



Chapter Title: ON THE MORALITY OF THE PATRIARCHS IN JEWISH POLEMIC AND EXEGESIS

Book Title: Cultures in Collision and Conversation

Book Subtitle: Essays in the Intellectual History of the Jews

Book Author(s): DAVID BERGER

Published by: Academic Studies Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt21h4xrd.13>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.



Academic Studies Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cultures in Collision and Conversation*

JSTOR

ON THE MORALITY OF THE PATRIARCHS IN JEWISH POLEMIC AND EXEGESIS¹

From: *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation*, ed. by Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (Paulist Press: New York, 1987), pp. 49-62. Reprinted with slight revisions in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations*, ed. by Shalom Carmy (Jason Aronson: Northvale and London, 1996), pp. 131-146.

THE POLEMICAL WORLD OF THE MIDDLE AGES

On three separate occasions, Nahmanides denounces Abraham for sinful or questionable behavior.² The first of these passages asserts that “our father Abraham inadvertently committed a great sin” by urging Sarah to identify herself as his sister, and goes on to maintain that the very decision to go to Egypt was sinful. Later, Nahmanides expresses perplexity at Abraham’s rationalization that Sarah was truly his half-sister; this appears to be an unpersuasive excuse for omitting the crucial information that she was also his wife, and although Nahmanides proceeds to suggest an explanation, his sense of moral disapproval remains the dominant feature of the discussion. Finally, he regards the treatment of Hagar by both Sarah and Abraham as a sin for which Jews are suffering to this day at the hands of the descendants of Ishmael. The bold, almost indignant tone of these passages is both striking and significant—but it is not typical.

Most medieval Jews were understandably sensitive about ascriptions of sin to the patriarchs, and the situation was rendered even more delicate by the fact that the issue of patriarchal morality often arose in a highly charged context in which Jews were placed on the defensive in the face of

¹ It is a pleasure to thank my friend Professor Sid Z. Leiman for his careful reading of the manuscript. I am particularly grateful to him for the references to *Menahot* and pseudo-Jerome in n. 13, *Sefer Hasidim* and the *midrashim* in n. 14, and Ehrlich’s commentary in n. 22.

² Commentary to Genesis 12:10, 20:12, and 16:6.

a Christian attack. Two thirteenth-century Ashkenazic polemics reflect a somewhat surprising Christian willingness to criticize Jacob as a means of attacking his descendants. Since the patriarch was a Christian as well as a Jewish hero, such attacks on his morality were problematical: Jacob may be the father of carnal Israel, but he is the prototype of spiritual Israel as well. While criticisms of this sort are consequently absent from major Christian works, it is perfectly evident that no Jew would have invented them. On the medieval street, then, Christians did not shrink from such attacks on Jews and their forebears. Jacob, they said, was a thief and a trickster; the implication concerning his descendants hardly needed to be spelled out.

In *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* we are informed that Joseph Official met a certain Dominican friar on the road to Paris who told him, "Your father Jacob was a thief; there has been no consumer of usury to equal him, for he purchased the birthright, which was worth a thousand coins, for a single plate [of lentils] worth half a coin."³ The technical impropriety of the reference to usury merely underscores the pointed application of this critique to medieval Jews. The next passage reports a Christian argument that Jacob was a deceiver who cheated Laban by exceeding the terms of their agreement concerning the sheep to which Jacob was entitled, and this criticism is followed by the assertion that Simeon and Levi engaged in unethical behavior when they deviously persuaded the Shechemites to accept circumcision and then proceeded to kill them.⁴

With respect to Jacob, the Jewish response was conditioned by two separate considerations acting in concert. First, religious motivations quite independent of the polemical context prevented the perception of Jacob as a sinner; second, the Christian attack itself called for refutation rather than concession. Hence, Joseph⁵ responded with a remarkable suggestion found also in Rashbam's commentary that Jacob paid in full for the birthright; the bread and lentils are to be understood as a meal sealing the transaction or customarily following its consummation. As Judah Rosenthal pointed out in his edition of *Yosef ha-Meqanne*, Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor reacted with exasperation to the apparent implausibility of this interpretation, which was almost surely motivated by both moral

³ *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, ed. by Judah Rosenthal (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 40-41.

⁴ Rosenthal, *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, pp. 41-42.

⁵ Despite the manuscript, this must refer to Joseph Official and not Joseph Bekhor Shor; cf. the editor's note, and see just below.

sensitivity and polemical need. As for Laban, the answer to the Christian critique was that Jacob was the real victim of deception, and his treatment of his father-in-law was marked by extraordinary scrupulousness.⁶

Joseph Official goes on to an uncompromising defense of Simeon and Levi which is particularly interesting because this was the one instance in which a concession to the Christian accusation was tactically possible. Jacob, after all, had denounced their behavior, and even if his initial concern dealt with the danger that could result from an adverse Canaanite reaction rather than with the moral issue (Genesis 34:30), his vigorous rebuke of his sons at the end of his life (Genesis 49:5-7) could certainly have supported the assertion that he considered their action morally reprehensible as well as pragmatically unwise. Nevertheless, there is no hint of condemnation in *Yosef ha-Meqanne*; if Christians denounced Simeon and Levi, then surely Jews were obligated to defend them, especially since a sense of moral superiority was crucial to the medieval Jewish psyche in general and to the polemicist in particular.⁷ Thus, Joseph tells us that the Shechemites regretted their circumcision and were in any event planning to oppress Jacob's family and take over its property; consequently, their execution was eminently justified.⁸

There is a certain irony in the fact that the Christian question in *Yosef ha-Meqanne* which immediately follows this series of objections to patriarchal behavior begins, "After all, everyone agrees that Jacob was a thoroughly righteous man; why then was he afraid of descending to hell?"⁹ Although this is a return to the Christian stance that we ought to expect, there is in fact one more incident in Jacob's life that Christian polemicists apparently utilized in their debate with Jews, and this is, of course, his deception of his own father.

⁶ Rosenthal, *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, loc. cit.

⁷ On this point, see my brief discussion in *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Northvale, NJ, 1996), pp. 25-27. I hope to elaborate in a forthcoming study on the problem of exile in medieval polemic.

⁸ Rosenthal, *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, p. 42. The persistence of Jewish sensitivity to this story in modern times can perhaps best be illustrated by a contemporary example of Jewish black humor. Simeon and Levi—so the explanation goes—were just as concerned as Jacob about adverse public opinion, and this is precisely why they arranged to have the Shechemites undergo the judaizing ceremony of circumcision. Once it would be perceived that it was a Jew who had been killed, no one would be concerned. Cf. *Kli Yakar* to Genesis 35:25.

⁹ Rosenthal, *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne*, p. 42.

The anonymous *Nizzahon Vetus* presents the following argument:

“I am Esau your firstborn” [Genesis 27:19]. One can say that Jacob did not lie. In fact, this can be said without distorting the simple meaning of the verse, but by explaining it as follows: I am Esau your firstborn, for Esau sold him the birthright in a manner as clear as day. It is, indeed, clear that Jacob was careful not to state an outright lie from the fact that when Isaac asked him, “Are you my son Esau?” he responded, “I am” [Genesis 27:24], and not, “I am Esau.”

They go on to say that because Jacob obtained the blessings through trickery, they were fulfilled for the Gentiles and not the Jews. The answer is that even the prophet Amos [*sic*] prayed for Jacob, for he is in possession of the truth, as it is written, “You will grant truth to Jacob and mercy to Abraham, which you have sworn unto our fathers” [Micah 7:20], that is, had not the truth been with Jacob, then you would not have sworn to our fathers.¹⁰

The pattern holds. Once again Christians attack the patriarch’s morality; this time the consequences for his descendants are spelled out with explicit clarity, and once again Jewish ingenuity is mobilized for an unflinching, unqualified defense.¹¹

Nevertheless, the pattern does not always hold. Polemicists will do what is necessary to win whatever point appears crucial in a particular context, and on one occasion at least we find two Jewish writers displaying very little zeal in defending the questionable action of a biblical hero. Their motivation is hardly mysterious: Jesus had cited this action approvingly.

Jacob ben Reuben and the *Nizzahon Vetus* both comment on the story in Matthew 12 in which Jesus defends the plucking of corn by his

¹⁰ Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, p. 56.

¹¹ For Rashi’s rather different defense of Jacob’s veracity as well as the persuasiveness of the version in the *Nizzahon Vetus* for later Jews, see my commentary in *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, pp. 246-247. It is worth noting that the *Nizzahon Vetus* also reports a Christian argument that Moses’ delay in coming down from Mount Sinai (Exodus 32:1) renders him “a sinner and a liar” (p. 67). Mordechai Breuer has suggested (*Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* [Jerusalem, 1978], p. 21, n. 57) that this argument *may* have originated among Christian heretics. On the other hand, since it ends with the question “Why did he delay?” it may have been leading to a Christian answer that Moses, who was not really a sinner, was testing the Jews and found them wanting. The ancient rabbis, of course, were generally not faced with the polemical concerns of the Middle Ages, and on rare occasions the Talmud ascribes sin to the patriarchs even where the biblical evidence does not require such a conclusion; see, for example, the accusations against Abraham in *Nedarim* 32a.

hungry disciples on the Sabbath with reference to David's eating of the shewbread when he was hungry. In his late-twelfth-century *Milhamot ha-Shem*,¹² Jacob responds as follows:

How could he cite evidence from David's eating of the shewbread when he was fleeing and in a great hurry? If David behaved unlawfully by violating the commandment on that one occasion when he was forced by the compulsion of hunger and never repeated this behavior again, how could your Messiah utilize this argument to permit the gathering of corn without qualification?

More briefly, the author of the *Nizzahon Vetus* remarks, "If David behaved improperly, this does not give them the right to pluck those ears of corn on the Sabbath."¹³ Although Jacob provided mitigation for David's behavior and the *Nizzahon Vetus's* comments might be understood as a counterfactual concession for the sake of argument ("even if I were to agree that David behaved improperly"), the impression of sin is not only allowed to stand but is actually introduced by the Jewish writers. Even more striking, Jacob continued his argument by saying that once Jesus was permitting every act of King David, "why did he not permit sexual relations with married women since David had such relations with the wife of Uriah?" Now, the Talmud had made the most vigorous efforts to deny that Bathsheba was still married to Uriah and, indeed, that David had sinned at all, and the insertion of this question—which was not essential to the argument and is in fact missing from the parallel passage in the *Nizzahon Vetus*—is a telling illustration of the impact of the search for effective polemical rhetoric.¹⁴

Thus far we have seen Jewish defenses of biblical heroes for reasons both religious and polemical, and criticisms of their behavior which arose from

¹² Edited by Judah Rosenthal (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 148.

¹³ P. 182. It is important to note that the Talmud (*Menahot* 95b-96a) had suggested a legal justification for what David had done. Note too the anomalous report in pseudo-Jerome cited by L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 6 (Philadelphia, 1928), p. 243.

¹⁴ It is, of course, difficult to say what Jacob's view of David's relationship with Bathsheba was in dispassionate, non-polemical moments. For Abravanel's rejection of the rabbinic exculpation of David (*Shabbat* 56a), see his commentary to 2 Samuel 11-12. See also the very interesting remarks in *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. by J. Wistinetzki (Frankfurt am Main, 1924), sec. 46 (p. 43)=R. Margulies' edition (Jerusalem, 1957), sec. 174 (p. 181). Cf. also the less striking references in *Midrash Shmuel*, ed. by S. Buber (Krakau, 1893), pp. 122-123, and *Seder Eliyyahu Rabbah*, ed. by M. Ish-Shalom (Friedmann) (Vienna, 1902), p. 7.

a sensitive, straightforward reading of the text as well as from polemical concerns. It remains to be noted that the particular ideology of a Jewish commentator, if pursued with sufficient passion, could itself overcome the profound inhibitions against denouncing the morality of the patriarchs. I know of but one example of this phenomenon, but it is quite remarkable.

In his study of Jewish social thought in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Poland, Haim Hillel Ben Sasson frequently pointed to the animus against the wealthy displayed by the prominent preacher and exegete Rabbi Ephraim Lunshitz. Among many examples of this animus, Ben Sasson draws our attention to Lunshitz's remarks about the rabbinic comment that when Jacob remained alone prior to wrestling with the angel, his purpose was to collect small vessels that he had left behind. Before Lunshitz, Jews had universally understood this as an exemplification of an admirable trait. Not so the author of the *Kli Yakar*: "A majority of commentators agree that this angel is Sammael the officer of Esau... whose desire is solely to blind (*lesamme*) the eyes. . . of the intelligence." Now, as long as Jacob refrained from the slightest sin, Sammael could not approach him, but once Jacob was guilty of even a small measure of sin, his immunity was lost. And for a rich man like Jacob to remain behind in a dangerous place for a few vessels is indeed the beginning of sin. Jacob had begun to blind himself, "for who is as blind as the lovers of money about whom it is written, 'The eyes of a man are never satiated' (Proverbs 27:20)?... Who is such a fool that he would endanger himself for such a small item? Rather, it is a mocking heart which turned him away from the straight path to succumb to such love of money, which causes forgetfulness of God."¹⁵

What makes this passage all the more noteworthy is that the talmudic source contains an explicitly favorable evaluation: the righteous care so much for their property because they never rob others (*Hullin* 91a). Moreover, if Lunshitz was uneasy with this talmudic evaluation, nothing was forcing him to mention the passage in the first place; the point is nowhere in the biblical text, and the *Kli Yakar* is in any event a discursive, selective commentary, which could easily have skipped the verse entirely. Clearly, he made the point because it served as an outlet for one of his driving passions. Patriarchal immunity from criticism, even in a traditional society, evidently had its limits.

¹⁵ *Kli Yakar* to Genesis 32:35. See Ben Sasson's *Hagut ve-Hanhagah* (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 118-119.

BIBLICAL CRITICISM AND JEWISH EXEGESIS IN MODERN TIMES

As the Middle Ages gave way to the modern period, the content and context of this issue were radically and fundamentally altered. Inhibitions against criticizing biblical morality began to crumble, and both Enlightenment ideologues and nineteenth-century scholars gleefully pounced upon biblical passages that appeared morally problematical. In the first instance, the target was the Bible as a whole and, ultimately, Christianity itself; in the second, it was usually the Hebrew Bible in particular, whose allegedly primitive ethics served as a preparation and a foil for the superior morality of the Gospels. In effect, an argument originally directed against Christianity was refocused to attack Judaism alone.¹⁶

Modern biblical scholarship, then, transformed the essential terms of this discussion, and the transformation was so profound that it ultimately inspired a reaction strikingly different from the standard medieval response. The crucial point is that the attack was no longer on the morality of the biblical personalities. To many Bible critics, the very existence of the patriarchs was in question, and the historicity of specific accounts of their behavior was surely deemed unreliable in the extreme. The attack now was on the morality of the biblical author or authors—an attack that was almost impossible in the premodern period, when the author was ultimately presumed to be God Himself.¹⁷

Consequently, it now became possible—perhaps even polemically desirable—for traditionally inclined Jews (whether or not they were strict fundamentalists) to take a different approach by driving a wedge between hero and author. There were indeed occasional imperfections in the moral behavior of the patriarchs, but these are condemned

¹⁶ Cf. the similar medieval phenomenon in which arguments by Christian heretics against the Hebrew Bible were reworked by Orthodox Christians in their polemic with Jews. See my *Jewish-Christian Debate*, p. 6.

¹⁷ For an exception, note Luther's remarks on Esther in his *Table Talk*: "I am so hostile to this book that I wish it did not exist, for it judaizes too much, and has too much heathen naughtiness." Cited approvingly by L. B. Paton in his discussion of "the moral teaching of the book" in *The International Critical Commentary: The Book of Esther* (1908; reprint, Edinburgh, 1951), p. 96.

by the Torah and required punishment and expiation. Whatever the exegetical merits of this approach, and they are, as we shall see, considerable, it would have been extraordinarily difficult both tactically and psychologically had the attack of the critics still been directed at the patriarchs themselves.

There is, however, a deeper issue here. The assertion that the Bible disapproves of certain behavior was not based on explicit verses of condemnation; rather, it depended on a sensitive reading of long stretches of narrative in which patterns of retribution and expiation emerged. On the simplest level, this approach demonstrated that the morality of the Torah is not inferior to that of Bible critics. On a deeper level, it undercut the effort of some critics to utilize the moral “deficiencies” of certain passages to establish divergent levels of moral sensitivity in the Pentateuch as a whole and in Genesis in particular. But on the profoundest level—at least for some proponents of this approach—it went to the heart of the essential claims of the higher criticism by arguing in a new way for the unity of Genesis. Many of the newly discovered patterns cut through the documents of the critics and emerged only from a unitary perception of the entire book; since the patterns seemed genuine, the only reasonable conclusion was that the unity of Genesis was no less real than its literary subtleties. These observations were not confined to narratives bearing on the morality of the patriarchs, but it is there that some of the most striking examples were to be found.

In the first half of this century, a number of Jewish writers—Martin Buber, Benno Jacob, Umberto Cassuto—began to note such patterns. Before going further, we are immediately confronted by a challenging, almost intractable methodological problem. I have suggested that this revisionist reading of the Bible is rooted in part in traditionalist sentiments, that it presented a new way of responding to people critical of sacred Jewish texts. At the same time, I consider the essential insights justified by an objective examination of the evidence (although my own motives are surely as “suspect” as those of the figures under discussion). Decades ago, Jacob Katz argued that one may not readily assign ulterior motives to someone whose position appears valid in light of the sources that he cites,¹⁸ and more recently Joseph Dan has criticized a work

¹⁸ Jacob Katz “Mahloqet ha-Semikhah bein Rabbi Yaaqov Beirav ve-ha-Ralbah,” *Zion* 15, secs. 3-4 (1951): 41.

about Gershom Scholem for attributing his view of kabbalah to factors other than his accurate reading of the kabbalistic texts themselves.¹⁹ Fundamentally, these methodological caveats are very much in order, and in certain instances they are decisive. At the same time, undeniable intuitions tell us that even people who are essentially correct can be partially motivated by concerns that go beyond the cited evidence, and there ought to be some way to determine when this is likely to be so. In our case, a figure like Cassutto was clearly concerned not only with the unity of Genesis but with the standing and reputation of the biblical text. Moreover, despite the fact that he was not a fundamentalist and that he was no doubt sincere in his protestation that his essential conclusions flowed solely from an objective examination of the text, the consistency of his conservative tendencies in issue after issue where the evidence could often point either way surely reveals a personality that was inclined to seek traditional solutions.²⁰

In contemporary biblical scholarship, such an inclination frequently labels one a neo-fundamentalist whose conclusions are rejected almost a priori. This is a manifest error with the most serious consequences. Even people with much stronger traditionalist tendencies than Cassutto can be motivated by those tendencies to seek evidence that turns out to be real. Kepler's laws are no less valid because he sought them as a result of his religious convictions. In this instance, a change in the attack on biblical morality liberated and then impelled people with traditionalist inclinations to see things in the text that had gone virtually unnoticed before. At first, these figures were necessarily non-fundamentalists; genuine Jewish fundamentalists would not easily shed their inhibitions about criticizing the patriarchs. With the passage of time, however, even some uncompromisingly Orthodox Jews could adopt this approach,²¹ while others—probably a majority—would

¹⁹ *Qiryat Sefer* 54 (1979/80): 358-362. Dan does note (p. 361) that even in Scholem's case, extratextual considerations can play some role.

²⁰ While maintaining that Cassutto's work is essentially anti-traditional, Yehezkel Kaufmann nevertheless pointed to several examples of this conservatism; see "Me-Adam ad Noah," in *Mi-Kivshonah shel ha-Yetzirah ha-Miqra'it* (Tel Aviv, 1966), p. 217.

²¹ Yissakhar Jacobson, *Binah ba-Miqra* (Tel Aviv, 1960), pp. 33-36; Nehama Leibowitz, *Iyyunim be-Sefer Bereshit* (Jerusalem, 1966), pp. 185-188 (English trans., *Studies in Bereshit [Genesis]* [Jerusalem, 1976], pp. 264-269); Leah Frankel, *Peraqim ba-Miqra* (Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 102-104, 143-144.

retain unabated the religious inhibitions of the past;²² fundamentalism is far from a monolithic phenomenon.

THE BIBLE'S JUDGMENT OF PATRIARCHAL BEHAVIOR: THE CASE OF JACOB'S DECEPTION

Let us turn now to a central example of an approach that we have thus far discussed only in the abstract. At Rebecca's behest, Jacob deceived Isaac by pretending to be Esau and thereby obtained a blessing intended for his brother. We have already seen a medieval Jewish defense of Jacob's behavior, and in the entire corpus of premodern Jewish exegesis there is hardly a whisper of criticism.²³ In the twentieth century, however, a number of scholars have noted a series of indications that make it

²² Professor Lawrence Kaplan has called my attention to Rabbi A. Kotler's "How To Teach Torah," *Light* 10, 12, 13, 15, 19 (1970/71), republished as a pamphlet by Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood. A Hebrew version appears in Rabbi Kotler's *Osef Hiddushei Torah* (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 402-411. "If there were any fault," writes the author, "—however slight (Hebrew: *dak min ha-dak*)—in any of the *Ovos* [patriarchs], the very essence of the Jewish people would have been different" (English pamphlet, p. 6=Hebrew p. 404). Rabbi Kotler makes it clear that his work is a reaction to modern heresy (*kefirah*), which perceives the patriarchal narratives as ordinary stories. On the other hand, Professor Kaplan notes that the popular *Pentateuch* and *Haftorahs* edited by Rabbi J. H. Hertz (1936) extols Scripture precisely because it "impartially relates both the failings and the virtues of its heroes" (commentary to Genesis 20:12, citing one of the passages from Nahmanides with which we began). Similarly, Arnold B. Ehrlich asserts that Scripture does not conceal the faults of the patriarchs; see *Miqra ki-Peshuto*, vol. 1 (New York, 1898; reprint, New York, 1969), pp. 33, 73 (to Genesis 12:14, 16 and 25:27); his German *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel* (Leipzig, 1908; reprint, Hildesheim, 1968) omits the first and more important passage. Ehrlich, a brilliant maverick who was neither a traditionalist nor a conventional critic, was in many respects *sui generis* and resists inclusion in any neat classificatory scheme. Finally, Rabbi Shalom Carmy has called my attention to the willingness of representatives of the nineteenth-century Musar movement to acknowledge minor imperfections in the patriarchs as part of the movement's special approach to the analysis of human failings.

²³ David Sykes, in his *Patterns in Genesis* (Ph.D. diss., Bernard Revel Graduate School, Yeshiva University, 1984), notes *Zohar, va-Yeshev*, 185b, which indicates that Jacob was punished for this act because even though something is done properly, God judges the pious for even a hairbreadth's deviation from the ideal. He also points to the Yemenite manuscript cited in *Torah Shelema*, vol. 6, p. 1432, no. 181 (where the editor also notes the *Zohar* passage), which indicates that Jacob was deceived by his sons with a goat (Genesis 37:31) just as he had deceived his own father with a goat (Genesis 27:16). See also below, note 25.

exceedingly difficult to deny that the Torah implicitly but vigorously condemns Jacob's action.

First, the deception was motivated by a misreading of Isaac's intentions. The blind patriarch bestowed three blessings on his children: the first to Jacob masquerading as Esau, the second to Esau, and the third to Jacob. It was only in the third blessing, when he knew for the first time that he was addressing Jacob, that he bestowed "the blessing of Abraham to you and your seed with you so that you may inherit the land in which you dwell which God gave to Abraham" (Genesis 28:4). Although other interpretations of this sequence are possible, the most straightforward reading is that Rebecca and Jacob had gravely underestimated their husband and father. Isaac had indeed intended to bless Esau with temporal supremacy, but the blessing of Abraham—the inheritance of the holy land and the crucial mission of the patriarchs—had been reserved for Jacob from the outset. The deception was pragmatically as well as morally dubious.²⁴

Jacob is then subjected to a series of misfortunes and ironies whose relationship to the initial deception cannot be accidental. He must work for his "brother" Laban (Genesis 29:15) instead of having his brothers work for him (Genesis 27:37); he is deceived by the substitution of one sibling for another in the darkness and is pointedly informed that "in our place" the younger is not placed before the older (Genesis 29:26); his sons deceive him with Joseph's garment and the blood of a goat (Genesis 37:31) just as he had deceived Isaac with Esau's garments and the skin of a goat (Genesis 27:15-16); his relationship with Esau is precisely the opposite of the one that was supposed to have been achieved—Esau is the master (Genesis 32:5, 6, 19; 33:8, 13, 14, 15) to whom his servant Jacob (32:5, 19; 33:5, 14) must bow (33:3, and contrast 27:29). Moreover, Jacob's debilitating fear of his brother results from the very act that was supposed to have established his supremacy.²⁵

²⁴ *Binah ba-Miqra*, loc. cit. Cf. also Malbim on Genesis 27:1 and Leibowitz, *Iyyunim*, pp. 193-195.

²⁵ For premodern references to such arguments, see note 23; *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. by S. Buber (Vilna, 1885), *Va-Yetzei* 11, p. 152, and the parallel passage in *Aggadot Bereshit*, ed. by S. Buber (Krakau, 1902), ch. (48) [49], p. 99, where Leah tells Jacob that he has no right to complain about being deceived since he too is a deceiver (although the midrash does not explicitly endorse her criticism); Eliezer Ashkenazi (sixteenth century) *Ma'asei ha-Shem*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1972), p. 115b, who comments on Laban's remark about the younger and older but apparently considers it evidence of Laban's nastiness rather than

There is, then, ample evidence that Jacob had to undergo a series of punishments to atone for his act of deception. It is almost curious, however, that no one has noted an additional—and climactic—element in this series, which can fundamentally transform our understanding of a crucial aspect of the Joseph narrative. One reason why the point may have been missed is that there are no key words calling it to our attention, and the presence of such words not only alerts the reader but serves as a methodological guide preventing undisciplined speculation. At the same time, we cannot permit ourselves to ignore grand thematic patterns, and in this instance I think that such a pattern has been overlooked.

Leah Frankel, utilizing the “key word” approach, has noted that the root meaning “to deceive” (*resh-mem-yod*) appears in Genesis three times. The first two instances, in which Isaac tells Esau that his brother deceitfully took his blessing (Genesis 27:35) and Jacob asks Laban why he deceived him (Genesis 29:25), are clearly related to our theme.²⁶ Perhaps, she suggests, the third instance, in which Simeon and Levi speak deceitfully to Shechem (Genesis 34:13), is intended to indicate that Jacob was “to taste deceit carried out by sons. He would have to stand in the place where his father stood when his son Jacob deceived him” [her emphasis].²⁷ While this approach is not impossible, it seems

Jacob’s culpability. Note too *Genesis Rabbah* 67:4, which speaks of later Jews crying out in anguish because of Esau’s agonized exclamation in Genesis 27:34, and the somewhat more ambiguous midrash of unknown provenance cited by Rashi on Psalms 80:6, in which Jews shed tears as a result of Esau’s tears; see Leibowitz, *Iyyunim*, p. 190. Such isolated observations over a period of more than a millennium and a half do not, I think, undermine or even significantly affect the thesis of this paper. For twentieth-century references, often containing additional arguments, see Martin Buber, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin, 1936), pp. 224-226; Benno Jacob, *Das Erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* (Berlin, 1934), p. 591 (abridged English translation, New York, 1974), pp. 197-198; Umberto Cassuto, *La Questione della Genesi* (Florence, 1934), esp. p. 227; idem, *Torat ha-Te’udot* (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 55-56=*The Documentary Hypothesis* (Jerusalem, 1961), pp. 63-64; idem, “Yaakov,” *Entziklopediyah Miqra’it* (EBH), vol. 3, cc. 716-722; Jacobson, Leibowitz, and Frankel (see note 21); Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York, 1966), pp. 183-184; Jacob Milgrom in *Conservative Judaism* 20 (1966): 73-79; J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen and Amsterdam, 1975), pp. 128-130, 200, 223, 227; Sykes, op. cit. (note 23). With the exception of Fokkelman, all these figures, whether they are fundamentalists or not, more or less fit the traditionalist typology that I have proposed. Needless to say, the evident validity of many of these exegetical suggestions must (or at least should) eventually affect biblical scholars of all varieties.

²⁶ Cf. *Tanhuma* and *Aggadot Bereshit* in the previous note.

²⁷ *Peraqim ba-Miqra*, p. 104.

unlikely; although Jacob suffers indirect consequences from Simeon and Levi's trickery, he is in no sense its object, and the resemblance to his own deception is exceedingly remote.

But there is another act of filial deception in Genesis whose similarity to Jacob's seems unmistakable. Jacob concealed his identity from his father by pretending to be someone else. Similarly, his own misery and anguish reach their climax when his son Joseph conceals his identity and pretends to be something other than what he truly is. The fact that the direct victims of Joseph's deception were the brothers may be the main reason why this observation has been missed, but it is perfectly clear that Jacob is as much a victim as his sons. This point alone should make us reevaluate the key element of the Joseph cycle as the culmination of the process of expiation suffered by the patriarch, and the essential argument does not depend on anything more. But there is more. Joseph deceives his father while providing him with food just as Jacob deceived his own father while bringing him the "savory food" which he liked (Genesis 27:7, 14, 17, 25). It is not just that the brothers are Jacob's messengers and will report Joseph's deceptive words to their father (although this is quite sufficient); in the final confrontation between Joseph and Judah, the latter is explicitly a surrogate for Jacob, acting to protect Benjamin *in loco parentis* (Genesis 44:32).²⁸ Moreover, there is only one other place in Genesis where one person speaks to another with as many protestations of servility as Judah addresses to his "master" in that climactic confrontation; that place, of course, is the description of Jacob's servile behavior toward Esau upon his return from the house of Laban (Genesis 32:4-6, 18-21; 33:1-15).²⁹ In short, Joseph has not

²⁸ It may be worth asking (with considerable diffidence) whether Judah's status as a surrogate for Jacob may help us resolve an old, intractable crux. In Joseph's second dream, the sun, moon, and eleven stars, presumably symbolizing his father, mother, and brothers, bow down to him (Genesis 37:9-10). But his mother was already dead at the time of the dream; less seriously, Jacob does not bow to Joseph until Genesis 47:30, by which time our intuition tells us (I think) that the dreams ought to have already been fulfilled. *Perhaps* two of the brothers who bow to Joseph represent both themselves and a parent; Judah is the surrogate for Jacob, and Benjamin, who is pointedly described as his mother's only surviving child (Genesis 44:20), is the representative of Rachel. Joseph's parents bow down to him through their offspring.

²⁹ For whatever this is worth, Jacob addresses Esau as "my master" seven times in these verses (32:6, 19; 33:8, 13, 14 [twice], 15 [32:5 is not addressed to Esau]) and Judah addresses Joseph as "my master" seven times in his final speech (44:18 [twice], 19, 20, 22, 24, 33). Since seven is clearly a significant number and since Jacob is explicitly

merely concealed his identity from his father; by threatening Jacob's family from a position of mastery, he has actually taken on the role of Esau.³⁰ The parallel to Jacob's deception is genuinely striking.³¹

LITERARY PATTERNS AND THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

During the last decade, J. P. Fokkelman,³² Robert Alter,³³ and Michael Fishbane³⁴ have searched the narratives of Genesis for patterns out of purely literary motivations, sometimes with the implicit assumption that the conventional documentary hypothesis remains virtually unchanged no matter how many interlocking themes are discerned. In a reaction to one of Alter's early articles on this subject, I wrote that "I think he underestimates the impact of such literary analysis on the documentary hypothesis. You can allow the 'redactor' just so much freedom of action before he turns into an author using various traditions as 'raw material.' Such an approach must ultimately shake the foundations of the regnant critical theory, not merely tinker with its periphery."³⁵ More recently,

said to have bowed to Esau seven times (Genesis 33:3 ["complete subjection," says Fokkelman, in *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 223]), it is at least possible that this is more than coincidence.

³⁰ Note too that Jacob was most concerned with Esau's threat to Rachel and her child (Genesis 33:2), and it was Rachel's child Benjamin who was singled out for persecution by the Egyptian viceroy. Finally, Professor David Shatz has called my attention to the use of the rare verb *stm*, "to hate," with regard to both Esau's hatred of Jacob (Genesis 27:41) and the brothers fear that Joseph would hate them (Genesis 50:15).

³¹ The fact that Joseph's actions were no doubt motivated by other factors involving his brothers does not, of course, refute the perception that we are witnessing the final step in a divine plan to purge Jacob of his sin. It is, in fact, possible that an even later incident in Genesis is related to Jacob's deception of Isaac. The successful expiation of that sin may be symbolized by Jacob's ability, despite his failing eyesight, to discern the difference in the destinies of his older and younger grandsons (Genesis 48:10-20). Cf. Benno Jacob, *Das Erste Buch*, p. 884 (called to my attention by David Sykes), and Cassutto, *La Questione della Genesi*, p. 232. (It need hardly be said that this new approach does not end with a denunciation of biblical heroes. After a process of retribution and moral development, the ethical standing of the patriarch is beyond reproach.) Finally, it must be stressed that other moral questions like the scriptural evaluation of the treatment of Hagar and the behavior of the young Joseph are also susceptible to this mode of analysis.

³² See n. 25.

³³ *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981).

³⁴ *Text and Texture* (New York, 1979).

³⁵ *Commentary* 61:3 (March, 1976): 16. It may be worth asking whether Shakespeare

the point has been made with vigor and documentation in David Sykes's dissertation, *Patterns in Genesis*.³⁶ To Alter's credit, he does confront the question in his later book, and although his conclusions are by no means traditional, they are not wholly consonant with those of critical orthodoxy.³⁷

It is becoming clearer from year to year that Genesis is replete with linguistic and thematic patterns of subtlety and power which run through the warp and woof of the entire work. Despite the overwhelming force generated by a critical theory that has held sway for generations, scholars will not be able to hide forever behind the assertion that they are studying the art of a redactor as that word is usually understood. The issue will have to be joined.

has ever been described as the redactor of the various Hamlet documents because he worked with earlier, related stories.

³⁶ See n. 23. My affirmation of the validity of this general approach does not, of course, imply an endorsement of every pattern or set of patterns that has been suggested, and it is self-evident that some proposals will be more persuasive than others. This mode of interpretation will always be vulnerable to the charge of arbitrary and subjective eisegesis. Nevertheless, such is the fate of almost all literary analysis, and a combination of methodological guidelines and a healthy dose of common sense can minimize, though never eliminate, undisciplined speculation. In any case, I am thoroughly persuaded that the recent literature contains more than enough convincing examples to sustain the essential point.

³⁷ P. 20, and especially chap. 7 (pp. 131-154). In the present climate, it requires some courage to express such views, and Alter has already been accused of involvement in (*horribile dictu*) "the new fundamentalism" (and he has already denied it); see *Commentary* 77:2 (February 1984): 14. Cf. also Fokkelman's very brief comment on the issue in *Narrative Art*, p. 4.