PARALLEL GUIDE 10
The Jacob Saga

Summary: Abraham's response to God—keep in mind that he is presented as being a faithful human, not a sinless creature—symbolizes Israel's ideal character, while Jacob's scheming and waywardness describe her actual character. The Jacob saga shows Israel at her most honest, depicting Jacob as the most human of humans, one who strives to achieve what God has already promised him.

Learning Objectives

• Read Genesis 25-36
• State the main characteristics which Israel found to be true of her national life as seen through Jacob who is a symbol for Israel
• State the significance of the dream about the ladder
• State the significance of Jacob's wrestling match
• Name the four 'mothers' of Israel

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Should the Christian church be "good" or should it be "faithful"?

2. As you read Genesis 28:10-22, have your notebook available for recording your thoughts and reactions. Begin by taking a few deep breaths. Let yourself relax, dwelling in silence. Stay quiet for a few moments.

When you are ready, read the passage over slowly, line by line, phrase by phrase. Read it once, then return to the silence with your eyes closed. After a few moments, read the passage again and return to the silence. Repeat the cycle a third time. After remaining silent, record your thoughts and reactions. Do this uncritically. Simply write what you have experienced. Write a short paragraph on what the passage means to you.

3. Trace Jacob's journey on a map, noting significant places and events.

4. The "Deceit Motif" occurs several times in the Old Testament. Trace out what this means for someone who wishes to be faithful.

Preparing for Your Seminar

If Jacob is a symbol for Israel and characteristics of its national life, how can we relate this to our own national life and the characteristics of those who lead us? Would you prefer to be faithful or to be good and right? What is the difference for you?

Additional Sources

The Torah: A Modern Commentary (Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981) is the result of the effort of several Jewish scholars, particularly W. Gunther

Plaut, who prepared the commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; the late Bernard J. Bamberger, who prepared the commentary on Leviticus; and William W. Hallo, who contributed to the volume several essays on Near Eastern literature. We refer to this exciting commentary on several occasions,

but particularly when we discuss the ways that the Pentateuch has been used by the Jewish tradition in both study and worship. The commentary is well worth owning. It is not expensive, considering the number of books it covers, and its different perspective and format make it a delight to use.

John Calvin, Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, translated by John King (Baker Books House, reprinted 1979).

Chapter 10
THE JACOB SAGA

The patriarchal stories are not simply accounts of the lives of certain heroes of Israel; they are stories in which Israel describes herself. Abraham, the forefather of every Jew and Christian, is the symbol of the faith-response on which the covenant of redemption depends. Abraham describes Israel in her ideal form: the elect people of God whose faith is to be the means by which all the nations of the world are to be blessed. It is profound that Abraham is never presented as sinless, but is portrayed as one who combines the good and bad choices we do in our own lives. As we have seen in Genesis 12, the Bible shows both sides of Abraham's life and highlights God's faithfulness in dealings with people as flawed as we ourselves are. Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes, is a symbol of the actual character of Israel—elected by God from before birth as the bearer of the blessing, and yet constantly striving throughout life to achieve by personal cunning and deceit the blessing that is already his. The characteristics of Jacob are those which a sensitive Israelite might recognize as those of the nation. It was "good news" that YHWH was willing to accept Abraham's faith as sufficient and to reckon it to him as righteousness; it was even more "good news" that YHWH was so intent on using Israel as his chosen vessel that YHWH remained faithful to Israel in spite of her failings. This is the central message of the Jacob saga: God is faithful to the promises and persists in God's purposes, even if Israel is an unworthy people.

Genesis 25:19-26 The Birth of Esau and Jacob

Read Genesis 25:19 through chapter 35 as a single narrative. Notice that although we are calling it the Jacob saga, the writer considers it the story of Isaac. Notice also that chapter 34 breaks the flow of the story; you should be able to guess that this is from a different tradition. See how many other places you can identify a shift from one tradition to another or a blending together of two or more traditions. Note what similarities there are among any of the stories in this section and stories in the Abraham saga. Look for what is being said about the relationship of Israel in later times with some of her neighbors. In these ways you will be doing your own critical study of the biblical text.

This section and chapter 26, the only places where Isaac appears as the main character, seem to give us no more than an "after-image" of Abraham. We know the kinds of motifs already from the Abraham story. One motif, that of the barren wife, we met in the stories about Sarah, particularly in chapters 16-18.

The motif of the barren wife, which occurs as well in the stories of Rachel, of Hannah (the mother of Samuel), and of Elizabeth (the mother of John the Baptist), seems to represent the notion of the "barrenness" of Israel which can be made fecund only by the creative power of God at certain critical moments in the life of the nation. The point is the same in all of these cases: the birth of the one who is needed to further God's purposes for his people comes about only by God's initiative. Israel's movement toward her destiny is not achieved by virtue of her own inherent power, goodness, or ingenuity, but rather in spite of her lack of these characteristics. In contrast

to this, the birth of Jesus—the one who is to fulfill the purposes toward which the others have provided only an anticipatory impulse—occurs through a woman who, far from being elderly and barren, is at the prime age of fecundity; yet here too it is by the power of God alone that the birth is achieved. Jesus, therefore, in the picture which Luke's Gospel presents, belongs to the long tradition of those whom God provided to Israel, but differs from them in that he does not come forth from the barrenness of Israel, but from her "virginal" response of faith: "Here am I the servant of the LORD; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

What is important here is that God hears the prayer of Isaac, the son of Abraham and the heir of the covenant. Rebekah's fertility is, in fact, a sign that God keeps the covenant. (The renewal of the Abrahamic covenant is found in 26:3-5 and again in 26:23-25.) Rebekah "inquires of the LORD" about the meaning of the struggle of her unborn twins. The twins who struggle within Rebekah's womb will continue to struggle for the rest of their lives. Two nations are being born in her, their relations with each other will result in their division, and the younger one will be superior to the older. Jacob is to be the father of the tribes of Israel and Esau is to be the father of the tribes of Edom. Indeed, between these two peoples there was to be a long rivalry, with Israel at one point ruling over Edom; yet they knew themselves to be kin to one another, and Israel appears to have been aware that Edom was the older nation. The naming of the two sons is, as always, significant. "Esau" does not carry any special meaning in itself, but the fact that he was red and hairy does: the word for "red" sounds something like "Edom" and the word for "hairy" sounds like "Seir," where the Edomites lived. Jacob's name can mean "he takes the heel" or "supplanter." Obviously both meanings are appropriate to the story, but that of supplanter is the more important for the ongoing relationships of the two brothers and the peoples they represent.

Note that before their birth YHWH has promised—more than that, has asserted as God's purpose—that Jacob is to supplant Esau. His preeminence over his brother is a divine decree from the outset. This is important for the story, because Jacob is constantly striving to achieve by his own devices that which he has already been promised even before his birth.

Genesis 25:27-34 The Birthright

Besides the conflict between Israel and Edom, we may be dealing here with the conflict between the hunter and the shepherd (v. 27). The Hebrews who settled in Palestine in the earliest days, before the invasion of the land by the tribes who escaped from Egypt, raised flocks and began to settle down on the land, laying claim to it and especially to the wells which were needed as the flocks moved from one grazing area to another. They were continually harassed by hunting nomads who moved on the fringes of the settled area, east of the Jordan. Two groups, therefore, are symbolized by Esau: the early hunting nomads of trans-Jordan and the settlers of Edom in the south. This is one of several indications in the story that we are dealing with different traditions which have been interwoven. (Notice that the description of Esau as red and hairy puns on the relation of Esau to Edom.) Still, the reference to Edom is the more important one in the story; the earlier remembrance of the conflicts

with the nomads serves mainly to provide a device for the story of Esau's loss of his blessing from Isaac in chapter 27.

In this story there are at least two important things to notice: Esau is "famished" when he comes in from the field, and the pottage (soup or stew) was red. The word translated "famished" is very strong in Hebrew—it is intensive and means that Esau was more than simply hungry. He is probably not exaggerating when he says in verse 32, "I am about to die." The pottage which Jacob is brewing is red—another play on "Edom" and tie to Esau's being red. He values his life more than a future birthright, more than his rights as eldest son,

including leadership of the family and a double share of his inheritance (Deut. 21:15-17).

If Esau's agreement to give over his birthright for the pottage is based on an assumption that is proved false, he may renege on it when he discovers that he has been deceived. Therefore, Jacob has him swear an oath, which cannot be rejected later. Here is the first of many instances in which Jacob tries to gain by less than noble means what is already his. The story highlights more than Jacob's deceit, however. Esau's dullness—he is outwitted as much by his own stomach as by his brother—may be intended to explain why Israel gained ascendancy over Edom.

Genesis 26:1-34 Isaac's Wanderings

The writer seems to consider this whole set of stories, which we have called the Jacob saga, to be about Isaac, for the account begins (in 25:19) with the heading, "These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son" and ends (in 35:29) with the death of Isaac. But then what we call the Joseph saga, chapters 37-50, is called "The story of the family of Jacob" (37:2). Thus the writer's format fits the tradition that the three patriarchs were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact, however, Isaac plays very little part in the second story—it is mostly about Jacob—and Joseph, not Jacob, becomes the main character in the last story.

Apart from the description of Isaac's birth and near sacrifice (in the Abraham saga) and the brief references to him at the birth of Jacob and Esau and at his own death, the stories in this chapter are all we have about him. They are a collection of stories which seem to come from different traditions and to speak of different settings; they do not succeed in giving us a very full picture of the man. As they are assembled in this chapter, they are very reminiscent of the things that happened to Abraham: there is a famine in the land, and Isaac sets off for Egypt (in contrast to the Abraham version, he is forbidden to go down to Egypt); the promises made to Abraham are repeated to Isaac; Isaac lies about his wife before Abimelech; there are stories about land ownership and the digging of wells—indeed Isaac seems to spend much of his time simply reopening wells originally dug by his father.

The Isaac stories do serve a purpose. Remember that Genesis begins with universal history, the story of all human beings. Beginning with chapter 12, there is a gradual narrowing down of attention to one people: Abraham first—but he is the father not only of Isaac but also of Ishmael (the Bedouin tribes people); then Isaac—who is the father not only of Jacob but also of Esau (Edom). The Israelites knew that they were related to other peoples, in both race and heritage. It was necessary to account

for this relationship, and yet to show that the promises made to Abraham came down to Israel alone. Isaac is a necessary figure in this plan.

One might carry this idea of a succession of "two sons" even further. Cain and Abel (with Cain as the city builder, 4:17, the ancestor, so to speak, of the city builders of the Tower of Babel story), Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, all show a double succession of those who were destined to depict humanity as it functions apart from God by its own strength, and humankind mysteriously under the power of divine grace. The main point is that God's favor, God's grace, comes to humankind for no discernible reason. Why was Abel's offering acceptable while Cain's was not? What was there about Isaac that made him preferable to Ishmael? Even more to the point, why should Esau, who is by far the more likable character, be ousted in favor of the devious and deceitful Jacob? The only answer to these questions is that none of them is relevant; God does not choose on the basis of human merit, but on the basis of his purpose for redemption.

Centuries later, in the Dead Sea community (generally assumed to be the sect of the Essenes), a book entitled "The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness" described two ways of life, the one leading to blessedness and the other to damnation. There is a similar motif in an early Christian book called "The

Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" (usually referred to by its Greek title, the Didache [pronounced DID-ah-kay], which means "teaching"). In these books there is a strong moral emphasis, which can easily lead one to think that blessedness and damnation are the results of human activity. In these chapters of Genesis this is denied in favor of the view that God's election is the only determining factor. Throughout our studies we shall encounter the exceedingly difficult and subtle issue of the relationship between election and morality.

The main purposes of this chapter are to show the extension of the covenant promises through Isaac to Jacob, and Israel's superiority over the Philistines—Abimelech is here called a king of the Philistines. Note that it is Isaac, as the superior, who gives the feast to seal the covenant between the two. There is also an accounting for the names of certain wells and the shrine at Beer-sheba.

According to our standards of coherent writing, verses 34 and 35 may seem to be tacked on. They do account for one of the reasons Jacob is later to seek a wife outside of Palestine (27:46-28:9). Esau marries two Canaanite women ("Hittite" simply means Canaanite here), "and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah." (Even when scholarship may be correct in identifying parts of a text as a later addition, the church considers the entire Bible to be the Word of God—not just those portions which we decide are "original" or which "fit." Although translators attempt to make the English versions read smoothly, we need to remind ourselves over and over again that this is literature written in a vastly different culture from the one we inhabit.) The remarkable thing about this story is that it shows Jacob, the father of the whole nation, in such a bad light. The theological motif—that God's promises do not depend on human righteousness—is presented in a most extreme form.

Genesis 27:1-29 Jacob's Deceit in Obtaining Isaac's Blessing

When Isaac calls for Esau, Esau gives the reply that is characteristic of faith: "Here I am" (cf., e.g., 22:1, 7, 11, the story of Abraham and Isaac; I Sam. 3:4). This forthright acceptance of one's identity before another—often God—is contrasted with Jacob's concealment of his identity even in the face of the direct question, "Who are you?" (27:18-19).

Isaac's request for food (v. 4) is not incidental to the story. He wants to give Esau a blessing before he dies, and the power of a blessing—as it was understood at the time—depends upon the physical strength of the man who utters it, as well as his moral and spiritual strength. Therefore Isaac wants his favorite meal in order to revive himself as much as possible. The blessing was a material thing; it carried power with it, and once it was uttered and had gone forth to the person to whom it was directed, it could not be recalled. Nor could the same blessing be given to someone else. It had become the possession of the receiver.

Rebekah thinks up the entire scheme to trick Isaac. She is willing to take Isaac's curse in place of Jacob if Isaac discovers the trick (v. 13). But Jacob is more than willing to go along with the plan, and it is he who lies to his father. Once again Jacob attempts to gain by deceit what is his already—and his mother shares his anxious ambition. Yet Rebekah is well aware of God's promise made before Jacob's birth; she is the one to whom the oracle was delivered.

In verses 18-29, the deceitfulness of Jacob is built up layer by layer. When Jacob speaks to Isaac and says, "My father," these are the last words of truth he utters in the entire story. Isaac's response sets the tone: "Here I am," and the words of integrity are followed by the question, " . . . who are you, my son?" Jacob lies: he says he is Esau and that he has done what his father told him to do. When Isaac wonders how "Esau" could have caught the game food for him so soon, Jacob carries the lie to the point of blasphemy: "Because the LORD your God granted me success" (v. 20). Isaac, still not convinced since "the voice is Jacob's voice," feels the kid's skins on Jacob's hands and is deceived into thinking that "the hands are the hands of

Esau" (v. 22). The lie becomes most direct when Jacob replies to Isaac's question "Are you really my son Esau?" with the words "I am" (v. 24). Finally, after eating the meal which he believes to be the game which Esau has caught, Isaac asks his son to kiss him. When Jacob kisses Isaac, the old man smells Esau's clothing and is fully convinced. (The kiss of Judas is not something new in the Bible: Jacob kisses Isaac while deceiving him, and Absalom will kiss his father, David, when he intends to kill him.)

The pathetic irony of the first sentence of the blessing which Isaac gives to Jacob sets in sharp relief the whole pattern of deception of which Isaac has been the victim: "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed" (v. 27). It is true that God has blessed Jacob—before he was born—but not in the wonderfully innocent way that Isaac pictures. The blessing gives material abundance (v. 28) and preeminence over other nations and kinsfolk (v. 29). It is the kind of blessing which one would expect to fall upon the firstborn, but it is given, as YHWH had said and Jacob had schemed, to the younger.

Genesis 27:30-40 The Blessing of Esau

Even though the blessing has been obtained by trickery, what has been given to Jacob cannot be taken back. The great emotion felt by both Isaac and Esau is shown in the choice of words "trembled violently" (v. 33) and "cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry" (v. 34); such expressions of emotion are rare for the J writer and indicate the enormity of the wrong done to Esau. The only blessing Isaac can now give to Esau is a negative one. It is not a curse, which would have indicated anger on Isaac's part, but a statement of what must be Esau's lot. He must live apart from the fatness of the earth and the dew of heaven which Isaac smelled on his clothing when Jacob kissed him; Esau must live by his sword and be subject to his brother.3The only positive note is the promise that Esau may eventually break free from Jacob's control. This reflects, of course, the reality of a later political situation: Edom, a part of David's "kingdom," was to revolt under Solomon and gain independence.

It is important to understand the whole of the Jacob saga, but particularly this part, in the context of the promise to Abraham (12:13a), a promise freely given and freely renewed with Isaac and with Jacob. Jacob's scheming to gain the things that God has already freely granted him is a failure in trust and a failure in understanding. It is a failure to trust the promise that God has made to him, that the blessings of Abraham and Isaac will also be his; it is a failure to understand that God is one who is always faithful in his promises, which depend never "on human will or exertion," as Paul reminds the Romans in his rehearsal of the story, "but God who shows mercy" (Rom. 9:16). Jacob obtains the promise, in other words, by what John Calvin calls "free gift; for if we compare the works of both together, Esau obeys his father, brings him the produce of his hunting, prepares for his father the food obtained by his own labor, and speaks nothing but the truth: in short, we find nothing in him which is not worthy of praise. Jacob never leaves his home, substitutes a kid for venison, insinuates himself by many lies, brings nothing which would properly commend him, but in many things deserves reprehension. Hence it must be acknowledged, that the cause of this event is not to be traced to works, but that it lies hid in the eternal counsel of God." Jacob is not preferred "because of his own merit, but because the Lord hath gratuitously elected him." (Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, 27:30; italics added)

Finally, Jacob's failure is blasphemous, because it is a failure to believe that God is other, that God is unlike human beings (particularly as Jacob knows them): selfish, deceitful, and always pressing individual advantage. That God is other, remaining faithful, even in the face of all there is about Jacob that "deserves reprehension," is the final marvel of the story, and sits theologically at the center of the entire Jacob-narrative.

Genesis 27:41-31:55 Jacob and Laban

This section is completely disconnected from the motif of the struggle between Jacob and Esau, for instead of dealing with the relations between Israel and Edom, it presents us with the relations between Israel and her Aramean relatives. The Arameans were the Semitic peoples from the Tigris-Euphrates basin from whom Abraham came, but they were also the peoples who in later centuries were to make war against the northern kingdom of Israel. Both Isaac and Jacob obtained their wives from the people of Abraham's stock, but relationships in later times were less than friendly, as is shown in the struggle between Jacob and Laban.

Although this section is made up of many fragments, we treat it as a unit giving the chapter and verse references for the entire unit. Read it through again, and then we will look at its several parts.

Genesis 27:41-28:9 Reasons for Going to Laban

Two motives are given for Jacob's trip to Haran: the first is his fear of Esau, who has determined to kill Jacob, and the second is his wish not to marry a Canaanite woman. Two different traditions are expressed here. The concern about marrying a Canaanite woman has nothing to do with racial purity, but rather with religious purity. The problem of Israel's absorbing the religious practices of the Canaanites plagued the nation after the period of the settlement of the tribes and became especially troublesome at the time of the return from Exile. This state of affairs is read back into the patriarchal period.

Notice the form of the blessing that Isaac gives to Jacob in vv. 3-4: it is conditional, an expression of hope, rather than a statement of fact. He prays that God may extend to Jacob the promises made to Abraham. Later in this chapter God will ratify this conditional blessing.

Notice also how thoroughly Esau has recognized the fact that Jacob has taken his place in his father's affections, even though he was "supplanted" by trickery. Since Jacob has been commanded not to marry a Canaanite woman—because Esau's Canaanite wives did not please Isaac—Esau tries to please his father by marrying a daughter of Abraham's son Ishmael. As the readers would know, this is a pathetic attempt which cannot work, since Ishmael was excluded from the Abrahamitic blessing (21:8-14).

Genesis 28:10-22 The Vision of the Ladder at Bethel

In part, this story is etiological; it tells of the origin of Bethel (the "house of God"), a pre-Israelite Canaanite shrine, which also became one of the important shrines of later Israel. The main interest of the writer is to show the first immediate relationship between Jacob and YHWH. Before this, the reader knew of the special relationship which YHWH decreed before Jacob's birth, but Jacob himself has had no experience of it. Even his father's declaring of the extension of Abraham's blessing to him was conditional. Now Jacob is to receive the blessing first hand.top

Jacob does what was quite common in ancient religion. He goes to sleep at a shrine in order to receive a visitation (in the form of a dream) from the god of the shrine. This practice is still going on at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the site of Solomon's temple, where Muslims process seven times around an interior walk and then lie down in hopes of a vision. Jacob does this same kind of thing: he takes a stone from the shrine and, using it as a shield for his head, goes to sleep. (Does Jacob use the stone for a pillow? Probably not. The Hebrew says he puts the stone "at his head place." We may think this could only mean that he slept with his head upon the stone. However, it was standard practice when sleeping on the ground in the open, to sleep with one's head behind a stone, as at least minimal protection from wild animals. The relative locations of Jacob's head and the stone make no difference in the meaning of the ensuing dream.)

He dreams that there is a ladder set up on earth that reaches to heaven. This should not be imagined as a runged ladder, but as the sloping ramp that goes up the middle of one face of a ziggurat. The "angels"—i.e., the messengers of God—are going up and down on it. That is, they are going about YHWH's business on the earth. Usually the Bible speaks only of YHWH's actions in relation to specific people, the acts of God in history. Here, for a brief moment, a window has been opened through which we have a glimpse of the usually invisible activities of God in the world. (Compare this with John 1:51, the only other place in the Bible where this imagery is used.)

In verses 13-15 YHWH ratifies the conditional blessing of Jacob. The Hebrew here can be translated in a number of ways. YHWH is "above" or "beside" either the ladder or Jacob. Which one is correct? The ambiguous pronouns and prepositions in Hebrew, combined with the theology of what YHWH and Jacob say, make all of them correct. That is, just as YHWH's presence is not confined to the Promised Land, YHWH is not limited to one location at a time, but can be both "in heaven" and "on earth" simultaneously. The two parts of the patriarchal blessing are given to Jacob: land and posterity. Further, YHWH promises to be with Jacob in his travels and to bring him back to the land. Note this, for it bears on Jacob's behavior a little later in the story.

Verse 17, in which Jacob is afraid and calls the place "awesome" and refers to it as the "gate of heaven," is interesting in the light of two authors we have mentioned earlier: Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. Here is awe in the presence of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, and here is also the notion that there is a place where heaven and earth almost touch each other. Eliade speaks of this as a common feature in ancient religion. A particular place on earth is the "center of the world," and at that place, under the right circumstances—usually during some cultic practice—the gate between heaven and earth opens. When this happens, the things that are happening in heaven are seen, and they define and give meaning to the things that are happening on earth. Jacob reflects this notion when he calls Bethel the "gate of heaven." As we have noted, the name of the place itself means "house of God." Bethel is the place where Jacob encounters YHWH. It is also interesting to consider this encounter in terms of one of the ways that it has come into Christian worship, through the spiritual "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." Because "we" are put in the place of Jacob, the encounter, which comes in the third stanza of the hymn, is stated in particularly Christian terms:

Brother, do you love my Jesus? Sister, do you love my Jesus?

The word "love" is essential here. It is often used to express the notion of encounter in these songs, particularly a personal encounter. The question says that the encounter will require a response. This requirement is affirmed in the form the encounter takes—it takes the form of a question that implies a response, particularly a response of faith. The faith that is challenged is defined in verse four of the spiritual: "If you love him, why not serve him?" It is a faith to be fulfilled in service to God.

We saw such service in the case of Abraham, who left his land and kindred for the land which God was to show him. Jacob's response is not at all like that of Abraham. Instead of the response of faith, he makes a conditional agreement: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God . . ." (28:20-21). The promise of a tithe, incidentally, which was very important to the P writer (though this is not P, but a combination of J and E), is not picked up in the later story at all. One would expect that at some point we would read an account of Jacob's having given a tithe, but none appears.

Genesis 29:1-30:24 Jacob's Wives and Sons

When Jacob arrives and meets Rachel, he “kissed Rachel and wept aloud” (29:11). This intense, almost idolizing love for Rachel seems to be one of the few sincere strands in Jacob’s nature. When Laban hears of Jacob’s arrival, he runs to meet him. He knows about the wealth associated with the house of Abraham; that it was he who, with his father, Bethuel, had given his sister Rebekah to be Isaac’s wife. Jacob has come into Laban’s household, and now the problem, since he is not a slave, is what to do with him. “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing?” (29:15). Unlike the story of the giving of Rebekah to Isaac, Jacob is no servant sent to take away a woman to be the wife of a man in a distant place. Jacob has come to marry one of the daughters of Laban.

Here we should note a legal peculiarity concerning two different kinds of marriages. The ordinary marriage, such as that between Rebekah and Isaac, was one in which the woman left her father’s household and went to live with her husband’s family. Various tablets have been discovered which show that, among the semi-nomads there was another kind of marriage in which the opposite took place: the man left his clan and went to live in the clan of his wife. (Compare this with Gen. 2:24.) In this situation, if the man decided to leave his wife’s clan, he could do so, but he had to leave his wife, his children, and his possessions behind. In this way the clan maintained its unity. As the Jacob story unfolds, we shall see that in his case, it is this second kind of marriage that is described.

The contract arranged between Laban and Jacob is that Jacob shall work for seven years for a wife. Jacob intends that this wife be Rachel, but Laban craftily avoids promising this. He says simply, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man . . .” (v. 19). Laban has promised nothing, though he seems to agree to Jacob’s proposal.

After the seven years, there is a typical marriage feast, and Laban brings Leah to Jacob. The deception is possible because of the custom of the time in which the groomsmen take the groom into the nuptial chamber and the bridesmaids take the bride, heavily veiled, to him. The lights are extinguished and the wedding party withdraws before she removes her veil, so Jacob cannot see that she is not Rachel. In the morning when the deception is discovered, the marriage has been consummated; it is too late to reject Leah.

Once more deceit is a feature of the story, though this time Jacob is its victim. Laban agrees to give Rachel to Jacob after the nuptial week of his marriage to Leah has passed, in return for seven more years of service.

Verses 24 and 29 introduce Leah’s maid, Zilpah, and Rachel’s maid, Bilhah. They will be mothers of children by Jacob also, after the custom we have seen in the Abraham story concerning Sarah’s maid, Hagar. The rest of the account is of the birth and naming of the children of these four women, the four mothers of the tribes of Israel.[top]

The birth of the sons is described with the usual concentration on the meanings of their names. The names are not given scientific linguistic interpretations; rather, the similarities in sound in Hebrew are once again used to connect the names with some meaning. Since these sons are the later tribes, we would expect the meanings to have some relation to the later history of the tribes, but, with the possible exception of Judah, this is not the case. Rather, the names reflect the state of affairs in the lives of the mothers: Leah’s sorrow and hopes for happiness and Rachel’s barrenness and hopes for children. Judah, from whose posterity the Messiah is later to come, has a name which may mean “praise YHWH.” Joseph means “he adds,” which indicates that Rachel is to have one more son later.

Although the maids actually bear some of these sons, they are legally offspring of the two wives, so that the later tribes are usually referred to as the Leah tribes and the Rachel tribes. We see later that there are slightly variant lists of these two sets of tribes. We also see how they were dispersed into different areas of the “land of promise.”

The strange little section in 30:14-15 about the mandrakes needs a comment. Mandrakes are plants which the ancients believed were aphrodisiac—able to increase sexual desire. Rachel wants them in the hope that they might make it possible for her to conceive: for her they are an antidote to barrenness. To get them from Leah, whose son Reuben has found them, she agrees to let Leah lie with Jacob that night. Leah is by this time past childbearing age, but God allows her to conceive, and she has a fifth and a sixth son and then a daughter, Dinah, who is not heard of again until chapter 34. Since that chapter is from a different tradition and has other peculiarities, it is likely that Dinah's birth was simply inserted here but did not appear in the original lists of the children of Jacob.

Jacob Acquires Wealth by Trickery

Jacob wants to leave and take his wives and children with him, but there are several things that stand in his way. First, if we are correct in seeing this as the kind of marriage which he only may leave by himself, Jacob must get Laban's special consent to allow him to break this custom; second, he has no possessions, since he has worked all this time for Laban; and finally, he must get his wives' agreement to break the custom and leave their father's tribe.

Genesis 30:25-43

Laban has learned "from divination"—and we do not know what was involved here— that YHWH has blessed Jacob, and he wants Jacob to stay and name his wages. The account that follows is confused—partly because it is made up of two traditions—but

in essence it involves Jacob's agreeing to take for himself only those animals which are in some way mottled —having spots or stripes in their fleece. Since these animals are relatively rare, most of the animals being of one color only, Laban thinks he is getting a good bargain. Jacob, however, uses "sympathetic magic"—imitating a desired action in order to bring it about—and places sticks which have been peeled so that they stand out as striped in front of the ewes at their usual mating place. (This idea that a child will be "marked" by sights or experiences of the mother still exists among some cultures today.) Besides this, Jacob breeds only the strong animals for his flock, leaving the weaker ones to breed for Laban. Thus Jacob acquires many animals while Laban's flock declines. A Near Eastern audience would be greatly amused at the craftiness of Jacob, especially given the character of Laban. There is an anachronism here (a misplacing in time of an event): camels are mentioned, but they had not been domesticated at the time of the patriarchs. Probably the narrator could not remember a time when there were no domesticated camels.

Genesis 31:1-55 Jacob's Flight from Laban

Jacob has solved the problem of having no possessions; one of the problems of leaving is taken care of. Verses 1-3 of this chapter give three reasons for leaving Laban. Of the three, the most important seems to be the direct command from YHWH, which is accompanied by the promise (once again) that YHWH will be with him.

Jacob obtains his wives' consent to leave by reciting the injustices of Laban. In verse 7 he claims that Laban has changed his wages seven times. Although we had not heard this fact before and thus could postulate an insertion from yet another tradition, let us remember that narratives do not have to be wooden about repeating each bit of data. Also in this tradition, it is YHWH who has caused the increase in Jacob's flocks, not his own cleverness. Note also that in this tradition Jacob gives the proper reply "Here I am" to the angel

of YHWH (v. 11).
There remains the matter of Laban's consent. It is relatively easy to steal away unnoticed, because Laban is out shearing the sheep. At such times there would have been much celebration, and no one would notice their leaving.

In the leaving there is a final act of deception, but it is perpetrated by neither Jacob nor Laban. This time both deceivers become the deceived. Rachel steals the "household gods" (v. 19), cheating her oldest brother and exposing her husband to unforeseeable danger. We do not know what these figures represented. They were small enough to be hidden in saddle bags, as we see in verse 34. The reason their theft is so important is that they were the sign of the inheritance. Recently discovered texts show that, if a man adopted a son and later had a natural son by his wife, he must divide the property between both sons. The natural son might get a double portion and, in any event, would receive the household gods. They embodied the spirit of the house, that which brought blessings to the family. The son that received them was the real heir to all the strength of the family. Rachel, in taking the household gods, had dispossessed her brother.

When Laban catches up with Jacob, the two play for advantage with each other. Laban has been warned by YHWH not to harm Jacob, in spite of the fact that he may be legally entitled to do so. He has the right to the wives, children, and possessions

which Jacob has taken, but because of the warning from YHWH, Laban is concerned to get back only the household gods. Jacob, however, does not know of their theft, and says that anyone found with them shall die. Rachel puts them in the saddle bags and sits on them, claiming that she is menstruating—adding one more lie to the story, deception upon deception. One can also read this portion of the story as monotheists jabbing at polytheists. These "gods" are so powerless that they allow themselves to be sat upon by a woman —whether or not she is menstruating at the time.

Jacob, knowing himself to be in the wrong, has been fearful up to this point.3 But when Laban cannot find the gods, Jacob becomes righteously indignant: "What is my offense? What is my sin . . . ?" (v. 36). The answer is obvious, in spite of Jacob's recitation of his virtue. Laban, whose only reason for not killing Jacob is his fear of divine punishment, tries to appear as the devoted father who cannot bring himself to do anything against his daughters and their children. The whole affair is so riddled with deceit that it would be comic if the issue itself were not so important: the determination of YHWH to bring about his purposes.

Laban asks for a covenant, and as its terms are spelled out we see that the locale has changed. We are no longer in Mesopotamia, but on the borders of the promised land. This is from a tradition in which the family of Laban, the Arameans, were just to the east of Israel, and therefore a marker setting the limits of their areas would be visible to both. The stone heap is set up is a boundary marker. But, in the story, it is more than this. Laban gets Jacob to agree that he will take no more wives and will not mistreat Laban's daughters. For good reason, the two men do not trust each other. The heap of stones is to be a witness to their oaths, and each man puts himself under the judgment of his own god if he violates them. The custom of erecting cairns as witnesses has carried on into the twentieth century in Syria. The passage in v. 49 is well-known, but we use it most often as a kind of blessing between friends who are about to be separated: "The LORD watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other." Actually the "Mizpah benediction" is not a blessing at all, but a warning that, although Jacob and Laban cannot watch one another, God will be watching them both!

This is the end of the Jacob-Laban stories, and from here to the end of the Jacob saga we take up again Jacob's relations with Esau.

Genesis 32:1-23 Jacob Fears to Meet Esau

After the opening verses, which account for a place name, Jacob begins a policy of appeasement toward his brother. Remember that when Jacob left home years before, Esau was planning to kill him. Now Jacob makes a series of protective moves. His people and flocks are divided into two companies so that one of them might survive if Esau attacks; a string of messengers bearing presents is sent, spaced out to delay the time of Esau's arrival and to require Esau to leave followers behind to care for the animals he has been given; Jacob fearfully prays to YHWH and reminds him of his promise to be with him.

Genesis 32:24-34 Jacob Wrestles with the "Man"

Having sent his family across the stream, Jacob is at the river Jabbok alone when the contest with the "man" begins[top]. There are many theories about the background of this story. Ancient lore is full of stories of humans wrestling with a divine being in order to get some particular blessing—to obtain fire, long life, or a protective covering from the arrows of the enemy. Some commentators have seen this as a story connected with ritual dance. The most popular theory explains it as one of many stories about encounters with river demons. And it is possible to infer that Jacob first understands himself to be wrestling with a demon. Indeed, the urgent request of the "man" to be released before the break of day would substantiate the idea that Jacob is engaged with a demon that cannot be seen and so must leave before sunrise. Whatever the original background may have been, the writer uses it for Yahwistic purposes.

As day breaks, Jacob seems to realize that he has been wrestling with God. Now he refuses to release the "man" until he is given a blessing. The "man" asks Jacob's name. Remember the significance of a name in ancient cultures: in the name resided the total identity and power of the person. In revealing his name, Jacob reveals himself as a cheat, a liar, and a blasphemer—not because his name means this, but because this has been his identity. Since the "man" is YHWH, Jacob has stripped himself before God. Then, and only then, God blesses Jacob and renames him Israel. There is a double play on the meaning of this name. The meaning of the name Israel may be "may God rule," but in the story it is said to mean "one who has striven with God"—and survived. The whole irony of the Jacob story is shown here: although Jacob has striven with God and, in a sense, prevailed in that the "man" did not choose to free himself from Jacob's grip, God has given the blessing only after having stripped Jacob of all pretense—and thus, God has ruled. The blessing which Jacob had earlier stolen from Esau now becomes his legitimately; the earlier promise given at Bethel when Jacob left the land is ratified; and the prayer in v. 11 that Jacob would be delivered from the hand of Esau has been heard.

Finally, when Jacob, now Israel, asks for the name of the "man," it is not given him. God will not be bound or manipulated by him. The play on words and the theology implicit here are directed toward the miracle that has happened: God has allowed Israel to prevail in order that "God may rule." Compressed into these few verses is a reflection on all of Israel's history. The narrator is interpreting the figure of Jacob as the nation Israel, and we are presented in this story with the continual striving of the nation with YHWH for blessing from its time of their entry into the land until the fall of the kingdom.

The limp that Jacob-Israel acquires from the "man's" touching his thigh is used to explain a dietary practice. But a deeper meaning is also possible. Israel, the man and the nation, comes out of the wrestling encounter—and later attempts to control God—scarred and marked for life. But Jacob also emerges from the encounter blessed. Indeed, the limp itself may symbolize blessing, for the Jacob who is to meet Esau is no longer Jacob the deceitful and arrogant, but Israel the diminished. His step is no longer proud with his own power, but limping under the rule of YHWH.

Genesis 33:1-20 Jacob and Esau Are Reconciled

Now Jacob does not need to be frantic when he sees Esau and his "four hundred men" coming, for his prayer has been answered. Still he plays it safe. He arranges his maids, wives, and children so that the most loved are farthest in the rear, and he is extremely subservient toward Esau. One prostration was considered enough; seven is the ultimate. Esau seems truly gracious and forgiving of Jacob, yet Jacob does not accept his offer to travel with him. He agrees to meet Esau at Seir, Esau's land, but goes instead to Succoth. (The name of the place means "booths." It is connected in the story with Jacob's having built booths, or huts, here. Succoth is also the name of a Jewish holiday, the "feast of booths," which originally goes back to a festival at harvest time when people lived in huts or booths in the fields.) Verses 19-20 deal with land ownership, a theme that runs throughout Genesis; early patriarchal ownership of the land is depicted as legitimating Israel's possession of the land.

Genesis 34-35:8 The Rape of Dinah

The story of the rape of Dinah seems a strange intrusion into the Jacob saga. Many commentators see it as a story about tribes. Shechem and Ham are both individual men in this story, but Shechem is also the name of a city of the Hamorites. Dinah may refer to a weak tribe associated with the tribes of Levi and Simeon. The tribe of Dinah, according to this theory, was somehow attacked or ravaged by the Hamorites and then avenged by her allies.

So far as our present account goes, we have heard of Dinah only in the brief note in 30:21 that she was born of Leah. Now she goes out "to visit the women of the region" (34:1), that is, she mingles with the Canaanites. Shechem rapes her, but then decides that he loves her and wants to marry her. Her brothers appear to give consent to a merger of the tribes, but only on condition that the Hamorites be circumcised. (This practice did not become important to Israel until after the events described here, but it is read back into the account.) The real reason for insisting on circumcision is so that the Hamorites may be weakened—"on the third day, when they were still in pain" (v. 25)—so that Levi and Simeon can attack them. The other brothers act like vultures and plunder the city—probably only a small unwalled village with a few stone houses.

Although Jacob seems strangely uninvolved in this story, it must be seen as another chapter in the Jacob saga. The deceit that he has practiced returns to him in this episode in which his sons dishonor not only themselves but also him by deceiving the people of Shechem. The result may even be his destruction, if the Canaanites and Perizzites take revenge. ("Perizzite" may be an ethnic group or may simply mean "an inhabitant of an unwalled village.") As the Jewish scholar W. Gunther Plaut points out, this is only the beginning of Jacob's troubles with his children.

Dinah, Simeon, and Levi are the first three children with whom Jacob has profound trouble; Judah, Reuben, and Joseph will follow in time. Jacob has become Israel but this fact has not erased the tragic element from his life. Quite the contrary, his perception and deep sensitivity have brought him a greater capacity for suffering. His children, who represent his future, will bring him untold

agony. This long-range retribution visited on Jacob also underscores the Bible's condemnation of the hypocritical concern for religion with which Jacob's sons induced Shechem and his people to submit to circumcision. The story of Dinah exposes this pretense of faith in all its ugliness (The Torah: A Modern Commentary, p. 229).

Against Jacob's fear stands God's protection; both are shown in 35:1-7. God tells Jacob to go to Bethel and make an altar to God. Jacob has his household purify themselves and put away all the foreign gods—presumably also Rachel's household gods—and earring amulets, which are then hidden under an oak. While such preparations were the rule for pilgrimages to shrines, another good reason to hide the gods and earrings

may have been fear of being plundered in revenge for Shechem. Once again Jacob's fears are needless. God promised to be with him and do good for him, and now the inhabitants are put under the influence of a "terror from God"—a supernatural dread—so that Jacob and his family can move about freely. They come to Bethel and build the altar. The final note, about the death of Rebekah's nurse, Deborah, is a part of another tradition; we have not heard about her until now. The story of the rape of Dinah may have been included in the biblical record in part to explain the landless status of Simeon and Levi, that is, to provide a moral explanation for later geographical reality. (See 49:5-7, the "prophecy of Jacob." Simeon and Levi, because of their violence, are cursed, and their tribes are to be divided and scattered in Israel. This reflects the later position of the tribes of Levi and Simeon. Levi became the priestly group, no longer a tribe but scattered throughout Israel. Simeon dwindled to a single city in Judah.) Whatever its background, this story is related to the Jacob saga. Despite the deceits of family members, YHWH continues to work with Jacob and to further God's own ends.

Genesis 35:9-15 Renaming Jacob

A separate tradition of the renaming of Jacob is inserted here. The name of the deity is "God Almighty," El Shaddai, instead of YHWH, but this is obviously only a different tradition's version of the same event which we have already seen in the dream at Bethel and the wrestling contest at the river Jabbok.

Genesis 35:16-29 The End of the Saga

These last few verses tie up loose ends in the Jacob story. Rachel gives birth to Benjamin, "son of the right hand" or "son of the south." Rachel, who dies in childbirth, names him Benoni, "son of my sorrow," but Jacob does not want him to go through life under the influence of such a name, and renames him. Rachel is buried by the side of the road—the only one of the patriarchs and their wives not to be buried in the tomb of Machpelah. The comment about the pillar used as her tomb marker shows that this story has an etiological purpose, accounting for the traditional site of her burial near Bethlehem, "which is there to this day" (v. 20).

Verse 22, telling of Reuben's lying with his father's concubine, Bilhah, is a fragment. Genesis 49:3-4, in the "prophecy of Jacob," alludes to this episode to account for the failure of Reuben, the firstborn, to have preeminence among the tribes. The later tribe of Reuben was never as significant as Ephraim and Judah.

The names of the sons are given again, and the chapter closes with the death of Isaac. It is a typical patriarchal pattern: the sons, Jacob and Esau, are there, as Ishmael and Isaac were at the death of Abraham. Isaac dies and is "gathered to his people, old and full of days"—the formula used in the patriarchal stories to indicate the end of a life which YHWH has blessed.

Genesis 36:1-43 Descendents of Esau

This chapter, is another genealogy which traces the background of the Edomite tribes. In v. 31 there is an indication that the Israelites were aware that there was an Edomite kingdom long before they themselves had a king. Beyond this, there seems little to be noted in this chapter; it is a completion of a story of two peoples who were related, yet separated, and whose relations were still a live issue at the time the narrative was compiled.

The low level of morality in this saga, the deceit and faithlessness of Jacob, makes a background against which the faithfulness of YHWH to the people and God's determination to use them for the redemption of the nations of the earth can be shown. This becomes a central note in the faith of Israel. She might strive again and again to further herself by her own efforts and might often interpret her relationship with YHWH as an election to privilege instead of to service. But the self-understanding shown in these stories would provide the basis for the interpretations of Israel's relationship to God which the later prophets were able to

make in times when it seemed that YHWH had abandoned the people.

End of Chapter

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Characteristics of Israel's national life[back]

Do we really want to go there? It's way too easy to misuse Jacob as an archetype and symbol for all Jews.

>

Our national life. Faithful or good?back

I'm having a lot of trouble with this. Perhaps I haven't understood the chapter at all. I can't think of any of this country's leaders whose personal characteristics define us, unless perhaps George Washington of the cherry tree and the expense account.

And someone please help me with the distinction between "good" and "faithful." Why can't the church be both? In fact it surely must be both. And notice that in Assignment #1 both words appear in quotes. Quotes are a strong indication of a local redefinition of the words' meaning; therefore an invitation to muddy thinking.

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Divine decreeback

Again we're back to the same problem as appears in the near-sacrifice of Isaac. God does what God wants, even if it doesn't seem reasonable, and ours is only to obey.

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Tribes who escaped from Egyptback

Does this mean the tribes that Moses led out of Egypt?

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The entire Bible as the Word of Godback

Now wait just a minute. What is this "the church" of whom you speak? The Episcopal Church? The Romans? The Baptists? The One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, transcendent throughout time and space? Surely the last, if any. But in fact it all depends.

This passage comes close to saying that we shouldn't think too much about what the Bible says. That's not the position of the Episcopal Church, nor indeed of the Protestant Reformation as a whole. But talk to any recovering Roman.

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Rebekah and Jacobback

OK, but were Rebekah and Jacob supposed just to sit and wait for God to make it happen?

>

"make all of them correct" back

Rather than saying they're all correct, I would prefer to look for an English translation that's just as ambiguous in the same way as the Hebrew. Here's a guess (and my Hebrew isn't that strong!): "And the LORD stood there..." It finesses the ambiguity without distorting anything.

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Mizpah benediction[back]

I have a political friend who uses this as a farewell blessing at the end of every meeting. I don't plan to tell her anything different!

>

"further herself by her own efforts" back

Does this thought have any relevance for modern Israel? Certainly some would say it's rather lost its way in recent years (I won't offer an opinion). But be aware that there are pious Jews who regard the creation of the State of Israel as a blasphemous mistake.

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Esau and Jacob reconciledback

Esau may be my favorite character in the Old Testament. He has become sufficiently wealthy, and evidently isn't consumed by the desire to get more more more, by whatever means. He's generous enough to see that he and Jacob are both doing well, so why should he bear a grudge?

And tradition makes him out to be a loser...

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