genesis. Indeed, the entire story is not interested in passing ethical judgments on Laban, any more than it was on Jacob earlier, though it may rejoice in the way people such as Jacob and Laban get their comeuppance. It is implicitly more interested in the way these two marriages (not to say Jacob’s having sex with the two maidservants) will bring about the fulfillment of God’s promise to make Jacob exceedingly fruitful.[[266]](#footnote-266)

**29:28-30**. Rachel becomes Jacob’s second wife straightaway; there is no seven-year betrothal. She, too, brings a maidservant with her. Thus the scene comes to a close, though we won’t be surprised if the inequality in Jacob’s affections brings consequences; there will be no “and they lived happily ever after” here.[[267]](#footnote-267) Nor will we be surprised if events have generated a tension in relations between Laban and Jacob that will not go away. But maybe Jacob would rather put up with that tension than go home and face the situation there.[[268]](#footnote-268)

**Genesis 29:31—30:24—Eleven Sons and a Daughter**

## Overview

In Scene 5 of the account of Jacob’s time in Harran, Leah gives birth to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Bilhah gives birth to Dan and Naphtali; Zilpah gives birth to Gad and Asher; Leah gives birth to Issakar, Zebulun, and Dinah; and at last Rachel gives birth, to Joseph. Difficulty in conceiving issues in resentment and conflict; fruitfulness issues from a combination of God’s activity, wifely initiative, and the cooperation of Jacob; and it results in gratefulness to God and a sense of honor.

## Translation

31Yahweh saw that Le’ah was rejected[[269]](#footnote-269) and he opened her womb; whereas Raḥel was infertile. 32So Le’ah got pregnant and gave birth to a son, and named him Re’uben, because (she said), “Yahweh has seen my humbling—because now my husband will like me.” 33She got pregnant again and gave birth to a son, and said, “Because Yahweh has heard that I was rejected[[270]](#footnote-270) and has given me this one as well,” so she named him Šim’on. 34She got pregnant again and gave birth to a son, and said, “Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I’ve given birth to three sons for him.” That’s why he named him[[271]](#footnote-271) Lewi. 35She got pregnant again and gave birth to a son and said, “This time I will confess Yahweh.” That’s why she named him Yehudah. Then she stopped giving birth.

30:1Raḥel saw that she couldn’t give birth for Ya‘aqob, and Raḥel was jealous of her sister and said to Ya‘aqob, “Give me children![[272]](#footnote-272) Otherwise, I’m going to die!” 2Ya‘aqob’s anger raged[[273]](#footnote-273) at Raḥel. He said, “Am I in the place of God,[[274]](#footnote-274) who has held back the fruit of the womb from you?” 3She said, “Here’s my handmaid Bilḥah. Be with her, so she can give birth on my knees and I can also be built up through her.”

4So she gave him Bilḥah her maidservant[[275]](#footnote-275) as wife, and Ya‘aqob was with her. 5Bilhah got pregnant and gave birth to a son for Ya‘aqob. 6Raḥel said, “God has given judgment for me; yes, he’s listened to my voice[[276]](#footnote-276) and given me a son.” That’s why she named him Dan. 7Bilḥah, Raḥel’s maidservant, got pregnant again and gave birth to a second son for Ya‘aqob. 8Raḥel said, “An almighty[[277]](#footnote-277) wrestling matchI’ve fought[[278]](#footnote-278) with my sister; yes, I’ve won.” So she named him Naptali.

9Le’ah saw that she had stopped giving birth, and she got Zilpah her maidservant and gave her to Ya‘aqob as wife. 10Zilpah, Le’ah’s maidservant, gave birth to a son for Ya‘aqob, 11and Le’ah said, “What luck/luck has come!”[[279]](#footnote-279) So she named him Gad. 12Zilpah, Le’ah’s maidservant, gave birth to a second son for Ya‘aqob, 13and Le’ah said “What good fortuneI have, because daughters are calling me fortunate.”[[280]](#footnote-280) So she named him Asher.

14At the time of the wheat harvest, Re’uben went and found love-plants in the open country and brought them to Le’ah his mother. Raḥel said to Le’ah, “Please give me some of your son’s love-plants.” 15 She said to her, “Was it a small thing, your getting my husband, and you’re also going to get[[281]](#footnote-281) my son’s love-plants?” Raḥel said, “Therefore he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son’s love-plants.” 16In the evening Ya‘aqob came from the open country, and Le’ah went out to meet him and said, “I’m the one you’re to be with, because I’ve definitely paid wages[[282]](#footnote-282) for you, with my son’s love-plants.” So he slept with her that night, 17and God listened to Le’ah.[[283]](#footnote-283) She got pregnant and gave birth to a fifth son for Ya‘aqob. 18Le’ah said, “God gave me my wages*,* in that I gave my maidservant to my husband.” So she named him Yiśśakar.[[284]](#footnote-284)

19Le’ah got pregnant again, and gave birth to a sixth son for Ya‘aqob. 20Le’ah said, “God has given me a good endowment—me; this time my husband will elevate me[[285]](#footnote-285) because I’ve given birth to six sons for him.” So she named him Zebulun. 21Later, she gave birth to a daughter, and named her Dinah.

22But God was mindful of Raḥel. God listened to her[[286]](#footnote-286) and opened her womb, 23and she got pregnant and gave birth to a son. She said, “God has gathered up my reviling.” 24So she named him Yosep, saying “May Yahweh add another son to me!”

## Interpretation

Scene 5 is the center and climax of the palistrophe relating Jacob’s time in Harran. It concerns itself exclusively with the birth of eleven sons who will give their names to the Israelite clans, and one daughter who will feature in a later story in Genesis (the twelfth son will be born on the way back to Canaan).

* To Leah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah (29:31-35)
* To Rachel’s maidservant Bilhah: Dan, Naphtali (30:1-8)
* To Leah’s maidservant Zilpah: Gad, Asher (30:9-13)
* To Leah with the aid of some love-apples: Issachar, Zebulun, also Dinah (30:14-21)
* To Rachel when God is mindful of her: Joseph (30:22-24)

The section’s focus on the birth of these offspring fits the way Genesis as a whole is “structured by genealogical tag lines tracing lineal descendants (the *tôlĕdôt*–structuring clauses).”[[287]](#footnote-287) The birth of these offspring is what most counts in the Jacob story. As was the case with Jacob’s parents and grandparents, the capacity to have children is key to the fulfilment of God’s purpose with Jacob and of his promises to him, but it is also a great challenge for Jacob and his wives. Gen 29:31—30:24 takes that fact for granted and relates how it gets met (the medieval chapter division oddly links Leah’s first four pregnancies with what precedes rather than with the birth of the other eight children).

Whereas previous genealogies have explained the relationships between “our” family and other families (notably, “us” and the Ishmaelites or “us” and the Edomites”), genealogies from now on implicitly account for “our” relationships with one another—here specifically, for the interrelationships of the Israelite clans. Thus while previously “women have partaken in the promise of birthing nations,” as was the case with Sarah, Hagar, and Rebekah, now “women cease birthing nations” and become the mean by which the house of Israel comes into being, “the means by which a nation is established.”[[288]](#footnote-288) Admittedly the section does not directly refer to the Israelite clans, as Gen 49 will; the focus lies on the development of the family, with the background it provides for the continuing Genesis story, and on the mothering of these women.[[289]](#footnote-289) But the members of the clans will hear of their own origins as they listen to the account.

The offspring, then, especially count in this section. They are organized by mother: four for Leah, two for Bilhah, two for Zilpah, two more and a daughter for Leah, one for Rachel (thus we should not infer that the twelve births are related in chronological order). Jacob himself “is hardly present—in 30:2 he furiously explains why”; he appears only a couple of times to do his creative duty in silence”[[290]](#footnote-290) (*Jub 28* makes explicit that he was the father each time). Yet he is omnipresent in the background of the story: “Leah struggles with her esteem in the eyes of Jacob (29:32, 33, 34; 30:15, 20), and Rachel with the reproach of her childlessness in the eyes of Jacob (30:1-2, 6, 23).”[[291]](#footnote-291) The focus of Leah’s life as the story tells it is having children and gaining her husband’s love.[[292]](#footnote-292)

The section brings together material of varied forms and origins. One can extract a sequence of simple birth announcements which report a woman’s pregnancy, her giving birth, her naming the child, and an explanation of the name’s significance. There are commonly two explanations; neither indicates the etymological meaning of the name (of which we are ignorant in most cases) but both indicate what the name signified for the mother. The announcements are collected into sets relating to each of the mothers: some sets have an introduction and/or conclusion, and/or have comments on how Yahweh was involved in the women getting pregnant and/or on actions the women took when they could not get pregnant. The form of the announcements again brings out how Jacob is a subordinate figure in the story’s action, subject in varying ways to the manoeuvring of his wives.

The names and their significance are different from the general run of First Testament names.[[293]](#footnote-293) The comments on them bring into focus the complicating feature that runs through the account: a motif characterizing it is the rivalry between Leah and Rachel, the one who has a functioning womb, the other who has a husband’s love. “The whole episode is governed by Leah’s longing for Jacob’s love and Rachel’s craving for children.”[[294]](#footnote-294) The section thus combines genealogy with the exposition of a theme, the tortuous ups and downs of four women’s fertility and their mutual relationships. It is not exactly a story; it does not go anywhere. It is more a series of episodic moments with this common theme. The vignettes about the women and their babies are significant in the context of Genesis’s concern with marriage and family, but more specifically, the genealogy matters to the story line of the Genesis narrative, though the births’ significance for this broader story line comes from the section’s setting in Genesis rather than from any explicit references within the material. The section also pays special attention to Yahweh’s involvement with Leah and Rachel and their relationship with Yahweh. God is invoked thirteen times, by Leah, Rachel, Jacob, and the narrator.[[295]](#footnote-295)

**29:31-35**. “After all the penetrating worldliness of the previous story, God is again the subject of the event,” though the section will go on to interweave references to God’s activity and references to wholly human initiative and motivation in a “truly unedifying thicket of passions and naked human characteristics” without theological comment.[[296]](#footnote-296)

It begins with Leah (v. 31). As Jacob had married Leah and Rachel at the same time, they might both have had children at about the same time, but it didn’t work out that way and the narrator has intuited why. Maybe Jacob simply liked or loved Rachel and didn’t like or love Leah at all, or maybe he liked or loved Rachel more than Leah. It might not make much difference to Leah. Genesis doesn’t just say Leah felt rejected; she was rejected. It is the converse of the fact stated in v. 30: Jacob did like or love Rachel more than or rather than Leah.[[297]](#footnote-297) “Reject” (*śānēh*) and “like/love” (*’āhēb*) are antonyms. To say that Jacob “hated” Leah (LXX) is misleading. As well as implying an absoluteness when that antithesis can simply imply preference, it implies a strength of feeling when the antithesis denotes action (a useful illustration is Mal 1:2-3, quoted in Rom 9:13). The pattern of rejecting one while liking/loving the other recurs from the story of Jacob’s grandparents. It occurs again in the rule in Deut 21:15-17, where these verbs recur and constitute quasi-legal language: rejecting a wife is close to repudiating her as wife, and 30:14-15 implies that Jacob has broken off his marital relationship with Leah. By contrast, such parallels make the more noteworthy Elqanah’s commitment to both Hannah and Peninnah in 1 Sam 1. In describing Yahweh’s response to the situation, Genesis does not say that Yahweh loved Leah and rejected Rachel, as it may imply that he loved Jacob and rejected Esau (the point Mal 1:3 makes explicit)—indeed, the Torah never says that Yahweh rejected anyone. Genesis simply says that on this occasion Leah’s having a baby was a sign that God was responding to her husband’s having rejected her; and it simply observes that Rachel was infertile, as Sarah and Rebekah had been (11:30; 25:21), not that Yahweh had closed her womb (cf. 20:18). Yahweh’s opening Leah’s womb might imply that she had been trying to have children for a while, though it need not do so; using a different root (*pāṭar*), the Torah refers to any firstborn as one who opens the womb (e.g., Exod 13:2, 12, 13, 15). It is the first reference to Yahweh’s activity (the first time Yahweh has been the subject of a verb) since his speaking to Jacob at Beth El.

It is the mother who names the child (v. 32), as will usually be the case and as is common in the First Testament (though *Jub* 28 has Jacob doing much of the naming). Each time, there is a relationship of sound rather than of meaning between the names and the mother’s comments. *Rᵉ’ûbēn* could be construed to mean “look, a son,” which would be apposite. But Leah also sees an overlap with the idea of Yahweh looking “at her humbling” (*bᵉ‘onyî*), as he once listened to Hagar’s (16:11). And she deludes herself with the thought that her son’s birth will make a difference to Jacob’s attitude to her.

Leah herself (v. 33) then expresses what the narrator has told us about Yahweh’s recognizing her rejection. We don’t know the etymology of the name *šim‘ôn*, but it makes Leah think of the verb *šāma‘* and thus she speaks not of Yahweh seeing her rejection but of Yahweh hearing of it (compare the name Ishmael).

Her comments on the birth of her third son (v. 33) indicate that the yearning she expressed in naming Reuben has not been fulfilled; but she is still holding onto her delusion about Jacob. Once again we don’t know the etymology of the name *lēwî*. Leah connects it with the verb *lāwāh* “attach.”

Yet again the etymology of her fourth son’s name (v. 34) is unknown, but *yᵉhûdāh* does overlap with the verb *hôdāh* from the root *yādāh*, which appears in the yiqtol as *yᵉhôdeh*. Has Leah stopped focusing exclusively on Jacob’s love and started focusing on Yahweh? Do the listeners notice that these third and fourth sons are the ancestors of the line of Moses and Aaron and of David, so that “priesthood and kingship… have their origin in an unwanted and unplanned marriage”?[[298]](#footnote-298) Is it significant that in connection with her first two sons she mentioned both Yahweh’s mercy and her yearning in relation to her husband, while in connection with the third she mentioned only her husband, in the fourth she mentions only Yahweh?

**30:1-8.** “Meanwhile, night after night Rachel hears the sons of Leah crying to be fed. Day after day she hears the babies cooing with joy. Occupying the adjacent tent, she most desires her own children.”[[299]](#footnote-299) Understandably, she can’t cope with the way Leah gives birth to sons so easily. One wife has children but no love, the other has love but no children, and “they are competing with each other, one for love and the other for children.”[[300]](#footnote-300) It is the first reference to individual jealousy in the Scriptures; Jacob will eventually facilitate another reference (37:11). Indeed, it is the first reference to Rachel’s feelings in the feelings-laden story of what has happened since Jacob arrived in Harran. Neither has she spoken, but now she does.[[301]](#footnote-301) While Sarah and Rebekah had chafed over their infertility, the contrast between Rachel’s experience and Leah’s in the context of their shared marriage underlies the heated immoderation of her protest to Jacob. Leah had not referred in so many words to bearing children “for Jacob,” though her phraseology has implied that it would be neat if he would look at her sons that way and that it would then make a difference to the way he looked at her. Rachel can talk in such terms because she is the woman he likes or loves. Yet that fact complicates things and imperils their relationship. “Give me,” she says, using the same verb form that Jacob used about her to Laban a few verses ago (29:21). With some illogic she implies that her not having got pregnant is Jacob’s fault; if he can beget sons with Leah, how can it be? She is consumed by her inability to conceive. Her whole life seems pointless. People listening to the story might recall the story of Hannah as well as those of Sarah and Rebekah and wonder if there should be some reference to Rachel praying, as Hannah did.[[302]](#footnote-302) Perhaps “Rachel’s infertility is the Deity’s way of challenging an otherwise privileged life,” but she goes on to challenge Jacob instead of God, “to target what one can control in a situation that appears to be beyond one’s control.”[[303]](#footnote-303)

Rachel’s anguish ruins the relationship in both directions (v. 2). Jacob didn’t just get angry. His anger raged at Rachel. “The whole dialogue is a matter of a few lines, but it succeeds in amply suggesting the tangle of emotions—love, consideration, jealousy, frustration, resentment, rage—that constitutes the conjugal relationship.”[[304]](#footnote-304) Why should Rachel blame Jacob? Yet (perhaps with wisdom and even love) he doesn’t blame her. Rather he makes the affirmation from which the narrator held back: it’s God who has closed Rachel’s womb. His magnificent conviction of God’s sovereignty is the kind of affirmation that leads to outrageous prayers in the Psalms. So why is there no reference to his praying, either, as his father did?

Like Jacob’s grandmother, Rachel has an alternative proposal (v. 3). Desperate times require desperate measures, and Rachel is desperate. Like Sarah, she speaks of building herself up[[305]](#footnote-305) through her maidservant, in that Bilhah’s child will count as Rachel’s. The child that a woman receives onto her knees or lap immediately after its mother gives birth to it, or that a man subsequently dandles on his knees, is her or his child. Even if it is not their birth child, it is a child that they recognize or adopt or claim, like father Joseph (50:23).

So Bilhah becomes Jacob’s third wife (vv. 4-6). Strictly or technically, we will later learn, her status is that of a secondary wife (35:22).[[306]](#footnote-306) Although she is a wife, she remains a maidservant, but there is no indication that her sons have a lower status than Jacob’s other sons. She duly gives birth to a son “for Jacob,” but also for Rachel. The relationship between Rachel and Bilhah does not implode like the relationship of Sarah and Hagar, and Rachel accepts Bilhah’s son as Sarah did not accept Hagar’s. It is Rachel who names the child. The name *dān* is a participle from the verb *dîn* which means exercise authority or make a decision, particularly by taking action on behalf of the needy and oppressed (cf. 15:14); Gen 49:16 will pick up the significance of the name. Rachel speaks of Yahweh listening to her voice: is it simply the voice that has cried out in sadness at not being able to conceive, or do her words indicate that she had prayed after all?

When Bilhah bears a second son for Rachel and for Jacob (vv. 7-8), we again do not know the etymology of the name *naptālî*, but Rachel is able to make a link with the verb *pātal* (niphal) which means “twist.” Whereas her greeting in v. 6 focused on what her son’s arrival said about Yahweh, her second greeting focuses on what this son’s arrival says about her rivalry with Leah. She has fought with her sister by having children by means of her maidservant, and she has in some sense won. While Rachel was apparently prettier than Leah, she doesn’t seem to have been nicer.[[307]](#footnote-307) But Genesis makes no comment on the propriety or otherwise of these goings on. They are simply the family history. Perhaps it invites its readers to be sympathetic rather than judgmental.

**30:9-13.** Leah evidently thinks that four sons is not enough. Is she afraid that Rachel will catch up with her? So Jacob receives a fourth wife. And “it seems that everybody except Rachel is able to conceive a child.”[[308]](#footnote-308)

Leah attributes similar meanings to the names of both Zilpah’s sons (vv. 11-13). Elsewhere in the Middle East Gad is the name of a deity who brings good luck, but in the First Testament it is simply a term for luck (except in Isa 65:11). Words from the root *’āšar* are much more common, especially the exclamation *’ašrê…,* “the good fortune of…”

**30:14-18.** A vignette illustrates the ongoing tension between the two original wives, and the ongoing yearning in Rachel’s heart for children of her own and in Leah’s heart for more.

Once again Genesis makes clear (v. 14) that being shepherds does not exclude some subsistence farming on the side (cf. 26:12). The wheat harvest happens in May, later than the barley harvest. Reuben is the eldest child, so it is not surprising that he should be the one who is out with the harvesters. He is perhaps seven or eight or nine. The love-plants are *dûdā’îm*, a name which suggests a link with words such as *dôd* “beloved.” LXX and Vg take them as mandrakes, a plant often understood to have hallucinogenic and narcotic effects and used in traditional medicine and rituals. Love-plants are apparently a species similar in appearance: a thick root, no stem, large leaves, violet flowers, and yellow or orange berries which appear in spring. They were evidently believed to be able to encourage conception as well as sexual desire, like perfume (cf. Song of Songs 7:13 [14]),[[309]](#footnote-309) though these qualities hardly fit with the smelly and soporific reputation of mandrakes.[[310]](#footnote-310)

It is now some years since the great marriage deception (v. 15), but it is still a cause of hostility between the sisters. When and how did Rachel take Jacob from Leah? Simply by being the one he liked? By having her shapely form? Apparently Rachel as the woman Jacob had always wanted can control who he goes to bed with. But did Leah stop getting pregnant because Jacob stopped having sex with her? Or has he stopped having sex with her because she has stopped getting pregnant? Like the English expression “sleep with,” *šākab* as a euphemism for having sex applies to irregular sexual liaisons rather than regular relations between husbands and wives (19:32-35; 26:10; 34:2, 7; 35:22; 39:7-14). So Rachel’s use of this verb is neatly snide.

Having made the bargain (v. 16), Leah needs to head off Jacob as he makes his way towards Rachel’s tent.[[311]](#footnote-311) Both Leah and Rachel believe in the potency of the love-plants, but Leah has surrendered some of them to the woman who doesn’t need them in order to be sexually attractive but who does need to find a way of overcoming her infertility. “Jacob, apparently, has no say in the matter. He seems to sleep with anyone his wives demand of him.”[[312]](#footnote-312)

Once again Genesis brings God in (v. 17). If Leah surrendered only some of the love-plants, is the implication that she made use of some of them? Whether she did or not, Genesis makes explicit that it was God who was key to her regaining her fertility, with or without their help.

Leah recognizes it, too (v. 18). God has listened to her, as she herself said in 29:33, though one would have thought she was more interested in God hearing her yearning about Jacob’s love. Issachar’s name suggests a link with *śākār*, a key word in Gen 29—31.[[313]](#footnote-313) The name suggests how Jacob has moved from being paid wages by Laban to being the payment for wages paid by Leah. To put it the other way, Leah relates to Jacob the same way as her father had.[[314]](#footnote-314) Jacob is a hired hand. It’s hardly calculated to help with her real problem.

**30:19-21.** No love-plants are required for Leah to have a sixth son. Once again, she sees him as God’s gift, and once again she harbors her hope that her fecundity will make a difference to Jacob’s attitude to her. Once again we see that “the first motif that runs through the narrative is the unhappiness of Leah”;[[315]](#footnote-315) she has more sons than the other three wives combined, but it doesn’t make up for the missing love. So “Leah fails in her own lifetime,” though she attains some measure of victory after her death: it is she after all, not Rachel, who lies forever beside Jacob in the Cave of Makhpelah” and who is looked back on as the mother of most of the clans, including Levi and Judah.[[316]](#footnote-316) Zebulun’s name could suggest a double way in which Leah articulates hope. The name overlaps with the root *zābad* meaning “endow”—though that root more obviously links with names such as Zabdi (and eventually Zebedee). But it is closer to the root *zābal* meaning “be on high” (cf. Beelzebul).

The brief mention of Dinah (v. 21), among the other daughters that the wives had (cf. 37:35; 46:7),[[317]](#footnote-317) provides background to what will happen in Gen 34.[[318]](#footnote-318) The lack of reference to Leah getting pregnant in connection with Dinah’s birth prompted the inference that she and Zebulun were twins (see e.g., *Jub* 28:23). Genesis makes no comment on the significance of Dinah’s name, which looks as if it links with the same root as Dan.

**30:22-24.** WhileRachel had the love-plants, they apparently haven’t worked so far, and when she does eventually get pregnant, it is because at last God is mindful of her, as he was mindful of Noah and Abraham (8:1; 19:29). The account of Joseph’s birth thus rounds off the section. God has listened to her as he listened to Leah and he has opened her womb as he opened Leah’s long ago: see 29:31; 30:17. For neither woman was it the love-plants that made the difference. There are four keys that God personally holds onto, so that only he can open the door: rain, food, tomb, and womb (TgNeoph). As was the case with Zebulun, there are two ideas that Joseph’s name could suggest. *’Āsap* means “gather,” and it can refer not least to gathering things up in order to get rid of them (e.g., Isa 4:1; there, too, it refers to getting rid of reviling). *Yāsap* means “add”; Rachel hopes that this birth will not be the only one for her, and she puts her hope in the possibility that Yahweh could take action to that end. The “historical” Rachel would say “God” rather than Yahweh; the name *yôsipyāh* (“may Yahweh add”) comes in Ezra 8:10. Joseph will indeed not be Rachel’s only son; the interpretation of the name is a placeholder for Benjamin.[[319]](#footnote-319) While closing off this section, the account of Joseph’s birth thus also looks forward to Benjamin’s. But that second son will cost Rachel her life (Gen 35:16-18), which is ironic in light of her opening statement about having children, in v. 1.

## God, Leah, Rachel, Jacob, Laban, Life

The theological genius of narrative or story is that it can do justice to the complexity of who God is and how life is, in a way that systematic analysis cannot. It may be impossible to know whether a narrator was conscious of making a statement that carried the implications one may see in it; one can only say that the statement does carry them or that it provides the raw materials for such a theological statement. Near the beginning of Genesis, the Noah story provided one example in its juxtaposition of declarations concerning Noah’s finding grace in Yahweh’s eyes and concerning his faithfulness (6:8-9). Near the end, Genesis will provide another in the dynamics of the actions of Joseph’s brothers and their consequences, summed up in Joseph’s declaration that they had intended something bad but God had intended something good (50:19-20). Joseph there also uses the same expression that Jacob uses here, “Am I in the place of God?” (they are the only occurrences of this phrase in the First Testament, though see also 2 Kings 5:7).[[320]](#footnote-320)

Here, Genesis comments first on Yahweh’s seeing. It is a theological commonplace that God is omniscient, that he sees everything, but the Scriptures show more interest in occasions when God looks at things, when he pays attention, and then takes action in response to what he sees. He may always see; he does not always look. If one can get God to look, it is almost inevitable that he will take action (but only “almost”: at the cross, he may look, but he takes no action, at least that day). God does not initiate things that happen in this section. He is always responding to concrete human situations,[[321]](#footnote-321) to things he sees.

Second, Genesis comments on what God saw. He does not always look at someone who is rejected in such a way as to do something about it, but he sometimes does so. He sometimes exercises a preferential option for the poor. Leah is right that Yahweh has seen her humbling (and perhaps likewise that he has heard about her rejection) and has taken action about it, though she is sadly wrong in her inference regarding what his action will achieve. Could Yahweh have made Jacob like or love Leah? While Exodus will go on talk about God making hearts hard, it’s difficult to find in the Scriptures any reference to God’s making hearts soft, though the two processes would presumably be similar, and perhaps circumcising the heart or giving people a soft heart (Deut 30:6; Ezek 36:26) are other ways of describing the same action. It looks as if Yahweh lets someone like Jacob love or like or dislike or reject as he wishes.

Third, Genesis comments on God’s opening a womb. As with his seeing and his omniscience, his omnipotence is a theological commonplace. His creative power lies behind every birth. If he did not give life, there would be no life. In particular, his creative activity lies behind every first birth; there is something especially marvelous about the initial opening of a womb. Yet the process of creation at the beginning involved his bestowing generative power on the animate world. He does not need to take direct action every time an animal or a human being is to give birth. Conversely, the infertility of a human being or an animal need not imply that God has closed the womb in question, though Jacob speaks in virtually those terms. But there are some occasions when he does take direct action, and the Scriptures show at least as much interest in specific occasions when he opens or closes wombs. They may be significant because a woman is in particular need, or because she has been unable to have children, or because this particular birth has a key place in his purpose, or because he is acting in chastisement. An unexpected birth or a closed womb properly makes one ask questions about what God is doing, though they do not make it appropriate to fret about getting answers. These experiences may be just one of those things.

So what can a human being do? Rachel and Leah make use of surrogacy, like Sarah and like some women in the West, and Genesis indicates no disapproval. Genesis is generally sparing in ethical judgments.[[322]](#footnote-322) Is surrogacy a way of resisting Yahweh’s purpose that Rachel should not have children? Or is it a way of facilitating the fulfillment of Yahweh’s purpose that Jacob should have many children? Or is it a theologically neutral action? Certainly Yahweh does not disapprove of surrogacy enough to decline to make use of it in bringing about the fulfilment of his promise to make Jacob the father of a numerous people. Is Rachel right that Bilhah is the means of Yahweh’s acting on her behalf?

Rachel and Leah both believe in the efficacy of love-plants, which were in effect a form of traditional medicine. And the First Testament does not always disapprove of medicine (Isa 38:21) though it does disapprove of it when medicine replaces God (2 Chron 16:12). Genesis leaves neatly ambiguous whether the love-plants worked. If they worked, it does make clear that they did so because God made them work. They did not sideline God. “God listened to Leah.”

Genesis offers no universalizable statements about the sense in which it is always God who opens wombs or closes wombs or about the significance of whether or not a woman can have children. Leah’s fertility was a gift from Yahweh that responded to her rejection by her husband; Rachel’s infertility was “just one of those things.” How does the narrator know? He intuited it; God inspired this insight.

**Genesis 30:25—31:2—Jacob Gains a Large Flock**

## Overview

In Scene 6 of the account of Jacob’s time at Harran, Jacob agrees to work for Laban for a further period so as to accumulate resources that will enable him to take his family back to Canaan. Earlier, Laban had pulled one over Jacob; now Jacob pulls one over Laban, and he does accumulate resources in clever and spectacular fashion, though his success arouses suspicion and ill-feeling on the part of Laban and his sons.

## Translation

25When Raḥel had given birth to Yosep, Ya‘aqob said to Laban, “Send me off, so I may go to my place, to my country. 26Give me my wives and my children for whom I’ve served you so I may go, because you yourself know the service that I’ve given you.” 27But Laban said to him, “Please, if I’ve found favor in your eyes: I’ve divined[[323]](#footnote-323) that[[324]](#footnote-324) Yahweh[[325]](#footnote-325) has blessed me because of you.” 28So he said, “Specify your wages with me and I’ll give it to you.” 29He said to him, “You yourself have acknowledged how I’ve served you and how your livestock have been with me, 30because the little that you had before me has exploded so as to become a large number. Yahweh has blessed you wherever I’ve gone.[[326]](#footnote-326) But now, when am I myself also to do something for my household?” 31So he said, “What am I to give you?”

Ya‘aqob said, “You aren’t to give me anything, if you’ll do this thing for me. I will again pasture your flock I keep. 32I’ll pass through your entire flock today, removing[[327]](#footnote-327) from there every speckled and spotted sheep, and every dark sheep among the lambs, and the spotted and speckled among the goats. It will be my wages. 33My faithfulness will aver[[328]](#footnote-328) against me[[329]](#footnote-329) on the future day when you come to look at my wages before you. Each one with me that’s not speckled or spotted among the goats, or dark among the lambs: that one with me will have been stolen.”

34Laban said, “There, yes, let it be in accordance with your word.” 35That day he removed the streaked and spotted he-goats and all the speckled and spotted she-goats, each one that had white on it, and each dark one among the lambs, put them into the charge of his sons, 36and put three days’ journey between him and Ya‘aqob, while Ya‘aqob was pasturing the rest of Laban’s flock.

37Ya‘aqob got for himself fresh cane of poplar, and almond and plane tree, and peeled white stripes in them, exposing the white that was on the rods. 38The canes that he had peeled he stationed in the troughs, in the water containers that the flock came to drink from, in front of the flock. They were in heat when they came to drink, 39so the flock were in heat by the canes; and the flock gave birth to streaked, speckled, and spotted young. 40The lambs Ya‘aqob divided off, and he put the flock’s faces toward the streaked and the completely dark animals in Laban’s flock. So he set herds for himself each on its own and didn’t set them by Laban’s flock. 41Every time the flock was in heat (the ones who were clustered),[[330]](#footnote-330) Ya‘aqob would put the canes in the troughs before the eyes of the flock so they would be in heat by the canes. 42But with the feebler in the flock, he didn’t put them there. So the feeble ones were Laban’s and the clustered ones were Ya‘aqob’s.

43So the man exploded very greatly. He had a large flock, maidservants, servants, camels, and donkeys. 31:1But he heard the words of Laban’s sons: “Ya‘aqob has got everything that was our father’s. It’s from what was our father’s that he’s made all this substance.” 2And Ya‘aqob saw Laban’s face: there, he wasn’t[[331]](#footnote-331) the same towards him as he had been in previous days.[[332]](#footnote-332)

## Interpretation

With Scene 6, the palistrophe in 28:10—33:20 begins its return journey. This scene in the sequence corresponds to Scene 3 (29:15-30), which recounted how Jacob agreed to work for Laban so as to earn the right to marry his daughter. Here Jacob agrees to renegotiate his contract with Laban.[[333]](#footnote-333) This renegotiation initiates the process whereby Jacob and his family will return to Canaan, though the scene turns out to represent a false start. But the result is that Jacob gains much more to take back to Canaan than the human assets he initially refers to.

The question underlying this section, then, is whether and how Jacob will be able to get back to Canaan with his new and extensive household. There are perhaps two obstacles that he has to overcome. The overt implication of his opening request is that he needs Laban’s permission in order to leave, but the question behind that question may be that he needs Laban’s practical help. He has wives and children, but as far as we know he has no other resources. So how can he make the journey back to Canaan, which would take several weeks, and how can he survive back there without simply being a big burden on his family (and who knows what their state is?).

It is to those unstated questions that Laban responds in giving Jacob the chance to earn the wherewithal to make it on his own. Jacob will continue his work as a shepherd who is involved in breeding sheep, but he will now share in the profits. In the event, he finds a way of doing way better than anyone could have expected, which also provides him with the bartering resources to gain a wider range of assets.

The medieval chapter division closes this scene in 30:43 with a summary reference to those enhanced assets, which would make a satisfactory ending to a section. But the subsequent verses continue without a break. Whereas LXX and many modern translations add explicit reference to Jacob as the subject in 31:1, MT continues straight on. While it then does make “Jacob” the subject in 31:2, this reference issues from the change of subject within 31:1, and in content 31:2 again continues from 31:1. This feature of the beginning of Gen 31 subverts the inference that 30:43 constituted closure. While one might then take 31:3 as also continuing the narrative sequence, the parallel with Gen 12 suggests rather that Yahweh’s instruction in 31:3 begins the account of the family’s return. So it is 30:25—31:2 that constitutes Scene 5, and the scene concludes with the note that Jacob has done considerably better than pleases his brothers-in-law or his father-in-law. Although Jacob has thus resolved the question behind the question at the beginning of the scene, he has not resolved the overt question, his need of Laban’s permission if he is to leave. Indeed, his relationship with Laban has deteriorated. It doesn’t seem likely that this permission will be forthcoming.

**30:25-26.** At least fourteen years have passed since Jacob arrived in Harran (seven years of service each for Leah and for Rachel). Although we need not assume that all the births have been listed in chronological order, the section does imply that Joseph came last: finally, Rachel has been able to have a baby, and that event apparently signals that it is time to go home. Perhaps there is a quasi-legal rationale: there are several senses in which a woman’s having a baby make the marriage a full marriage, in terms of her relationship with her husband and with her father.[[334]](#footnote-334) And “from his birth, Joseph is the motor of Jacob’s future, and therefore motor of the future of the covenant.”[[335]](#footnote-335) Anyway, Jacob thinks the time has come; he had hardly envisaged staying this long.

His reference to the service he has given Laban (v. 26) implies an allusion to the fourteen-year stint. He is perhaps aware of the possibility that Laban may assume a rule like the one in Exod 21:2-11. Laban is responsible for the family of which he is head, and his offspring are both part of his responsibility and part of that family’s resources. In some sense he is the owner of his daughters and of the children that they have had (cf. 31:43). A servant such as Jacob can’t simply assume the right to take them away. Yet Jacob has surely furnished Laban with the kind of service that gives him some rights in relation to them. Further, while Jacob might be okay about arriving back home with nothing to show for his fourteen years away but four wives and a large number of children, he might equally feel that he needs to be able to return with some further assets. Indeed, we have noted that it might be hardly practicable for him simply to set off with these dependents: what about their needs on the long journey? Possibly he is not really asking Laban for permission to leave; he might even be wondering whether the framework within which Laban could be expected to work would be an equivalent to Deut 15:12-14. There,the term for releasing a servant with the means to start of new life is “send off” (*šālaḥ* piel), and Jacob uses that verb here (see further 31:42),though it was also the expression for Isaac “sending off” Jacob to Harran in 28:6 (cf. 24:54, 56, 59). Or (with similar implications) the subtext of his words to Laban might be, “We need to renegotiate our work relationship now that I have served my fourteen years for your two daughters, so that I can accumulate enough resources to be self-sufficient and go home.”

**30:27-31a.** This possibility links with the way the negotiations in this section recall the negotiations between Abraham and the Hittites (Gen 23), in which statements may not need to be understood at their face value.

This comparison (v. 27) links with the fact that Laban is formally more courteous than he was in 29:26-27, and more courteous than Jacob in vv. 25-26. Jacob did not say “please”, though neither did Abraham in the opening rounds in Gen 23. Laban’s civility has the same rationale as his straightness in 29:26-27: he is concerned for himself and his family. By the blessing that Jacob has brought to him, he will mean the flourishing of his flocks, which has come about either because Jacob is an expert shepherd or because Yahweh has been gracious to Laban for Jacob’s sake—or both. Either way, it is a fulfillment of the promise that people outside Abraham’s immediate family will find blessing through that family. While Laban may speak metaphorically about divining, a literal reference fits with the subsequent allusion to effigies (31:19),[[336]](#footnote-336) which appear in association with divination in Ezek 21:21 [26]. While such divination is forbidden to Israelites, Ezekiel accepts it as appropriate to foreigners who don’t have the same resources as Israelites and who may get guidance from Yahweh by means of the resources they have. Strictly, divination applies to discovering what one should do in the future, so the implication here may be that it is his divination that has revealed to Laban that he needs to find a way of holding onto Jacob.

So he needs to negotiate a new contract with Jacob (v. 28), because the original contract for seven years, and then for seven more, has expired. Laban speaks as if he is prepared to write Jacob a blank check, though his extravagant offer is likely the kind of overstatement that simply opens up a discussion (cf. Gen 23).

Jacob consents to take part in a polite conversation (vv. 29-30) that discretely avoids putting hard figures on the table. He does take up Laban’s (perhaps unwise) admission of how he has done well through Jacob’s work, and makes it more concrete: “Blessing? Yes, look at how many sheep you have now compared with fourteen years ago.” And he does imply that his statement in vv. 25-26 was simply an opening gambit in the negotiation he wants to have with Laban, like Laban’s statement in vv. 27-28. He didn’t really mean he’s itching to set off for Canaan next week, though sometime he will want to do so. In the short term, the question is, how can he build up his family assets in the way he has enabled Laban to build up his? For his fourteen years of service so far, he will have been compensated by the provision of food and shelter and by the granting of wives (and children). But that contractual time is over, and he now needs a different form of compensation that will establish his family for the future. And he needs Laban to make him an offer in this connection.

Laban’s response is to invite Jacob to be more concrete (v. 31a). The negotiation is becoming real.

**30:31b-33**. Jacob continues to negotiate in the Gen 23 manner. “You needn’t give me anything” means “You need give me only what follows.” For his part, he is willing to continue to pasture Laban’s flocks in his expert fashion, and to look after them and protect them.

He then defines what Laban is to give him (v. 32). Middle Eastern sheep are usually white, and goats are usually black or brown (cf. Song of Songs 4:1-2; 6:5-6),[[337]](#footnote-337) but some sheep may be speckled, spotted, or dark, and some goats may be spotted or speckled. Jacob suggests that both now and in future the small minority of non-standard sheep and goats among Laban’s flocks will belong to Jacob. It is they and their future offspring that will be his wages. The proposal might seem modest but realistic for a man who has nothing at the moment.

This arrangement will apply (v. 33) for as long as Jacob continues to pasture and look after the flocks. On the “future day” when the arrangement comes to an end, Laban will be free to examine Jacob’s flock, and what he finds will testify to Jacob’s honesty—or as Jacob puts it, to the faithfulness that Jacob claims will testify against him (that is, for him). Laban won’t find any stolen dark goats or white sheep there. In the event, 31:38 will imply that this arrangement holds for another five or six years.

**30:34-36.** Laban knows he is being offered a bargain and he accepts it. But being a sharp operator himself, he deems it wise personally to separate out from his flock the sheep and goats that were to be Jacob’s and put them in the care of his sons, rather than risk having Jacob cheat or having Jacob’s animals mate with his and produce more animals like Jacob’s. We have not heard of Laban’s sons before; Laban’s family is a bigger enterprise than we realized. These sons will be adults of similar age to Jacob who perhaps live and work semi-independently of their father and look after flocks that Jacob has not been involved with and that are not covered by the agreement. It wouldn’t be too complicated for Laban to slide off some of his sheep and goats and attach them to theirs while Jacob is looking the other way.

**30:37-42.** We don’t know whether Laban knew that Jacob had been known to be as deceptive and could be as clever as Laban himself. Even if he did, he was perhaps overcome by the apparent good terms of the employment contract that Jacob offered him, and he failed to ask questions about how the expert sheep-breeder might make the contract work in his favor. There are three strands to his way of doing so and of encouraging Laban’s flocks to produce offspring that will belong to Jacob. In part, his selective breeding operation was a shepherdly equivalent to the traditional medicinal procedures involved in the use of love-plants or mandrakes. As is the case with traditional medicine, modern Western readers may now be less dismissive of such breeding methods than we were when we assumed that Western science had plumbed all truth about how nature works.[[338]](#footnote-338) But the nonplussed reaction of Laban and his sons does not suggest that Jacob is simply doing what any knowledgeable sheep breeder would do, and at this point Genesis offers us no hint regarding what gave Jacob his ideas about sheep breeding, so that the story leaves us with a question. In 31:10-12 Jacob will give his own account of where the idea came from and why it worked (SP adds those verses here). That explanation will parallel the narrator’s implicit comments on the effectiveness of the love-plants: it wasn’t the love-plants that were key; it was Yahweh’s taking action. In 31:10-12 Jacob will imply that he hadn’t originally known that he was going to go in for his stratagem; the idea came in connection with the mating. “God is the power, the force, behind Jacob's trick.”[[339]](#footnote-339)

First (vv. 37-39) there is a strategy for the goats. Jacob partially peeled the bark from some canes from certain trees so that they resembled the mixed appearance of the animals he wanted to breed, and placed them where the animals came to drink. We don’t know why it was these particular trees, except that one of them was poplar (*libneh*), that he peeled white (*lᵉbānôt*) stripes, and that he thus exposed the white (*lābān*) inside them. To defeat his father-in-law (*lābān*), Jacob is engaging in some “white magic.”[[340]](#footnote-340) It is as if Laban, Whitey, is harnessed to aid his son-in-law’s project. Genesis does not say that the animals have to see the canes; it may be that somehow the juxtaposition of the mixed canes and the monochrome animals leads to the birth of animals that are mixed in appearance. Perhaps it’s an enacted prayer like someone preparing a room for someone they hope will live to come home from the hospital, or like preparing a baby’s room before they are pregnant.[[341]](#footnote-341)

For the sheep, there is a further element in Jacob’s strategy (v. 40), though it presupposes the same logic. Jacob placed the (white) sheep so that they faced the streaked and dark goats. The result of the double strategy is that the mating process issues in the birth of speckled, spotted, and dark sheep as well as white ones, and spotted and speckled goats as well as black ones, and Jacob can divide the flocks into animals that will belong to Laban and ones that will belong to him.

Then thirdly (vv. 41-42), Jacob makes a point of putting the stronger animals to the front of his process while leaving the feebler ones among the white sheep and the black goats to their own devices. Other things being equal, the stronger offspring would then come in to the category that belonged to Jacob, while the weaker ones would be straightforward white sheep and black goats and would belong to Laban.

**30:43—31:2.** Over time, as a result (v. 43), Jacob does very well. Indeed, the growth of his assets is explosive, as v. 30 had said of the growth of Laban’s assets through Jacob’s work, but also as Yahweh had promised Jacob himself in 28:14. And it was not just a matter of sheep and goats but of servants, camels, and donkeys—like Abraham on his Egyptian adventure (12:16).

Not surprisingly (31:1), Laban’s sons are riled by this flourishing at the expense of their father (and in due course at their expense, when they inherit his flocks). Equally unsurprisingly, Laban is not too pleased, either. The form of words invites us to look at things from Jacob’s angle: “There…..”

“A classical example of understatement”[[342]](#footnote-342) follows (31:2). Jacob has engaged in no deception; he has simply been a shrewd operator. But it threatens to get him into trouble just as his deception did. “Laban is not going to readily accept the fact, that for seasons on end succeeding generations of flocks ‘go over,’ as it were, to Jacob.”[[343]](#footnote-343)

**Genesis 31:3-54—Jacob Makes a Run for It**

## Overview

In Scene 7 of the story of Jacob’s time in Harran, Yahweh bids Jacob leave Harran and get back to his homeland, and promises his protective presence. Jacob gets Rachel and Leah to agree to make a run for it with him, but Laban gives chase and catches them up. Once again Yahweh appears and this time bids Laban “Hands off.” Laban and Jacob nevertheless confront each other but then agree on a mutual pact that protects their respective interests, and Scene 7 ends happily.

## Translation

3Yahweh said to Ya‘aqob, “Go back to your forebears’ country, to your homeland, and I will be with you.”[[344]](#footnote-344) 4So Ya‘aqob sent and called Raḥel and Le’ah into the open country, to his flock, 5and said to them, “I see your father’s face, that he’s not the same towards me as he was in previous days. But the God of my father—he has been with me. 6You yourselves know that with all my energy I’ve served your father, 7and your father[[345]](#footnote-345) – he’s played about with me and changed[[346]](#footnote-346) my wages ten times.[[347]](#footnote-347) But God didn’t let him act badly with me. 8If he would say, ‘The speckled will be your wages,’ the entire flock would give birth to speckled. If he would say, ‘The streaked will be your wages,’ the entire flock would give birth to streaked. 9So God has rescued your father’s livestock[[348]](#footnote-348) and given them to me. 10And at the time of the flock’s being in heat, I lifted my eyes and looked in a dream: there, the rams that were mounting the flock were streaked, speckled, and mottled. 11In the dream God’s envoy said to me, ‘Ya‘aqob!’ I said ‘I’m here.’ 12He said, ‘There, lift your eyes, please, and look. All the rams that are mounting the flock are streaked, speckled, and mottled, because I’ve seen everything that Laban has been doing to you. 13I am God, of Bet-’el,[[349]](#footnote-349) where you anointed a standing stone, where you made a pledge to me. Now, set off, get out of this country, go back to the country that is your homeland.’”

14Raḥel and Le’ah answered him, “Do we still have a share, a domain, in our father’s household? 15We are deemed outsiders by him, aren’t we, because he sold us and also totally consumed the silver paid for us. 16Because all the wealth that God has rescued from our father: it belongs to us and to our children. So now: everything that God has said to you, do it.”

17So Ya‘aqob set off. He put his children and his wives on camels 18and drove all his livestock and all his property that he had gained, the livestock he had acquired, which he had gained in Paddan Aram, to come to Yiṣḥaq his father in the country of Kena‘an.

19Now Laban had gone to shear his flock, and Raḥel stole the effigies that belonged to her father. 20So Ya‘aqob stole away without Laban the Aramite knowing, by not telling him that he was taking flight. 21He took flight, he and all that he had, set off, and crossed the River and set his face towards the highland of Gil’ad.

22It was told Laban on the third day that Ya‘aqob had fled. 23He got his brothers with him and pursued after him a seven days’ journey. He caught up with him in the highland of Gil’ad. 24But God came to Laban the Aramite in a dream by night and said to him, “Keep watch over yourself so you don’t speak anything with Ya‘aqob, either good or bad.”

25So Laban reached Ya‘aqob when Ya‘aqob had pitched his tent in the highland, and Laban pitched, with his brothers, in the highland of Gil’ad.[[350]](#footnote-350) 26Laban said to Ya‘aqob, “What have you done? You stole away without me knowing[[351]](#footnote-351) and you drove off[[352]](#footnote-352) my daughters like captives of the sword. 27Why did you secretly take flight and steal away from me[[353]](#footnote-353) and not tell me? I would have sent you off with rejoicing and with singing, with tambourine and with guitar. 28You didn’t give me leave to kiss my children and my daughters. You’ve been idiotic just now in doing that. 29It was[[354]](#footnote-354) in the almightiness of my hand[[355]](#footnote-355) to act badly with you. But the God of your father—last night he said to me: ‘Keep watch over yourself to avoid speaking anything with Ya‘aqob, either good or bad.’ 30So while just now you surely went because you were longing so much[[356]](#footnote-356) for your father’s household, why did you steal my gods?”

31Ya‘aqob answered Laban, “Because I was afraid, because I said, ‘So that you don’t seize your daughters from me.’ 32Given that the person with whom you find your gods will not live, in front of our brothers recognize for yourself what I have and get it for yourself.” (Ya‘aqob didn’t know that Raḥel had stolen them.)

33Laban came into Ya‘aqob’s tent, into Le’ah’s tent, and into the two handmaids’ tent, but he didn’t find them. He went out of Le’ah’s tent and came into Raḥel’s tent. 34Now Raḥel had got the effigies, put them in the camel saddle, and sat on them. Laban felt through everything in the tent and didn’t find them. 35She said to her father, “May it not cause rage in my lord’s eyes that I can’t get up before you, because the way of women applies to me.” So he searched but didn’t find the effigies.

36It enraged Ya‘aqob and he got into an argument with Laban. Ya‘aqob averred to Laban, “What was my offense, what was my wrongdoing, that you chased after me, 37that you felt through all my possessions? What did you find of all your household possessions? Put it here in front of my brothers and your brothers, so they can decide between the two of us. 38Indeed[[357]](#footnote-357) twenty years I’ve been with you. Your ewes and your goats, they haven’t miscarried. Rams from your flock, I haven’t eaten. 39Animals that had been killed, I haven’t brought you; I myself would deal with the shortfall.[[358]](#footnote-358) From my hand you would look for what was stolen by day and what was stolen by night. 40I became—by day heat consumed me, and frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. 41Indeed,[[359]](#footnote-359) I’ve had twenty years in your household; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times.[[360]](#footnote-360) 42If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Reverence of YIṣḥaq, had not been mine, empty-handed you would now have sent me off. But my humbling and the weariness of the palms of my hands—God saw, and he decided last night.”

43Laban answered Ya‘aqob, “The daughters: my daughters, the children: my children, the flock: my flock. All that you see is mine. But about my daughters: what can I do today about them or about their children to whom they have given birth? 44So now, come, let’s solemnize a pact, you and I, and it will be[[361]](#footnote-361) a witness between you and me.”

45So Ya‘aqob got a rock and set it up as a standing stone, 46and Ya‘aqob said to his brothers, “Collect rocks.” They got rocks and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. 47Laban called it Yegar Sahaduta, while Ya‘aqob called it Gal‘ed. 48Laban said, “This heap is a witness between me and you today.” That’s why he named it Gal‘ed, 49and “The Watchtower,” because (he said), “May Yahweh watch between me and you when one is hidden from the other. 50If you humble my daughters or get wives on top of my daughters, there being no one with us, see, God will be a witness between me and you.” 51And Laban said to Ya‘aqob, “Here is this heap and here is the standing stone that I have thrown up between me and you. 52This heap will be a witness and the standing stone will be a witness that I will not go past this heap to you and you will not go past this heap to me, or this standing stone, to act badly. 53The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor—may he decide[[362]](#footnote-362) between us (the God of their ancestor).” And Ya‘aqob swore by the Reverence of his father Isaac. 54Ya‘aqob offered a sacrifice at the mountain and invited his brothers to eat bread, and they ate bread and stayed the night at the mountain.

## Interpretation

In Scene 7, Jacob sets off south west to get away from Laban. It thus parallels Scene 2 of the story of Jacob’s time in Harran (29:1-14), where Jacob had set off north east to meet up with Laban. Scene 7 also continues the sequence whereby the narrative alternately speaks in purely human terms or brings God into events. In Scene 1 people spoke of God, but God stayed silent and inactive; Scene 2 involved God; Scenes 3 and 4 spoke only in terms of human action (and coincidence); Scene 5 involved God; Scene 6 spoke only in terms of human action; Scene 7 involves God again. The narrator refers to Yahweh (v. 3), Jacob refers to his father’s God (v. 5), as does Laban (v. 29), and Jacob later refers to “the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Reverence of Isaac” (v. 42; cf. v. 53). Jacob also refers simply to God (vv. 7, 9, 11, 42), as do Rachel and Leah (v. 16) and Laban (v. 50), and the narrator (v. 24), and Jacob refers to the God of Beth El (v. 13). God appears to Laban (v. 24) and Laban refers to Yahweh (!) (v. 49) and to “the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor” whom the narrator identifies as “the God of their ancestor” (v. 53).

Scene 6 left us in the middle of things. Jacob had solved the problem implicitly raised at the opening of the scene, in that he has accumulated flocks and other assets and is thus in a position to sustain the journey home and to sustain his family’s life back in Canaan. But solving that problem has raised another, the hostility of Laban and his sons. What is he to do? Wait to see whether the conflict can be resolved and he can get leave with Laban’s goodwill? Or make a run for it? Yahweh bids him make a run for it, which threatens not to work too well, but Yahweh intervenes again and warns Laban off. After some straight talking, Jacob and Laban make a pact. Scene 6 thus ends happily, though listeners with long memories will remember that Jacob now has to face Esau, so this scene by no means comprises a resolution of the question with which the story of Jacob’s journey to Harran began.

The double question for this section, then, is how Jacob is to handle the antagonism of Laban and his sons and how he is to get out of Harran so as to get back to Canaan.

* The preliminary to the answer is the reassurance that comes from Yahweh (v. 3).
* In practical terms, the first stage of the answer is then to persuade Rachel and Leah to agree that they should make a move (vv. 4-13).
* It works (vv. 14-16).
* It thus makes departure possible (vv. 17-18).
* But a series of further notes indicate that this simple account of the departure can’t be the end of the story (vv. 19-21).
* Laban’s giving chase raises the question whether Jacob will make it to Canaan (vv. 22-23).
* Another preliminary answer is another intervention from Yahweh (v. 24).
* That intervention doesn’t deal with all the issues raised by those footnotes: what about Laban’s questions (vv. 25-30)?
* Jacob has two responses; the second sets up a further question because of what the listeners know but Jacob doesn’t know (vv. 31-32).
* Laban takes up the second matter but doesn’t find out what happened; Jacob thus gets the chance to vent his protests about Laban’s treatment of him over the years (vv. 33-42).
* Laban reverts to the first matter and proposes a way of resolving it (vv. 43-44).
* Jacob and Laban implement the proposal (vv. 45-54).

The end result is that relations between Laban’s family and Jacob’s family are mended and Jacob’s family is safe to continue its journey to Canaan, though the matter of the effigies is never tidied up.

After the making of the pact, the medieval chapter divisions in their English version make Laban’s departure for Harran (31:55 [32:1]) the closing verse in this scene. But the immediately following account of Jacob’s departure to continue his journey (32:1 [2]) pairs with that account of Laban’s departure. I thus prefer the alternative version of the medieval chapter divisions which appears in printed Hebrew Bibles, and I see Laban’s departure as the beginning of Scene 8.

Jacob’s accounts of preceding events in vv. 6-13 and 38-42 offer new angles on the events related in Gen 29—30, and they might come from a different earlier version of the story, but in the context these unusually long speeches offer illuminating retrospective insights and climactic summary reflections on Jacob’s time in Harran, and the phenomenon whereby repetitions work in this way recurs in Genesis and adds to the drama. The account of the pact in vv. 43-53 is complicated: it incorporates the names of two places (Gal‘ed and The Watchtower) and it describes two monuments (a standing stone and a cairn), which has also raised the question whether the narrative combines two versions of the making of the pact.

**31:3.** One is perhaps to infer that despite what he has discerned, Jacob “dared not move a foot” until God spoke to him.[[363]](#footnote-363) “In these straits the Lord speaks to him when he would have nothing else but faith and prayer left.”[[364]](#footnote-364) Yahweh’s intervention once again plays a vital role in the story. The narrative’s introduction uses the same phrase as 12:1; just the name is changed from Abram to Jacob. And Yahweh speaks in the same location, in Harran, where he spoke to Abram. But here Yahweh says “go back” instead of “go,” and “to your forebears’ country” instead of “from your country” or “from your ancestor’s/father’s household,” and “to your homeland” instead of “from your homeland.” Thus “your ancestors’ country” has changed places: it is now Canaan not Mesopotamia.[[365]](#footnote-365) The verb “go back” also makes the point. Yahweh adds the promise “I will be with you,” the promise first made to Jacob’s father (26:3) and now renewed for Jacob. Whereas Laban is not the same “with him” as he was (v. 2), over against that troublesome fact Yahweh makes the promise that he will be “with you”: compare Jacob’s own version of the contrast in v. 5.[[366]](#footnote-366)

**31:4-13.** Jacob was out in the open country pasturing the flock that now belongs to him, and it seems to be there that Yahweh speaks to him. While shepherds in the Negeb might have to travel long distances to find pasture and be away from home for a while, and 30:35-36 has located Laban’s sons’ flocks three days’ journey away, the Harran area is more hospitable than the Negeb and 30:16 has also perhaps implied that Jacob came home each evening. So he is not too far away and can send one of his boys to get Rachel and Leah (the order of their mention is noteworthy). Perhaps he wants to have a conversation that Laban and his sons can’t overhear, or perhaps he simply can’t abandon the flock. Either way, he knows that he needs to talk to Rachel and Leah about what they are to do. Like other wives in Genesis such as Sarah and Rebekah, they are not women you can take for granted or mess with.

Jacob’s first words to them (v. 5) thus presuppose the developments related at the end of Scene 6, including the change in the look on Laban’s “face” which “is not the same” compared with “previous days,” noted in v. 2. On the other hand, Jacob knows that Yahweh’s being with him is not simply a declaration of principle (“I am with you,” a noun clause) or a promise for the future for when he is on his return journey or for when he gets back to Canaan (“I will be with you,” v. 3). He can speak in past tense terms of this reality (“he has been with me”). The promise Yahweh made to his father in 26:3 has already been true for Jacob. It is thus appropriate that Jacob’s distinctive title for God is “the God of my father” (cf. 31:42; 32:9 [10], where it also applies to Abraham; otherwise it appears only in special a special connection in Exod 18:4). It is echoed in Laban’s “the God of your father” in 31:29 and in Joseph’s use of that phrase with regard to Jacob himself as the father in question, in 43:23.

The significance of Jacob’s continuing words (vv. 6-7) is less clear. Jacob’s complaint about Laban is entirely believable, but we have had no previous hint of such a charge. Since his escape from his mother’s manipulation Jacob has indeed become a man of initiative and energy, while the story has indicated that Laban knows how to manipulate situations in a less than straightforward way; “tactfully, Jacob does not mention the occasion on which Laban really made a fool of him, at his wedding.”[[367]](#footnote-367) Maybe Jacob is being economical with the truth or elaborating it in the manner of his father and grandfather, and thereby indicating that he is still operating in light of his mother’s mentoring. Or maybe his statement gives us a picture of what has actually happened over the six years since he completed his fourteen years of service for Leah and Rachel. If so, 30:25-42 then gives us the short version of those six years, either focusing on the coup de grâce which brought things to a climax, or focusing on Jacob’s breeding ploy at the beginning whose results Laban then tried to circumvent. On either of those understandings, Gen 30—31 is another example of Genesis providing its listeners with a summary and then going back to give them more information, and of its sometimes incorporating two accounts of an event. Either way, the passage also complements Scene 6’s speaking only in terms of Jacob’s initiative. Here he himself speaks of God’s involvement in thwarting Laban’s maneuvering.

Jacob goes on to make more concrete both his accusation and his testimony (vv. 8-9). The elaboration involves a third instantiation of a pattern: Jacob relates Laban’s attitude or actions and follows it with a “but” to relate Yahweh’s attitude or actions (vv. 5a and 5b, then vv. 6-7a and 7b, now vv. 8 and 9). Jacob spells out his earlier hyperbolic “ten times” in the specific accusations about the speckled and the striped. The accusation implies a different and earlier resolution of the initial negotiation about wages in 30:25-28, though it parallels the later resolution in granting Jacob small proportions of the animals that he manages to breed. The testimony is that Jacob managed to breed extraordinary numbers of speckled and then streaked—except that he doesn’t claim the credit for this result but describes it as God’s way of transferring Laban’s assets to him.

Jacob’s alternative account of the coup de grâce (v. 10) underscores the move from speaking purely in terms of human action to speaking in terms of God’s activity. Jacob had again dreamed, as in 28:12. In 30:34-39 the rams were white, but in the dream they are streaked, speckled, and mottled (the last word is an addition to the earlier description). Once again the narrative invites us to follow the scene as Jacob describes how God spoke and directed his gaze: “There, lift up your eyes…..” We might say that the white rams are streaked, speckled, and mottled inside, that they have the capacity to generate streaked, speckled, and mottled offspring—as of course they do.

God’s envoy interprets the dream to Jacob (vv. 11-12), as he had spoken to Hagar in 21:17; compare the references to Yahweh’s envoy in 16:7-13; 22:11, 15. The attention-getting exchange in which Jacob is addressed and says “I’m here” parallels that between the envoy and Abraham in 22:11, while the bidding “lift up your eyes, please, and look” parallels that given to Abraham in 13:14 (and cf. 22:13). The logic of the envoy’s words follows that in vv. 7 and 8-9, though here the divine action comes first and the rationale follows.

The envoy then moves from speaking for God to speaking as God (v. 13), as happened in 16:7-13; 22:11-12 and 15-18. And as Hagar then identified God as El Ro’i and Abraham identified the place of the envoy’s appearing as Yahweh Yir’eh, here God reminds Jacob that he is the God of Beth El, the one who had appeared to Jacob there twenty years previously. God now speaks explicitly of Jacob “anointing” the standing stone and of his “pledging” his tithe. The association of the oil with the pledge suggests a link with the use of oil in sealing pledges, treaties, and contracts;[[368]](#footnote-368) making a pledge will be the significance of the stone to which 31:45-52 will refer. Finally Jacob’s summary jumps forward to share with Rachel and Leah the message related in v. 3, which had prompted his sending for them. God told him to get going for home. He will get there, but it will not be the end of his wanderings or of his conflicts.[[369]](#footnote-369)

**31:14-18**. Although Rachel and Leah are married to Jacob, his words to them have presupposed that nevertheless they are still members of Laban’s family (cf. Laban’s words in v. 43), especially in a situation where in effect Jacob has become part of Laban’s family. Jacob could not simply assume that they would choose him rather than their birth family.

But maybe there is nothing like a mean father to turn rival wives into friends (v. 14). “Share” and “domain” are technical terms from family life. Both refer to the same thing, but they have different meanings. “Share” (*ḥēleq*), as the word suggests, denotes the particular slice of something that belongs to a person; usually it signifies the portion of the clan’s land that belongs to a particular family. “Domain” (*naḥălāh*) denotes something as a person’s inalienable property: the Hebrew word is conventionally translated “inheritance,” but it does not draw attention so much to the process whereby one gains something (that is, by its owner passing it on, probably on dying) but to one’s secure ownership or possession of it. The sisters are saying that there is no allotment in their father’s estate that belongs to them or is going to belong to them.

The reason (v. 15) is simple. Metaphorically speaking, their father sold them to Jacob, and as far as Laban is concerned, they don’t belong to the family any more. They belong to Jacob. He has paid for them. In a sense a father receives such a payment when he accepts a marriage gift from the man who marries his daughter. Speaking of this arrangement as selling is their unique and sharp-edged way to describe it. Given that there were various marriage customs in different parts of the Middle East at different times, there are various ways of interpreting the practices lying behind Rachel and Leah’s words.[[370]](#footnote-370) But in Israel, as far as we know, “obtaining a wife is not a ‘purchase.’”[[371]](#footnote-371) Yet Jacob did (as it were) pay Laban for them, with his fourteen years’ labor, and Laban has (as it were) spent that marriage gift, by having Jacob work for him and by thus accumulating flocks in which they have no share. Laban has done nothing wrong and they are not accusing him of wrongdoing, though they sound somewhat resentful. It’s just the way things work. A man abandons his father and mother and joins up with his wife and they become one new flesh, one new family; and the same applies to a woman.

With poetic justice, however (v. 16), God has “liberated” the wealth that Laban gained from Jacob, because Jacob’s labor has resulted in his having substantial flocks that would have belonged to Laban if God had not liberated them. And therefore they also belongs to the women and to their children through their being part of Jacob’s family. Their future, their destiny, lies with Jacob. They are therefore happy to hightail it out of Harran, if that’s what Jacob wants—or rather, what God proposes. There’s nothing for them in Harran.

So Jacob gets going (vv. 17-18). The account of the process whereby he sets his household on the move (riding on camels, driving livestock…) draws attention again (cf. 30:43) to the way Jacob has flourished over these six years.

**31:19-21.** The story pauses for a moment to tell us three further things we need to know as background to what follows.

First (v. 19), Jacob could set his household on the move without entering into more negotiations with Laban because by chance Laban was away from home. Sheep-shearing in the spring is a shepherdly equivalent to harvest, a time when the year’s work comes to a climax but a time that involves shepherds in intense hard work for some days. The work’s completion is marked by a festival, as happens at harvest (cf. 38:12-13). But apparently not all shepherds were shearing at the same time, and Jacob is still at home. So is the rest of the family, which gives Rachel chance to steal Jacob’s effigies, his *tᵉrāpîm*—this note forms the second piece of background to what follows. We do not know the origin of this word, but Ezek 21:26 associates *tᵉrāpîm* with divination (cf. Zech 10:2), and elsewhere they appear along with the chasuble that was associated with divination (Judg 17:5; 18:14-20). It is thus natural to link them with the practice of divination to which Laban referred in 30:27.[[372]](#footnote-372) They might be figurines that represent family members who have passed, who can be honored and remembered by means of these likenesses, and can also be consulted for information (especially about the future) to which they are privy now that they are beyond the confines of this world. We noted in connection with 30:27 that recourse to them on the part of non-Israelites could be viewed with condescension but with understanding and tolerance. Rachel might have wanted to keep hold of these effigies for both emotional and practical reasons. Maybe they were like a good-luck charm. Maybe she was simply glad of the chance to get her own back on Laban for deceiving Jacob when she was the girl he wanted. But the narrative doesn’t show an interest in their inherent significance or in their significance to Rachel. The point that interests the narrative is that their theft and the way Rachel prevents Laban finding them will make a fool of him.

Jacob’s stealing away (vv. 20-21) neatly complements Rachel’s stealing; it is arguably “a far more serious theft than Rachel’s.”[[373]](#footnote-373) It will give Laban another reason for his protests about stealing in vv. 26-30. The verb “steal” (*gānab*),comes seven times in this section, much the densest concentration in the First Testament; in v. 31 Jacob also speaks of robbery (*gāzal*). Soon Jacob is across the Euphrates and making his way further south on the further several weeks’ journey (three hundred miles) to Gilead, the mountain range east of the Jordan that would later be the home of some of Jacob’s descendants. This reference constitutes the third piece of background to what follows. The narrator doesn’t tell us why Jacob was aiming for Gilead. He had made his journey from Beer Sheba to Harran via the mountain range west of the Jordan, where God had appeared to him at Beth El, but maybe from Beth El he had crossed the Jordan into Gilead and continued toward Harran by the eastern route; and/or at least he intends to return that way. But eventually we will discover that he needs to face Esau, and following the eastern route would link with that commitment. In more than one way, then, events have come full circle for him. Rebekah had urged him to “set off, take flight” from his native land to Harran to her brother Laban (27:43). Now Jacob “takes flight,” again and “sets off” from Harran and from Laban back to his native land.[[374]](#footnote-374) Crossing the River (Euphrates) would imply that he was back in the promised land (cf. 15:18).[[375]](#footnote-375)

**31:22-24.** Apparently someone goes from Laban’s regular encampment to the site of the sheep-shearing, to bring him the news. While someone might also have discovered the theft of the effigies, Laban would perhaps anyway need to return home to prepare to chase Jacob, and would then discover the theft, especially if he had recourse to them for guidance in the situation. How would Jacob expect Laban to react? Jacob doesn’t know about the theft, and it might even have been this news that tipped Laban into chasing Jacob. The effigies would be really important to him as a means of gaining supernatural guidance. By now Jacob has several days’ start on Laban; “the third day” is a conventional expression like “two or three days” in English, but it is a plausible period to think in terms of.

So Laban takes his “brothers” (v. 23) and they set off in pursuit; while these brothers or relatives will include his sons, the term suggests a broader extended-family group. Whether or not “third day” was a literal figure, “seven days’ journey” is likely a figurative one, even though Laban’s posse would be able to travel much faster than Jacob’s entourage. But “the formulaic seven days actually serves to convey the terrific speed of the chase” (cf. Jacob’s later comment about Laban racing after him, in v. 36).[[376]](#footnote-376)

Once more (v. 24), Genesis backtracks. Would Laban and his company have been intent on attacking Jacob, re-appropriating the property and the people by force, and taking them back to Harran? After telling us that Laban had caught up with Jacob the narrative relates how God had meanwhile appeared to Laban in a dream, as he had to Abimelek (as well as to Jacob himself). In both cases appearing and speaking in a dream to people outside the family of Israel’s ancestors is God’s way of protecting both the ancestors and the dreamers; dreams will feature in related connections in Gen 40—41. Laban knows about speaking bad or good (see 24:50): he and his father had recognized that they could not say anything about what should happen to Rebekah, in light of what Abraham’s servant had told them about the process that had taken him to Harran. God urges Laban to recognize that he is in the same position again. Jacob should be allowed to get home. The sudden note that Laban is of course an Aramaean forms another piece of background to what will follow in v. 47: the Aramaean will name things in Aramaic.[[377]](#footnote-377) Strictly, Laban may have been Amorite rather than Aramaean, but he was living in Aram;[[378]](#footnote-378) further, the audience would know about conflict between Israel or Judah and Aram, and the paragraphs that follow would have political resonances for them in terms of boundaries between Israel and Aram.[[379]](#footnote-379)

**31:25-32**. After the summary announcement in v. 23 and the background information in v. 24, the listeners wonder what will happen next. The suspense is first heightened by another summary which makes explicit that Laban makes camp in the same area as Jacob.

Then he confronts Jacob (vv. 26-28a). His words remind one of the plaintiff in a case brought before the elders at the town gate, or of a commander-in-chief expressing a grievance on whose basis he threatens to make war.[[380]](#footnote-380) Is his plaint serious? Laban is a deceiver; indeed, “What have you done?” was Jacob’s question to Laban in 29:25. Yet he had implicitly claimed to undertake that act of deception for Leah’s sake. And one can imagine that even the deceiver would want to farewell his daughters and (grand)children.

Either way (vv. 28b-29), Laban moves from his ostensible sense of offense to the retaliatory possibilities that had been open to him. Jacob has been stupid in the risk he has taken. How could he have thought he would get away with it? The answer is in v. 3, but Laban doesn’t know about that encouragement and promise, and whereas he thought he had omnipotent capacity to do as he liked to Jacob, God has informed him that he was wrong. In v. 5, Jacob spoke of the way “the God of my father” has been with him, and Laban here gives conscious or unconscious testimony (even if he is being sarcastic)[[381]](#footnote-381) to the way “the God of your father” is continuing to protect Jacob.

Laban assumes (v. 30) that there is nevertheless no prohibition on speaking badly about the past. While he recognizes that Jacob had the right to go home, he had no right to steal Laban’s “gods”—Laban’s own word for the *tᵉrāpîm*. To call them *’ĕlōhîm* is not to imply that he thinks of them as deities that would be worshiped: the word *’ĕlōhîm* applies to a variety of entities other than simply ordinary human beings.

Jacob’s answer (vv. 31-32) suggests that he hadn’t wanted to rely too much on what Yahweh said in v. 3. His response concerning the *’ĕlōhîm* sets up further suspense, not least because the listeners know as Jacob does not who is the thief. The prescription of death seems extreme and looks like a hyperbole; Jacob’s more literal point lies in his commitment to restoring the *’ĕlōhîm*. But the narrative is beginning to anticipate both the story of Akan in Josh 7 and the story about Jonathan in 1 Sam 14, though it will issue in a different outcome from either.

**31:33-35.** Dramatically, we follow Laban through the different tents of the party. He comes to Rachel’s last, giving her time to take action to avoid getting caught. One can evidently remove a camel saddle (which is presumably padded) and use it as a seat. Perhaps the saddle is actually a more substantial palanquin. Either way, the effigies are small enough to hide in it, apparently unlike the *tᵉrāpîm* referred to in 1 Sam 19:13-17. In that passage the word that looks plural refers to one object, and it would make sense if there was only one object here also, notwithstanding the plurals in vv. 30-34.[[382]](#footnote-382) When Rachel says that the way of women applies her and that she can’t get up, she may mean that she is menstrual and unwell (and perhaps is therefore liable to convey impurity through contact with her or with what she has been sitting on); and Laban would then believe her, because she is after all his dear daughter who loves him. Thus “she devises a very fine lie.”[[383]](#footnote-383) But her form of words doesn’t elsewhere refer to menstruation, and she might be alluding to her inability as a woman to take her stand and take part in the kind of public disputation that Jacob and Laban have been engaging in.[[384]](#footnote-384) Either way, her deceit of Laban is “a final act of retribution for the fraud he had perpetrated on her and Jacob on what was to have been their wedding day.”[[385]](#footnote-385) And as a result “the great loser” has simply made a fool of himself.[[386]](#footnote-386)

**31:36-42**. One has sympathy for Jacob in his indignation as well as for Laban in his sense of affront. Some parallelism runs through Jacob’s expression of his indignation; while parallelism is not confined to poetry and Jacob’s words are prosaic in other ways, the parallelism does mark his words as heightened speech.

The language of “contention” (*rîb*)and “avow” (*‘ānāh*)(v. 36) is the language of a quasi-legal confrontation at the town gate. Jacob has been accused, and he is responding to an accusation. LXX likewise takes the word for “offense” (*peša‘*) to denote a “crime,” but the word refers to an affront against a person rather than against a law—it commonly denotes rebellion against an authority (Vg’s “blame” is more appropriate). Likewise “all perceived unscrupulous behavior by a subordinate” counts as “shortfall” in the eyes of the superior.[[387]](#footnote-387) The word pair “offense” and “wrongdoing” (*ḥaṭṭāt*) recurs in words put on Jacob’s lips by his sons in 50:17.

Either Jacob’s “brothers” (v. 37) are the servants of whom 32:16 will speak, or Laban’s brothers here become “my brothers and your brothers”: that is, Jacob identifies himself with his broader adoptive family who would be the arbiters in this family conflict, like the elders at the town gate. But Jacob speaks rhetorically. He knows that Laban has found nothing of his household possessions in the tents—effigies or anything else.

He now builds further on the opportunity to vent his sense of affront (vv. 38-41), which he assumes to be totally justified. It gives him opportunity to pour out his feelings about the past twenty years of tending and breeding in a “tale of hardships” which is “an astringent corrective to romantic ideas of the biblical shepherd.”[[388]](#footnote-388) He had cared for the animals in a way that likely implies going well beyond the call of duty.[[389]](#footnote-389) He had not made lamb stew. He had accepted responsibility for animals that got mauled by wild creatures or were stolen. He had put up with the heat of the desert day and the cold of the desert night. He had hardly slept. And he had put up with Laban’s maneuvering his wages: ten times will again be a hyperbole.

It was God who made all the difference (v. 42). Jacob again testifies to the way the God of his father has been with him, as he did in v. 5 and as Laban did in v. 29. But here he glosses that title. The God of his father is also the God of Abraham, who had set Jacob on this journey from Harran back to Canaan as he set Abraham on his journey from Harran in the first place. And as the God of his father he is also “the Reverence of Isaac.” This title comes only here and in v. 53. The one in whom Isaac stood in awe and who invites awe from other people is the one who has been protecting his son. He is the one who saw Jacob’s low position and the exhausting nature of the work he did for Laban over those twenty years. He is the one who had given Jacob the ideas about breeding that led to his not leaving Harran empty-handed. The reference to Laban sending him off harks back to 30:25, where we noted the connection with Deut 15:12-15 and its reference to sending off a servant “empty-handed.” And the previous night when he appeared to Laban, God had already made the decision for which Jacob had called (rhetorically) in v. 37. Jacob has been in the right and Laban in the wrong at every point, and God has recognized it.

**31:43-53.** Jacob cannot be held responsible for Rachel’s thievery and deception, and his own story may seem convincing. But now we look at the situation from Laban’s angle. “The first person in a dispute seems in the right; then his neighbor comes and examines him” (Prov 18:17). Everyone and everything that sits before Laban and Jacob was once Laban’s, and Laban thinks that in a way they still are. In the back of his mind may be the assumption that a servant never becomes the actual possessor of the wife he receives from his master (cf. Exod 21:4-6).[[390]](#footnote-390) Laban knows he has to be realistic, not least in light of God’s appearing to him. Yet Jacob has taken away his daughters and his grandchildren. When your daughters get married, it doesn’t stop you worrying about them—you may do so even more. What is going to happen to them and to their children at the hand of this son-in-law who takes them away so precipitously and so furtively?

Laban therefore proposes a pact or covenant between him and Jacob (v. 44). It is a sign that he admits defeat. He cannot overpower Jacob in any sense. He has failed to find the effigies and he apparently cannot dispute Jacob’s self-defence. Given that pacts or covenants are needed only between people who do not belong to the same family, it is a reflection of the sadness of the situation that Laban needs to propose a pact. To say that the pact will be a witness involves an ellipse: it is the making of the pact combined with the erecting of the standing stone and the cairn that will generate a witness, as the subsequent verses will indicate. “Solemnizing” is literally “cutting”: it may be simply a metaphor derived from the kind of formal procedure described in 15:9-21, or the verses that follow may imply some actual cutting of the kind. Either way, it will be an agreement entered into with gravity and earnestness, which will reassure Laban about the fate of his daughters and grandchildren.

Formal procedures follow (vv. 45-46). It is only Laban who feels the need of the pact; Jacob is done with Laban and with Harran. But the pact-making must involve both parties, and Jacob doesn’t object to the idea of setting up a standing stone as he did in 28:18. It will commemorate what the God who appeared to him at Beth El has now done,[[391]](#footnote-391) though v. 51 will make clear that it implicates both Jacob and Laban. In addition, Jacob gets his “brothers” to collect rocks to make into a cairn. The unnecessarily double commemorative marker indicates the significance of the pact for Laban and for Jacob; there are two witnesses to it.[[392]](#footnote-392) There follows a ceremonial meal as an aspect of sealing the mutual commitment (cf. 26:26-31). These two verses summarize what follows in vv. 47-54.

Laban and Jacob both call the cairn “Witness Heap” (vv. 47-48), in Aramaic and Hebrew. Strictly, then, Laban does not name the heap Gal‘ed: he gives it a name in Aramaic which can be understood to mean Witness Heap in Hebrew when it is split into two parts. So now we know one aspect of the significance of Jacob’s journeying initially to Gilead (*gil‘ād*; the different spelling indicates that it is a name in in its own right unrelated in meaning to the phrase *gal ‘ed*).[[393]](#footnote-393) Possibly the single rock or the cairn incorporated an inscription recording the pact.

There is also a place called Watchtower (*miṣpāh*) in Gilead (v. 49), possibly more than one,[[394]](#footnote-394) which also makes for an apposite link with this pact. Both parties are to be prepared to take the risk of having Yahweh “watch over” what they are doing from there. To use the imagery of 28:10-22, this place is one where one could imagine divine envoys traveling up and down, reporting on events in the world and returning to take action in light of discussions in Yahweh’s court about them. Laban asks that Yahweh may indeed keep a watch on Jacob and Laban when they cannot keep a watch on each other.

Specifically (v. 50), like many a father he is indeed concerned for his daughters. There is some irony in his envisaging the possibility that Jacob might humble them (*’ānāh* piel), since it was this word that Jacob used of Laban’s treatment of him in v. 42. It is a serious potential accusation: the verb has referred to the way the Egyptians will treat the Israelites (15:13) and the way Sarah treated Hagar (16:6), and it will refer to the way Shechem treats Laban’s granddaughter (34:2). Perhaps taking wives who effectively displace Leah and Rachel is one way Laban can envisage such humbling. If Jacob behaves in this way, Laban may not hear (there are no social media). But Yahweh will know.

Laban identifies with both the cairn and the standing stone (vv. 51-52), as if he himself had erected them. For him, too, both will be a witness. On his part, they will witness to a commitment to stay his side of them, in effect to stay in Aram and leave Canaan to Jacob. He will not come south of this point, raiding or attacking. He will not thus deal badly with Jacob: it is what Yahweh had forbidden in vv. 24 and 29.

To be more local in the way he speaks of God (v. 53), this God is the God of Abraham (the God of the line from which Jacob comes) and the God of Nahor (the God of the line from which Laban comes). The collocation of these two expressions with the plural verb “decide” makes it sound as if Laban thinks in terms of two deities, though the idea of two gods trying to determine something that concerns their respective devotees seems like a recipe for problems. Laban (or the narrator) goes on to refer to *’êlōhê ăbîhem*. Laban perhaps sees the plural deities of Abraham and Nahor as the plural deities of their father Terah, which in part fits Josh 24:2. Or perhaps the God of Terah is the God of Abraham (and thus of Isaac) and also the God of Nahor (and thus of Laban), and the plural verb which follows issues from the juxtaposition of these two designations of that God. If there is some ambiguity about Laban’s theology, however, there is none about Jacob’s. He simply swears by his father’s God—that is, he opens himself to that God’s judgment if he fails to live by the pact. Here as elsewhere in the stories of the ancestors, they “deal always with but one God.” While it’s not philosophical monotheism; “there is yet no trace of polytheistic influence” in their stories. “What later became the first commandment and confession of the religion of Israel (Deut. 6:4) is present here without command or confessional formula. It is *one* God who deals with and speaks to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, their wives and children. It is *one* God whom they invoke and in whom they trust.”[[395]](#footnote-395)

The account of the sacrifice and sacrificial meal (v. 54) gives more detail on the meal mentioned in v. 46. A sacrifice (*zebaḥ*) as opposed to a burnt offering is shared by between offerers and God and by the offerers among themselves. Lev 7:11-18 associates such sacrifices with gratefulness to God for a blessing or an answer to prayer, and such connotations will be appropriate here. The sacrifice will seal the mutual commitment they have made before God and further seal their non-aggression pact with one another.

**Genesis 31:55—32:32 [32:1-33]—Envoys Divine and Human**

## Overview

As Jacob draws near a reunion with Esau, Scene 8 in the account of his journey to and from Harran relates further appearances of God’s envoys to him. Interwoven with these two appearances (and with Jacob’s prayer, which comes in between) are accounts of the parting of Laban and Jacob, of Jacob’s sending envoys to Esau, and of Jacob’s sending offerings to Esau to seek to mollify him before their meeting.

## Translation

55Laban started early in the morning, kissed his children and his daughters, and blessed them. Then Laban set off and went, back[[396]](#footnote-396) to his place, 32:1while Ya‘aqob went on his way. God’s envoys came upon him, 2and Jacob said when he saw them, “This is God’s encampment.” He named that place Maḥanayim.

3Ya‘aqob sent envoys before him to Esaw his brother in the country of Se‘ir (the land of Edom). 4He ordered them: “You’re to say this: ‘To my lord, to Esaw. Your servant Ya‘aqob has said this: “As I have resided as an alien with Laban and have delayed until now, 5ox, donkey, and flock, and servant and maidservant have come to belong to me. I’ve sent to tell my lord so as to find favor in your eyes.”’” 6The envoys came back to Ya‘aqob, saying, “We came to your brother, to Esaw, and actually he’s coming to meet you, and 400 men[[397]](#footnote-397) with him.” 7Ya‘aqob was very fearful. It put him under pressure, and he divided the people that were with him, the flock, the herd, and the camels, into two camps, 8and said “If Esaw comes to the one camp and strikes it down, the remaining camp may be an escape group.”

9Ya‘aqob said, “God of my father Abraham, God of my father Yiṣḥaq, Yahweh, you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country, to your homeland, and I will do good things with you,’ 10I’m too small for all the acts of commitment and all the truthfulness with which you’ve acted towards your servant. With my cane I crossed this Yardan and now I’ve become two camps. 11Rescue me from the hand of my brother, please, from the hand of Esaw, because I’m fearful of him, in case he comes and strikes me down, mother with children. 12But you yourself said, ‘I will definitely do good things[[398]](#footnote-398) with you and make your offspring like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of the large number.’” 13He spent the night there that night.

Then he got an offering for Esaw his brother from what had come into his charge: 14200 she-goats and twenty he-goats, 200 ewes and twenty rams, 15thirty milch camels and their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty she-donkeys and ten he-donkeys. 16He put them into the charge of his servants, herd by herd on its own, and said to his servants, “Cross over before me, but put a space between herd and herd.” 17He ordered the first: “Esaw my brother will meet you and ask you, ‘To whom do you belong? Where are you going? To whom do these belong, before you?’ 18You’re to say, ‘They’re your servant Ya‘aqob’s. They’re an offering sent to my lord, to Esaw. Here, he himself is behind us as well.’” 19He ordered both the second and the third and also all the ones who were going behind the herds: “You’re to speak these very words to Esaw when you reach him. 20You’re also to say, ‘Here, your servant Ya‘aqob is behind us,’” because (he said), “I’ll cover his face with an offering that goes ahead of my face, then afterwards when I see his face, maybe he’ll lift my face.” 21Thus the offering crossed ahead of his face, while he was spending that night in the camp. 22But he set off that night[[399]](#footnote-399) and got his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, and crossed the Yabboq crossing. 23So he got them and took them across the wadi, and took what belonged to him across.

24But Ya‘aqob was left on his own, and someone wrestled[[400]](#footnote-400) with him until dawn rose. 25He saw that he had not overcome him, so he touched[[401]](#footnote-401) the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Ya‘aqob’s thigh recoiled[[402]](#footnote-402) as he wrestled with him. 26He said, “Let me go away, because the dawn has risen.” He said, “I won’t let you go away unless you bless me.” 27He said to him, “What is your name?” He said, “Ya‘aqob.” 28He said, “You will no longer be named Ya‘aqob, but Yiśra’el, because you have exerted yourself[[403]](#footnote-403) with God and with human beings and you have overcome.”[[404]](#footnote-404) 29Ya‘aqob asked, “Tell me your name, please.” He said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” But he blessed him there, 30and Ya‘aqob named the place Peni’el, “because I saw God face to face, and my life was rescued.” 31The sun rose on him as he crossed by Penu’el; he was limping because of his thigh. (32That’s why the Israelites don’t eat the sciatic nerve which is at the hollow of the thigh until this day, because he touched Ya‘aqob at the hollow of the thigh, at the sciatic nerve.)

## Interpretation

We noted in the introduction to 31:3-54 that 31:55 in English Bibles is the beginning of a new section rather than the close of 31:3-54. This understanding is suggested by the parallel between 31:55 (which relates the northward departure of Laban) and 32:1 (which relates the southward departure of Jacob). Printed Hebrew Bibles thus appropriately make Gen 31:55 the first verse of Gen 32. MT itself makes 32:2 the close (at last) of its paragraph (and lection) that began at 28:10 and also the close of the immense unit (and the previous lection) that began at 25:19. But the rest of Gen 32 continues to speak of envoys and camps, and in particular incorporates a further encounter between God and Jacob, which suggests that Gen 32 as a whole comprises Scene 8. God’s encounter with Jacob parallels and balances the appearance when Jacob was on his way out of Canaan in Scene 2 (28:10-22). Scene 8 then leads straight into Scene 9 (MT has no break at all at the end of Gen 32); it prepares the way for the meeting between Jacob and Esau. In the “Interpretation” section of the commentary which follows, I will simply give the English versification references.

The chapter alternates movement and action (31:55; 32:3-8, 13-22) and meetings between supernatural figures and Jacob (32:1-2, 9-12, 22-32), each alternating pair longer than the previous one:

1. Laban departs: Jacob’s relations with Laban are finally resolved (31:55)
2. God’s army appears to Jacob, with the implications unspecified (32:1-2)
3. Jacob sends envoys to Esau, with equivocal results (32:3-8)
4. Jacob prays for God’s protection, but gets no response (32:9-12)
5. Jacob prepares an offering for Esau, sends it across the Yabboq, and takes his family across (32:13-23)
6. A supernatural figure wrestles with Jacob and renames him (32:24-32).

The section thus speaks more explicitly of Jacob’s actions and reactions than it does of the things that happen to him, though even in connection with Jacob, the narrative leaves things unclear. Why do God’s envoys come on Jacob? Why is he going to see Esau, anyway (given his fear)? What is the effect of his prayer? Why does he stay north of the Yabboq after taking everyone else across? Who is the wrestler and why does he want to leave when dawn rises? There are further detailed puzzles, such as why there are the variant forms *maḥănayim*, *maḥăneh*, and *maḥănôt*, and the variant forms Peni’el and Penu’el. Ambiguity is pervasive; fear is explicit. Arguably the chapter constitutes one great raising of suspense.

**31:55-32:2.** It’s the morning after the meal that sealed the covenant relationship between Laban and Jacob. The two men will perhaps have eaten and drunk late into the night and then drifted off to sleep where they were. But early in the morning Laban springs into action: the opening verb (*šākam*)suggests as usual a commitment to doing what needs to be done. What now needs to be done is the saying of goodbyes. Laban really is letting go of his (grand)children and their mothers and he prays for God to bless them. Against the odds, Jacob’s Harran adventure has come to a satisfactory ending.

Jacob now sets off in the opposite direction from Laban (32:1). But there is an elephant in the room, though it will not be named until v. 3. Jacob now has to face Esau. The expression “God’s envoys” comes otherwise only in the parallel scene in 28:12, while the verb and the construction (*pāga‘ b*) are the ones that described Jacob’s coming upon the site at Beth El in 28:11. There is no doubt here that the verb denotes a deliberate “coming upon.” What is the significance of their coming to meet Jacob? They don’t do anything or say anything. Are they a threat or an encouragement? Whereas one might wonder whether the account of the event at Mahanayim is truncated, its allusiveness will turn out to be just the first instance of an allusiveness which runs through the chapter. The parallel with 2 Kings 6:16-17 suggests that the event could remind Jacob and the listeners that there is more going on than meets the eye and that there are grounds for encouragement. The envoys’ appearing suggests the promise of support;[[405]](#footnote-405) they signify the reality of God’s protection which Ps 91:9-11 describes.[[406]](#footnote-406) To anticipate Elisha’s comment to his servant 2 Kings 6:16-17, “there were many more [angels] with Jacob than were with Esau.”[[407]](#footnote-407) Both passages are characterized by an allusive brevity; they hint at another reality without revealing all that we would like to know about it. They also thus compare with the appearance in Josh 5:13-15,[[408]](#footnote-408) where the response of the commander-in-chief of Yahweh’s army to a question from Joshua is to decline to answer his question about whose side he is on.

The narrative tells us only of Jacob’s reaction to seeing the envoys (v. 2). That reaction is to name the place, as he did in 28:19. The parallels with 28:10-22 embolden hope for the return to Canaan of which Jacob spoke in 28:21, “with things being well.”[[409]](#footnote-409) The parallel with 28:17-19 supports the idea that “this is God’s encampment” refers not to the envoys but to Jacob’s camp, which God’s envoys are indeed protecting.[[410]](#footnote-410) The subsequent First Testament narrative mentions Mahanayim a number of times as a place of some significance east of the Jordan, especially as an off-the-beaten-track place of refuge (e.g., 2 Sam 2:8; 17:24). It is also as a marker of borders (Josh 13:26, 30), which fits the context here where Jacob is about to cross the Yabboq, the border river.

**32:3-8.** It now becomes more explicit why Jacob was proceeding through Gilead down the east side of the Jordan rather than (for instance) crossing the Jordan north of Lake Kinneret at the site of the modern “Bridge of the Daughters of Jacob.” Even from where he now is, he could cross the Jordan to proceed to Beth El or Mamre or Beer Sheba. Yahweh had told him to go back to his own land (31:13), he had set off to go back to Canaan to his father (31:18), and Esau has evidently left the promised land (as 36:6-8 will relate).[[411]](#footnote-411) But for reasons that are not stated, Jacob wants to get back on friendly relations with his brother, which involves continuing southwards.

We are not done with envoys, but now they are Jacob’s envoys (v. 3). Like Abraham’s servant’s entourage in Gen 24, Jacob’s party evidently includes people other than the ones that have been explicitly mentioned—only when they have a part to play do they receive mention. Presumably these envoys will be the servants mentioned in 30:43. Jacob sends them to the area he evidently knows Esau now to be located, the region that can be designate as Se‘ir on the basis of the dominant presence of Mount Se‘ir, in what will later be known as Edom (as the explanatory phrase notes).

The charge Jacob gives his envoys (v. 4) comprises a commission, an address, an introduction of the kind that comes in a prophetic message (“thus has said so-and-so”), and then the main content of the message for Esau. Messages structured in this way are more familiar from the Prophets, but the story offers a useful example from ordinary life, such as are also instanced in Middle Eastern letters.[[412]](#footnote-412) Jacob notes that he has been away a long time. He has stayed all that time as a resident alien in Harran and has delayed coming back—Jacob uses the verb his grandfather’s servant used in 24:56 when he told Laban that he could not delay returning to Canaan. So why did Jacob delay? Does the verb acknowledge that it was not merely because he needed to work seven years, then seven, then six, but because he hadn’t wanted to deal with the implications of returning—and facing Esau?

At least he has done well there (v. 5). We knew about the donkeys, flock, and male and female servants; Jacob here adds mention of oxen. If we are to take that note as more than local color or hyperbole, they would have made the journey from Harran even slower. Jacob provides his list of assets in order to find favor or grace in Esau’s eyes. Jacob neatly exemplifies the use of the word “favor” or “grace” (*ḥēn*) as implying something undeserved; it can only be a gift. Given the history of their relationship, Jacob can only throw himself on Esau’s grace or mercy, though he offers no expression of contrition, and giving his list of assets introduces some ambiguity into the appeal for grace. His deference is also expressed in his extravagantly obsequious use of the terms servant and lord—only Abraham’s servant in Gen 24 (again) has used that language more than Jacob now does. Jacob may seem to be “nullifying” the prediction of their relationship in 25:23.[[413]](#footnote-413) His action invites the audience to recall the formulation of that prediction and note the way it allowed for the possibility of the younger serving the greater, after all. Whatever the significance of his having extracted from Esau the transfer of the position of firstborn and swindled him of the firstborn’s blessing, Jacob is not behaving like someone who is the senior party in this relationship.

The response the envoys bring back is worryingly equivocal (vv. 6-8), or at least it seems so to Jacob, because a body of 400 men could suggest a fighting force (cf. 1 Sam 22:2; 25:13; 30:10, 17).[[414]](#footnote-414) Of course it need not do so; Esau might even be simply bringing his family group as a whole, so that the two family groups will meet.[[415]](#footnote-415) Esau doesn’t have to come as far as Laban did, but he will have needed several days to get to Jacob’s encampment.[[416]](#footnote-416) The envoys’ return ahead of Esau will imply a day or two’s delay while he collects his entourage and gets it ready. Here is where camps reappear.[[417]](#footnote-417) Although Jacob has a substantial entourage, it comprises women, children, servants, and animals—nothing like a fighting force of 400. “The shepherd, with all his success, is at the mercy of the fierce marauder who was to ‘live by his sword’” (27:40).[[418]](#footnote-418) If Esau is coming to attack them, as v. 11 will note, they are doomed, and dividing them into two groups seems a pathetic and hopeless gesture. But if these camps have supernatural support (cf. Exod 17:8-13)…. So we are not done with fear on Jacob’s part: “once fear of Laban faded and was no more, then fear of his brother took hold of him.”[[419]](#footnote-419) Fortunately Yahweh’s envoy camps around those who fear other people as well as those who fear Yahweh (Ps 34:7 [8]).

**32:9-12**. Fear drives Jacob to prayer. The shape of the prayer overlaps with that of other First Testament prayers (e.g., Isa 37:15-17). Like most of the Psalms it contains no expression of contrition; unlike most of the Psalms it is not dominated by protest. It is more specific and concrete in relation to Jacob’s situation than a psalm; the Psalms avoid concrete references in order to be more broadly useful. But like a psalm, Jacob’s prayer incorporates address to God (v. 9a), recollection of God’s words in the past which Jacob longs for God to fulfill (v. 9b), description of the petitioner as one who has seen God’s faithfulness in the past (v. 10), an actual petition (v. 11), and another recollection of God’s words in the past which relate to the present situation (v. 12). While the last element is the most direct suggestion of motivation for God to answer the prayer, the whole is an exercise in such persuasion. It is the first such prayer in the Scriptures.

Jacob addresses God (v. 9) in virtually the same terms as the ones God had used to him in 28:12 and summarizes commitments God made to him there and in 31:3, though he speaks of God doing good things with him rather than of being with him.

His saying “I am small” (v. 10) recalls the description of him as the “small son” of Isaac and Rebekah, Esau being their “big son” (27:15, 42). He didn’t want to be small then, but he wants to be treated that way now. He’s willing to be Esau’s servant; he’s also willing to see himself as Yahweh’s servant.[[420]](#footnote-420) “Acts of commitment and truthfulness” (in other words, acts of steadfast commitment) is again the phraseology of his grandfather’s servant (24:27, 49), though Jacob makes it concrete by using the plural of the word for commitment. The phraseology comes in Yahweh’s own classic self-description in Exod 34:6 (compare e.g., Ps 25:10; 26:3; 40:10-11 [11-12]; 57:3, 10 [4, 11]). Yahweh’s acting with commitment has expressed itself in “doing good things” and has thus issued in Jacob’s having so much by way of people and possessions that they now comprise those two camps. The reference to the Jordan coheres with the idea that Jacob had come this way on his outward journey to Harran.

But he is now scared (v. 11). It’s all very well for God to have rescued property from Laban (31:9, 16). Now Jacob needs rescue from Esau; at least, that’s what Jacob thinks. His understandable but unfounded fear anticipates that of Joseph’s brothers (50:15).[[421]](#footnote-421) Esau will surely obliterate mothers and children alike: the bleak expression recurs in a similar context in Hos 10:14 (cf. Deut 22:6). Is Jacob even gloomier than v. 8 implied, or is he giving the bleakest possible portrait of his situation in order to move God to act? The verb “rescue” makes for another link with the Psalms, where it is a standard appeal, while the brevity of Jacob’s petition in the prayer (just one word in Hebrew) also corresponds to the Psalms.

Finally Jacob reminds Yahweh again of the nature of his promises (v. 12), as Israel does in its prayers (e.g., Ps 89:19 [20]; 119:25, 28). They are the promises given to his grandfather and his great aunt and his father (16:10; 22:17; 26:4) and they again recall God’s promise to do good things for Jacob. Actually Jacob does well “in requesting nothing from the Lord other than fulfillment of his promises.”[[422]](#footnote-422)

Jacob spent the night there, where he prayed (v. 13a). But the narrative tells of no response from God.

**32:13b-23.** How are the listeners to see Jacob’s initiative in relation to his prayer? It more obviously follows from his understandable sense of anxiety at the report of the returning envoys, related in v. 8, and his sending this offering to Esau makes for a contrast with Esau’s apparent military expedition.[[423]](#footnote-423) The inventory of the offering boggles the mind and makes one laugh out loud, as do the instructions to the servants regarding the way they are to explain this monumental cavalcade. Convoy after convoy is to meet up with Esau assuring him that there is more to follow, even as his eyes go wider and wider. Perhaps Jacob is seeking to forestall the military action by inviting Esau to see him as returning the blessing which he had stolen as well as restoring the senior position that Esau had given over to him (cf. 33:11).[[424]](#footnote-424)

Having given instruction concerning his “offering,” Jacob goes on to speak of being accepted by Esau (v. 20). In the First Testament an “offering” (*minḥāh*)is more often than not something presented to God (cf. 4:3-5). The related talk of being “accepted” can also belong to the context of sacrifice (e.g., Job 42:8-9). But behind those sacral references are everyday contexts such as are presupposed here. An offeringis something a subordinate person gives to someone in a higher position in the hope of finding acceptance (cf. 43:11-26); it’s different from a “gift” such as someone might give without there being an implication that the giver is in a subordinate position. Mal 1:8-13 illuminates the usage as it brings into juxtaposition talk of “offerings” and of having one’s “face lifted” and of thus being accepted, and it explicitly compares offerings to God and offerings to the governor. So in this respect, too, Jacob puts himself in a subordinate position in relation to his brother, hoping that Esau may “lift his face.” The image is again of someone approaching a more powerful person with deference, not presuming to look them in the face, but hoping that the recipient of the offering will lift their face and encourage the offerer to look the recipient in the face (cf. 19:21; 1 Sam 25:35). The expression “cover” the face (*kāpar* piel) comes only here and is thus trickier. Prov 16:14 does speak of covering the king’s wrath, which would be expressed in his face, and in the present context the use of the word “face” coheres with the focus on the face (Jacob’s, Esau’s, God’s): the chapters’ reference to face “crescendos” in this verse.[[425]](#footnote-425) In its more common usage the verb “cover” appears in connection with the covering over of offenses, while Mal 1:9 speaks of mollifying (*ḥālāh* piel) God’s face (TgOnq here has “soothe his fury”). One might thus see the expression “cover his face” as a cross between “cover his anger” and “mollify his face,” with similar meaning to both; “covering the face” points to Jacob’s hope of mollifying Esau. V. 20 is then “the key to everything” insofar as it shows that Jacob has a bad conscience (or at least that he is scared) and knows he needs to appease Esau.[[426]](#footnote-426) “The gift shows Jacob to be concerned solely with Jacob; he merely wants to mollify Esau so as to save his own skin.”[[427]](#footnote-427)

The last thing Jacob wants is to “face” Esau (v. 21). He keeps pushing someone or something ahead of him to avoid coming fact to face with him: the servants, the offering, the animals….[[428]](#footnote-428) As the little brother wanted to be the big brother but now wants to be treated as little, so the guy who wanted to push to the front now wants to be at the back.[[429]](#footnote-429) The references to his crossing the Yabboq and to his spending the night are then confusing. I take it that v. 21b refers to an original intention to stay north of the Yabboq after sending on the convoys. But he changes his mind.

In his anxiety, then (vv. 22-23), that evening he personally sees his wives, maidservants, and sons across. Once again, there is no mention of daughters as the narrative focuses on the ancestors who will give their names to eleven of the clans to which the listeners belong. Although v. 23 refers to the Yabboq as a wadi, it is one of the two perennial rivers that flows down the eastern mountains into the Jordan. While it is quite fordable, it runs through a deep gorge so that the crossing as whole could be tricky. Perhaps Jacob takes the family across group by group until they are all on the other side.

**32:24-32.** After the unexpected twist involving Jacob’s making an approach to Esau rather than proceeding to Canaan, another unexpected twist follows.[[430]](#footnote-430) “Jacob has been in tight situations—but the tightest is yet to come.”[[431]](#footnote-431)

Jacob himself apparently crosses back to where the camp had been (v. 24), given that v. 31 indicates that in due course he will need to cross again from the north to the south. While one could imagine him returning to make a final check that no one and nothing has been left behind,[[432]](#footnote-432) going back would fit with a desire to put everyone and everything between him and Esau.[[433]](#footnote-433) Whatever the reason, he is now on his own as he was at Beth El in 28:10-22. What happens at the Yabboq has some parallels with what happened at Beth El, though it has major differences. In some sense one could no doubt describe the event as a dream or vision, but Genesis does not use those terms. Nor does the account compare closely with tales about river spirits that oppose travelers crossing their river or demons who must disappear before dawn[[434]](#footnote-434) or accounts of the bad spirit that comes on Saul or the evil spirits that attack people in the Gospels. Nor can Jacob’s experience be “spiritualized into wrestling in prayer: it does appear that a real fight was involved.”[[435]](#footnote-435) The narrative does not imply something happening simply within Jacob’s spirit. Who, then, is the “someone”?[[436]](#footnote-436) The word *’îš* indicates an individual person, and it would normally denote a human being. Is it Esau?[[437]](#footnote-437) But 33:1 does not point in this direction, and v. 27 will refer to Jacob fighting with God. The story in Gen 18—19 has Yahweh and his companions described as *’ănāšîm*, the plural of *’îš*. In the nearest First Testament parallel to this passage, Exod 4:24-26, the assailant is Yahweh, and in due course the story will suggest that Jacob’s attacker is indeed God. As far as Jacob is concerned at this stage, he is attacked either by a human being or by a supernatural being who takes human form, like the ones who appear in Gen 18—19. Hos 12:4 [5] calls the attacker an envoy (*mal’āk*), and Jacob might wonder if he is one of the envoys that appeared in this very place in vv. 1-2.[[438]](#footnote-438) Or his being an attacker might rather suggest that he could be Esau’s guardian angel,[[439]](#footnote-439) someone representing Esau’s interests.

The identity of the subsequent he/him/his (v. 25) is also initially not explicit, and this momentary ambiguity will recur through vv. 25-28. Retrospectively the identity of each he/him/his becomes clear, but initially it is not so, which adds to the allusiveness and mystery of the event. Is the assailant holding back from utilizing his supernatural capacities and fighting like a human being?[[440]](#footnote-440) If so, it gets him nowhere in the fight, though it gets him somewhere in understanding Jacob; this “he saw” compares with the “now I know/acknowledge” of 22:12. Eventually the “man” resorts to a fighter’s classic cheating maneuver: the “hollow of the thigh” is the groin (cf. 24:2, 9).[[441]](#footnote-441) It is a painful place to be punched, and even a touch makes the body recoil. Once again the cheat is the victim of cheating.

Surely that touch or punch will make Jacob let go? (v. 26). It’s an odd question, because it was the assailant who started the fight. But apparently he can’t end it, though he doesn’t want to continue the fight after morning has dawned. If the assailant is God, then Exod 33:20 might suggest that it is because it will be too dangerous for Jacob to see him[[442]](#footnote-442) (in TgNeoph and TgPsJ, it is because the angel has to get back for morning worship). Why does Jacob insist on continuing to fight? At the beginning of his story he was concerned about the blessing, and he had cheated Esau of it. One would have thought that subsequently he has had ample evidence of God’s blessing. But apparently it is still his concern.[[443]](#footnote-443) And by now he perhaps recognizes that there is something supernatural about this assailant, and that it is therefore a good idea to seek a blessing from him. This plea suggests Jacob is not thinking that his assailant is an evil angel[[444]](#footnote-444) though he might still think of him as Esau’s guardian angel whom he could urge to yield the blessing to him.[[445]](#footnote-445)

The assailant’s question about Jacob’s name (vv. 27-28) illustrates how such an inquiry need not be a request for information unavailable to the questioner. The question is the lead in to giving Jacob a new name. Typically, the significance given to the new name is different from the name’s inherent meaning, though there are several possibilities regarding that inherent meaning. *Yiśrā-’ēl* in itself would likely imply “God will rule/may God rule” (compare the name Sarah) or perhaps “God will exert himself/may God exert himself.” But the adversary’s words make Jacob the subject of the verb. The fight between the adversary and Jacob has illustrated not only the relationship between Jacob and a supernatural adversary but also the relationship between Jacob and human adversaries such as Esau and Laban. For the audience, it encapsulates something of Israel’s life and destiny. LXX and Vg suggest taking the final verb as a promise; the giving of the name then constitutes the blessing that Jacob asked for.[[446]](#footnote-446) The listeners would know that there is more to the promise than meets the ear in the immediate context. In the short term the name Israel does not replace the name Jacob, as the name Abraham replaced the name Abram (the name Jacob recurs another 66 times in Genesis). Neither is Jacob a changed person, any more than Abram was, though his fear of Esau evaporates. The promise that Jacob is destined to become Israel is In effect a reaffirmation that he is going to be the ancestor of a vast nation.

Why does Jacob ask after his assailant’s name (v. 29)? Such a question recurs on two occasions. Moses asks about God’s name in order to be able to tell the Israelites (Exod 3:13), and God gives him an answer. Manoah asks about the name of Yahweh’s envoy in order to be able to honor him (Judg 13:17), and the envoy refuses on the grounds that his name is extraordinary or supernatural or mysterious (*pil’î* or *pelî*). On the basis of these parallels, one could not be sure whether Jacob has yet come to a conclusion about his assailant’s identity as God or as a divine envoy, though the second passage makes clear that this alternative may be false. Yahweh’s envoy is an embodiment of Yahweh, and Genesis can also move between these two alternatives (see 16:7-14; 22:11-18; 31:11-13).[[447]](#footnote-447) Whether Jacob thinks of his assailant as God or as God’s envoy, it might be natural to ask his name, though the assailant doesn’t think so. He gives no reason for sidestepping the question, though we might infer from the Judges story that there was something dangerous about it. There is no indication here or elsewhere that the name would be withheld because knowing someone’s name conveys power in relation to them or enables people to misuse it. Yahweh seems not to worry about identity theft, and is prepared to live with the consequences of revealing his name. The further reference to blessing might resumptively confirm that giving Jacob his new name was the blessing, or it might simply indicate that the assailant is now saying farewell (cf. 31:55). As it is an exaggeration to say that “all the profound theological consequences drawn from Jacob’s supposed encounter with God… have no basis in the text,”[[448]](#footnote-448) so it is worth asking the further question that the passage raises but does not answer: why did God or his envoy attack Jacob in the first place? There are some points of comparison with Yahweh’s attack on Moses in Exod 4:24-26, which thus suggests insights. Both Moses and Jacob are going through liminal experiences; both are migrants on the way home.[[449]](#footnote-449) Like Jacob, Moses is on the way back to his people after being in exile, where he had taken refuge because he was afraid of being killed on account of something he had done. Yahweh attacks Moses as he or his envoy attacked Jacob, but holds back from utilizing all his firepower (“Yahweh sought to kill him”—but was unable to!).[[450]](#footnote-450) The reason for the attack on Moses is apparently his failure to circumcise his son, which would indicate his not taking seriously the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel of which Moses is supposed to be a servant. So perhaps there is a parallel reason for God’s attack on Jacob: perhaps it is the fear which is a prominent feature of his portrait.

Once again there is an oblique relationship between a place’s name (vv. 30-31) and the name’s significance. Peniel/Penuel and Mahanayim are perhaps places on either side of the Yabboq at this crossing point. Both *pᵉnî* and *pᵉnû* have archaic case endings (genitive and nominative)[[451]](#footnote-451) but both are close to the first element in the regular expression for “the face of God,” *pᵉnê ēl*. In so far as the assailant was God’s true representative, Jacob has seen God face to face and been “rescued” from the possible consequences of such an experience (the verb recurs from 31:9, 16; 32:11). Perhaps the implication is that the fight did not come to an end before daybreak (though it did before sunrise), so that Jacob did see God face to face (at least in the person of the envoy) without getting struck blind or dead. The sun had set on him at Beth El; the sun rises on him at Peniel,[[452]](#footnote-452) as he crosses the Yabboq for the final time. At this point “Jacob was at one and the same time blessed and lame.”[[453]](#footnote-453) But there is no further mention of his lameness in the First Testament and no suggestion that he is permanently affected by the wrestler’s touch; *GenR* 78:5 argues that the point about the reference to the sun rising is that it brought Jacob healing (cf. Mal 4:2 [3:20]).[[454]](#footnote-454)

There is a footnote (or rather a thigh-note) to the story (v. 32). You know we don’t eat the sciatic nerve, it says to the audience? Err, no, most of them reply, because they haven’t heard of such a rule. It doesn’t appear in the Torah. But evidently there were Israelites who did observe this rule. And they can find its background here.[[455]](#footnote-455)

**Genesis 33:1-20—The Reunion**

## Overview

In the closing scene of the palistrophe, Jacob and Esau meet again. Jacob is no longer afraid of Esau but he bows down low to him as his lord. Esau is not very interested in his submission or in his offering, only in enjoying an enthusiastic reunion with his brother. After this reunion Esau goes back home to Seir while Jacob stays for a while near the Yabboq before crossing into Canaan proper and settling near Shechem.

## Translation

1Ya‘aqob lifted his eyes and looked: there, Esaw was coming, and with him 400 men. He divided the children among Le’ah, Raḥel, and the two maidservants, 2and put the maidservants and their children first, Le’ah and her children after, and Raḥel and Yosep after, 3while he himself passed on before them. He bowed low on the ground seven times until he came right up to his brother. 4But Esaw ran to meet him, embraced him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him, and they cried.[[456]](#footnote-456) 5He lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children, and said “Who are these of yours?” He said, “The children with whom God has favored[[457]](#footnote-457) your servant.” 6The maidservants came up, they and their children, and bowed low. 7Le’ah also came up, she and her children, and bowed low. Last, Yosep came up,[[458]](#footnote-458) he and Raḥel, and they bowed low. 8He said, “What did you mean by this entire camp[[459]](#footnote-459) that I met?” Ya‘aqob said, “To find favor in my lord’s eyes.” 9Esaw said, “I have much, brother. What you have should be yours.” 10Ya‘aqob said, “No, please. If I’ve found favor in your eyes, please, get my offering from my hand, because of the fact that I’ve seen your face, like seeing God’s face,[[460]](#footnote-460) and you accepted me. 11Please get my blessing which has been brought to you, because God has favored me, and because I have everything.” So he urged him, and he got it.

12Then he said, “Let’s move on, let’s go, I’ll go in front of you.” 13But he said to him, “My lord knows that the children are frail and the flock and herd are suckling with me. Were people to drive them hard for one day, the entire flock will die. 14My lord should please pass on before his servant. I myself will lead on gently, at the pace[[461]](#footnote-461) of the stock[[462]](#footnote-462) that are before me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Se‘ir.” 15Esaw said, “May I please place alongside you some of the company that’s with me?” He said, “Why is this? I want to find favor in my lord’s eyes.”

16So Esaw went back that day on his journey to Se‘ir, 17while Ya‘aqob[[463]](#footnote-463) moved on to Sukkot. He built a house for himself, and for his livestock he made bivouacs; thus they named the place Sukkot.

18Ya‘aqob came to Šalem,[[464]](#footnote-464) Šekem’s town,[[465]](#footnote-465) which was in the country of Kena‘an, when he came from Paddan Aram, and camped facing the town. 19He acquired the division in the open country where he spread his tent, from the sons of Hamor, Šekem’s father, for a hundred qesitas. 20He put up an altar there and called it “God is the God of Yiśra’el.”[[466]](#footnote-466)

## Interpretation

Scene 9 in the story of Jacob’s time in Harran continues straight on from Scene 8. The advance parties which comprised his offering have disappeared from the scene, though v. 8 will refer to them. There is no more reference to fear on Jacob’s part, but he is obsequiously deferential to Esau as servant to lord. In contrast, Esau meets Jacob with enthusiasm as his long-lost brother. Scene 9 thus forms an extraordinary contrasting pair with Scene 1 in the palistrophe. In the account of events leading up to the parting of the two brothers, Isaac and Esau were gullible, and eventually Esau was violently aggressive, while Rebekah and Jacob were deceptive and eventually fearful. Here, Esau gives the impression of having no memory of those events, and perhaps of having done fine over the past twenty years so that his theoretical loss of the blessing hasn’t made much difference to him. But Jacob (or at least the narrator) hasn’t forgotten, as is suggested by Jacob’s reference to “my blessing” in v. 11; it is the expression Esau used in 27:36. There is a further irony about the use of that term “blessing.” Whereas Jacob has continued to speak of his “offering” in v. 10, a term which suggests something presented by a person in a less powerful position to a more powerful person, the term “blessing” applies to gifts from one human being to another, and usually denotes something given by a more powerful person to a less powerful one. Scene 9 closes with a brief and slightly disjointed account of Jacob’s arrival west of the Jordan. MT treats that brief account in vv. 18-20 as a paragraph of its own, whereas the medieval chapter division unequivocally links it with his meeting with Esau. It both brings the account of Jacob’s time away from Canaan to a final end, and also provide the background to the story in 34:1-31.

**33:1-11.** Esau’s appearance on the horizon follows immediately on the account of Jacob’s crossing the Yabboq. The listeners know that Jacob goes into this meeting in the safety and protection of things the assailant said the other side of the Yabboq. What difference does that context make to Jacob’s mindset?

We stand with Jacob (vv. 1-3a) as he discerns Esau approaching.” It will become clear that the 400 men are not a military force, though not what they are; they might be just a sign of how impressive and important a person Esau is. At first Jacob’s “dividing” the family group in accordance with their preciousness to him recalls the “dividing” of the offering earlier, with the idea that Esau might get tired or satisfied with slaughter before he gets to the end. But it transpires that Jacob takes the lead in this procession; he did not extend the principle of making as extensive as possible the distance between him and Esau. Jacob’s being “before them” now contrast with the repeated “before me/behind us” of 32:16, 18, 20. Conversely, there are now no references to Jacob’s fearfulness, like the ones in Scenes 7 and 8. In this sense the event at the Yabboq did bring about a change in Jacob. The family advance in increasing order of their status for Jacob.

Release from fear does not mean release from deference and submissiveness (v. 3b), though in First Testament-speak one could call it another kind of fear. But there is nothing wrong with such deferent submissiveness. While bowing prostrate need not imply abject self-humbling (see 23:7, 12), an Egyptian king’s underlings in Canaan speak metaphorically in their letters of bowing prostrate before him seven times,[[467]](#footnote-467) which suggests such deferent submission, like that of a once-rebellious underling appearing before his overlord.[[468]](#footnote-468) Here Jacob does the sevenfold prostration literally; no one else in the First Testament does. It is an extreme and complete expression of self-lowering. As Jacob’s servant-lord language in 32:4 [5] reversed the obvious implication of 25:23, his bowing low (to be followed by that of the rest of his family in vv. 6-8) forms an extreme inversion of Isaac’s blessing in 27:29, “your mother’s sons are to bow low to you.” The relationship between these two mother’s sons is now the opposite to the one spoken of there. While Jacob had originally drawn up his offering in the context of his fearfulness, its overt aim had been to “cover Esau’s face” in such a way as to lead him to “lift Jacob’s face” (32:20 [21]). It had constituted a recognition that Jacob had no basis for assuming Esau’s good will and had wanted to acquire it, which continues to be his aim. To “cover someone’s face” likely implies having foregone that good will; the context of Jacob’s relationship with Esau would confirm that implication. In seeking Esau’s goodwill, Jacob need not be implying contrition, but he is at least indicating remorse or shame. The gift and the self-lowering honor Esau and put right the exalting of himself above Esau. The verb for “came up” (*nāgaš*), which also recurs in vv. 6-7, likewise suggests an approach where some deference is felt to be needed; it often applies to approaching an altar.

Esau’s approach to Jacob then makes for a startling incongruence (v. 4). It is hardly the case that Jacob’s submissiveness has turned Esau from hostility to magnanimity.[[469]](#footnote-469) “Jacob only breaks down open doors with all his preparations.”[[470]](#footnote-470) Esau does not behave like the overlord receiving the submission of the rebel; the running, the enthusiasm, and the expressiveness contrast sharply with the sevenfold bowing. Embracing (*ḥābaq*) is so similar to but so different from wrestling (*’ābaq*).[[471]](#footnote-471)The significance of a kiss (27:26) is also here reversed.[[472]](#footnote-472) The crying, one can imagine, has different significance for each of the brothers, but it joins them together. “Our Lord could find no better model for the prodigal’s father at this point than Esau” (Luke 15:20).[[473]](#footnote-473) Like the account of Jacob’s offering in 32:14-20 [15-21], the portrait of Esau invites a smile from the story’s listeners. Jacob has been understandably so wrong in his expectations of his brother. While God had not intervened to speak to Esau so as to restrain him as he had to Laban, one way or another God has acted even more spectacularly in accordance with his words to Jacob in 32:26-29 [27-30].[[474]](#footnote-474) He has proved that the mind of a king (or other superior) is a stream of water that he can channel in his direction (Prov 21:1).[[475]](#footnote-475) “When the Lord of all wishes to give evidence of his providence in our regard, he makes those hostile to us become gentler than lambs.”[[476]](#footnote-476) What is happening to Jacob is illustrating for the listeners that whatever happens to Jacob-Israel and whatever Jacob-Israel does, God will not only protect but also honor him/it.

Esau looks beyond Jacob, who is now at the front of the line (vv. 5-7) to the procession of wives, maidservants, and children joining in humbling themselves and thereby honoring him. Notwithstanding the implications of Jacob’s ordering of the wives and children in v. 2 and again in v. 6-7, the children as a group are equally the fruit of God’s gracing Jacob, and this uniformity of status compares with the sense that the old tension between Leah and Rachel has eased (e.g., 31:14)—as the indications of differences of position and significance among the later clans do not relate to who their mothers were.

The “camp” (v. 8) is not this family grouping but the other of the two camps into which Jacob had divided his entourage, the assemblage of animals and servants that Jacob had sent on ahead (32:7-8 [8-9]). It was this camp that constituted an offering by means of which Jacob had sought grace with Esau. Tellingly, the only First Testament chapter which speaks more of grace and gracing is Exod 33, which speaks systematically of the grace or favor that God shows because he decides to do so and not because we manage to gain access to it by some action or argument. Here Jacob starts from the common human expectation or reality that one finds grace with someone because one earns it, although seeking grace does not imply seeking forgiveness; Jacob shows no signs of seeking forgiveness, given that seeking to cover someone’s face need not have that implication.

Esau disclaims Jacob’s understanding of their relationship (v. 9), and the narrative subverts the general assumption about earning grace from someone. Jacob has spoken of Esau as his lord and of himself as Esau’s servant, but as far as Esau is concerned, Jacob is his brother. In the context of a story such as Gen 23, one might take Esau’s declining the offering as a formal refusal that expects itself to be turned down, and it is turned down.[[477]](#footnote-477) But the context of this transformation of the terminology and the expressions of Esau’s emotional welcome of Jacob suggests that Esau means what he says. Evidently he has somehow not missed out through his loss of the firstborn’s blessing. His declaration that he already has enough constitutes another subversion of regular human speech. Whoever thinks they have enough and does not like the idea of more?

But Jacob starts from having now had two potentially fatal face-seeing experiences (v. 10). To see someone’s face is to be admitted to their presence, in particular to the presence of someone important and powerful, and thus to be accepted by them—as Jacob also puts it. Seeing God’s face is life-threatening (32:31 [32]); Jacob had assumed that seeing Esau’s face would also be life-threatening. But Esau accepted him. Jacob’s verb (*rāṣāh*) comes only here in Genesis, but elsewhere it can refer to God’s accepting (or not accepting) someone bringing an offering, or accepting (or not accepting) the offering itself (e.g., Ezek 20:40-41; and Mal 1:8-13, which we noted in connection with 32:20 [21]). Esau’s acceptance means that the relationship is restored.

Once again, Jacob finds himself unintentionally subverting the logic of the imagery (v. 11). He had thought he needed to bring an offering in order to be accepted. Actually Esau has accepted him for reasons unrelated to his offering, and now the offering becomes Jacob’s own means of sealing the relationship. Indeed, Jacob finds himself engaged in a neat illustration of the way any process of reconciliation cannot be captured in a formulation. On the way, discretely or indiscreetly Jacob turns his “offering” into a “blessing.” Apart from the reference to Abraham’s blessing in 28:4, it is the first occurrence of the word since it played its key role in Gen 27. Jacob leaves undetermined whether he sees his “my blessing” as Esau’s “my blessing” of 27:36 which Jacob appropriated. However he sees the link, he has now brought the blessing to Esau.

**33:12-15**. Polite negotiation again becomes a factor at the close of the story. Ideally, the Jacob-Esau narrative needed to end with the two brothers reconciled and with their two groups settled in the respective future homelands with which the listeners would associate them. The first aim has been achieved; the second remains. Esau is a long way from home and Jacob needs in due course to turn west across the Jordan to get back into the promised land.

As an aspect of his generosity and a further sign of his acceptance of Jacob (vv. 12-14), Esau invites him back to Seir, but he may not expect Jacob to accept the invitation. Jacob’s “diplomatic” response[[478]](#footnote-478) in turn may be a plausible excuse (Chrysostom calls it “specious”)[[479]](#footnote-479) which enables him to decline a move that will not fit into the story in the long run, and Esau may know very well that he’s not meant to take seriously Jacob’s implicit undertaking to come to Seir in due course.[[480]](#footnote-480) In Los Angeles people say “we must have lunch one day,” and in a sense they mean it, but they don’t mean what the words literally say. In the real world, the lunch will never happen.

Esau’s offer to leave behind some of his staff (v. 15) carries some irony: the apparent menace now becomes the potential protection squad. It is another expression of Esau’s generosity and acceptance, though also perhaps not one to be taken literally. And Jacob’s gracious request to be excused this favor also means he recognizes Esau’s gesture but does not take Esau up on it. Perhaps the further implication is that God has been fulfilling his commitment to protecting Jacob, and it can be assumed that he will continue to do so. The brothers do each other a favor in making the offer and declining it.

**33:16-17**. There follows a parting of the ways that corresponds to the one in 31:55—32:1 [32:1-2]. The summaries are similarly expressed, comprising descriptions of Laban/Esau “going back” home, then contrasting descriptions of Jacob. “The narrative concludes in *reconciliation with separation and an open-ended future*.”[[481]](#footnote-481) Insofar as people listening to the story would see Jacob and Esau as mirroring Israel and Edom, the story’s vision would seem a challenging one.[[482]](#footnote-482)

While Esau begins a long journey home, like Laban, Jacob finds somewhere to settle not far away. *Sukkôt* are bivouacs such as the Israelites made for themselves after the exodus (hence the “Sukkot Festival”). The Jerusalem Talmud (*Shebi’it* 9:2)[[483]](#footnote-483) identifies this Sukkot with Deir Alla, a couple of miles east of the Jordan but just north of the Yabboq, which implies that Jacob crossed back over the Yabboq again. For Israelite readers, Jacob is actually therefore home, since the Yabboq/Mahananim/Peniel/Suqqot area is part of the country allocated to the twelve clans by Moses. Following Esau would mean leaving that land which Jacob entered when he came into Gilead; it would result in “a disruption in the theological aim of the narrative.”[[484]](#footnote-484) At the same time, Judg 7—8 suggests an awareness that Sukkot is on the way from the Peniel area to the Jordan and thus on the way to Shechem and to Canaan proper, so that Jacob’s moving to Sukkot would imply a move towards Canaan proper.[[485]](#footnote-485) While Jacob evidently settled in Sukkot for a while, one need not read too much into the word “house,” though something a bit more solid than a tent is implied.[[486]](#footnote-486)

**33:18-20**. From Sukkot Jacob would cross by the ford near the modern ed-Damiyeh Bridge from which the road ascends to Shechem. He really is now within Canaan proper, even more unequivocally his own country. His return from Paddan Aram/Harran comes to a definitive end, though still not quite a complete one.

Presumably Shalem (v. 18) is the later village of Salem/Salim, just east of Shechem, mentioned in Judith 4:4 (cf. *Jub* 30:1; John 3:23). But the name would also recall Jacob’s having gone on his sojourn with the conviction that God would bring him back to his father’s household *bᵉšālôm* (28:21). Further, with some appropriateness Jacob arrives where Abraham first arrived when he reached Canaan from Harran. There the town is referred to as Shechem; here Shechem is the name of a person who lives there. The double usage corresponds to that of Mamre in Gen 13—14 and 23.

Jacob’s purchase of some land (v. 19) would no doubt be designed to ensure secure possession of it; his encampment is evidently intended to be a long-term one. But the account of his purchase also indicates that it gives the people of Abraham further actual ownership of land in Canaan. Jacob’s action parallels his grandfather’s when he bought a burial plot in Hebron (Stephen apparently conflates the two stories in Acts 7, while John 4 presumably refers to this purchase while also presupposing further traditions). The word “division” (*ḥelqāh*) would remind the listeners of the Israelites “dividing up” (*ḥālaq*) the land which Yahweh gave them (e.g., Josh 14:5). Like Abraham and like Lot who camped near Sodom, Jacob wants to maintain an encampment and not simply become part of the town, but he does want to settle near the town. And the sons of Hamor, the Hamorites, are the Shechem equivalent to the sons of Het, the Hittites, at Hebron. As the name of the Hetites of Gen 23 may have nothing to do with that of the Hittites who ruled a great northern empire, so the name of Hamor and the Hamorites may have nothing to do with the word *ḥămôr* meaning “donkey” (BDB lists four roots *ḥāmar*), but the readers of Genesis will have appreciated the paronomasia.[[487]](#footnote-487) The qesitah will have been a measure of weight like the sheqel, but we don’t know its value (LXX, Vg, Tg nicely take it the qesitahs to denote sheep).

Like Abraham, too, Jacob builds an altar in the area (v. 20); while building an altar can commemorate God’s appearing, it can mark a broader sense of God’s having acted and of settling in an area as a result. Genesis actually describes Jacob as “putting up” an altar, which corresponds to the way one “sets up” or “puts up” a standing stone to commemorate God’s appearing (28:18, 22; 31:45; 35:14, 20). His setting up an altar marks the significance of this moment, though it need not imply that the story of his journey has come to a final end—and it has not (see 35:1-20). Again, like Abraham when he plants the tamarisk at Beer Sheba (21:33), Jacob associates his action with giving God a new name. Like other such names for God in Genesis, it starts off from the word El, a standard way of speaking of God which Israel’s ancestors shared with other peoples, and which in both contexts can function both as a generic word for deity and as a name for God. It thus compares with the English word God/god. As happens with other names in Genesis such as *’ēl ‘ôlām*, *’ēl rŏ’î*, and *’ēl šadday*,Jacob then modifies and further describes that word/name in a way that is allusive and suggestive, though Jacob’s title is more allusive than most. First, it can be construed either as “El, the God of Israel” or as “El is the God of Israel,”[[488]](#footnote-488) but the latter is more suggestive. Either way, it is the first occurrence of the expression “God of Israel.” While it is unusual for Genesis to take literally the idea that Jacob’s own name is Israel, Jacob’s here speaking of God (*’ēl*) as the God of Israel (*yiśrā’ēl*), would carry those overtones. The name testifies to God’s having shown himself to be the God of Israel (see 32:28 [29]). In the context of the story the name could thus mean something for Jacob himself. “He named the altar thus in commemoration of the fact that God had saved him while he was en route, and had sent an angel to accomplish that, and had also changed his name to Israel.”[[489]](#footnote-489) It would also signify that he recognizes this God as his God.[[490]](#footnote-490) But when Israelites read this story it would suggest an identity between Yahweh as the God of Israel and El and Jacob’s God. Within sight of the location of Jacob’s altar, Joshua later builds an altar for “Yahweh the God of Israel” (Josh 8:30).

But has Jacob failed to keep his promise in 28:20-22?[[491]](#footnote-491)

**Genesis 34:1-31—Dinah and Shechem**

## Overview

Some time after Jacob’s arrival at Shalem, a local Hivvite has sex with Jacob’s daughter Dinah, and he and his father seek to negotiate her marriage and a wider coming together of the two groups. Jacob’s sons insist first on the circumcision of the village’s men. When they are incapacitated after their circumcision, the brothers kill all of them, and take the women and the property. Jacob expresses his disapproval.

## Translation

1Dinah daughter of Le’ah, to whom she had given birth for Ya‘aqob, went out to see[[492]](#footnote-492) the daughters of the region, 2and Šekem ben Ḥamor, the Hivvite,[[493]](#footnote-493) leader in the region, saw her. He got her, slept with her,[[494]](#footnote-494) and overwhelmed her. 3With his whole being he was attached[[495]](#footnote-495) to Dinah, Ya‘aqob’s daughter. He liked the girl, and he sought to encourage[[496]](#footnote-496) the girl. 4Šekem said to Ḥamor his father: “Get me this child as wife.”

5When Ya‘aqob heard that he had defiled Dinah his daughter, but his sons were with his livestock in the open country,[[497]](#footnote-497) Ya‘aqob remained silent[[498]](#footnote-498) until they came. 6Ḥamor, Šekem’s father, went out to Ya‘aqob to speak with him. 7When Ya‘aqob’s sons came from the open country, the men were pained when they heard. It deeply enraged them, because he had done something villainous in Yiśra’el in sleeping with Ya‘aqob’s daughter. Such a thing is not done.

8But Ḥamor spoke with them: “Šekem my son—with his whole being he has got attracted to your daughter. Please give her to him as wife. 9Make marriages with us:[[499]](#footnote-499) your daughters you can give to us and our daughters you can get for yourselves. 10With us you can live, and the region—it will be before you. Live and traverse it[[500]](#footnote-500) and have holdings in it.” 11And Šekem said to her father and to her brothers, “May I find favor in your eyes: what you say to me, I will give. 12Set a very large marriage payment and gift[[501]](#footnote-501) upon me, and I will give as you say to me. But give me the girl as wife.”

13Ya‘aqob’s sons answered Šekem and Ḥamor his father with guile.[[502]](#footnote-502) They spoke (in that he’d defiled their sister Dinah) 14and said to them, “We can’t do this thing, give our sister to a man who has a foreskin, because that would be a reviling to us. 15Only on this basis could we consent to you: if you become like us, by every male of yours being circumcised, 16then we’ll give our daughters to you and get your daughters for ourselves and we’ll live with you, and we’ll become one people. 17But if you won’t listen to us by being circumcised, we’ll get our daughter[[503]](#footnote-503) and go.” 18Their words were good in the eyes of Ḥamor and in the eyes of Ḥamor’s son Šekem, 19and the boy didn’t delay doing the thing, because he wanted Ya‘aqob’s daughter.

Now he was the most honored person in his father’s household. 20So Ḥamor and his son Šekem came to the gateway of their town and spoke to the men of their town: 21“These people are peaceable with us. They should live in the region and traverse it. This region—here, it’s wide enough for them. Their daughters we will get for ourselves as wives and our daughters we will give to them. 22It’s just on this basis that the people will give their consent to us to live with us, to become one people—by every male of ours being circumcised as they are circumcised. 23Their livestock and what they have acquired and all their animals: they’ll become ours, won’t they.[[504]](#footnote-504) Let’s just give our consent to them so they will live with us.” 24They listened to Ḥamor and to Šekem his son, all who went out to the gateway of his town; and every male, all who went out to the gateway of his town, were circumcised.

25On the third day, when they were hurting, two of Ya‘aqob’s sons, Šim’on and Lewi, Dinah’s brothers, got each his sword, came on the town, confident of safety,[[505]](#footnote-505) and killed every male. 26Ḥamor and Šekem his son they killed with the mouth of the sword, and they got Dinah from Šekem’s house and left, 27while Ya‘aqob’s sons[[506]](#footnote-506) came on the men who had been run through and plundered the town because they had defiled their sister. 28Their flock, their herd, and their donkeys, what was in the town and what was in the open country, they got. 29All their resources, all their little ones, and all their women, they captured and plundered, with[[507]](#footnote-507) everything that was in the house.

30Ya‘aqob said to Šim’on and Lewi, “You’ve brought disaster on me, making me stink to the people who live in the country, the Kena‘anite (the Perizzite).[[508]](#footnote-508) I’m few in number. They’ll gather against me and strike me down and I’ll be annihilated, I and my household.” 31But they said, “Like a whore should he treat our sister?”

## Interpretation

The story of the conflict between Jacob and the Hivvites balances the story of the conflict between Isaac and the Philistines in 26:1-33. That earlier story bridged the opening of Genesis Part Three and the long account of Jacob’s sojourn in Harran; this story bridges the end of that long account and the close of Genesis Part Three which will follow in Gen 35. Once again, a conflict issues from the ancestral family’s living cheek-by-jowl with another settled local people, notwithstanding the family’s living in the setting to which the God of the promise has brought them. Once again trouble arises because of the local people’s interest in one of the family’s women. Once again the head or the men of the family respond with action that involves deception. Once again the family eventually does very well out of the sequence of events. Once again the story thus handles questions about the relationship between Israel’s ancestors and other peoples that will be significant for an Israelite audience, and raises questions about the position of women in the society. Once again the story reports on conflicts and on other actions that may look reprehensible but makes no moral comment, though it also raises issues that later are the subject of rules within the Torah. More broadly, it shares with the rest of the Torah “concerns about the relationship of Israel to its neighbors, Israel's identity defined from intra- and intergroup perspectives; appropriate sexual behaviors; and the place of violence.”[[509]](#footnote-509) It is thus “a story about *issues:* through pondering… upon the (largely unsatisfactory) ways in which the characters handle their situation, the reader's own moral sensibilities are sharpened.”[[510]](#footnote-510) At the end of Gen 34, no one wins, and the story leaves us with a plethora of ethical ambiguities, though its effect is thereby to demand a response from readers, so that Gen 34 “has created the possibility for ethics.”[[511]](#footnote-511)

Although thematically the story has a different focus from Gen 27—33, it links with it in detailed ways, picking up the reference to Simeon and Levi’s position as Leah’s sons and to Dinah as their full sister; Simeon and Levi’s action will be taken up again in 49:5-7. In MT, Gen 34 forms the last section in 32:3 [4]—34:31. It is similar in length to 26:1-33 but it differs in comprising a single complex story (framed by narrative but dominated by dialogue), whereas 26:1-33 consisted of a more loosely linked sequence of stories about a series of conflicts. Further, whereas Gen 26 reported a series of issues that get resolved, this conflict does not get resolved. As is the case with Gen 26, it is hard to trace how Gen 34 may have developed: “all modern expositors are agreed about the extraordinary difficulty of a literary analysis of this narrative, but there is no agreement on the means of arriving at a satisfying solution. Indeed, it seems that ultimate scientific clarification is no longer possible.”[[512]](#footnote-512) Consideration of the traditions that lie behind the chapter raises parallel difficulties. The story takes up a number of social, theological, and moral categories that reappear in the First Testament: defile (*ṭāmē’*,v. 5), villainy (*nᵉbālāh*, v. 7), something which is not done (v. 7), acquire a holding (*’āḥaz*, v. 10), marriage payment (*mōhār*, v. 12), reviling (*ḥerpāh*, v. 14). In addition, an important part is played by questions about groups intermarrying and assimilating, about the importance of circumcision, and about conventions regarding looting. These features are capable of linking with a wide variety of contexts in the First Testament story—second millennium times, early Israelite times, the monarchic period, and the Persian period. And they are capable of linking with many strands of First Testament tradition.

The story contrasts with Gen 26 in having no reference to God’s involvement in events. In this respect it parallels several of the scenes within Gen 27—33; further, a contrast will emerge between the absence of God from Gen 34 and the presence of God speaking, terrorizing, appearing, and blessing in 35:1, 5, and 9. Theological or moral understanding of the story thus depends on reading it in the context of the broader narrative to which it belongs. The closing two verses do suggest two questions that underlie it. Among the Israelite clans, Judah had a prominent place as the clan from which David came (cf. 49:8-12). One can imagine Israelites asking why Judah had this prominent position when Judah himself was only the fourth of the sons of Jacob, following on Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. We will soon discover why Jacob declared that Reuben would lose his position (see 35:21; cf. 49:3-4), and one significance of Gen 34 is that it explains why Jacob also declared that Simeon and Levi would lose theirs (cf. 49:5-7)—and fail to keep their place as regular clans. The other question is, “Why are the local people so hostile to us and why are we so vulnerable to them?” And the answer is, “Because we have to be somewhat separatist in relation to them, and because getting involved with them tends to lead to them defiling our women, and because they want to take over our land, and because we may feel we have to take action against them.” Paradoxically, the chapter affirms the principle that the descendants of Jacob must not let themselves be defiled through intermarriage with other local peoples, but tells a story about how the effort to avoid or counter that defilement can raise problems of its own. There is no concrete “lesson” to be drawn from that fact. A story does not work in that way, which links with the story’s not offering theological or moral judgments. The story just tells of how things are or can be. But its theological setting in Genesis and specifically in Part Three of Genesis conveys to the audience the good news that God can be working out his purpose and fulfilling his promises notwithstanding the pressures, dilemmas, and mistakes that his people make. This consideration means it matters less if it is hard to be sure about making moral judgments concerning where the mistakes lie.

**34:1-4.** The reason why Dinah was the one daughter whose birth Gen 30 reported is presumably that it provides background to this chapter. She was specifically the daughter of Leah, who was not the wife that Jacob wanted, but Genesis also notes that Leah had Dinah “for Jacob,” which works against the idea that there is something negative about the reference to Dinah’s mother. Dinah is of marriageable age, perhaps in her middle teens, and her brothers are at least young adults, so some years have passed. The account of an ordinary girl or boy going out to see the young people in the area has no parallel in the First Testament, but there is no indication of whether the story hints that such an action is a bad idea[[513]](#footnote-513) (there would be no doubt that a girl hanging out with local boys or vice versa would be a bad idea). Her venture does fit in the context of there being a relationship between tent-dwelling people who live near a town or village but who focus on tending sheep and goats and do some agriculture on the side, and village-based people who focus on agriculture and keep a few animals on the side. These groups could live in collaborative interaction but could find themselves in conflict, and this double possibility is part of the story’s background. But the Torah recognizes that within Israel itself a girl out on her own is vulnerable, and it includes rules to cover the kind of event that follows here (see Exod 22:16-17 [15-16]; Deut 22:28-29). Thus the implication is not that Dinah gets into trouble because she mixes with foreigners and they are inclined to act immorally in a way that members of her own people are not; the same issues arise within Israel. But the fact that it happens to be a foreigner who gets involved with her provides the premise for the story that follows.

The boy (v. 2) bears the name of the town Shechem, which as such is not mentioned in the story. Perhaps the implication is that his father Hamor is the “leader” (*nāśî’*)in the region named after Shechem, but that Hebrew term (like the English word “leader”) does not suggest an office, like the word “king”; it comes in the singular elsewhere in Genesis only when the Hittites apply it to Abraham (Gen 23:6). Further, Late Bronze Age Shechem was a major city-state and it is hard to imagine the story that follows, with the slaughter of its entire male population by a couple of Jacob’s sons, as a story about that town. We will get the picture better if we think in terms of something more like a village such as Shalem, which was “Shechem’s town” (33:18). Genesis uses seven verbs in vv. 2-3 to describe Shechem’s action—he saw, he got, he slept, he overwhelmed, he was attached, he loved, he encouraged. They are a sequence of *waw­-*consecutives with no other indication of how they interrelate. They resemble “I came, I saw, I conquered,” but they hardly make sense as descriptions of a chronological sequence of actions. I have assumed that the first “he saw” stands on its own, following on from the fact that Dinah went out “to see” the local girls. “He got, he slept, he overwhelmed” then form three more-or-less parallel descriptions of the action that ensued. He got her, laid her, ravished her: “three verbs describe the rapid-fire action of the rape” in a kind of hendiadys[[514]](#footnote-514)—or hendiatris. “Got” (*lāqaḥ*)is the standard verb for marrying someone, in which connection it will come in v. 4, and it is not an inherently aggressive or forceful word, but it is also the verb Genesis used for the four kings getting the resources of Sodom and getting Lot (14:11-12). Further, the sequence seeing-getting is a worrying one (cf. 3:6; 6:2; Josh 7:21).[[515]](#footnote-515) The verb “slept [with]” or “laid” (*šākab*)is applied chiefly to sex outside marriage (e.g., 19:32-35; 26:10; an exception that tests the rule is 30:15-16).[[516]](#footnote-516) The third verb (*‘ānāh* piel)would imply that their having sex was not consensual. It’s the nearest to a Hebrew verb for rape, though it can also refer (e.g.) to a man having sex with a woman whom he has captured in war and married (Deut 21:14). While it thus need not indicate that he has violent sex with Dinah, it does suggest that he is behaving like a man who assumes he can do as he likes with a woman, and that he violates her. Shechem and his father “are influential men in the city and likely are accustomed to getting – and taking – what they want.”[[517]](#footnote-517) Maybe Shechem would be able to say that she agreed to their having sex, but he at least put pressure on her.[[518]](#footnote-518)

Yet the boy was apparently not just interested in sex (v. 3). “Abductive marriage” is a well-known way of achieving marriage in some traditional cultures.[[519]](#footnote-519) And from the beginning, Shechem was interested in marriage, not a “casual liaison.”[[520]](#footnote-520) In the cultural context (indeed in most cultural contexts) it is just as well, because a girl who is known to have had sex has become “damaged goods.”[[521]](#footnote-521) She would likely have a hard time finding someone who wanted to marry her; hence those rules in the Torah to deal with the situation when boys and girls have had sex. It seems psychologically implausible to imagine that Shechem’s feelings of love emerge only after they have had sex that was not very consensual. More likely the feelings lay behind the action, as was the case with Amnon in relation to Tamar in 2 Sam 13, whose deed Shechem anticipates. It was Shechem’s whole being (his *nepeš*)that got attached to Dinah. While attachment is a physical thing (2:24), it was Shechem’s whole person that got attached. He had fallen in love with her, as we say (again like Amnon), though admittedly his feelings might not deserve the word “love” and might rather be an obsession (like Amnon). And he engaged himself in seeking to encourage her about what happens now, to reassure her. He told her he loved her, and told her it was going to be okay, and told her that his father would fix things with her father. No doubt that process started before they had sex, and he hardly thought of himself as raping her. It was not like the rape that takes place in war as an expression of violence—after all, she went along with it, didn’t she? But Genesis doesn’t tell us anything about her feelings or about whether she went along with it or resisted—here there is a contrast with the story of Amnon and Tamar. Tamar’s angle was significant for the bigger story there. Dinah’s angle is not significant for the bigger story here.[[522]](#footnote-522) And if Shechem raped Dinah, the monstrous nature of his action is not lessened by any feelings he might have had or any commitment he might then have been prepared to make.[[523]](#footnote-523)

Shechem did set about getting his father to fix it (v. 4). In his cultural context, there was perhaps nothing odd about the process and the order of events. Indeed, the presence of rules in the Torah to deal with the situation when boys and girls have had sex presupposes that life in an Israelite village might not be so different. But there is another factor that the story does not make explicit but maybe the listeners would not be surprised at. Shechem’s family has held onto Dinah, with or without her willingness: see vv. 17, 26. She herself is now termed a “child” (*yaldāh*), etymologically a girl who has been birthed—maybe with the implication that she is someone who as a female is capable of birthing.[[524]](#footnote-524) Dinah herself remains silenced; “Shechem was not dumb… but he acts as if Dinah was deaf.”[[525]](#footnote-525)

**34:5-7**. Once again, Genesis tells its story in non-chronological order, putting in the forefront a key factor that it wishes to highlight.

This key factor (v. 5) is not Dinah’s possible rape or seduction but her defilement. Whether she was pressurized by Shechem or whether she was a willing participant, defilement is the framework that the narrative uses.[[526]](#footnote-526) It is the only reference to defilement in Genesis. While the First Testament will go on to see adultery as defiling a person, it will give no indication that premarital sex does so. In a First Testament context, the idea is that people and areas outside Israel are lacking in purity and that sex across these frontiers is defiling.[[527]](#footnote-527) Purity is a quality of a place or of a people that God has set apart and made special to him. It’s not a moral quality but a theological one, though various moral and religious actions can compromise it. Genesis does not otherwise speak in terms of defilement, which suggests that Jacob and his family would not think in terms of this category—the story is using a category that would be familiar to the people listening to the story. But built into the wider Genesis story is the fact that God has set Abraham’s family apart, as was presupposed by the need to get wives for his family from outside Canaan. The question whether to marry inside the clan (endogamy) or outside it (exogamy) is important in Genesis, though it’s quite an exaggeration to say that “the essential problem with which Genesis is concerned is that of endogamy and land rights.”[[528]](#footnote-528) Endogamy can have a religious basis or an economic/political one.[[529]](#footnote-529) No doubt Israel’s ancestors would be concerned about the economic/political aspect, but Genesis puts any such concern in the framework of a charge from God that sets Israel’s ancestors apart. The language of purity and defilement is then a way of conceptualizing that setting apart and its implications. The problem in this story, then, is that Shechem has spoiled Dinah by virtue of being a Canaanite. The talk of defilement would also hint at the later Israelite sense that the local peoples (the “Canaanites”) had defiled the country by their sexual practices, that this defiling was one reason why Yahweh got the country to throw them up out of it, and that the Israelites needed to make sure they did not fall into the same defilement (Lev 18:24-30). Although the statement about Jacob hearing of Dinah’s “defilement” therefore need not imply that he himself would look at the event within this framework, the comment that “his daughter” has been treated in this way does suggest that as her father he is scandalized by what he has heard. But the unfolding story will associate more of the sense of scandal about defilement (and of a need to do something about it) with his sons than with Jacob. We have noted that it is going to emerge that Hamor and Shechem have taken Dinah into their home, which would presumably also make Jacob realize the need to take action. But at the moment his sons are some distance away pasturing the flocks, and their absence apparently makes it difficult to do anything, and he says nothing.

The account of the visit from Hamor (v. 6) then explains how Jacob knew what had happened. Hamor has set about doing as his son said, like a dutiful father, though we will discover that he has more in mind than fulfilling his son’s desires. Hamor will not see anything defiling to have gone on, or even anything untoward. The boy and the girl getting involved sexually just meant that a marriage needed to get fixed. Maybe Jacob would feel the same, if Dinah had got involved with someone within the clan. But anyway he says nothing for the moment: “I’ll talk about it with her brothers,” he says to Hamor.

Their reaction is something else (v. 7). They have their own sequence of words: pained, enraged, villainous, not done. Pained is the word that describes Yahweh’s reaction to the degenerate state of the world (6:6). Rage is Moses’s reaction to Israel’s apostasy at Sinai and Saul’s response to the Ammonites’ threat against the people of Yabesh-in-Gilead (Exod 32:19; 1 Sam 11:6). Villainy (*nᵉbālāh*)is the term in Judges for sexual assault and rape in Gibeah (Judg 19:23-24; 20:6, 10) and the term Tamar uses to describe Amnon’s rape, which she also calls something that is not done in Israel (2 Sam 13:12-13; cf. also Gen 20:9). Villainy denotes “an obstinate insensibility to moral and religious relations, and repudiation of the claims which they impose.”[[530]](#footnote-530) Shechem’s action is something villainous “in Israel.” The expression is anachronistic, in a different way from that in which the talk of defilement is anachronistic, but like the talk of defilement it implies that the audience is expected to look at the event this way and that the brothers were quite right in their assessment of what Shechem had done.[[531]](#footnote-531)

**34:8-12**. When they are back, Hamor returns to talk to them: all the second-person verbs and pronouns in vv. 8-12 are plural. Maybe adult brothers come to be party to decision-making in the family (cf. 24:50)[[532]](#footnote-532) and/or maybe it will be the brothers who will be interested in the marriages and eventually the land rights to which Hamor will refer.[[533]](#footnote-533) Hamor’s proposal assumes the key importance of endogamy/exogamy and land rights.

So in a sense, Dinah becomes her brothers’ daughter (v. 8). Hamor adds another verb to describe Shechem’s love, the verb “be attracted to” (*ḥāšaq*), which further underscores the depth of the boy’s feelings for the girl. On its basis Hamor makes a formal proposal for the two to be allowed to wed. In that he indicates no sense that there had been anything improper about the boy’s action, given that young people often got to marry this way, his implicit perception is quite different from that of Dinah’s brothers.

But he is not proposing a one-of-a-kind match (vv. 9-10). It is to be a first instance of a pattern that will follow; it will seal relationships between the two groups. They will intermarry and intermingle. Groups do come together by intermarriage, as famously happens at another level through Solomon’s marriages. Jacob’s family will then have even more freedom in the trade between sheep farmers and agriculturalists. Perhaps by way of the greatest temptation, Hamor points out that Jacob’s family can thus gain holdings in the land, as the readers know they are destined to do (see especially Lev 25 for the noun from this verb). He is indeed making a proposal about exogamy/endogamy and about land rights. But unconsciously, he proposes exactly a relationship that will count as defilement. Deut 7:1-3 explicitly prohibits what Hamor proposes (it mentions the Hivvites), with the implication that it is indeed what happened as the Israelites settled in Canaan. And in the Persian period Ezra 6:21 emphasizes the importance of avoiding defilement through accepting the practices of the community’s neighbors. The story’s preoccupation with endogamy is thus one aspect of its ongoing theological significance. For Christians and Jews the continuing distinctive existence of the people of Abraham was integral to the fulfillment of God’s purpose. Only if there was such a distinctive Jewish people could there be a Jewish Messiah in whom Christians could also come to believe; hence the positive theological significance of the action of Ezra and Nehemiah to safeguard the distinctive existence of that people. Further, in the early decades of the church’s life Paul warns about defilement that issues from being improperly yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14—7:1).

Shechem, of course, is more focused on the girl he has fallen for (v. 11). While the arranging of a marriage is formally the concern of the two fathers, it would also involve the boy and the girl, and Shechem in his enthusiasm cannot resist the temptation to take part in the negotiation by declaring that he will give whatever they ask for the girl he loves or wants. Shechem “is in effect showing willingness to abide by the terms of the Deuteronomic law”[[534]](#footnote-534)—that is, the aspect of it that concerns marriage between two people who have already had a sexual relationship. But he is bound to fall foul of the broader and more fundamental aspect of the Deuteronomic law regarding intermarriage, and to meet with “a rejection by her family which is much more impassioned than he can understand, and no one tells him the reason for the irritation, even though he is quite ready for any compensation which will enable him to marry Dinah.”[[535]](#footnote-535)

Specifically, Shechem recognizes the need for two sorts of marriage gifts (v. 12). They compare with the two forms of gift mentioned in 24:53 and overlap with the forms of conventional transaction traditionally involved in a Western marriage. In neither case is the term “bride price” illuminating; the groom is not buying the bride and she does not become his property as a result of the transaction except in the sense that any bride or groom comes to belong to the other person (cf. Song 6:3; 1 Cor 7:4). The “marriage payment” (*mōhër*; cf. Exod 22:16-17 [15-16]; 1 Sam 18:25) will go to Dinah’s family and will seal the relationship between the two families; it is the equivalent to the payment Jacob himself had made to Laban (by working for him all those years) by which he had recompensed Laban for the “cost” of bringing up Leah and Rachel. The “gift” (*mattān*) will go to Dinah herself; it will belong to her and give her a degree of potential independence (not least if her husband dies or divorces her). It parallels the provision traditionally denoted as a dower in European law (there is no equivalent to any dowry that the bride brings with her into the marriage). As a leader in the region, Hamor will be well-to-do, and since he has agreed to set up this marriage for his son, Shechem knows he can give better marriage gifts than anyone. He will pay any price.

**34:13-19a.** The narrative reaches its turning point.[[536]](#footnote-536) Actually, the price will be other than he has imagined, and will eventually be far greater than he dreams. The answer comes not from father or from father and brothers but simply from brothers. Jacob continues to say nothing. Again the story anticipates the Tamar and Amnon narrative, where David does nothing and it is Tamar’s brother who takes action. Here as there, too, the action involves trickery. “Guile” (*mirmah*) is the word Isaac had used of Jacob (27:35—they are the only two occurrences of the word in the Torah). It is thus striking that the guile does not involve Jacob! Have the sons learned from their father or did they inherit this trait? There need be no implied criticism in the word guile, any more than there is in (say) the lying of the Israelite midwives in Exod 1:15-22).[[537]](#footnote-537) “Misinformation in some cases may not have adverse effects, while accurate information may be used to violate others” and in the First Testament deception can be “a sanctioned way that the weaker party exercises power over more powerful people.”[[538]](#footnote-538) Hamor and his family have abducted the young men’s sister, who need a stratagem to free her to return to her family. If vv. 1-12 saw “the accumulation of maximal sympathy for Jacob’s sons,” vv. 13-19a only deepens that sympathy; it is, after all “their sister” whom Shechem has “defiled” and for whom they surely must do something.[[539]](#footnote-539)

The brothers then nuance the nature of the boy’s defilement of Dinah (v. 14): Shechem and the rest of the men in his community are not circumcised. Strictly or historically, in one way or another, this lack might not suffice as a way of distinguishing Jacob’s community from Hamor’s community. The Hivvites (v. 2) are admittedly something of a puzzle, though Josh 9:7 and 11:19 do speak of the people of Gibeon (not far away) as Hivvites. In the First Testament Hivvites are in effect a subset of Canaanites, like the Perizzites, whom Jacob will mention in v. 30 (see e.g., 10:15-18; Exod 3:8; Judg 3:5). As is the case with some of the groups mentioned in such passages, we know nothing about the Hivvites except what the First Testament tells us. Unlike many of these groups, they do not appear in the list of peoples in Ezra 9:1-2 as the kind of people the Judahites intermarried with in the Persian period. But further, such groups would be likely to practice circumcision. It was the Philistines who were the great uncircumcised people; Judg 14:3 makes this point in connection with Samson’s desire to marry a Philistine girl. Perhaps the Hivvites were another non-Semitic people.[[540]](#footnote-540) But in any case, circumcision becomes a kind of synecdoche. Gen 17 has presupposed that it distinguishes Abraham’s clan from other peoples and that it is a mark of God’s distinctive commitment to Abraham’s clan and of their distinctive commitment to God. Isa 52:1 sets up an association between defilement and lack of circumcision on the part of people such as the Babylonians who invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, and affirms that the restored Jerusalem will be protected from the uncircumcised and the defiled. It is a telling collocation for this story. Read against such contexts, “whereas Hamor stressed the economic advantages of intermarriage, the brothers emphasize the religious impediments.”[[541]](#footnote-541) The link between lack of circumcision and defilement would make intermarrying with people who do not practice circumcision a cause of reviling (*ḥerpāh*) to Jacob’s family. It would be a disgrace: it is another term that Tamar uses (2 Sam 13:13). The brothers thus add another powerful notion to the list in v. 7. It is in a way a puzzling notion: who will be doing this reviling? Reviling is something other peoples do to Israel. On the other hand, the delayed circumcision of the Israelites on their arrival in Canaan from Egypt removed their reviling (Josh 5:9). Perhaps God’s insistence on circumcision as a sign of his relationship with them means it would be his reviling.

So circumcision would solve the problem (vv. 15-17), understood in that broader symbolic context. Intermarriage with peoples who maintain their own traditions with their religious implications is one thing (Ezra 9). But foreigners who come to live in Israel can take part in Passover if the men are circumcised (Exod 12:48); intermarriage with people who are prepared to accept circumcision is another thing. So people listening to this story might be able to understand the theological theory behind (or in front of) the brothers’ proposal. The Hivvites need to be prepared to look at the matter this way. If they are not, the brothers will take their daughter (!) and go. Of course we know the brothers are speaking with guile. Drawing the Hivvites into the Abrahamic covenant is not the perspective with which they are actually operating. Ironically, by broadening the negotiation with the brothers so that it concerns not just the question about Shechem and Dinah but the interrelationship of the two entire communities, Hamor and Shechem have made their community horribly vulnerable.

Neither is Shechem interested in that broader significance of circumcision (vv. 18-19a). He’s just a boy in love. He’ll pay any price.

**34:19b-24.** So without delay Shechem sets about implementing the brothers’ requirement. Fortunately for him he is the favorite son of the big man in the community, “the most eligible man in the district.”[[542]](#footnote-542) So he and his father can easily take up the matter with the men of the town. The town gateway is as usual the informal and formal meeting place (cf. 19:1; 23:10, 18), and it is the townsmen as a group that father and son approach. They would in effect count as the town’s elders, though a town that is really more the size of a village might not need to distinguish between the grown-up men and the elders.

Hamor and Shechem put forward their proposal (vv. 21-22). On the assumption that this town is Shalem (33:18), which could mean “peaceable,” saying that Jacob’s clan are peaceable people especially commends them. Describing them in these terms will turn out to imply a massive irony, but neither they nor the audience realizes it yet. There are no disadvantages about agreeing to form one community with Jacob’s clan by intermarrying with them. Well, there is this slight physical price to pay….

Hamor and Shechem hasten on to the big advantage of making this commitment (v. 23-24). Jacob’s sons are not the only people operating with guile, and Shechem is not only operating as a boy who is in love. But the words of Hamor and Shechem will turn out to contain another massive irony: it will transpire that the transfer of livestock and other property will happen in the opposite direction to the one of which they speak. But the townsmen took little persuading.

**34:25-29.** For all the intimations that something is going to happen that involves trickery, action against the defilement, and the retrieval of Dinah, what now follows is jaw-dropping. The plot of the story turns out to focus less on the rape of Dinah by Shechem than on the rape of Shechem by Dinah’s brothers,[[543]](#footnote-543) on “the Sack of Shechem.”[[544]](#footnote-544) Simeon and Levi are perhaps operating on behalf of the brothers as a group, yet they are certainly acting on behalf of “their sister”—that is, their full sister, because Leah is both their mother and Dinah’s mother. They are the second and third sons whose births are recorded in Gen 29, following Reuben who will lose his honor as senior son because of the event to be recorded in 35:22 (see 49: 3-4)—though is Reuben’s absence here something to be commended?[[545]](#footnote-545) The listeners would not be surprised at the idea that Hamor and his community were in pain after their circumcision, like someone who has had surgery, and were incapable of defending themselves against attack. Perhaps the brothers take the view that it was not Shechem alone who had responsibility for what had happened so that the rest of the community had done nothing about it, and/or that attacking everyone was the only way to retrieve Dinah. (On the basis of this verse, *b. Shabbat* 134b allows the washing of a baby on the third day after circumcision even if it is the Sabbath, because the pain and the danger of infection are then particularly high.)

At the same time, Shechem obviously bears special responsibility, as does his father (v. 26) One again imagines Israelites reading the Tamar story in light of this story, and vice versa. And again, the jaw drops: it is only at this point that we discover that Dinah has been in Hamor and Shechem’s house all along. Had she been taken captive? Was this a rescue mission? Or was she as committed to Shechem as he was to her? In effect, had the marriage already happened, so that the result of the brothers’ action is to make Dinah a widow?[[546]](#footnote-546)

Dinah was not the only thing that got taken (vv. 27-28). Whereas Simeon and Levi focused on the slaughter of the menfolk and the retrieval of their sister, the rest of the brothers have operated with the conventions of war as Deut 20 will later lay them out in respect of a town that insists on fighting rather than making peace.[[547]](#footnote-547) The brothers have treated the Shalemites as if they were people who had declined terms for peace and have paid the price. The brothers’ action also overlaps with the Israelite treatment of Midian in Num 31.[[548]](#footnote-548) The story may thereby further honor Simeon and Levi, because they were interested only in rescue and redress not in looting, whereas the brothers’ looting “reduces them to the moral level of the Hivites.”[[549]](#footnote-549) Further, having the Hivvites take one of their girls is one thing. Taking over the Hivvites’ women is another.[[550]](#footnote-550)

**34:30-31.** The narrative has not indicated whether Jacob has shared the outrage of Simeon and Levi, and his comment about their action is simply negative. But neither does he offer any moral or legal objection to their action as he will in 49:5-7, which will reduce their redress on the Hivvites to “an outbreak of blind fury”[[551]](#footnote-551) and will envisage Simeon and Levi scattered in Israel (as their clans were) because of their violence (Levi’s violence will have a different outworking in Exod 32). Here, Jacob thinks Simeon and Levi have been stupid. His objection is only strategic or military; his mention of the Canaanites and specifically the Perizzites matches the association of the Canaanites and specifically the Perizzites with this area in Josh 17:15.[[552]](#footnote-552) Fortunately 35:5 will show that his fears will not be realized.[[553]](#footnote-553) Far from it: “nearly all the future violence will be within the family itself.”[[554]](#footnote-554)

Simeon and Levi’s response (v. 31) is something like a moral one. The family has responsibility to take action in connection with wrong done to one of its members. If Jacob embodies one possibility for Israel in relation to the Canaanites, that of fear, Simeon and Levi embody a different attitude whereby the clans will face the Canaanites with confidence, firmness, and solidarity.[[555]](#footnote-555) “As with the Book of Jonah, the closing rhetorical question provides an irresistible argument.”[[556]](#footnote-556) The rhetorical question closing the chapter parallels 27:45; there are further examples of dramatic statements closing sections of Genesis (29:14; 30:24; 37:35; 42:38; 45:28).[[557]](#footnote-557) The trouble with a rhetorical question, however, is that it leaves an opening for the addressees to answer it in a way other than the questioner intended. Both Jacob’s comment and the brothers’ question raise issues that will be taken further in Genesis and in the Torah more broadly. The broader context of the Torah suggests on one hand that it was appropriate for judgment to come upon the Hivvites for their defilement, and Judith is unambiguous in her approval of the brothers’ action (Judith 9:1-4; cf. *Jub* 30:5-6). But Gen 49:5-7 suggests a negative judgment on Simeon and Levi for their violence.[[558]](#footnote-558) And by no means does this chapter’s story come to a complete end. At the end, the wrong done to Dinah is described not as defiling but as treating her like a whore, which might have several implications. Like the English word “whore,” a *zônāh* can be someone involved in the sex trade (cf. 38:15), and the brothers may mean that Shechem had had sex with Dinah and was then prepared to pay for it.[[559]](#footnote-559) But calling someone a whore can also be a way of designating more broadly anyone whose sexual life does not fit in with society’s norms. Yet further, the association of whoring with defilement suggests a link with the First Testament’s use of whoring as a term for religious faithlessness or compromise, and the chapter’s sense of offense at Shechem’s action suggests such a connotation.

**Genesis 35:1-29—Jacob’s Return to Beth El, Rachel’s Passing, and Isaac’s Passing**

## Overview

The chapter brings Part Three to an end by narrating “journey’s end for Jacob and Isaac.”[[560]](#footnote-560) It describes Jacob’s move back to Beth El where Rebekah’s nanny is buried, summarizes God’s renewing of his promises to Jacob there, relates Jacob’s further move to Ephrat where Rachel dies in giving birth to Benjamin, recounts his onward move to Herd Tower where Reuben sleeps with Bilhah, lists the now complete register of the twelve sons of Jacob, and finally narrates Jacob’s arrival at Mamre and Isaac’s death, and his burying by Esau and Jacob.

## Translation

1God said to Ya‘aqob, “Set off and go up to Bet-’el. Live there and make an altar there for the God who appeared to you when you were taking flight from your brother Esaw.” 2Ya‘aqob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Remove the foreign gods[[561]](#footnote-561) that are among you. Purify yourselves. Change your clothes. 3We are to set off and go up to Bet-’el and make an altar there for the God who averred to me[[562]](#footnote-562) in my time[[563]](#footnote-563) of pressure, and has been with me on the way that I’ve gone.” 4They gave Ya‘aqob all the foreign gods that were in their hand and the rings that were in their ears, and Ya‘aqob hid them under the oak that was near Shekem.[[564]](#footnote-564)

5So they moved on, and an almighty[[565]](#footnote-565) terror came over the towns that were round about them, and they didn’t pursue after Ya‘aqob’s sons. 6So Ya‘aqob came to Luz which is in the country of Kena‘an (i.e., Bet-’el), he and the entire company that was with him. 7He built an altar there and called the site “God of Bet-’el,” because God had revealed himself[[566]](#footnote-566) to him there when he was taking flight from his brother. 8Deborah, Ribqah’s nanny, died, and was buried beneath Bet-’el, beneath the oak; people named[[567]](#footnote-567) it Crying Oak.

9So God appeared to Ya‘aqob again when came from Paddan Aram, and blessed him. 10God said to him, “Your name is Ya‘aqob. You will no longer be named Ya‘aqob; rather, Yiśra’el will be your name.” So he named him Yiśra’el. 11God said to him, “I am El Šadday. Be fruitful and numerous. A nation and a congregation of nations will come into being from you. Kings will come out from your insides. 12The country that I gave to Abraham and to Yiṣḥaq I will give to you, and I will give the country to your offspring after you.” 13Then God withdrew from him at the site where he spoke with him, 14and Ya‘aqob put up a standing stone at the place where God had spoken with him, a standing stone of rock, and poured out a libation on it and poured oil on it. 15Ya‘aqob named the site where God spoke with him Bet-’el.

16They moved on from Bet ’El. There was still a stretch[[568]](#footnote-568) of country in order to come to Ephrat,[[569]](#footnote-569) and Raḥel gave birth. She had a tough time in giving birth. 17When she was having a tough time in giving birth, the midwife said to her, “Don’t be afraid, because this one is a son for you, too.” 18As her breath was leaving her, because she died,[[570]](#footnote-570) she named him Ben-’oni;[[571]](#footnote-571) but his father called him Binyamin. 19So Raḥel died and was buried on the road to Ephrat (i.e., Bet Leḥem). 20Ya‘aqob put up a standing stone over her grave (it’s the standing stone at Raḥel’s Grave until today).

21Yiśra’el moved on and spread his tent beyond Herd Tower. 22While Yiśra’el was dwelling in that region, Re’uben went and slept with Bilhah, his father’s secondary wife; and Yiśra’el heard.[[572]](#footnote-572)

Ya‘aqob’s sons were twelve:

* 23The sons of Le’ah: Ya‘aqob’s firstborn, Re’uben; Šim‘on; Lewi; Yehudah; Yiśśakar;[[573]](#footnote-573) and Zebulun.
* 24The sons of Raḥel: Yosep and Binyamin.
* 25The sons of Bilhah, Raḥel’s maidservant: Dan and Naptali.
* 26The sons of Zilpah, Le’ah’s maidservant: Gad and Ašer.

These were Ya‘aqob’s sons who were born to him in Paddan Aram.

27Ya‘aqob came to Yiṣḥaq his father at Mamre at Arba Township (i.e., Hebron), where Abraham and Yiṣḥaq resided as aliens. 28Yiṣḥaq was a man of 180 years. 29Yiṣḥaq breathed out and died, and joined his kin,[[574]](#footnote-574) old and full of time.[[575]](#footnote-575) Esaw and Ya‘aqob, his sons, buried him.

## Interpretation

Gen 35 comprises an episodic sequence of short units or “snapshots”[[576]](#footnote-576) which close off Isaac’s story:

Vv. 1-8 How God bade Jacob return to Beth El, where Deborah died

Vv. 9-15 How God appeared to Jacob and renewed his promise of increase and land

Vv. 16-20 How the clan moved on from Beth El to Herd Tower and Rachel died in giving birth to Benjamin

Vv. 21-22a How Jacob moved on from Herd Tower and Reuben slept with Bilhah

Vv. 22b-26 A summary list of Jacob’s sons

Vv. 27-29 How Jacob came to Isaac at Mamre and Isaac died and was buried by Esau and Jacob.

MT treats the chapter as three units, vv. 1-8, 9-22a, and 22b-29.

While the chapter comprises these separate short sections, in a variety of ways they together close off the account of Isaac’s line of descent, begun in 25:19. Following on Gen 34, a striking feature is that the first two sections refer to God speaking, terrifying, appearing, blessing, and naming (vv. 1, 5, 9, 10, 11, 13). The second half of the chapter reverts to more theologically austere narration, much of it relating troublesome events (Rachel’s death, Reuben’s incest, Isaac’s death). The chapter is thus typical of the Jacob narrative as a whole in moving between talk of events in which God’s activity can be seen and of events in which that activity is invisible, behind the scenes—between the revealed God and the hidden God.[[577]](#footnote-577) A further feature is that the chapter always refers to God as *’ĕlōhîm* or *’ēl* not as Yahweh, which contrasts with (e.g.) 25:19-26; 26:1-33; 27:1-29 (the opening sections of Part Three); 28:10-22 (Yahweh’s first appearing at Beth El); and 29:31-30:30 (the main sequence of births and namings). Various views are held regarding the extent to which the material has a background in the work of the Yahwist, the Elohist, the Priestly writer, or a redactor.

**35:1-8.** There is no indication of how long a time elapses before Jacob’s company makes this move. Possibly the logic is the same as that in 31:1-3: Jacob is scared (34:30-31) and God responds by telling him to move.[[578]](#footnote-578) But the ancestors’ lifestyle as sheep farmers means that they do move around, so that there might be nothing odd about relocating twenty miles or south from the Shalem/Shechem area towards the Beth El area, notwithstanding their having acquired land at Shalem (33:19-20). Nor in the context of Genesis is there anything surprising about God commissioning such a move. God is taking Jacob one stage further towards the completion of a journey back to the family from whom he had departed further south in Beer Sheba, though God does talk about “living” or settling (*yāšab*) there at Beth El; it’s not just a staging post. God’s explicit point is that the move to Beth El pairs with his having appeared to Jacob there on his way out of Canaan (28:10-22). God had noted this fact in commissioning Jacob to return to Canaan (31:13), though neither the story of his appearance at Beth El nor the commission to return to Canaan had specifically envisaged Jacob going back to Beth El in particular. There is again no explicit reference to Jacob’s fulfilling the tithing commitment he made in 28:22 (*Jub* 32 makes up for the lack). But Jacob had made this commitment, and when he set up the standing stone at that point, he designated the worship site at Beth El as a house of God, so a return would be natural. God’s own directive is that Jacob is to build an altar there. It is the only time in Genesis when God commissions the building of an altar. Jacob is going to retrace Abraham’s steps and repeat the sequence of Abraham’s altar-making (12:6-8). But the divine commission follows on the defilement story and leads into Jacob’s charge about renunciation and purifying in v. 2, which suggests that something else underlies the commission. Shechem was a major Canaanite town and Beth El “had a long Canaanite prehistory” as a sanctuary, so here the building of an altar at Beth El points to the dedication of the worship site there to the true God.[[579]](#footnote-579) Jacob would need to “go up” from Shechem to Beth El: Shechem stands at one of the lower points on the mountain ridge, at another crossing point between west and east, at about 1,800 feet, while Beth El stands near the highest point on the ridge, more like 3,000 feet. But the audience might also recall the idea of going up to Beth El or to Jerusalem for a pilgrimage festival (e.g., Hos 4:15!). In a sense God is inviting Jacob on such a pilgrimage, back to where God first met with him.

The requirement to dispose of foreign gods (v. 2) then raises eyebrows. But Rachel’s theft of the teraphim opens a window on the possibility that people within Jacob’s household would have brought their images with them from Harran; the teraphim would count as gods in the broad sense that can attach to that word (cf. 31:30, 32). Other people such as his servants and shepherds who were not members of his immediate family would have done the same thing; TgPsJ adds reference to idols which would have been among the plunder referred to in 34:29. Having images like the teraphim need not stand in conflict with the idea that Yahweh, or the God of Abraham, or El Shadday was the only real God. But one needs to be a bit theologically sophisticated to live by that view, and Jacob apparently recognizes that with this pilgrimage the time has come when the gray area becomes black and white. And for some people listening to the story, it would contain a nudge (see Deut 31:16; Josh 24:20, 23—at Shechem; Judg 10:16; 1 Sam 7:3; 2 Chron 33:15; Jer 5:19), particularly people in Ephraim who were accustomed to going up from Shechem to the sanctuary at Beth El for festivals (again, cf. Hos 4:15).[[580]](#footnote-580) Read in light of the exhortation to repudiate their foreign gods, the exhortation to purification would suggest that this repudiation would be the action that had the purifying effect, which would fit the motif of defilement in Gen 34. Defilement and purity form a related pair of concepts and these two chapters are the only ones in which either word group comes in Genesis except for the reference to clean animals in Gen 9. Foreign people defile because they serve foreign gods, and people who serve foreign gods or worship in foreign ways need purifying (e.g., 2 Chron 34:3; Jer 13:27; Ezek 36:20; 37:23). The requirement that people change their clothes points in a different, complementary direction. At Sinai the Israelites were to safeguard their sacredness and wash their clothes when Yahweh was about to appear, and here the change of clothes along with the purification links with the fact that the community (not just Jacob) is about to meet with God.

Jacob goes on (v. 3) to personalize further the reason for the journey and the altar-making. It will be an act of thanksgiving and testimony. His “we” underscores the significance of God’s actions for the entire group even though it was only Jacob who had the experience of God reaching out to him at Beth El and being with him over the twenty-plus years that have since passed. The time when he was under pressure was the time when Esau was threatening to kill him, and the time when God reached out to him and averred his protection was the time a few days later when he was on his way to Harran. Like the English word, “pressure” (*ṣārāh*)can suggest both something objective (“Esau is planning to kill me!”) and something subjective (the sense of distress that naturally follows). But God had said, “I am with you: I will keep you wherever you go” (28:15), and he has kept the promise. The listeners might recognize the expression “my time of pressure” from the pleas that appear in the Psalms (see Ps 77:2 [3]; 86:7). Jacob is now in the position that the Psalms also reflect, of being able—indeed under obligation—to testify that God “rescued me from every pressure” (Ps 54:7 [9]).

The people do as they are told (v. 4). There is no other First Testament allusion to a link between earrings and alien worship, though the reference could imply a kind of catachresis if it reminded listeners of the way earrings can be turned into a means of alien worship (Exod 32:2-3; Judg 8:24-27). More likely “their ears” means the images’ ears: the earrings were an adornment of the divine images not of the people, and they had been appropriated as part of the plunder.[[581]](#footnote-581) The allusion to the oak near Shechem (the only reference to Shechem the place in Gen 33-35) suggests another link with Abraham, though here the word is *’ēlāh* not *’ēlôn*,[[582]](#footnote-582) but the reference to hiding might be slightly worrying: what is hidden can be dug up.[[583]](#footnote-583)

The background to the possible need of protection from the towns around (v. 5) lies in 34:30. God makes sure that the action by Jacob’s sons doesn’t have the effect Jacob feared. “Terror” parallels “pressure” in having both an objective and a subjective aspect (e.g., Ezek 32:23-32). Here the communities between Shechem and Beth El are overwhelmed by subjective terror when Jacob’s company was not objectively terrifying, as Jacob had realistically commented. Whereas they could have attacked them and treated them the same way as Jacob’s sons had treated Shalem, they hold back from doing so.

Explaining that Luz is the same place as Beth El (v. 6) is unnecessary after 28:19, and it is even less necessary to tell us that the place is in Canaan, but rhetorically this note functions to remind us once again that Jacob is back home in the promised land. God has fulfilled his pledge.

Jacob in turn fulfills God’s commission (v. 7), designating God by the name of a place rather than by the name of a person (e.g., “God of Abraham”) even more unequivocally than God himself did in 31:13. Such is the vital importance of God’s having “revealed himself” (*gālāh* niphal) to Jacob at that place when he was under pressure and on the run. That verb comes only here in Genesis: indeed, the First Testament elsewhere uses it only in connection with Eli’s line, with Samuel, and with Isaiah (1 Sam 2:27; 3:21; Isa 22:14).

What had been happening to Rebekah (v. 8) over the past twenty-plus years? We never get to hear that story, or to hear when she died. Perhaps she had sent her nanny Deborah (24:59) to get Jacob in fulfilment of her promise in 27:45, and Deborah died on the way home.[[584]](#footnote-584) Or perhaps Rebekah and Deborah had spent time at Beth El and Deborah had died there some while before, so that Jacob found her tomb there, somewhere just below the height on which Beth El itself stood, under a tree (cf. 1 Sam 31:13), where graves are often still located.[[585]](#footnote-585) It might thus be a place well-known to some of the audience. The account of Deborah’s death and burial is just the first such account in this chapter, all part of closing off the story of Isaac’s line of descent.

**35:9-15.** The account of God’s appearing to Jacob constitutes an alternative summary account of much of the story from 28:10—35:8. Its opening implies reference to God’s appearing to Jacob after he left Paddan Aram, recounted in 32:24-31. But the formulation of God’s words of blessing takes up God’s promise to Abraham in 17:1-22 whose wording had already recurred in Isaac’s blessing in 28:3-4.

17:1-8, 22 28:3-4, 18 35:9-12

Yahweh appeared to Abram God appeared to Jacob

and said to him, I am El Shadday El Shadday—may he bless you He blessed him… God said to him, I am El Shadday.

I will make you very, very numerous and make you fruitful Be fruitful

I will make you very, very fruitful and make you numerous and numerous.

You will no longer . You will no longer

be named Abram be named Jacob.

Your name will be Abraham. Israel will be your name.

You will become the ancestor. so you become. A congregation of nations

of a horde of nations a congregation of peoples will come into being from you.

From you kings will come out. Kings will come out from your insides.

I will give to you May he give to you Abraham’s blessing, The country that I gave to Abraham… I will give to you,

and to your offspring after you to you and to your offspring with you, and I will give the country to your offspring after you.

the country so you take possession of the country

where you are residing as aliens. where you are residing as aliens,

which God gave Abraham.

When he had finished speaking with him, God withdrew from him at

God withdrew from Abraham. the site where he spoke with him.

He got the rock… Jacob put up…

and put it up as a standing stone a standing stone

This rock that I have set up a standing stone of rock.

as a standing stone.

He poured out a libation on it.

He poured oil on the top of it. He poured oil on it.

He named the site Beth El. He named the site where God spoke with him Beth El.

The only new note in vv.9-15 is thus the comment on pouring a libation, which was a regular feature of daily, monthly, and annual offerings in Israel according to Num 28—29. The emphasis in vv. 9-15 and the significance of the section is that God has affirmed for Jacob his commitment to Abraham (ironically after Gen 34, the great omission in the recollection of Gen 17 is reference to circumcision) and has confirmed Isaac’s blessing prayer for him.

**35:16-22a.** Whereas God had told Jacob to move from the Shechem area to Beth El, there is no such commission in connection with this further move south. The end of the chapter will imply that the clan is on its way to Mamre, but there is no indication at this point that Jacob is deliberately working his way there. They have come about half way, perhaps two or three days’ journey from Beth El. Ephrat (nothing to do with Ephraim, to the north) is apparently an area that includes Beth Lehem. Rachel gives birth a little further north of that area, not far from Jerusalem (other references make the location of Ephrat a more complicated matter and raise the question whether there were two place called Ephrat, north and south of Jerusalem: see 1 Sam 10:2; Jer 31:15).[[586]](#footnote-586) One wonders about the background to the clan’s undertaking this move when Rachel is extremely pregnant, but maybe she went into labor early and they had been hoping to reach Eprat or Mamre before the baby came.

Rachel’s midwife (v. 17) is “the functional counterpart of Rebekah’s nurse.”[[587]](#footnote-587) Her words of encouragement recur in a similar context in 1 Sam 4:20, reflecting the way death in childbirth is a recurrent event in a traditional society—and perhaps you are more or less as likely to die in childbirth if you stay put as if you are on the move.[[588]](#footnote-588) “There is scarcely a text in the patriarchal stories which shows so clearly the harshness of their life-style.”[[589]](#footnote-589) Yet the midwife’s encouragement indicates that Rachel’s own prayer in 30:24 is being answered.

Only for this son of Jacob does Genesis make no comment on his name(s) (v. 18).[[590]](#footnote-590) Ben-’oni could mean “son of my sorrow” or “son of my vigor”,[[591]](#footnote-591) and both meanings would be applicable. Like the change from Abram to Abraham, the change to Benjamin does not involve too drastic an alteration. The adjective *ben-yᵉmînî* could imply “my right hand son,” with which one might compare the English expression “right hand man”; perhaps the name would indicate that Jacob will keep his youngest son at his right hand, for his mother’s sake.[[592]](#footnote-592) Or the adjective might imply “son of the south” (for people who orient on the east, the south is on their right-hand side); Benjamin was the only son not born in the north, in Harran. But the actual name is *binyamin* (as opposed to *benyamin*) and it corresponds to the name *binu jamina* known from Mari on the Euphrates, the area Jacob has returned from, where it did mean “son of the south.”[[593]](#footnote-593) So Jacob likely brought the name from Harran. Does he rename the baby because either of the possible meanings of Ben-’oni is too painful? But a modern midrash has Rachel commenting, “In choosing this name for my son, I wanted Jacob to know that this child was the fruit of our love and that I didn’t regret dying to give him life. And Jacob respected my wishes… by repeating my meaning within his own act of naming. He knew precisely what I meant when I chose my baby’s name.”[[594]](#footnote-594)

Rachel’s death and burial (vv. 19-20) follow on the reference to Deborah’s death and burial but it is a more grievous death for Jacob than that of his mother’s nanny. Jacob marks it in the same way as that death had been marked, but he does so with a more solid and notable monument that reflects what Rachel meant to him, a kind of gravestone to mark the place where they had laid Rachel. Like Western people who may go to talk to a loved one at their grave, it would be a place where people could go and talk to Rachel. “The caravan then departs, leaving the grave of the mother behind it, and the newly born child, who has now no mother, is taken along.”[[595]](#footnote-595) The story thus continues to prepare the way for the final death to be related, at Mamre. And from her tomb Rachel continues to weep in Jeremiah’s day, not just for this one child but for all her children trudging off into exile (Jer 31:15-17), and she does so again for the babies who die as a result of Jesus’s birth (Matt 2:17-18). “Dying always happens in the midst of new life. Living always happens in the midst of death. There is, after all, a time to be born and a time to die (Eccles. 3:2). And this time… is both times.”[[596]](#footnote-596)

Herd Tower (v. 21) was presumably further south on the road along the ridge. It will have been one of many towers that provided shelter and lookout posts for farmers and shepherds (cf. Isa 5:2). If Jacob “spread his tent,” he was settling down for a while again, not simply making an overnight stay (cf. 26:25; 33:19), which confirms that we are not reading about a simple relocation from Beth El to Mamre.

Reuben’s bedding Bilhah (v. 22a) further prepares for the end of Part Three of Genesis. Reuben is Jacob’s eldest son, and as such has a natural claim to be the head of the family when Jacob dies. To start appropriating his father’s women is to underscore his perception of himself and his presentation of himself to other people as the natural next head of the family (see e.g., Deut 22:30 [23:1]; 2 Sam 3:7; 12:7-8; 1 Kings 2:13-25). Bilhah is regularly the object of things that people do: Laban gives her to Rachel, Rachel gives her to Jacob, Jacob takes her off from Harran and pushes her ahead to meet Esau with the rest of the family, and Reuben beds her. We will discover that he has miscalculated: see 49:3-4, where ironically (in light of Rachel’s naming of Benjamin) Jacob calls Reuben *rē’šît ’ônî*, “the first fruit of my vigor.” Bilhah was Rachel’s maidservant and there may be a suggestion that after Rachel’s death Bilhah might take her place as Jacob’s favorite wife, so that bedding Bilhah in particular is significant in connection with Reuben’s ambitions. Once again Jacob hears about it, which (notwithstanding 34:5) hints that there may be action in due course (see 49:3-4); compare the sequence in Num 12:2, 4.[[597]](#footnote-597)

**35:22b-26**. Benjamin’s birth has brought to completion the roster of Jacob’s twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve Israelite clans; Benjamin is of course the exception to the general statement that all the sons were born in Paddan Aram. The list notes (pointedly in the context of v. 22a) that Reuben is Jacob’s firstborn, another term that recurs in Jacob’s description of him in 49:3-4. The sons come in a different order from the account in Gen 29:31-30:24—there the order was Leah, then her handmaid, the Rachel’s handmaid, then Rachel herself.

**35:27-29.** At last we arrive at to the end of Genesis Part Three. Jacob had understood God to be promising that he would come back to his father’s household with things being well (28:21), and he has done so. “The description of Jacob and Isaac’s reunion is laconic and utterly devoid of all emotional detail, unlike the meeting between Jacob and Esau.”[[598]](#footnote-598) What matters is the objective fact. The cycle has reached completion.

We arrive also at the end of the Isaac story (v. 28). Apparently Rebekah has died, so she never experienced the reunion with her favorite son that she expected. And apparently Isaac has moved from Beer Sheba to Mamre and Rebekah has died there, and so she has been buried in the Double Cave (49:31).

So Isaac “breathed out and died, and was gathered to his kin” (v. 29), like his father and his brother (cf. 25:8, 17). He was “full of time” with the implication “satisfied” (*šābēa*‘) with his span of life. While Abraham was “full” (25:8), elsewhere only Job is called “full of time” (42:17). Neatly, as in the Abraham story “Isaac and Ishmael, his sons, buried him” (25:9), Isaac’s two sons (named in the Esau-Jacob order) bury him.

## Beth El

Beth El is a puzzle, in more than one sense. There is a puzzle over its relationship with Luz. Whereas this story implies that Jacob here renames Luz as Beth El, the name Luz does not seem to die out (see 35:6; Josh 16:2; 18:13; Judg 1:22-26). Further, Josh 16:2 implies that Luz and Beth El are distinguishable if nearby places (cf. Josh 18:13). Possibly Beth El was originally the name of a sanctuary near Luz but the fame of the sanctuary eventually led to its replacement as the town’s name.[[599]](#footnote-599) Whereas Luz was just a “town,” Beth El is a worship site, a place where God appeared.[[600]](#footnote-600) There is a related question about Beth El’s location. Archeologists have assumed that it corresponds to the modern Beitin,[[601]](#footnote-601) ten miles north of Jerusalem, but we have no direct evidence for the correctness of this assumption. Further, Beth El may also have been the name of a god,[[602]](#footnote-602) and Jacob will later call this place El Beth El (35:7).

The biggest puzzle concerns its status or reputation in different periods. In the First Testament narrative covering the time before David, it is a respected sanctuary (1 Sam 7:16; 10:3), and the Jacob story would make sense against this context. After David’s day it became one of the renegade Ephraimite sanctuaries (e.g., 1 Kings 12—13). It was a center of Elijah and Elisha’s activity In their day (see 2 Kings 2), but soon afterwards Hosea and Amos speak snidely about it as a “house of wickedness” rather than a “house of God” and declared judgment on it (e.g., Amos 3:14; 5:5; Hos 4:15; 10:15); and Josiah destroyed it (2 Kings 23). But subsequently, people from Beth El feature among the people who returned from Babylon (Ezra 2:28), and the people send from Beth El to inquire of Yahweh in Jerusalem (Zech 7:1-3).

It is not clear how the Jacob story relates to the long history of this town and sanctuary. On one hand, “the Old Testament tradition contains not the slightest hint that 28:10ff could have served as a later legitimation for the worship arrangements of Jeroboam I.”[[603]](#footnote-603) On the other, if the story existed in Jeroboam’s day, Jacob would surely seem to have anticipatorily done a favor to Jeroboam as the first king of Ephraim, when Jeroboam made Beth El the location of one of his nation’s sanctuaries. He would have been able to assert that Beth El had a great Israelite ancestry—unlike Johnny-come-lately Jerusalem.

1. As far as I know, M. A. Fishbane first made this observation (“Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle,” *JJS* 26 [1975]: 15-38; cf. his *Text and Texture*, 40-62). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 210 (his italics). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I think I owe this phrase to T. E. Fretheim but I cannot now locate it. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2:260. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thus Zimmerli, for instance, covers 11:27—25:11 in the second volume of his commentary, *1. Mose 12—25* (he did not complete the commentary on 25:12—50:26). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On this expression, see the comment on 25:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. LXX, Vg have “he dwelt,” an easier reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For *nāpal*, Vg has “he died,” which is a common enough meaning but does not fit here. LXX, Tg repeat the translation “dwelt” from 16:12, but the verb does not have thiwas gathered toing anywhere else, even Judg 7:12 (cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 271). “Fall on” means “attack,” and in Nah 1:2 “fall on/in the face of” has the same meaning. See *DCH* 6:720-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The “tolerative niphal,” when you let something happen to you, followed by *l* of the implicit agent (GK 51c, 121f). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. LXX “jump” apparently takes the verb as from *rûṣ* rather than *rāṣaṣ*; contrast Vg. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rebekah’s sentence breaks off. The *zeh* strengthens the *lāmmāh* (cf. 3:13; 12:18; 18:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Formally the colon is ambiguous and could mean that the younger will serve the greater/older; but that point would hardly need making. On the ambiguity, see Anderson, *Jacob*, 59-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The verb is active singular (contrast v. 25), more literally “one named him.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Tām* most often describes a person as having integrity (e.g., Job 1:1); cf. *tāmîm* (Gen 6:9; 17:1) and the noun *tōm* (20:5, 6). With this meaning the description would carry heavy irony in the Jacob story, or it might anticipatorily invite readers to soften their judgment on him when he seems to act dishonorably (see Y. Zakovitch, “Inner-biblical Interpretation,” in Hendel (ed.), *Reading Genesis*, 92-118 (108). Yet a man of integrity is a man who is resolute in a particular way, and the broader meaning of resolute makes sense when applied to Jacob. LXX, Vg have “simple,” a meaning not far from “innocent” in the sense attaching to *tōm* in (e.g.) 2 Sam 15:11, while *DCH* suggests “safe” for *tāmîm* in 2 Sam 22:33. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. LXX has him living “at home,” which he was, but the phrase more likely relates to his occupation (cf. 4:20). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Presumably Isaac’s mouth (cf. LXX, Vg); compare the English expression “he had a taste for game.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. While *’āhēb* meant “love” when used of Isaac in 24:67, it will mean “like” in 27:4, 9, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Literally, he “stewed stew”; *zîd*/z*ûd* more commonly refer to someone metaphorically “seething” or “being in a stew,” and the expression may hint that Jacob was in a stew about Esau. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cf. LXX, Vg: not “your birthright,” for which the expression is *mišpaṭ* *bᵉkôrāh* (Deut 21:17); the same applies to the reference in Greek in Heb 12:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I.e., “right now.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 520. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See further the introductory comment on 28:10-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cf. V. Lieber in Eskenazi/Weiss (eds.). *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, 152-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:40-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Mbuvi, *Belonging in Genesis*, 111-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on v. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. A. W. Engar, “Old Testament Women as Tricksters,” in Toller/Maier (eds.), 143-57 (144); cf. Adelman, *Female Ruse*, 11-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Arnold, *Genesis*, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Hamilton (*Genesis 18—50*, 176-77) notes the lack of reference to methods of divination or to mediators such as prophets; see further E. E. Fleming’s study of “independent divination” in “‘She Went to Inquire of the Lord,’” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 60 (2007): 1-10. TgNeoph has Rebekah going to Shem’s Study House (seek is *dāraš* and “study” is *midraš*), and Ephrem (“Commentary on Genesis,” 171) has her consulting Melkizedeq, whom Jewish tradition identified with Shem. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. And cf. De La Torre’s critique of this way of thinking, *Genesis*, 245-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 414. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See *HALOT*. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. M. Tsevat on *bᵉkôr*, *TDOT* 2:122. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See Driver, *Genesis*, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. S. Weiss has studied “The Ethics of Price Gouging” in this story (*Journal of Religious Ethics* 45 [2017]: 142-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Kidner, *Genesis*, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Visotzky, *Genesis of Ethics*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Reno, *Genesis*, 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Genesis* 2:45-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *Genesis 21—25*, 366-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. I adapt the formulation of E. P. Sanders: see e.g., *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. D. S Gregory and W. W. Evert. “The Book of Genesis Unfolded,” *Christian Faith and* Life 6 (1907): 65-77 cf. Driver, *Genesis*,255. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. MT (L) has *’ăbîmmelek*, perhaps to distinguish him from the earlier *’ăbîmelek* (see Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 183). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. *Gûr* generates paronomasia with the name Gerar—an appropriate place to be a *gēr*. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Simple *waw* plus yiqtol, practically signifying “so I may be with you and bless you.” [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. “Because” in effect introduces a citation of the promise to Abraham, not just a separate reason (Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2:280). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. SP has *’ištî hî* “she is my wife” (cf. LXX), which makes for a smoother reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Abimelek uses the idiom which combines an infinitive and its cognate finite verb to indicate emphasis, but in contrast to passages such as 2:17 and 20:7, the finite verb is hophal: see the comment. He uses the same idiom in v. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. For the hapax *šᵉ‘ārîm* LXX has *śᵉ‘ārîm* “barley.” [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. SP, Vg makes explicit that “they” refers to “the servants of his father Abraham.” [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Literally “living water,” i.e., running water. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Perhaps in the sense of “up-country,” given that Beer Sheba is not at a higher elevation. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. The subject precedes the verb, marking a new subject and paragraph. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. See the comment on 24:41. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. The *waw* plus cohortative suggests a purpose clause (GK 108d). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Abimelek leaves the rest of the terms of the oath unstated. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. See G. G. Nicol, “The Narrative Structure and Interpretation of Genesis xxvi 1-33,” *VT* 46 (1996):339-60; he sees the unit as illustrating the interrelationship of promise, threat, and partial fulfillment which runs through much of Gen 12—50. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. See further G. G. Nicol, “The Chronology of Genesis,” *VT* 46 (1996): 330-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Brett, *Genesis*, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. See e.g., Coats, *Genesis*, 191; Van Seters, *Abraham*, 167-91; E. Boase, “Life in the Shadows,” *VT* 51 (2001): 312-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. See the comment on 20:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Cf. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. So *Jub* 24:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:59-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. See the comment on 21:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Cf. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* *46—67*,59. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 529. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. *Genesis*, 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. *Genesis*, on v. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. See further S. Greengus, “The Anachronism in Abraham’s Observance of the Laws,” *HUCA* 86 (2015): 1-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. See the cpmment. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. See J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003) 1:349-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Brichto, *The Names of God*, 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 26-30*, 3-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Skinner, *Genesis*, 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. See BDB, 932b; but see the comments in E. Robinson et al., *Biblical Researches in Palestine* (2nd ed., London: Murray, 1856) 1:196-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. And see the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Cf. Speiser, *Genesis*, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Ironically, *yᵉhûdît* elsewhere means Yehudite or Jewish and generates the name Judith. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. SP, LXX have Hivvite. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. *Mōrāh* could carry the overtones of “an expression of rebellion” (from *mārāh* rather than *mārar*); cf. Tg. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. The meaning of this hapax is a matter of guesswork (see Tal, *Genesis*, 144-45\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. The cohortative marks the clause as purpose or result (GK 108d); the idiom recurs in v. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Literally, “and my *nepeš* will bless you”; simple *waw* plus yiqtol practically signifies “so my *nepeš* may….,” as in 26:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. LXX suggests *lᵉ’ābîw* “for his father” instead of *lᵉhābî’*, an easier reading since that verb would usually have an object. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. *Tā‘a‘* “scorn” carries the overtones of *tā‘āh* “go astray” and thus “mislead,” if they are not variants of the same word (so e.g., Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 261; cf. *GenR* 65:15). [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. As with the verb *qālal*, so with the related noun “one does better to keep the word ‘curse’ for the root *’rr*; *qll* rather means“reduce” (Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2:296; see the comment on 8:21). It suggests shrinking as opposed to increasing. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. LXX, Vg “brought” implies *wayyābē’* for *wayyābō’*,assimilating to vv. 10, 14, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. SP prefaces the verb with interrogative *h* to make explicit that the sentence is a question, as in v. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. The rare (singular) imperative alternative for *hinnēh* has no literal addressee. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. *Mišmannê* is more likely plural construct from the noun *mišmān* (*DCH*)with the preposition *min* understood from the parallel colon, than a misspelling of *miššᵉmannê* (*min* plus the plural construct of a hapax noun *šāmān*; BDB, *HALOT*) or an abbreviation of *mimmišmanê* (Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse).The plural of amplification is then explained by the succeeding colon. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. While *hĕyēh* is the only imperative in the blessing, and there are no morphologically unambiguous jussives, the use of this imperative coheres with the context in suggesting that the rest of vv. 28-29 is more like an empowerment and commission than a prediction. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. LXX implies singular *lᵉ’aḥîkā* for MT *lᵉ’aḥeykā*, assimilating to 25:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. LXX, Vg, TgNeoph resolve the move from plural to singular in each colon in v. 29b (distributive singular, suggesting each one: GK145l) by making everything singular. TgOnq does so by making everything plural. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Genesis uses the idiom which combines an infinitive and its cognate finite verb to indicate emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. The narrative uses an idiom that combines a verb, its related noun, an adjective, and an adverbial expression: Isaac “trembled a big trembling very much.” It uses this idiom again in v. 34: “he cried a great and bitter cry, very much.” [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Tg has “with smartness,” implying approval of Jacob and disapproval of Esau (so also in v. 36). Sym nicely has “by means of an ambush,” Aq “by laying hands [on you].” [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. On the use of *zeh*, see the footnote to 31:38. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. LXX adds, “Isaac was silent,” Aaron’s reaction to his sons’ death in Lev 10:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. The line compares and contrasts with v. 28b. The word order with the adverbial phrase preceding the verb now suggests a concessive clause (likewise in v. 40a). The preposition *min* again has to be understood before *mišmannê*, now being back-projected from the second colon into the first (a recognized practice in Hebrew poetry; the link with v. 28 makes it easy enough). But the *min* now changes its meaning from partitive to locative in a way that underlines the grievousness of the loss Esau is to experience (as MT repeats *min*, LXX repeats *apo* and Chrysostom assumes it keeps the partitive meaning [*Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, 89], though Vg changes from *de* to *in*). [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. The exact meaning of *tārîd* is debated but the approximate meaning seems clear (see Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 225); Tg in effect makes the phrase refer to Israel’s wandering from the Torah, which will justify its losing the mastery over Edom. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. As in English, “the words of Esaw her older son” is treated as if the object of an active verb “they told” (see GK 121a). [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. “Get yourself” represents *lᵉkā*, literally simply “for yourself”; cf. 28:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. For this connotation of *gam*, see GK 154a, note 1(c). [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. The negative is *lō’* not *‘al*, as in the Decalogue, suggesting a particularly categorical prohibition. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. The name of God comes before the verb, as it regularly does, suggesting emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. *Qāhāl*: not merely “hordes” (Vg); LXX *sunagōgas* “assemblies” has nicely suggestive connotations. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. For *‘ammîm* TgOnq has *šbṭyn* “clans,” which make the expression refer to Israel rather than the nations (TgPsJ has a longer paraphrase). [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. See *IBHS* 32.3d for this understanding of the *weqatal* verb. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2:296-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Westermann treats them separately (*Genesis 12—36*, 444-49). [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. E. Blum, “The Jacob Tradition,” in Evans et al. (eds.), *Book of Genesis*, 181-211 (189). [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. See A. Olrik, “Epic Laws of Folk Narrative,” in Dundes (ed.), *Study of Folklore*, 129-41 (134-35). [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 534. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Cf. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. N. A. Steinberg, “The World of the Family in Genesis,” in Evans et al. (eds.), *Book of Genesis*, 279-300 (285). [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Coats, *Genesis*, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 105 (referring to 27:1—28:5). [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:82. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. So Philo, e.g., *On Drunkenness* II (9-10); XXXI (120). [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. *City of God* 16:37. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. See Luther, *Genesis 26—30*,99-179. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:81-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah* 2:380. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. On Luther’s calculation, Isaac is now 137 (*Genesis 26—30*, 99); cf. the comments in Driver, *Genesis*, 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Cf. D. Sylva, “The Blessing of a Wounded Patriarch,” *JSOT* 32 (2008): 267-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 254, though the Rebekah story as a whole does not suggest that she fits the picture of the powerless person who functions as a trickster (see Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 110). [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. So Brayford, *Genesis*, 350-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. So A. J. Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster, Heel and Hairy Man,” in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, 282-95; and see further Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 111-18. . J. Zucker (“The Deceiver Deceived,” *JBQ* 39 [2011]: 46-58) argues that there is collusion between Isaac and Rebekah, who are deceiving Jacob. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 192-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Other passages add oil (cf. TgNeoph here, also *Jub* 26:23, 31). [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. See J. H. Han, “The Role of ‘an Audience’ in Isaac’s Blessing in Genesis 27,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 42 (2015): 5-10; and the additional comment on “Blessing” below. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Sarna, *Genesis*, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Though Driver (*Genesis*, 260) gives a positive portrayal of Edom’s territory in support of the view that *min* keeps its partitive meaning, so that Isaac’s first line is positive not negative. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 443. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. R. Alter, “Literature,” in Hendel (ed.), *Reading Genesis*,13-27 (24). [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 443. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 238-40; contrast De La Torre, *Genesis*, 261-62.See further the introductory “Interpretation” comments on Gen 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Josephus, *Antiquities* I, 19:1; though according to *Jub* 27:6-7, Rebekah is manipulated by Jacob. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Luther, *Genesis 26—30*, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Brett, *Genesis*, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Augustine, *City of God* 16:38. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* *46—67*, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. See the comments on 26:34-35 and 36:2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. *Exposition on Genesis*,as quoted in Schroeder, *Genesis*, 154; an equivalent point could be made about the Lord’s Supper and about baptism (cf. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 256).. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. See the discussion of this story in B. Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 76-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. See the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. TgNeoph, TgPsJ neatly take *pāga‘* to have the rarer meaning “entreat” as in 23:8, and thus “pray at,” which Jacob does end up doing (see further the comment), but one would have to take the first clause in v. 11 as part of the anticipatory summary of the section. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Literally “the site” (see GK 126r). [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Not “one of” (EVV), which would require a word for “one” (e.g., 2:21; 3:22); cf. TgPsJ, Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Accusative of place (Skinner, *Genesis*, 376; cf. LXX), in the terms of European grammar; not “under” his head (Vg), as a pillow (for which a stone would not be very comfortable): *mᵉra’ăšōt* suggests that it is more in the position of a headboard (cf. 1 Sam 19:13, 16; 26:7, 11, 16; 1 Kings 19:6). [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. LXX and Vg have words that denote a ladder or staircase. M. Oblath suggests it was something like a gate structure (“‘To Sleep, Perchance to Dream…,’” *JSOT* 95 [2001]: 117-26). [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. *GenR* 68:12; 69:3 assume “on him” and explain that they were over him protecting him. This understanding of *bô* facilitates John 1:51: cf. M. J. J. Menken, “Genesis in John’s Gospel and 1 John,” in Moyise/Menken (eds.), *Genesis in the NT*, 83-98 (85-88). But the repeated *hinnēh* (“there”) indicates that story is being told as through Jacob’s own eyes (cf. E. van Wolde, “Cognitive Linguistics and Its Application to Genesis 28:10-22,” in P. C. Counet and U. Berges (eds.), *One Text, a Thousand Methods* (S. van Tilborg Festschrift; Boston: Brill, 2005), 125-48 (138-39). [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. *Niṣṣāb* *‘al* means “standing by him” in 18:2; 45:1, and “standing over him” would be appropriate, but it is not the regular connotation of *niṣṣab* *‘al*, and by the reasoning remarked in the previous footnote more likely Yahweh is “standing by it” (cf. 24:13, 43). LXX, Vg have Yahweh leaning on the ladder, a nice image. Standing “over it” in the sense of “on top of it” stretches the preposition and distances Yahweh from the proximity suggested by what follows. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. *’Ereṣ* “earth” and *’ădāmāh* “land,” which overlap in meaning like their English equivalents, are used in an idiosyncratic way in vv. 12-15; in v. 14 Yahweh was taking up the phraseology of 12:3 where *’ădāmāh* means the land in the world as a whole, but in v. 15 *’ădāmāh* has a more defined meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. *‘Ad* does not imply that once Yahweh has finished, he will abandon Jacob (see GK 164f). [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. I follow SP’s punctuation in attaching this verb to the previous sentence (Tal, *Genesis*, 148\*). He was not “afraid”(see the comment on 9:2); Yahweh’s words in vv. 13-15 would not invite fear. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. See previous footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Literally, “the gateway of the heavens.” This expression, like “the house of God,” is a construct phrase, and constructs are almost invariably definite. Constructs preceding names can be exceptions, and that preceding phrase might thus properly be rendered “a house of God,” but that possibility would not apply to the second phrase. Nevertheless the phrases do not designate the place as the one-and-only house of God or heavenly gateway, and in effect they do suggest “a house of God” and “a gateway into the heavens.” [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. That is, one of the rocks referred to in v. 11; again cf. GK 126r. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. LXX “and he will bring me back” assimilates to the form of the rest of Yahweh’s statement in vv. 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Literally, “Yahweh will be for God for me.” Vv. 20b-22 comprises a sequence of yiqtol and weqatalclauses, with no syntactical indication where the if-clause gives way to the then-clause, and LXX preserves the ambiguity of the Hebrew (on which cf. also Y. Peleg, *Going Up and Going Down* [London: Bloomsbury, 2015], 141-55). But whereas Vg locates the transition before the last of the clauses in v. 21 (“then Yahweh will be God for me”), MT’s versification rightly assumes that the if-clause rather extends right through v. 21, with the transition from the if-clause to the then-clause signaled by the switch in v. 21 to clauses in which the subjects precede the verbs, which are thus yiqtol rather than weqatal. Cf. TgNeoph; Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 320. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Literally, tenthing I will tenth,” the idiom which couples the infinitive of a verb and a finite form, for emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 452. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. “Modern scholars are in full agreement concerning this source analysis” (Gunkel, *Genesis*, 309). Gunkel could not know that the phrase “modern scholars agree” would become the kiss of death. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. R. Hendel, “Cultural Memory,” in Hendel (ed.), *Reading Genesis*, 28-46 (35-36). Peleg (*Going Up and Going Down*) suggests that it also symbolized the Israelites’ journey out of the land, which will correspond to Jacob’s—so they can be sure that their return will correspond, too. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. See further the comment on 13:10-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. So Peleg, *Going Up and Going Down*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 19:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. So Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 319; cf. TgNeoph, TgPsJ. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Cf. Reno, *Genesis*, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (revised ed., Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Luther, *Genesis 25—30*, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18--50*, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 456. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Peleg, *Going Up and Going Down*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 260, quoting from Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 6 on “The Dedication of the Church.” [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Ephrem, “Commentary on Genesis,” 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 245-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. See J. L. Kelso, *The Excavation of Bethel* ([Cambridge, MA] American School of Oriental Research, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 66-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. See the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. On Beth El and Luz, see the additional comment at the end of the commentary on Gen 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:123. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Sarna, *Genesis*, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 543. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Literally, “lifted up his feet” (see the comment). [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Vg takes this phrase to mean simply “the country to the east.” [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. SP has anarthrous *’eben*, implying “a big stone was on the well’s mouth.” [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Literally, “big.” [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. In the sense of relative; as the previous verse indicates, he is actually Laban’s nephew. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. In the (intensive) piel; Jacob had delicately kissed Rachel only in the qal. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Vg “And after the days of one month were fulfilled…” takes v. 14b as subordinate to v. 15, but the lack of any explicit subject for the verb in v. 14b suggests that MT is right to link v. 14b with what precedes; it is v. 15 that begins the next scene. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Literally, “a month of days.” [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2:328. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Assis, *Identity in Conflict*, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 465. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:128. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. I.e., a member of my family. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. *Rak* can mean soft in the sense of weak (so LXX, Vg), but it need not carry this implication (cf. Deut 28:54, 56) and in this context the positive connotation fits better (cf. Aq, Sym, Tg). Either way, Jacob’s attraction for Rachel is based on her appearance. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Literally, “come into her”; so also in vv. 23, 30; 30:3, 4, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. There being no other first person plurals in the context, I take *wᵉnitnāh* as third person niphal, as in 38:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Vv. 31-34 imply not just “more than”; cf. the use of *min* in Ps 52:3 [5] (Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 129); but see also Gen 38:26 and the footnote, and GK 133b. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 126 (he notes that *‘bd* (serve) and related words also recur. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Cf. T. J. Schneider, In Eskenazi/Weiss (eds.). *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary,* 176*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 327-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 262-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. See the comment on 24:52-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Brayford, *Genesis*, 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. See further Anderson, *Jacob*, 97-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Vg makes explicit that it is Jacob (not Rachel) who does the rejecting. B. Wells (“First Wives Club,” *Maarav* 18 [2011)] 101-29) argues that this rejection implies a demotion from the quasi-legal position of senior wife. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. I infer the tense of the noun cause from the context, but no doubt it implies “and I *am* rejected still.” [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. LXXA “it was called” takes the third person verb as impersonal; it confirms MT’s unexpected masculine verb. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. TgPsJ has Rachel urging Jacob to pray that Yahweh would enable her to get pregnant. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. He did not merely “get angry” (LXX, Vg) nor does *ḥārāh* suggest kindling in the sense of starting a fire (so BDB, *HALOT*, *DCH*). His rage became overpowering (Tg). [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. TgOnq and TgPsJ have Jacob suggesting that Rachel should be praying: “Is it from me that you are asking—isn’t it from before Yahweh you should ask?” Even more neatly, TgNeoph has Jacob suggesting that they should both pray. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. On the two words translated handmaid and maidservant in vv. 3-4, see the footnote to 21:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. TgOnq has “he has accepted my prayer” (cf. TgPsJ). [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. For this use of *’ĕlōhîm*, cf. 14:6 and the footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Literally, “twistings of God I have twisted.” Tg take this as another reference to prayer—in effect, “[in] twistings in relation to God, I have twisted with my sister”; the subsequent reference to “winning” would encourage one to read the puzzling expression in light of 32:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. The ketib *bgd* “what luck,” implying *bᵉgād* (in pause; cf. LXX, Vg), anticipates *bᵉ’ošrî* in v. 13. Perhaps both are instances of *bᵉ* as *b* of identity (*bet essentiae*; cf. Job 23:13; Ps 54:6; Isa 28:16), on which see GK 119i; *HALOT* 104. B. Hartmann gains a similar meaning by seeing the *b* as a kind of copula, thus “It’s luck/it’s my good fortune” (“‘Es gibt keine Kraft und keine Macht ausser bei Gott,’” *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 14 [1965]: 115-21 [119]; cf. *HALOT* 105). The qere has *bā’ gād* “luck has come” (cf. Tg, Aq, Sym). [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. The qatal verb suggests something so certain it can be described as having already happened (GK 106n). [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Literally “and for taking” (cf. *TTH* 204). SP suggests adding a shewa at the end of the verb, which then becomes second person qatal, “and you will take” (cf. Tal, *Genesis*, 151-52\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Leah uses the idiom which combines an infinitive and its cognate finite verb to indicate emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Again, Tg have God accepting Leah’s prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. The qere has *yiśśśākār* (!), the ketib *ysskr.* The name might comprise two components (see Skinner, *Genesis*, 389) or might goes back to an archaic verb form meaning “He [God] rewards” (see Sarna, *Genesis*, 210)*: t*he qere spelling perhaps suggests that behind the meaning “hire” for the verb *śākar* is a more general meaning “reward” (cf. BDB). [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. TgOnq “the dwelling of my husband will be with me” (cf. TgPsJ; Aq) works with a different meaning of *zābal* for which see *DCH*. MT’s verb’s having a direct object makes this understanding difficult, though Ibn Ezra notes possible parallels (*Genesis*, 287). [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Once again TgOnq has “accepted her prayer.” [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Arnold, *Genesis*, 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 268-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Cf. W. A. Bailey, “Intimate Moments,” in *Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 29 (2009): 1-14 (3). [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 554. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Cf Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 554. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 289, 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. See the footnote to v. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—30*, 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Cf. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 186-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Tg provides such references: see the footnotes. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 167, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. See the footnote to 16:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. See the comment on 16:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Cf. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, e.g., 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—20*, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. See O. Keel, *The Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 256-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. See further Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on v. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Brayford, *Genesis*, 361. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. See the comment on 29:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. Sarna, *Genesis*, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Frankel, *Five Books of Miriam*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:244. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. On the paucity of reference to daughters in Genesis, see I. N. Rashkow, “Daughters and Fathers in Genesis,” in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 22-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2:337. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Cf. Driver, *Genesis*, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 555. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. For ethical judgments with varying bases see e.g., Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* *46—67*, 125-32; Calvin, *Genesis* 2:134-49; De La Torre, *Genesis*,268-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. For the verb *nāḥaš*, cf. 44:5, 15. TgOnq, TgNeoph have “I have tested,” a less shocking thought than the idea that Yahweh responded to divination (TgPsJ retains that idea). The Akkadian verb *naḫāšu* means “prosper” (cf. *DCH*)*,* and a verb with this meaning would fit in the context and avoid that thought, but such a Hebrew cognate is not otherwise known. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Literally, “and.” [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. LXX, Vg have “God”: Laban of course would not say “Yahweh,” but the narrator knows that it was Yahweh who so acted. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. Literally, “blessed you for my foot.” [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. Following onthe opening first person verb,the ambiguous *hasēr* is more likely infinitive absolute than imperative (cf. Tg). LXX, Vg have both verbs as imperative, assimilating to what actually happens in v. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. On this translation, see the footnote to 18:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. We would expect Jacob to say “for” but this would be an unparalleled use of *‘ānāh b* (Skinner, *Genesis*, 392; cf. *DCH* 6:496). Jacob’s usage involves a kind of catachresis. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. *Qāšar* (pual passive here, qal passive participle in v. 42) usually means bind/bind together (cf. Aq), and then conspire. Whereas BDB takes this unique usage to denote ewes that are (individually) well-knit and thus vigorous, the idea of crowding together and pushing forward fits the more regular use better; the implication will not be so different. Vg, Tg, Sym have “early/first,” which might also link with the idea that the stronger sheep conceive in the spring, the weaker in the autumn and/or with the idea that the animals are having their firstborn (see e.g., Pliny, *Natural History* 8:72; Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 68, with Hayward’s notes, 204; Driver, *Genesis*, 280). [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. The singular suffix on *’ênennû* implies that the subject is Laban not “his face,” which is a plural noun and would make one expect a plural suffix (though Lam 4:16 has *pānîm* governing a singular verb: see Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 297). [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Literally, as yesterday, the third. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. A. Wauters notes ironies in the relationship of 30:25-43 to 29:15-30 (and in its relationship to 27:1-40): see “Un retournement de situation aussi amusant qu'insoupçonné,” *RB* 121 (2014): 321-37; “**Ironie** et jeux de mots sur les noms propres,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 90 (2014): 515-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Cf. Frankel, *Five Books of Miriam*. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Reno, *Genesis*, 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. But for ideas on how Jacob’s ploy may have operated, see e.g., Sarna, *Genesis*, 212; Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. S. S. Park, “Transformation and Demarcation of Jacob's ‘Flocks’ in Genesis 30:25-43,” *CBQ* 72 (2010): 667-77 (676). [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Coats, *Genesis*, 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Simple *waw* plus yiqtol, practically signifying “so I may be with you,” as in 26:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. Putting the subject before the verb juxtaposes the two references to “your father” and underscores the contrast between vv. 6 and 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. The *weqatal* verb indicates that this verb does not denote an event that was consecutive on the playing about; it further defines the playing about. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Cf. TgOnq, Vg for this traditional understanding of the hapax *mōnîm* from *mānāh* “count.” TgPsJ has ten “portions” (the meaning of other more common nouns from *mānāh*), while LXX has ten “lambs” (on the basis of what follows). [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. TgOnq reads “some of…” to make explicit that Jacob hasn’t appropriated the entire flock. TgNeoph, TgPsJ read “emptied” and thus move in the opposite direction; LXX likewise has “all.” [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. *Hā’ēl bêt-ēl* with the article, and thus not the regular construct expression for “God of Beth El” (see GK 127f and contrast Gen 35:7). Tg glosses as “the God who revealed himself to you at Beth El” (cf. LXX); Ibn Ezra presupposes an ellipse, “God, the God of Beth El” (*Genesis*, 299). [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. Vg, TgPsJ make explicit that Laban thus camps “in the same highland of Gilead.” [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Literally, “you stole my mind.” [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. The verb *nāhag*, which applied to cattle in v. 18, but here piel rather than qal, further heightening the implied enormity of the action. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Literally, “steal me”: cf. v. 26 and the footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. The context suggests a past tense translation for the noun clause: he had this power, until God took it away. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Literally, “it was for the god [power] of my hand” or “my hand was for a god [power].” “The meaning is certain, but the expression is very obscure” (Skinner, *Genesis*, 398). “I cannot adduce anything certain to bring out the meaning of this idiom” (Luther, *Genesis 31—37*, 52). [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Both “surely went” and “so keen” involve the combination of an infinitive and its finite verb, an idiom which recurs in v. 15 (“totally consumed,” though there the word order is the reverse). In light of the asyndetic relationship between v. 30a and v. 30b, I have taken the first clause as circumstantial; the same logic applies in v. 32, though there the long subject preceding the verb (“the person with whom you find your gods”) gives a clearer signal. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. LXX has “these twenty years,” but singular *zeh* before the noun can hardly have this meaning; it is rather an instance of *zeh* used adverbially (cf. v. 42; 27:36; 43:10; 45:6; see Tal, *Genesis*, 157\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Piel privative from *ḥāṭā’*, related to the noun *ḥaṭṭāt* in v. 36. LXX “pay for” may take the verb (lacking the final root letter aleph) to be *ḥûṭ* meaning “pay for” (see *DCH*; Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 307). [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. See the footnote to v. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. See the footnote to v. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. It’s not clear what is the “it.” “Pact” is feminine and the verb is masculine; see the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. For MT’s plural verb. SP, LXX, Vg, have singular. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:163. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Luther, *Genesis 31—37*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Cf. Brett, *Genesis*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 152-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. So Sarna, *Genesis*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Cf. Reno, *Genesis*, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. See e.g., Van Seters, 78-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. See T. J. Lewis, “Teraphim,” in K. van der Toorn et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (revised ed., Leiden: Brill, 1999), 844-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Luther, *Genesis 31—37*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:171. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. Alter, *Genesis*, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Cf. Brett, *Genesis*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. See Speiser’s comments, *Genesis*, 245-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. See e.g., Driver, *Genesis*, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis*, 2:256-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Luther, *Genesis 31—37*, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. See J. E. Lapsley, “The Voice of Rachel,” in Brenner (ed.), *Genesis*, 233-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Sarna, *Genesis*, 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 306 (but he uses “offense” to translate *ḥaṭṭāt*). [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Kidner, *Genesis*, 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. See e.g., the rules about shepherds in Hammurabi’s “Lawcode,” sections 261-67 (*ANET*, 177); cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2:367. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Cf. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 279-80; and the comment on v. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 188-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Wenham, *Genesis*, 279-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. See *HALOT*. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Cf. BDB. There is also a better-known Miṣpah north of Jerusalem, and more than one place called Miṣpeh. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 575 (his italics). [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Literally “set off and went and returned.” [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. TgNeoph makes explicit that they are a military force. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Jacob uses the idiom which combines an infinitive and its cognate finite verb and thus makes the reminder more emphatic than it was in v. 9 [10]. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Vg has him getting up early, to solve the question of the relationship between the statements in vv. 21b and v. 22a [22b and 23a]. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. The verb *’ābaq*, which etymologically perhaps implies “get dusty” (cf. BDB),comes only here. Did the narrator invent it to generate the assonance with the names in the context—“he wrestled [*wayyē‘ābēq*] with *ya’ăqōb* at the *yabbōq*”? S. Tongue notes that this story itself is a text that “raises dust, obscuring the scene, provoking many commentators to try and interpret what is going on before the dust settles again” (*Between Biblical Criticism and Poetic Rewriting* [Leiden: Brill, 2014], 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. BDB notes that occasionally the verb *nāga‘* nearly equals “strike,” but it does not cite this instance as an example. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Cf. Vg for this translation of the rare verb *yāqa‘*. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. See BDB for the rare verb *śārāh*. Aq, Sym “ruled” derive the verb from *śārar*.LXX, Vg “were strong” suggests the Aramaic verb *šārar*. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. LXX, Vg suggest “you have exerted yourself with God, and with human beings you will overcome,” which makes good sense in the context but involves treating “and with human beings” as an extraposed object, and there is no direct pointer to that understanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* I, 20:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. So Sarna, *Genesis*, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. Ephrem “Commentary on Genesis,” 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. Cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. Cf. Bunn, *“Return to the Land of Your Fathers*,” 104. While “encampment” is the regular singular *maḥănēh*, *maḥănayim* is an example of names that look dual but have singular meaning, such as *yᵉrûšālayim*, and *miṣrayim*, and perhaps ’ărām nahărayim (24:10: see the footnote). The quasi-dual ending is apparently an archaic locative. What is different about *maḥănayim* is that it also occurs here in the singular (cf. also vv. 8 and 21) whose plural is *maḥănôt* (which comes in vv. 7 and 11 where a genuine dual would be appropriate). The parallel with names such as *yᵉrûšālayim* and *miṣrayim* suggests that (as often happens) *maḥănayim* was this place’s longstanding name which finds a new significance through the appearance of a quasi-army to Jacob. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Cf. Calvin’s comments, *Genesis* 2:187. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. See e.g., *ANET*, 623-26; cf. Speiser, *Genesis*, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Brayford, *Genesis*, 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Cf. Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 129-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2:382. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. There is a hint of a further significance in the name Mahanayim with its quasi-dual form (see the footnote above on v. 2), though v. 7 uses the plural *mahănôt* rather than the quasi-dual *mahănayim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Skinner, *Genesis*, 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* *46—67*, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Cf. Frey, *Das Buch des Kampfes*, 131-32 (cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 203). [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 320. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* *46—67*, 156-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2:388. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 511. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. B. A. Anderson, “The Intersection of the Human and the Divine in Genesis 32–33,” *ZAW* 128 (2016): 30-41 (38). [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Anderson, *Jacob*, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 325-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 205-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Cf. Bunn, *“Return to the Land of Your Fathers*,*”* 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Cf Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. On his cowardice and its implications, see S. Frolov, “The Other Side of the Jabbok,” *JSOT* 91 (2000): 41-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. See e.g., Gunkel, *Genesis*, 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. On the rereading and rewriting of this figure over the centuries, see Tongue, *Between Biblical Criticism and Poetic Rewriting*, especially 169-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Cf. Bunn, *“Return to the Land of Your Fathers*,” 137-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. TgNeoph identifies him with the archangel Sariel. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. See Rashi’s comment, *Br’šyt*, 374. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. Cf. B. Howell, “God’s White Flag?” *Southeastern Theological Review* 1 (2010): 29-46 (41). [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. See e.g., S. H. Smith, “‘Heel’ and ‘Thigh,’” *VT* 40 (1990): 464-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. See Fretheim, “Genesis,” 566. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Cf. Arnold, *Genesis*, 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Cf. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. Cf Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 375. [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:279. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. See further M. D. Wessner, “Toward a Literary Understanding of ‘Face to Face,’” *Restoration Quarterly* 44 (2002): 169-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 519. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. See A. Gorospe, *Narrative and Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 166-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. On this theme, see T. E. Fretheim, “Jacob’s Wrestling and Issues of Divine Power,” in Cadwallader/Trudiger (eds.), *Where the Wild Ox Roams*, 181-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. See GK 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. Augustine, *City of God* 16:39. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. *GenR* 79:5 also links the healing with the description of Jacob as *šālēm* in 33:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. Ibn Ezra (*Genesis*, 318) reports the understanding that v. 32 refers to eating the penis. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. Vg has “he cried,” assimilating to the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. LXX has “shown mercy”; but Aq’s “graced” is a more appropriate rendering of *ḥānan*. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. This last occurrence of *nāgaš* is niphal rather than qal, but with no apparent difference in meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Literally, “Who to you this entire camp?” The time reference is suggested by the past tense verbs in the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Vg “as if I might have seen” draws attention away from the actual seeing of God’s face to which 32:30 [31] referred. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. Literally, “the foot.” [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. On this unique usage of *mᵉlā’kāh*, see Tal’s comments, *Genesis*, 160.\* [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. As happened in 32:1 [2], Genesis underscores the contrast over against the previous verse by placing Jacob as the subject before the verb. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. I follow LXX, Vg in taking *šālēm* as the name of a place, as in 14:18 (the phrase “Shechem’s town” then makes clear that this is a different Shalem/Salem from there), rather than an adjective (cf. Tg) which would then mean “safe” or more likely “peaceful” (cf. 34:21). The latter is also appropriate in the context, however, and the text may invite both readings (an invitation accepted by *Jub* 30:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Not “the town of Shekem,” with the genitive then being defining; *‘îr* followed by a name is regularly possessive (cf. Nahor’s town, 24:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. LXX, Vg, Tg have Jacob calling on “God the God of Israel” (cf. Dillmann, Genesis 2:293), which makes good sense but is hard to fit with the use of *lô*. I rather read the name as a sentence (like the name Israel), not an asyndetic phrase (cf. Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 311). [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. See *ANET*, 483-485 (the “Amarna Letters”). [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 524-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. So Skinner, *Genesis*, 412. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. See further the footnote to 32:24 [25]. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. Kidner, *Genesis*, 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 2:207-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* *46—67*, 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis 2/2*: 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. Alter, *Genesis*, 187. Cf. E. J. Bridge, “The ‘Slave’ Is the ‘Master,’” *JSOT* 38 (2014): 263-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* *46—67*, 163 (Anderson, *Jacob*, 165-66, sees Jacob as continuing to be deceptive). [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 527. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 573 (his emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. See F. Crüsemann, “Dominion, Guilt, and Reconciliation,” *Semeia* 66 (1994): 67-77 [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. *The Talmud of the Land of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991) 5: 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. Bunn, *“Return to the Land of Your Fathers*,” 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. Cf. Sarna *Genesis*, 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Speiser (*Genesis*, 260) has “quarters.” [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Cf. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. See the footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on v. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. Cf. J. C. Geoghegan, “Jacob’s Bargain with God,” in S. Malena and D. Miano (eds.), *Milk and Honey* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrains, 2007), 23 -36 (29-30). [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. So Hankore, *Abduction of Dinah*; he sees the events in 34:1-31 as a consequence. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. *Rā’āh b*, more literally “look into”; “the active *qal* verb is highly unsuitable for the following prepositional indirect object” (Tal, *Genesis*, 162\*). *DCH* 7:352 gives this occurrence alone the meaning “visit, meet.” The translation “see” makes the link with *rā’āh* in the next verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. LXX has Horite. [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. *Šākab* usually requires a preposition but it is occasionally transitive, especially when there is a question about the legitimacy of the sexual act (cf. English “he laid her” or “he bedded her”); in v. 7 the *’et* could be read either as the mark of the accusative or as the preposition meaning “with.” Seebass (*Genesis* 2/2: 420) compares 2 Sam 13:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. Literally, “his whole being attached”; similarly in v. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. Literally, “he spoke upon the heart/mind of” (*lēb*). The expression often belongs in context where a person has reason to be discouraged or worried. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. The subject comes before the verb in the first two clauses, marking them as circumstantial (so also v. 7a). [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. The *weqatal* carries the past continuous meaning that can attach to a yiqtol (GK 112ss; *TTH* 133, note). [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. “Us” is the direct object of the hitpael verb; the odd usage recurs in 37:18. See GK117w. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. LXX, Vg, Tg, “trade in” (cf. the participle in 23:16; 37:28) would make good sense, but the use with a direct object makes this understanding difficult (Speiser, *Genesis*, 264-65). [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. LXX takes the two expressions as a hendiadys, but see the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. Tg has “smartness,” as at 27:35. [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. LXX has plural “daughters.” [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. But on the words in this verse see B A. Mastin, “What Do *Miqneh* and *Bohema* Mean in Genesis xxxiv 23, xxxvi 6; Numbers xxxi 9, xxxii 26?” *VT* 45 (1995): 491-515. [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. I follow LXX, Vg in taking *beṭaḥ* to denote the brothers’ confidence rather than the villagers’ sense of security (so TgOnq): cf. the use of the verb *bāṭaḥ* in Prov 14:16; Job 6:20; 40:23 (BDB). [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. The word order with the subject coming first in the sentence implies that “Jacob’s sons” does not refer to the two sons named in v. 25 (so that the entire action in vv. 25-31 is undertaken by the two), but that the phrase denotes the rest of Jacob’s sons, as Vg makes explicit; SP’s *w* and LXX’s *de* point in the same direction. [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. The *wᵉ* is explanatory; the closing phrase recapitulates “all their resources” (Tal, *Genesis*, 164\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. The *w* is presumably explanatory, as in 13:7 (see the footnote to 4:4). [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. M. Jacobs, “Love, Honor, and Violence,” in C. A. Kirk-Duggan (ed.), *Pregnant Passion* (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 11-35 (11). [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. Noble, “A ‘Balanced’ Reading of the Rape of Dinah,” 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. F. M. Yamada, “Dealing with Rape (in) Narrative,” in Cosgrove (ed.), *The Meanings We Choose*, 149-65 (157, 163); Yamada includes a study of how Sternberg (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 445-75) and D. N. Fewell and D. M. Gunn (“Tipping the Balance,” *JBL* 110 [1991]: 193-211) seek to resolve the ambiguities (cf. also Sternberg, “Biblical Poetics And Sexual Politics,” *JBL* 111 [1992]: 463-88). See further Noble, “A ‘Balanced’ Reading of the Rape of Dinah”; A. Brenner, “Literary Approaches to Biblical Literature,” in F. E. Greenspahn [ed.], *The Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarship* [New York: New York University Press, 2008], 45-75; P. F. Lockwood, “Disentangled from the Web of Deceit,” in D. Reid and M. W. Worthing (eds.), *Sin and Salvation* (Hindmarsh, Australia: ATF, 2003), 20-40; D. S. Earl, “Toward a Christian Hermeneutic of Old Testament Narrative,” *CBQ* 73 (2011): 30-49; Parry, *OT Story and Christian Ethics*. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. So e.g., *GenR* 80:1-5: and for subsequent such readings, Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead*, 188-93; R. Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 87-122; C. Blyth, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 152-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. S. Scholz, “Through Whose Eyes?” in Brenner (ed.), *Genesis*, 150-71 (165, 167). [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. Cf. Parry, *OT Story and Christian Ethics*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
516. See the footnote to v. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
517. Brayford, *Genesis*, 376. [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
518. See the arguments in e.g., L. M. Bechtel, “What If Dinah Was Not Raped? *JSOT* 62 (1994): 19-36; S. Scholz, “Was It Really Rape in Genesis 34?” In Washington et al. (eds.), *Escaping Eden*, 182-98; Y. Shemesh, “Rape Is Rape Is Rape,” *ZAW* 1119 (2007): 2-21; A. L. Joseph, “Understanding Genesis 34:2,” *VT* 66 (2016): 663-68; Blyth, *Narrative of Rape*, 40-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
519. See Hankore, *Abduction of Dinah*, 185-86, 232-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
520. Cf. Kidner, *Genesis*, 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
521. Frankel, *Five Books of Miriam*, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. See C. Blyth, “Terrible Silence, Eternal Silence,” *BibInt* 17 (2009): 483-506. [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. See C. Blyth, “Redeemed by His Love?” *JSOT* 33 (2008): 3-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. See J. Kelso, “Reading the Silence of Women in Genesis 34,” in Conrad/Boer (eds.). *Redirected Travel*, 85-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
525. J. Havea, “Whoring Dinah,” in W. J. Bergen and A. Siedlecki (eds.), *Voyages in Uncharted Waters* (D. Jobling Festschrift; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 172-84 (178). [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
526. Cf. A. B. Wagner, “Considerations on the Politico-Juridical Proceedings of Genesis 34,” *JSOT* 38 (2013): 145-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
527. Cf. A. Rofé, “Defilement of Virgins in Biblical Law and the Case of Dinah,” *Biblica* 86 (2005): 369-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
528. Pitt-Rivers, *Fate of Shechem*, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
529. Pitt-Rivers, *Fate of Shechem*, 164-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
530. Driver, *Genesis*, 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
531. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
532. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
533. Cf. Frankel, *Five Books of Miriam*, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
534. Brett, *Genesis*, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
535. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 326-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
536. Cf. Parry, *OT Story and Christian Ethics*, 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
537. Cf. Rashi’s comment, *Br’šyt*, 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
538. Jacobs, “Love, Honor, and Violence,” 27, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
539. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative,* 446, 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
540. See Arnold, *Genesis*, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
541. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
542. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative,* 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
543. Coats, *Genesis*, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
544. The title of S. A. Geller’s article on the chapter, *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 1-15 (like Coats, Geller assumes that the town is Shechem, though we have seen reason to doubt that idea). [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
545. See J. Goldin, “Reuben,” in Brettler/Fishbane (eds.), *Minḥah le-Naḥum*, 133-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
546. Cf. Jacobs, “Love, Honor, and Violence,” 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
547. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2: 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
548. Driver, *Genesis*, 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
549. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative,* 471. [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
550. Cf. Pitt-Rivers, *Fate of Shechem*, 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
551. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative,* 453. [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
552. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2: 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
553. Cf. Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
554. Brayford, *Genesis*, 382. [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
555. Cf. R. T. Hyman, “Final Judgment,” *JBQ* 28 (2000): 93-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
556. Sarna, *Genesis*, 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
557. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-557)
558. See further Parry, *OT Story and Christian Ethics,* especially 179-204. [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
559. Cf. P. R. Noble, “A ‘Balanced’ Reading of the Rape of Dinah,” *BibInt* 4 [1996]: 173-204(194). [↑](#footnote-ref-559)
560. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
561. Tg nicely translates *’ĕlōhîm* “waywardnesses/deceptions/idols.” [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
562. On this translation, see the footnote to 18:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
563. Literally, “on my day.” [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
564. LXX reassuringly adds “and destroyed them until the present day.” [↑](#footnote-ref-564)
565. For this use of *’ĕlōhîm*, cf. 14:6 and the footnote, also 30:8, though this context with the references to God’s involvement could also suggest the more literal connotation “a terror from God” (so Tg). [↑](#footnote-ref-565)
566. On the plural verb, see the footnote to 20:13. Qimchi (*Genesis*, on the verse) refers *hā’ĕlōhîm* to the *mal’ăkê ’ĕlōhîm* of 28:12, which works better grammatically, but less well contextually. [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
567. The verb is singular, and LXX assumes it is Jacob who does the naming. [↑](#footnote-ref-567)
568. On the puzzling word *kibrāh*, see Tal, *Genesis*, 165-66\*. [↑](#footnote-ref-568)
569. Comparison with 48:7 suggests that the *h* on *’eprātāh* is locative, though elsewhere the actual name seems to be *’eprātāh* (see BDB). [↑](#footnote-ref-569)
570. Following MT, which marks *mētāh* as qatal rather than participle by putting the accent on the first syllable. [↑](#footnote-ref-570)
571. LXX, Vg, Tg derive *’ônî* from *’āwen* meaning “trouble,” but LXX and Tg recognize that in 49:3 it derives from *’ôn* meaning “vigor.” [↑](#footnote-ref-571)
572. One would expect a new verse to begin here; perhaps the actual verse division meant that “the reader did not linger over such a doubtful passage, but hurried on” (Dillmann, *Genesis*, 2:310). *Jub* 33 offers a contrast with its expansion of this brief report to a whole chapter, incorporating an assurance that Bilhah was Reuben’s unwilling victim (see Segal, *The Book of* *Jubilees*, 73-82). [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
573. See the footnote to 30:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
574. On this expression, see the comment on 25:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-574)
575. Literally, “days.” [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
576. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 586. [↑](#footnote-ref-576)
577. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 333 (he associates the first with P, the second with J and E). [↑](#footnote-ref-577)
578. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 543 (though he associates this idea with the suggestion that 35:5 originally followed directly on 34:27-29). [↑](#footnote-ref-578)
579. Sarna, *Genesis*, 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-579)
580. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-580)
581. Cf. V. A. Hurowitz, “Who Lost an Earring? *CBQ* 62 (2000): 28-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-581)
582. See the footnote to 12:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-582)
583. See the footnote to v. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-583)
584. Cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 396. [↑](#footnote-ref-584)
585. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-585)
586. See e.g., Sarna, *Genesis*, 407-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-586)
587. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-587)
588. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-588)
589. Westermann, *Genesis 13—36*, 554. [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
590. Cf. Pirson, *Lord of the Dreams*, 26-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-590)
591. See the footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-591)
592. So Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
593. See e.g., N. P. Lemche, “Is It Still Possible to Write a History of Ancient Israel?” *SJOT* 8 (1994): 165-90 (175-79); his argument that the Benjaminites as a clan came from Mari is a different matter. See further D. E. Fleming, “The Syrian Background of Israel’s Ancestors, Reprise,” in J. K. Hoffmeier and A. R. Millard (eds.), *The Future of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 193-232. [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
594. Frankel, *Five Books of Miriam*, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
595. Westermann, *Genesis 13—36*, 554. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
596. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
597. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
598. Assis, *Identity in Conflict*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
599. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-599)
600. Cf, Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 68-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-600)
601. See Kelso, *The Excavation of Bethel*. [↑](#footnote-ref-601)
602. See Sarna, *Genesis*, 399-400. [↑](#footnote-ref-602)
603. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2: 323 [↑](#footnote-ref-603)