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

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

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

2 For instance, Henri Gaubert, Isaac and Jacob, God’s Chosen Ones (New York: Hastings House, 1969), 19, maintains that even in his youth Jacob shows himself to be an egocentric and “disturbing” character who employs “methods which even in those days were hardly to be commended.” Similarly, Terence E. Fretheim, “Which Blessing Does Isaac Give Jacob?” in Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures (ed. A. O. Bellis and J. S. Kaminsky; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 290, argues that the deceiver Jacob’s selection by God reveals that God has little concern to insure His blessing is granted only to the morally upright and that God is thus “not a moralist.” The implication in Fretheim, then, is that Jacob is such a degenerate character that it is striking for God to express any interest in him. Fretheim, however, here recognizes quite possibly the core idea expressed in the Jacob cycle (that God maintains a relationship with a figure the likes of Jacob) yet sketches it in overwhelmingly negative terms. What remains lacking in Fretheim’s interpretation will form the
figure to be heir to His covenant and a recipient of His blessing, and why would ancient Israel identify the wily Jacob as her namesake, evident in Genesis 32:28 and 35:10? Based upon the presence of these tensions in the text, one may initially conclude that from the perspective of ancient Israel no problems existed in understanding the God/Jacob relationship. If anything, God’s seeming tolerance of Jacob’s deceptiveness appears to disclose more about God than many scholars are willing or comfortable to admit, and those choosing to admit at least the plausibility of a deceptive God tend either merely to express how unpalatable such an image is or try to exonerate God.\(^3\) I propose, however, that much more than divine tolerance is operative in the Jacob cycle; rather, ancient Israel divulges, through God’s intimate association with and concern for Jacob, that God’s character also may possess these very same trickster tendencies. In fact, the text of Genesis makes this assertion explicitly in 31:1-16, an episode classically interpreted as the trickster getting tricked.\(^4\) In this passage, Jacob, speaking to Rachel and Leah, quite candidly attributes the prior deception of Laban in chapter 30 to God. Verse 9 reads: “and God has caused to be stripped away the cattle of your father and given [them] to me” (v. 9).\(^5\) Immediately thereafter in

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

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

\(^5\)The hiphil הָעַל (“strip away”) with God as the subject highlights all the more the causative aspect of what God has done. Likewise, the qal form of פֹּלָה at the end of v. 9 also
31:10-13 God corroborates Jacob’s claim in a dream. Ancient Israel depicts God as not only tolerant of but also as complicit in Jacob’s deception. This notice gives rise to a theological “problem.”

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

Victor H. Matthews and Frances Mims (“Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation,” PRSt 12 [1985]: 191) corroborate my reading that God (or a figure speaking for God) accepts divine responsibility for this episode, evident in 31:12-13. I do not intend to mean, by labeling Gen 31:1-16 a “problem,” that this text is marred with connections and issues that must no doubt be wrong based merely upon the obstacles they present to a neat and tidy theological interpretation. Rather, I take these verses as a sincere expression of ancient Israel’s own experience and understanding of God which Old Testament theology must take seriously.

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

I do not intend through this limitation to imply that my specific study of the four passages below in reference to 31:1-16 should serve as a synecdoche, a part representative of the whole. Instead, I hope this study will serve as a starting point for more prolonged investigations into the theological phenomenon of God’s complicity in deception.
Despite being very anthropocentric in the specific stories recorded, the Jacob narratives are highly theological. That God does not appear consistently and often throughout the Jacob narratives makes the moments of theophany that much more significant. Kevin Walton argues that clear instances of divine presence and absence typify the stories about Jacob. While this oscillating motif of explicit presence and absence may be accurate, one must remain mindful that when God shatters the silence and explodes onto the scene it becomes clear that He has been active behind-the-scenes throughout. Our central theological passage, Gen 31:1-16, poses no exception.

I contend that Gen 31:1-16 reveals God’s direct participation in Jacob’s deception of Laban and therefore offers an issue that is theological in nature. As a means of arriving at a proper comprehension of ancient Israel’s intent in preserving this apparent tension in God’s character, I will examine four passages in detail for what they further reveal about God in the surrounding context of the Jacob/Laban stories: (1) Gen 28:13-15 attests to God’s continued fidelity to the promise and blessing of Abraham through Jacob and his children; (2) Gen 29:31-30:24 speaks of divine activity in granting multiple children to Jacob; (3) Gen 30:27, which relates the blessing of all nations by God through the descendants of Abraham; and (4) Gen 31:24 speaks of divine protection for the heir(s) to the covenantal promises. Taken together, these four texts and what they say about God provide the hermeneutical key to understanding God’s complicity in Jacob’s deception in 31:1-16. They accomplish this by expanding the portrait of God in the Jacob narratives. God’s deception, then, takes on a new valence. It does not reveal any sort of corresponding character flaw in God but rather shows His paramount concern and desire that the promises made to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3—a multitude of descendants who will both be blessed and bless all...


11 Matthews and Mims, “Jacob the Trickster,” 187.


13 Richard D. Patterson, “The Old Testament Use of an Archetype: The Trickster,” *JETS* 42 (1999): 393, does not mention Jacob or Genesis as places where divine deception occurs in the Bible, but he does elucidate several other passages in which he says God is clearly deceptive, thus showing the possible ubiquity of this theological theme in the Hebrew Bible. Among the texts he references are 2 Kgs 7:6-7, God feigning the sound of a great number of soldiers in the distance so as to cause the Aramean soldiers to flee; 2 Sam 17:14, Absalom and his advisors are deceived by God to follow a plan that would end in their defeat; 1 Kgs 22:19-23, Ahab likewise is compelled to follow advice of false prophets leading to his defeat; 2 Kgs 6:15-20, God causes blindness on Aramean troops resulting in their entrapment. One may see covenantal overtones at work here as well, especially since the Deuteronomistic Historian has sketched out the narrative in a highly systematic way, including theological judgments in reference to each king and how well he walked in the way of YHWH, a covenantal reference. As another example, Matthews and Mims, “Jacob the Trickster,” 189 read Rachel’s theft of her father’s household gods as a scene in which Rachel shares the trickster role with YHWH, whom Matthews and Mims call “her fellow trickster.” An example that goes surprisingly unmentioned is Jer 20:7: “YHWH, you deceived me, and I was deceived.” (בשנים ידסיIDEO ה́כוב)
nations in the name of Israel’s God—will reach its culmination. God’s complicity in deceiving Laban, then, can be regarded from ancient Israel’s perspective as demonstrating His covenantal fidelity to the lineage of Abraham.14 Put simply, God will stop at nothing to achieve His covenantal promise, even complicity in deception.15

Assumptions and Methodology
A brief word about the assumptions and methodology I bring to this study is in order. First, I agree with von Rad that any Old Testament theologian must engage ancient Israel’s Scriptures in the order they have been preserved by that

14 Jacob M. Myers, “The Way of the Fathers,” Int 29 (1975): 135, comes closer than anyone I have read to this line of reading. Unfortunately, his treatment is tantalizingly brief and, as has been the norm, does not discuss the theological implications of such a possibility. He writes: “From the tone of the text [31:3] as it now stands, it would appear that the convergence of circumstances was part of [YHWH’s] plan to fulfill the promise made to Abraham and to Isaac.”

More recently, Michael James Williams has written a judicious and important study of Genesis and deception—the most thorough treatment on the topic of which I am presently aware—that analyzes each episode of deception in Genesis on its own terms. He also considers how later Jewish tradition struggled with these difficult texts, and he analyzes the various ancient Near Eastern and folklore parallels for texts of deception. In his Deception in Genesis: An Investigation into the Morality of a Unique Biblical Phenomenon (Studies in Biblical Literature 32; New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 221, he concludes that the biblical text deems deception as “justified when it functions to restore shalom” and unjustified “when deception introduces a disruption in shalom.” According to Williams’ model, the central text under consideration here falls into the latter of these categories, but the evaluation is not against Jacob but against Laban’s attempt to cheat Jacob of the agreed upon wages from 30:28-34. This way of reading highlights one rationale for reading chapters 30 and 31 together as a connected, coherent narrative; I will offer more thorough reasons below. One should also be aware that the way in which Williams utilizes “shalom” in his conclusion and throughout his study offers no readily apparent affinities to my understanding of the covenant/promise and deception. Williams’ contribution focuses more upon how deception does or does not affect the way in which one lives, whereas the present study seeks to read deception and covenant together.

15 I do not intend by this bold statement to imply that God is ruthless or for that matter immoral. Rather, I am taking the witness of ancient Israel seriously. It is not difficult to find other divine actions in Scripture that many have viewed as safeguards to the covenant and its recipients: God’s slaying of the Egyptian firstborn in Exod 12:29, the notion of the ban (נְפֹר) in Deut 7:1-5 (especially vv. 1-2) in which God commands no mercy (יִפְרָד) and strikingly no covenant (נְפֹר) for the nations occupying Canaan, and the crucifixion and barbaric death of Jesus. These instances should prove that God’s character, when it comes to His covenant, need not always be compassionate, or perhaps even adhere to reason, and can often take on a much more ominous tenor.

Most recently (and after my original completion of this study), Joel S. Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 57, has linked Jacob’s role as deceiver with his place in the covenant. Although given only a cursory mention, Kaminsky’s notice helps to substantiate the present study. He writes: “... human action may be required to bring the chosen one’s election to consummation . . . . It appears that at times even deceitful actions can be employed in bringing God’s purposes to pass. While such deceit may lead to family strife and may result in the deceiver himself being deceived in hurtful ways, in this instance, the elect status of Jacob is further reinforced through his morally questionable behavior.”
community of faith.\textsuperscript{16} This ordering will be of the utmost significance as I sketch out the development, continuity, and incipient realization of God’s promises to Abraham through Jacob and his descendants. Second, in line with Brueggemann I am seeking a return to theology proper, taking the term literally as a “word about God.”\textsuperscript{17} Third, as I have already alluded to, I am viewing and interpreting Gen 31:1-16 strictly from the perspective of ancient Israel. This trajectory, I believe, preserves ancient Israel’s own theological impressions and as such is seminal if one wishes to grasp fully her view of God. My approach will therefore be that of a close synchronic reading of the four aforementioned passages within the wider contexts of Genesis broadly and the ancestral narratives and God’s purposes within them more specifically. One may say I tread quite closely to Childs’ canonical approach,\textsuperscript{18} yet this theological study is reliant solely upon the material about God within the Jacob/Laban stories of Genesis and does not seek to interpret divine deception—although it does indeed occur elsewhere—within the Hebrew Bible. Where Childs is helpful, though, is in delimiting that the text and not the numinous history lying behind the text is the primary edifice of ancient Israel’s theological interpretation.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, we now turn to the examination of our four texts.

Expanding the Portrait of God: The Connection between Deception and Blessing

Genesis 28:13-15

Theologically, Jacob’s dream theophany functions to confirm God’s covenantal fidelity to the promise to Abraham by means of an adaptation of the tripartite formula of land, descendants, and blessing found in 12:1-3. Scholars have not failed to recognize this important point of passing on the promise to Abraham, noting the pervasiveness of the promise theme in Gen 12-36 and identifying it as perhaps the central motif and organizing principle of the ancestral narratives.\textsuperscript{16}von Rad, The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions, 120.
\textsuperscript{17}Walter Brueggemann, Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 117.
By mentioning Abraham and Isaac in 28:13, God demonstrates that this promise stands in continuity with His earlier wishes for this particular people. Mark Brett correctly recognizes a clear trajectory of the promise thus far in the narrative: first to Abraham in 12:1-3, then to Isaac in 26:2-5, and now to Jacob in 28:13-15, all at the behest of God.

What emerges to the fore in 28:13-15 is a recognition of Jacob as the sole recipient and bearer of the ancestral promise. One should not regard Jacob, however, as the sole actor in the Jacob cycle. Victor Matthews and Frances Mims posit, and I would agree, that while it may seem that Jacob acts of his own volition throughout the narrative, strategically occurring theophanies help to orient the reader theologically and emphasize the covenantal backdrop of the ensuing narrative. Matthews and Mims, though, believe the Jacob cycle is about preparing Jacob to become the rightful heir to the promise, a preparation which the narrative encapsulates in chapter 35 when Jacob is renamed “Israel.” The problem with this conclusion is that if one reads the narrative synchronically as Matthews and Mims appear to be doing, Jacob is renamed Israel already in 32:28. Moreover, if one compares chapter 35 with chapter 28, the similarities abound: both episodes take place at Bethel; God addresses Jacob each time; and the tripartite formula is reiterated in both texts. As such, in the overall flow of the narrative the Bethel episode in chapter 35 appears to be God’s reaffirmation of his original selection of Jacob as heir to the promise here in 28:13-15. A ‘Bethel inclusio’ thus encompasses the bulk of the Jacob cycle.

The understanding presented in Matthews and Mims, namely that Jacob is being molded into a character worthy of receiving the promise, is therefore without textual merit. Jacob’s name change in 32:28 seemingly does nothing to change his character as he clearly deceives Esau again in 33:13-17 when, after what can only be regarded as fearful flattery in the hopes of self-preservation, he agrees to follow his brother to Seir. The text resolutely states that instead, Jacob journeyed to and made his residence in Sukkoth. And likewise near the end of his life, in Gen 48 Jacob again acts as trickster by insuring that the younger son Ephraim be granted the blessing of the firstborn. Even as Israel, the character Jacob is deceptive as ever. Additionally, God’s selection of Jacob does not occur at the close of the cycle but instead at the beginning (Gen 25:23; 28:13-15). As I have shown above, God has already made known His fidelity by

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23 Matthews and Mims, “Jacob the Trickster,” 187.
choosing Jacob and passing on the promise of Abraham and Isaac to Jacob in 28:13-15; no preparation or testing as Matthews and Mims suggest is overt in the text. The promise to Jacob, just like the promise to Abraham, rests on the bedrock of God’s own initiative and covenantal fidelity.

Such continuity of the promise as established above allows for the reader to draw connections among the three patriarchs and to interpret subsequent problematic episodes in light of those which are earlier and perhaps more defined. For instance, Jacob is not the only patriarch with a questionable character. Abraham, too, appears out of nowhere in the narrative, bearing no overt evidence of merit warranting his selection by God.24 Likewise, Abraham and Isaac both deceive by attempting to pass off their wives as sisters in chapters 12, 20, and 26.25 Elmer Martens notices, however, that each instance of deception is here tempered by listing the promise of descendants as a precursor to any act of deception, which he correctly understands as buttressing the fact that the promise will not be undone by any deception.26 Following Martens’ claim, the reiteration in 28:14 of the promise of descendants serves to solidify all the more that the promise remains in full effect, even with individuals who opt for deception as a means of perpetuating the promise—a practice in which, as we will see later, God also engages. This connection between deception and promise/blessing is carried through the entire ancestral narratives as a reminder that God’s presence is never in doubt and that in moments of deception the patriarchs have not strayed from God’s purposes for them. Rather, they are acting wholly in accord with His concern over the sustaining of His original promise to Abraham.

The positioning of 28:13-15 immediately prior to the Jacob/Laban narrative of chapters 29 through 31 is seminal for understanding the situation into which Jacob is about to enter. One learns almost immediately in 29:21-27 that Laban is also a deceptive figure, able to trick the trickster Jacob by giving him Leah instead of Rachel. What results then is that Jacob must submit, if he desires to marry Rachel, to another seven years of servitude under Laban. After those seven years are completed and Jacob marries Rachel, Laban tarry in the effort to maintain Jacob’s services even further.

God, however, has other plans for Jacob, which are revealed in 28:13-15. Here God declares in v. 15 that He will be present with (אֲנֶ֑שׁ נֵ֖עָר) Jacob and will watch over/protect (שָׁמְרָה/מַצְטָל) him in all his journeying until God has accomplished what He has set forth, that being the original promise to Abraham, which here has been passed on to Jacob. Jacob, then, stands as the very embodiment of God’s promise to Abraham, and protection of Jacob necessarily means protection of the promise.27 Westermann and Ross each note the

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24Brett, Genesis, 49.
27Ellen F. Davis, “Job and Jacob: The Integrity of Faith,” in Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible (ed. Danna Nolan Fewell; Louisville:
expectation of fulfillment in God’s words and deem the theme of presence to be of the utmost significance in the Jacob cycle. So before Jacob even begins his eventful interactions with Laban, we have a promise of guaranteed divine presence with Jacob until God’s purposes are realized.

**Genesis 29:31-30:24**

I have thus far established the broad covenantal framework that encompasses the ancestral narratives. Now the task turns to the particulars of this covenant as they are limned in the surrounding context of Jacob/Laban stories. Among the most fundamental tenets of God’s promise to Abraham is that he will be the father of many descendants, a promise occurring at least three times within the span of a few short chapters (12:2; 15:5; 17:2). Thus far, however, all one can surmise from the narrative is not the great numbers of descendants claiming Abraham as their father but rather, as Christopher Heard aptly puts it, a

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Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 210-13, discusses this three-fold relationship between God, Jacob, and the promise. She correctly argues that Jacob is a character with an “obsession” for “God’s blessing,” and that Gen 28:10-22 cements the notion of divine protection for the children of Abraham (212). I cannot, however, agree with Davis’ treatment of Jacob much beyond these two points. Primary among my difficulties is her discussion of Jacob as יְרָא in Gen 25:27. No doubt יְרָא has here plagued scholars. Davis herself notes the reason: “if indeed tam denotes ethical integrity, then Jacob is not an obvious candidate for that accolade” (211). In the next paragraph, Davis offers her own sense of יְרָא: in contrast to the uncivilized Esau, Jacob is a man who “is well-adapted to the mores, if not the morals, of society” (211). Davis goes on to discuss, similar to Matthews and Mims (see above), that Jacob undergoes a change in character. What is missing here, I believe, is how to reconcile Jacob as יְרָא—most likely a positive comment by the narrator, given that Esau is presented in a less than flattering light—with Jacob as deceiver. If it is only after the wrestling match of Gen 32 that Jacob truly becomes a person of character and worthy of the blessing—a point I have already called into question above—why not describe him as יְרָא יְרָא then rather than at the outset of the Jacob cycle? In my view, Davis does not treat this question adequately. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 42-46, offers some clarification, treating יְרָא as the complex and seemingly ‘out-of-place’ epithet that it is in the narrative. For Alter, its positioning at the outset of the Jacob cycle results in the need for the reader to struggle throughout the rest of Genesis concerning the nature of Jacob’s character. My sense arising out of Alter’s treatment is that Jacob as יְרָא must be clarified as the narrative ensues, and that יְרָא quite possibly is explained at least in part by Jacob’s deceptive activities. He is the conniving and clever trickster who more often than not will come out on top, and as such, alongside a complicit deity, no doubt seems “well-adapted” to societal norms, of which deception—at least here—appears to be a part. That one need not separate יְרָא from Jacob’s deceptions provides a helpful lens through which to view this episode as well as the dynamics at work in the relationship between God and Jacob. Alter summarizes the point concisely: “covenantal privileges by no means automatically confer moral perfection, and that monitory idea is perhaps something the writers wanted to bring to the attention of their audiences” (46).

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29Implicit in this recognition is God’s complicity in Jacob’s deceptions beyond Gen 31:1-16. If God remains as intimately present as He promises, one is perhaps warranted in saying that God thus becomes at the least a passive participant, perhaps an advocate, of Jacob’s other deceptions.
narrowing of the family tree in accord with God’s purposes. Lot, Ishmael, and Esau respectively have become the “diselect,” cut off from God’s covenant with Abraham. With this focusing of who could count themselves as heirs to the promise to Abraham, the motif of barrenness presents a theological problem for Sarah and Rebekah, and it will also for Rachel. In each circumstance, God answers the call of distress (18:10 and 25:21) by granting a child, which in and of itself speaks to the divine concern for the covenant’s perpetuation. Would He do the same for the deceiver Jacob?

In 29:31-30:24, ancient Israel reveals her understanding that God hears and answers Rachel and Leah’s respective concerns, granting not a single child of promise but ultimately twelve children of the promise. Ancient Israel affirms that it is God’s initiative and no other that brings about these children by tethering several of the names to a direct action of God. For example, the name of Leah’s second son, Simeon (שֵׁם), relies on the verb for “hear” (שָׁמַע) and is explained by the sentence “YHWH heard that I am hated.” The narrative, when read as a whole, depicts a rapid influx of children at God’s behest, set in the context of a dispute between Jacob’s two wives. Such an oversimplified reading, however, fails to grasp the highly theological nature of the passage and its relation to the initial promise to Abraham, now embodied by the deceiver Jacob and in the incipient stages of realization by the birth of his twelve sons, who also become conduits of the blessing.

As was just alluded to, God receives overt credit for the births of nearly all Jacob’s children. For the first time in the ancestral narratives we have multiple sons of the promise, none of whom are “diselect.” Heard notes the shift: “From Jacob forward, all of the elect patriarch’s children will be elect (though not without variations in their status relative to one another).” The significance of this shift is that God now begins to set the stage for the actualizing of His promises. From Jacob’s children listed here arise the entire people Israel. God’s prior particularity with the patriarchs alone begins to expand to include all nations. Schreiner perhaps sums it up best when he claims that with Jacob’s

31 See Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 473-77 for a fine discussion on each child’s naming.
32 One should not conclude, as does George W. Coats, Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature (FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 216, that because the text lacks specific mention of the promise, the motif of 29:31-30:24 (and the entire Jacob narrative) is familial strife. As I have shown above, and as countless scholars have recognized, the theme of promise pervades the ancestral narratives.
33 God appears no less than ten times within these verses, and always in the context of “remembering” (זוהי) one of Jacob’s wives, a word which itself has covenantal overtones (see Gen 8:1; 9:15-16; 19:29; Exod 2:24; 6:5; 32:13). See 29:31, 32, 33, 35 and 30:6, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23 for explicit mentions of God regarding Jacob’s children.
34 Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 97.
36 Bernhard W. Anderson, Contours of Old Testament Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 78, and Premkumar, “Theology of Promise,” 120, discuss this theme of the
children one discerns in 49:28 the democratization of the original blessing to Abraham.37 God’s activity in providing numerous descendants for Jacob, from whom will come the “great nation” (גֵּרְם הָעָם) of 12:2, functions theologically to highlight God’s presence with Jacob and to anticipate the blessing to all.38

Reading forward in the story will clarify that the operative context in 29:31-30:24 is the original blessing to Abraham which Jacob receives in 28:13-15. Jacob’s children, who by their sheer number indicate that the promise has expanded, are those who will go to Egypt, where they will remain captives. Despite Egyptian oppression, Israel grows even more numerous and powerful (Exod 1:12), evincing the fact of God’s continued presence and promise of increase. If one reads the theme of promise in the ancestral narratives, the Jacob cycle more specifically, in light of what occurs in the early chapters of Exodus, the continuity of blessing between Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Jacob’s growing family becomes clear.39 Martens argues correctly that God’s blessing means both salvation and deliverance, both of which are elements that define Exodus and find their foundation in the promise.40 Language of God’s remembering (תִּזְכִּרָם) His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Exod 2:24 and 6:5, in which the descendants of Jacob are the beneficiaries of God’s action, further highlights this continuity.41

One final note of interest to conclude this section deals again with deception. Some of Jacob’s children appear equally as deceptive as their father. In 34:13, after the rape of Dinah, Jacob’s sons speak with Shechem and Hamor “in deceit” (מִשְׁפָּט), saying they will assent to the marriage if only the men of Shechem agree to be circumcised. Shortly thereafter in v. 25 Simeon and Levi act upon this deception, killing all the Shechemite males as they recover. It is striking that God does not appear in this chapter, potentially leading one to believe that He did not find much humor in this deception. As ancient Israel has shaped the narrative, however, chapter 34 closes with Jacob’s lament over the danger in which Simeon and Levi have placed their family, and chapter 35 opens with a particular people Israel (here, the patriarchs) and their universal summons to bring blessing (salvation?) to all nations.

38Brueggemann, Theology, 168, notes this forward-looking aspect of Jacob’s blessing his sons in Gen 48.
39I recognize a potential problem in this logic, namely that it does not appear from the text that Jacob’s descendants bless Egypt in any way during their internment there. One may argue that their slave labor exists as a means of blessing, but such an argument seems tenuous to me. A more apt reading connects Egypt’s failure to be blessed with the ancestral promise of Gen 12:3. There YHWH plainly states that those who bless Israel will receive blessing, and those who curse Israel will be cursed. Understood from this perspective, Egypt’s harsh treatment and exploitation of the Israelites may be regarded as a curse, which, in the context of the ancestral promise, requires a corresponding curse. Therefore, somewhat paradoxically, Egypt’s failure to be blessed (or to bless itself, depending on how one chooses to construe the niphal שֵׁרָם in 12:3) functions not contrary to the promise but rather as another indication of the fulfillment of the promise.
40Martens, God’s Design, 31-32.
41Also significant is Exod 20:24, which unites the notion of remembrance and divine blessing.
theophany—as always at a quite opportune moment—in which God instructs Jacob and his family to go to Bethel and reside there. Theologically, 35:1 achieves more than just delivering Jacob from a dangerous situation (although no doubt the promise of divine presence from 28:15 is evident here); it also hearkens back to the theophany at Bethel where Jacob inherited that very promise. Therefore, God’s appearance at the outset of chapter 35 serves to confirm His choice of Jacob and his heirs, made at Bethel in chapter 28, on the very heels of a deadly act of deception.42

Genesis 30:27
If 29:31-30:24 establishes the circumstances necessary to realize the promise of 12:2, then 30:27 presages the concept of blessing all nations by means of Jacob and his descendants. In 30:27 Laban says to Jacob, “If I have found favor in your eyes, I know by divination that YHWH blessed me on account of you” (משהו מתאטרה וטעים נחשת וברכת יהוה פණל). This mention marks the first instance in the text in which the descendants of Abraham are explicitly said to be a blessing to a foreigner. Westermann astutely sees great significance in that one would expect Laban, a non-Israelite,43 to use the more generic אלהים in reference to God, but rather he employs the personal name of Jacob’s God, יהוה.44 Westermann does not, however, comment on the significance of Laban’s choice of words for God. No doubt this episode is essential to the ensuing narrative. Fishbane demonstrates the centrality of chapter 30 by situating it at the literal center of his structuring of the Jacob narratives, but again does not offer insight into the affect of Laban’s using YHWH.45 The theological import ancient Israel seeks to convey by Laban’s use of the personal name YHWH is that one must regard Laban’s blessing as coming only from the personal God of Jacob. This point is punctuated all the more in that Laban only learns of his blessed position vis-à-vis Jacob through divination of, arguably, Laban’s own personal deities.46

42The connection I have drawn here between deception and promise/blessing need not imply that God was the motivating factor for the deception in chapter 34; however, as I have sketched out the wider structure of the Jacob narratives (God’s watchful eye behind-the-scenes and direct appearances at vital moments), one could argue that God, because of the theophany and explicit mention of guidance and protection in chapter 35, at bottom does not condemn Jacob’s sons for their actions. Might this notice imply God’s complicity in their deception as well?

43Laban’s status as a foreigner is not in question, but it remains interesting to recognize that in the passing on of the promise to Jacob in 28:13-15, v. 14 records God stating that Jacob and his descendants will spread out and bless those to the west, east, north, and south (יהיה רוקח והמצמיח ו]]></script>). Almost immediately thereafter, 29:1 says Jacob continues his journey and comes to the “sons of the east” (בנריarden); the same word for “east” (ברך) appears in the text in each instance. The effect of such proximity of language at the narrative level leads one to believe that if Jacob will be a blessing to those in the east, his venturing to Laban, a “son of the east,” theologically reveals both that 30:27 is not utterly unexpected in the flow of the story, and also that the motivation driving the narrative onward remains God’s desire that His covenant with Abraham come to fruition.

44Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 481.
46The הריפת in this instance appear to be divine in some way, as evidenced by Laban’s calling them “my gods” ( אלהים) in 31:30. In Ezek 21:26 and Zech 10:2 the הריפת are
The god of Laban is not the same God he calls “YHWH” in 30:27. Elsewhere in 31:19 Rachel steals her father’s household gods, perhaps out of fear that he would learn of Jacob’s escape through divination, and in 31:47, 53 Laban swears in Aramaic by invoking the name of his own personal god. Laban’s deity (or deities) is unable to bestow the same profitable blessing on Laban as has YHWH, the God of Jacob. God’s promise is at work here, and the theological impact from ancient Israel’s perspective becomes all the more palpable when this recognition comes from the foreigner Laban. J.P. Fokkelman describes the theological nature of Laban’s words succinctly:

connected with divinatory practices, an understanding that may also have been operative in the Genesis text. A full analysis of the term and its complexities goes beyond the purview of this study, yet in all the biblical occurrences of the word (Gen 31:19, 34, 35; Judg 17:5; 18:14, 17, 18, 20; 1 Sam 15:23; 19:13, 16; 2 Kgs 23:24; Ezek 21:26; Hos 3:4; Zech 10:2) it represents some type of deity and perhaps connotes its function as an instrument of divination; only the occurrences in 1 Sam deviate from this function as there the הוהי serve as a stand-in for the sleeping David. See Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 485, 493 for a brief yet helpful explanation of the term as well as a thorough bibliography.

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

A brief caution is in order, however. Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 167-68, provides a fine and brief discussion of the relevant issues and complexities. He correctly concludes that the text is at best ambiguous, leaving the choice open to the reader how he or she sees the larger whole. Both interpretations concerning the relationship between the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor have points which commend themselves and also which cast doubt on their veracity. Heard offers a helpful reminder: even the earliest interpreters and readers wrestled with this text. If those who are far closer to the text than we struggled so greatly, as interpreters we must honor their struggle by not glossing over the problems they saw as important. This struggle keeps us humble, yet as part of the ongoing exegetical conversation, it is also our task to proffer new answers. I have here sought to situate the episode in its wider literary context and within my understanding of the Jacob cycle as a whole, which I believe results in a plausible reading.
From the enemy’s mouth we now hear that God’s blessing has accompanied Jacob all the time. God has kept his promise made at Bethel, Jacob creates prosperity wherever he appears . . . The b'rākā shines about him. And who has benefited by it so far? Laban . . .

Fokkelman helpfully confirms the covenantal/blessing context behind Jacob and Laban’s negotiations, as well as noting that Laban the other (enemy, foreigner) stands to be blessed also by God. One should not conclude, as does Turner, that Laban’s status as kin to Jacob necessitates not viewing him as “a representative of the nations.” Here ancient Israel sees the realization of Gen 12:3 in miniature by having Laban acknowledge that YHWH blessed him through Jacob, just as Jacob’s descendants will be a blessing to all nations.

Laban’s characterization in the wider narrative as a deceiver forms an apt parallel to Jacob’s character. In 30:25-34 the two renegotiate the terms of their agreement, with Jacob first requesting to leave so as to care now for his own family (vv. 25-26, 30), followed by Laban’s counteroffer of a wage of Jacob’s choosing (vv. 28, 31). Jacob accepts Laban’s proposal, naming only the spotted and speckled goats and black sheep of Laban’s flocks as payment. Westermann helpfully reminds the reader that in so doing Jacob has not merely named his wage but also has agreed to continue working for Laban. Laban quickly and unwaveringly assents to Jacob’s terms, possibly because he knew that such a request would yield only a very small number of animals for Jacob’s taking. Or, perhaps more likely, the conniving and clever Laban already had a preemptive plan in mind, as the ensuing narrative makes overt.

Verses 35-36 describe Laban as attempting to alter Jacob’s wages by means of deception. Laban acts quickly—v. 35 states “on that day”—by taking the spotted, speckled, and black of his herds and entrusting them to the watch of his sons. Had he intended to pick out Jacob’s wages himself, there is no reason for such a vast separation. If Laban were acting in earnest one would expect him to let Jacob know his wage had been collected, or perhaps to corral the animals in a space allotted to Jacob. The agreement to which Laban assents (v. 34) dictates that Jacob is to go through the flocks and pick out his wage, and then Laban is to come to Jacob to verify the wages (v. 33), not the other way around. Moreover, nothing in the narrative reveals Laban’s intention to turn these animals over to Jacob as a wage. Therefore,
coterminal deceptive activity while tending the rest of Laban’s flocks, perhaps in part because Laban had already proven himself untrustworthy in the giving of Leah as a wife before Rachel. Yet as the text continues into chapter 31, Jacob boldly asserts that God was the one at work here, thus opening up the likelihood that God is at work behind the scenes here as elsewhere in the Jacob cycle, a point to which I will return below. While Jacob’s shenanigans here may seem odd and unclear to contemporary readers, the text is graphic in its detail. He takes and peels back branches from the poplar, almond, and plane trees, revealing white streaks on the branches (v. 37). Jacob then places the peeled branches in the watering troughs, and when the flocks come to drink they also mate, giving rise by some elusive means not yet spelled out at this point in the text—although clarified in 31:1–16 as an act of God—to spotted and speckled young (vv. 38–39). He continues this technique with only the strong of the flocks, separating his take from those of Laban (vv. 40–42).

The results are unequivocal: Jacob’s property and wealth increase at the expense of Laban (vv. 42–43). How should one understand the quick succession of events? Laban at first is blessed by YHWH, a comment to which Jacob agrees in v. 30, and by v. 43 Laban is left with the weakest of the flock while Jacob possesses the strongest. The difficulty is compounded even more by our central passage, 31:9, in which Jacob attributes the success of his deception to God, a charge to which God also assents by means of a dream in 31:10–13. How should one make sense of the seeming unraveling of Laban’s blessing?

Laban’s actions can only be viewed as an attempt to alter the agreed upon contract he had established with Jacob.

54Noegel, “Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster,” 14-15, notes a fascinating connection between the episode in 30:37-43 and that of 29:21-30. In the latter, Laban deceives Jacob by giving him Leah rather than Rachel. Recognizing the pun operative here cements the connection: Leah (לעָה) may mean “wild cow,” while Rachel (רָאשִׁית) may mean “ewe lamb.” The connection between the two scenes thus becomes patent, and Noegel summarizes the essentials well: “In Genesis 29 Laban tricks Jacob into receiving the ‘wild cow’ Leah instead of the ‘ewe lamb’ Rachel. In Genesis 30, Jacob tricks Laban into giving him the lambs of his desire.” Going one step further, on the heels of the successful deception, chapter 31 sees Jacob acquiring not only the strongest of Laban’s flock, but also his ‘bovine-named’ daughters, who choose to join Jacob on his flight from Laban.

55Brueggemann, Genesis, 251, makes a similar point. He writes: “The story-teller apparently relishes this story, embellishing it with exaggerated (though not decipherable) vocabulary with reference to ‘striped, speckled, and spotted.’” Noegel, “Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster,” 16, regards the “ambiguity” evident in the text as a purposeful mechanism to reinforce the idea of deception.

56Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 491, sees “no contradiction” between Jacob’s pointing to “God’s providence” as the true, numinous actor of the scene. Reflecting upon a similar question, Walton, Thou Traveller Unknown, 118, muses as to whether Jacob is speaking deceptively in 31:9f. and concludes that at best one is unable to know. I, conversely, believe Jacob is speaking truthfully for some of the very reasons Walton brings up, namely that Bethel appears in 31:13 and thus “Jacob is all but swearing by his most sacred experience.” Moreover, the concern over whether Jacob is here being truthful or not does not exist as a contentious issue for the simple fact that my synchronic approach honors the received text, with all its theological shaping and all its complexities. By merit of ancient Israel’s preserving these complexities, it seems clear that she deemed them vital to her theology. Fokkelman, Narrative Art, 161, shares my contention, claiming the absence of any textual indicators to
Reading within the context of divine promise, as I have throughout, provides a potential solution. Central to 28:13-15 is the promise of divine presence and protection “until” (אַדּ) God’s purposes come to fruition. Thus far in the narrative the promise still hangs in abeyance, awaiting the future fulfillment that until now had only been partially realized. In Laban, however, the promise finds not only an outlet for blessing but also an individual who potentially could harm the heir to the promise, Jacob, by prolonging his stay with Laban and thus minimizing—or perhaps wholly negating—the possibility for blessing to all nations mentioned in 12:3 and 28:14. Laban is thus trying to arrogate to himself the conduit of his blessing, Jacob, as a guarantee of continued prosperity. Aware of this potentially deceptive tactic, God intervenes in accord with His promise of presence and protection. Schreiner correctly interprets the reversal in such a way: God sees and prevents the harm from coming upon Jacob, and in response takes Laban’s cattle and grants its strongest to Jacob.57 The message appears to be that blessing to the nations is contingent upon their not impeding the sharing of the blessing with other nations.

Understanding the connection between 30:27-43 and 31:1-16 is seminal for grasping God’s intervention on behalf of Jacob. At first glance one may acknowledge the presence of several tensions between the two episodes. These tensions, however, are easily resolved when read synchronically and with an understanding of the conventions of biblical narrative.

The first tension exists between 30:31-34 and 31:8. In the former, Jacob names his wage as the spotted and speckled goats and the black sheep, the anomalous of the herd. In the latter, Jacob reports to his wives that Laban had variously named Jacob’s wages as either the spotted or striped, and whichever Laban deemed the wage, that was what the flocks bore. It may be easy to see a discrepancy between the terms of chapter 30 and the actuality of chapter 31, yet such is not the case. In fact, the discrepancy is absolutely vital to the unfolding plot and confirms Jacob’s words in 31:1-16. Just one verse earlier in 31:7 Jacob asserts that Laban had changed the agreed upon wage ten times, a point which scholars have noted does not occur in the narrative and is thus, at best, a severe stretching of the truth.58 Verse 8, then, in the mouth of a reflective Jacob looking back upon his years of service to Laban, shows the progression: the original agreement was for the spotted, speckled, and black cattle, and upon seeing Jacob’s prospering, Laban seeks to change the terms of the deal by claiming only the spotted were discussed as payment, and then only the striped, and so on.59

mark Jacob as deceptive. All too often, says Fokkelman, one’s a priori interpretation of the Jacob character incorrectly colors how one reads other texts in the cycle. Just because Jacob may speak deceptively in one circumstance does not make him unable to speak honestly in another. Fokkelman cautions: “A correct literary analysis is not interested in a preconceived portrait of Jacob, but wants to elicit the image of Jacob from the story itself, line by line.”


58Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 158, offers a brief bibliography of some representative positions.

59This reading is most fully spelled out by Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 152-62. Fokkelman goes so far as to construct the imagined words of a bewildered Laban to
Not every event of Jacob’s lengthy time with Laban receives thorough enumeration. What this reading succeeds in doing is showing the continuity between chapters 30 and 31, as well as addressing the presumed authenticity of Jacob’s speech in 31:1-16. When one reads the final form of the text as a connected narrative, Jacob’s words shed their a priori guise of falsehood and are cast anew as revealing new information about the narrative.

Another potential tension lies in the intersection of Jacob’s action in 30:37-43 and his report of God’s action in 31:7-13. I have already outlined the events of 30:37-43 above. How then is Jacob said to be the actor in one scene and God the actor in the other? Here one must consider the conventions of biblical narrative, paying specific attention to how things are narrated as opposed strictly to what is narrated. Alter has pointed out the propensity within the biblical text for dialogue or direct speech as the means of driving the narrative forward rather than through simple narration. This notice finds its outlet in 30:36-43, the only text in the entire Jacob cycle that is entirely narration. Neither Jacob nor Laban speaks. What one finds, instead, is a meticulous narration of Jacob’s practice of selected breeding by employing the peeled, white branches. Nothing of Jacob’s thoughts or the impetus behind such a numinous practice receives any clarification or exposition. Only in 31:7, 9, 12, and 15 does one garner any sense of what has taken place. There, Jacob shares with his wives that it was God who had been behind it all, just as he had promised in 28:13-15 at Bethel (cf. 31:3). Again, as promised, God comes to the fore, revealing his action behind-the-scenes throughout. According to Alter, this after-the-fact revelation is also endemic to biblical texts, which will often suppress important details until a critical and pertinent juncture in the narrative. In chapter 30 it is not immediately relevant that God is at work in some mysterious way (although the attentive reader of the Jacob cycle may assume this to be the case based upon my discussion above), yet in chapter 31, with the threat of further internment to the bearer of the promise, it becomes immediately relevant. Chapter 31 brings the latent character God to the forefront, and it is God alone who the narrator shows can and does upset the equilibrium between the two

an ever-increasing Jacob: “No, Jacob, we had agreed that the speckled animals should be yours’ and a season later, ‘but, Jacob, you must be mistaken! I said the striped animals . . . .’”

Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 115, notes that biblical narrative is often “selectively silent in a purposeful way.”


Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 158.

Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 155.

Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 159, 162.

Brueggemann, Genesis, 258, notes the significance of this episode coming immediately upon the heels of the birth of Jacob’s children. Until now, the narrative was not “explicit.” For Brueggemann, 31:1-16 is the “theological summary” for the entirety of Gen 29-31, and therefore succeeds in “affirm[ing] that all of Jacob’s life is kept (cf. 28:20) and valued by this God who works inversions for the sake of the promise.” Yet Brueggemann seemingly reduces the promise here solely to the return to the land, which is surely part of yet not the entirety of the ancestral promise. In the ancestral narratives, the promise expands; it is never reduced.
deceivers Jacob and Laban. Fokkelman perhaps summarizes the connections between the two chapters best:

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

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

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66Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 161, calls God “the only effective ‘factor’ in the attack-counter-attack of the two sly men . . . ” and, very similar to this study, states that in this particular instance, God plays the role of deceiver while Laban plays the role of the deceived. Niditch, Underdogs and Tricksters, 110, further clarifies that by choosing to reveal God’s explicit participation in this way, “God is made a part of the scene without intruding too heavily upon its trickster pattern.” What Niditch does not state, however, is what Fokkelman and I both hold to be the case: that God is here complicit in Jacob’s deception.  

67Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 159.  


I have already addressed the veracity of Jacob’s own words (see n. 56 above). A question remains, however: can the narrator similarly be trusted? This issue has already been addressed in part through my discussion of the conventions of biblical narrative as outlined by Alter, yet one can say more. As I have limned this study, the narrator is ancient Israel, recounting her own experiences with and understandings of her covenantal God. She is, therefore—especially in this episode!—a biased narrator to be sure. She is also, though, telling her story. I do not mean to ascribe dishonesty to ancient Israel, as though her story were one of shrewd and calculated myths. Rather quite the opposite, as Alter writes of in his chapter entitled “Sacred History and the Beginnings of Prose Fiction,” for the ancient writers and shapers of these narratives likely molded and cast their received traditions in a highly stylized and artistic way. Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 33, writes: “All of these narratives are presented as history, that is, as things that really happened and that have some significant consequence for human or Israelite destiny.” So can one trust the narrator? From the perspective of ancient Israel (or, in most of our cases, from the perspective of an empathetic reader of ancient Israel’s Scriptures), yes. History is just that . . . story. Whether Jacob truly had a dream (or whether there ever was an historical Jacob for that matter!) we will never know, but one can and should trust ancient Israel as a narrator of her own history. Certainly, as with any modern autobiography, there exists a bent to the writing and what is/is not narrated; history is never disinterested. But as a teller of her own story, ancient Israel immortalityes a particular image of herself. Would a figure as deceptive and potentially problematic as Jacob be the prime candidate to become “Israel” were there not some intention in depicting him as the ancient Israelite narrator has chosen to do? On this point, see most recently Albert de Pury, “The Jacob Story and the Beginning of the Formation of the Pentateuch,” in A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation
Chapters 30 and 31 also share some similar language. Two of the three words used to describe the cattle that would become Jacob’s wages in chapter 30 pose a neat parallel with 31:10, 12. The roots וָֽשֵׁ֔נֵי and וָֽשַׁ֔נּ both occur in 30:39 and 31:10, and וַֽשַׁ֔נּ occurs also in 30:32. This affinity demonstrates not only a connection between the two chapters, but a connection that focuses upon the central action of 30:37-43: the coloring of the animals. Additionally, this connection highlights how the promise continues to be operative in Jacob’s daily life. His deception will succeed whereas Laban’s will not, all because YHWH will insure it to be so.

Jacob’s attribution of the prior deception of Laban to God in 31:1-16 commends itself to another way of seeing the connection between chapters 30 and 31. Alter writes of the biblical type-scene as one in which convention allows the audience readily to pick out traditional and nontraditional material. Niditch, as I mention above, has outlined the traditional pattern of the ‘hero’ based upon her work in folklore. A vital part of this pattern is the deceiving of the deceiver. The interactions between Jacob and Laban fall nicely into her schema, as she recognizes. The ways in which that schema is adapted for a given figure and narrative, however, is of the utmost importance and would not go unnoticed by an ancient audience. Against this backdrop, God’s preemptive involvement on behalf of Jacob and to the detriment of Laban is unprecedented in any of the folklore parallels. As such, God’s role in chapters 30 and 31 serves as a unique part of the type-scene and is a way in which ancient Israel has sought to give expression to her unique, unrivaled, and inimitable experience with and understanding of a God who is not above deception as a means of achieving His ultimate ends.

**Genesis 31:24**
In light of all the above, this final section may hardly seem necessary. God, just as He promised, provides protection for those who are the conduits of His

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(SBLSym$ 34; ed. Thomas B. Dozeman and Konrad Schmid; Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 51-72, esp. 72, in which he conjectures, given her theological and historical circumstances, that ancient Israel may have come to view the pervasive deception of the Jacob cycle more positively in the fifth century and used the cycle as a foundation around which the Pentateuch grew and developed.


Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 47-48. One should remain mindful, however—as Alter himself warns—against too easily equating convention with form criticism. For Alter, the search for “recurrent regularities of pattern rather than the manifold variations upon a pattern that any system of literary convention elicits” typifies form criticism. Also, he writes that form criticism concerns itself with “the social functions of the text” and “its historical evolution.” Conversely, convention and type-scenes focus upon the multifarious ways in which a story has been rendered.

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


Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 199. One should be aware also that Williams’ treatment here looks to presuppose a reading of the two chapters together as a literarily cogent unit.
blessing, Jacob and his family. Each of the previous three passages have as their background this theme of divine presence and protection. By warning Laban to do Jacob and his family no harm, God creates and ensures a framework wherein the blessing can and will be spread to the west, east, north, and south (28:14).

God’s protection of the entire lineage of Abraham becomes evident based upon the divine speech in 31:24, which Laban reiterates in 31:29. Walton argues for a connection between 31:24 and 24:50, in which Laban and Bethuel identify the chance meeting of Abraham’s servant with Rebekah in accordance with God’s purposes. The textual affinity between these two verses lies in Laban’s speaking in each passage about his inability to speak either evil (זָר) or good (ב։ז) because the central action revolves around divine action. Theologically, the function of 31:24 deals with God’s desire to actualize His promise by means of divine protection, which I have shown to be ubiquitous in the Jacob narratives.

Lastly, one must read this verse not only in its obvious covenantal context but also in the context of its relation to deception. Jacob’s flight occurs at the urging of God following their successful co-deception of Laban with the mysterious episode about the spotted and speckled cattle. Moreover, Laban regards Jacob’s hastened departure as a means of deception, a point to which the text attests three times: 31:20, 26, 27. Again, following an adapted version of Martens’ pattern noted above, the explicit deception is tempered by the covenantal overtones of the passage, which do not seek to exonerate God or Jacob from any type of deception but rather to convey that this deception should be understood as a means of carrying the covenantal promise and blessing to Abraham forward to its ultimate realization.

Walton, Thou Traveller Unknown, 164.

In vv. 20 and 26 the Hebrew records some form of the verb “steal away” (נַעַבָּר) + “heart” (בְּלִי), commonly regarded as an idiom implying deception, resulting in the translations “and Jacob stole the heart of Laban” and “you have stolen my heart” respectively. Verse 27 has just the word נַעַבָּר, oftentimes translated as “deceive.”

I have until now resisted comment on what I believe to be the moment or figure of this ultimate realization. Certainly the tragic history of apostasy of ancient Israel recounted in her very Scriptures has led many to posit that the advent of Jesus stands as the fulfillment of all God’s promises, stretching all the way back to the patriarchs. I, however, maintain a certain level of agnosticism about the certainty of such professions, namely because of their triumphalism and tendency to mute the voice of a still living and vibrant community, the Jews, for whom the Hebrew Bible and its promises hold an important and continuing place in God’s plan of salvation. Much like with Jesus, ancient Israel has pushed this moment of ultimate realization into the eschaton, as texts such as Isa 2 show. No easy answer to this question occurs to me, but I am certain that one must always remain mindful that ancient Israel’s survival of all the atrocities she has faced—exile, Temple destruction, Bar Kochba rebellion, Inquisition, ghettoization, pogroms, the Holocaust—theologically affirm that the covenant and its promise/blessing are still very much alive and well in the Jewish community today. Perhaps, then, we do indeed persist in our waiting for the moment when the descendants of Jacob, named Israel, bless the whole world in the name of Israel’s God, the trickster God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.
Conclusion: Deception as a Covenantal Defense

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

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

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