

LIVING IN EXILE: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF THE JACOB CYCLE

by

ZACHRY CARL LAUERSDORF

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ZACHRY CARL LAUERSDORF

Approved:

Date:

David G. Garber, Ph.D.
Faculty Advisor for Thesis

Date:

Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Ph.D.
Faculty Advisor for the Academic Research Track

Date:

Karen G. Massey, Ph.D.
Associate Dean, Masters Degree Programs,
James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology

Date:

Jeffrey G. Willetts, Ph.D.
Dean, James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology

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ABSTRACT

ZACHRY CARL LAUERSDORF
LIVING IN EXILE: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF THE JACOB CYCLE
Under the direction of DAVID G. GARBER, Ph.D.

The Jacob Cycle of Genesis is one of the most fascinating series of stories from the biblical text. These stories are marked by Jacob's deceitful nature, life in exile, and eventual return from exile. These stories are also marked by God's continual protection and blessing of Jacob throughout the stories. These stories have as much to say about God as they do about Jacob. This thesis attempts to connect the stories of Jacob with the Judean experience of the Babylonian Exile, to see how that experience may have shaped these stories.

Given that this thesis examines the effects of empire on the biblical text, this study utilizes a postcolonial literary analysis of the Jacob texts and exilic prophetic texts to determine how the Jacob texts bear the scars of the exilic experience. To determine the postcolonial nature of the Jacob texts, this thesis addresses the following questions: (1) How does Jacob's flight from home and subsequent divine encounter at Bethel reflect a postcolonial worldview?; (2) How is Jacob's labor in Laban's household significant with regards to postcolonial thought?; and (3) How do Jacob's character and personality reflect a postcolonial worldview?

The conclusion of this study is that the Jacob texts exhibit a large exilic influence, and the character of Jacob is a hero for the colonized and the exiles. Further studies could examine other texts in the book of Genesis, especially the stories of younger brothers, through a postcolonial lens to see how the theme of exile is present in them.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Exile in the Hebrew Bible

Jacob is a monolithic figure in the Hebrew Bible. As a patriarch, he is one of the progenitors of the nation of Israel. In the context of Genesis, Jacob stands as a representation of the nation of Israel, and the Hebrew Bible attaches Israel's national identity to his character. He is an extraordinarily important figure for the nation of Israel, from both a historical and a literary perspective. The fact that Jacob experiences an exile illustrates the importance of the theme of exile to Jewish identity.

One cannot overestimate the importance of exile when studying the Hebrew Bible. The Babylonian Exile, which occurred in three waves beginning in 598 BCE,¹ is a central event in the history of Judaism. As a political and a theological event, the Babylonian Exile was jarring for the people of Judah, who believed that their God was the strongest of all of the gods in the ancient Near East. The theological significance of this event would have a far-reaching impact, not only for the people who experienced it, but also their descendants. According to Robert Carroll, the Babylonian Exile and its aftermath were major factors in the formation of the Hebrew Bible, with the Hebrew Bible having been composed largely during the Second Temple Era.²

¹ Leslie J. Hoppe, "Israel, History of (Monarchic Period)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. III., ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 566.

The Babylonian Exile came some time after another cataclysmic event in the history of Judaism. In 721 BCE, the northern kingdom of Israel suffered destruction and dispersion at the hands of the Assyrian empire.³ Both exiles challenged the worldview of the people of Judah in the sixth century BCE, and a basic understanding of the theme of exile in general allows one to have a better understanding of the Hebrew Bible as a whole, and the book of Genesis in particular.

Thesis Question

Ultimately, I want to examine how the Jacob narrative bears the marks of exile. The most logical place to look within the Jacob cycle is in Genesis 29-31, which documents the time that Jacob spent in Haran in his uncle Laban's household. The change in geography that occurs in Genesis 28 is important because Jacob's flight from his home is a form of exile. After demonstrating the importance of Jacob's flight from home, I will examine Jacob's actions during his time in exile. I am particularly interested in Jacob's initial subservience to Laban, which leads to Laban's deception of Jacob. After discussing Jacob's actions during his time in Laban's household, I will discuss the importance of the trickster image in the Jacob cycle. Jacob's deception of his father led to his initial exile, and Jacob's deception of Laban leads to Jacob's return home. I hope to examine the relevance of the trickster image in relation to postcolonial studies with regards to the self-depictions of vulnerable and oppressed peoples.

² Robert P. Carroll, "Israel, History of (Post-Monarchic Period)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary: H-J*, vol. III, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 572.

³ Hoppe, "Israel (Monarchic Period)," 565.

This brings me to the question that I will attempt to answer: In what ways does Jacob's experiences in Haran with Laban's household reflect a postcolonial worldview?

In order to answer this question, I will address the following sub-questions:

- Thesis Sub-Question 1: How does Jacob's flight from home and subsequent divine encounter at Bethel reflect a postcolonial worldview?
- Thesis Sub-Question 2: How is Jacob's labor in Laban's household significant with regards to postcolonial thought?
- Thesis Sub-Question 3: How do Jacob's character and personality reflect a postcolonial worldview?

Historical Background of Study

What makes the study of any biblical text difficult is the fact that there are two histories at work. On one level, there is the world in which the text was composed. This is the historical context in which the biblical writers worked. On the other level, there is the world of the text itself. This is a world that is composed of a blend of history and symbolism, and might be described as mythical. It may not be "true" in a factual sense, but it is still "real" in that it is rooted in the experiences of real people. While I will mainly be focusing on the textual world, the lived, factual experiences of the people who composed and compiled the biblical texts will influence my conclusions.

A great deal of scholarship surrounding the exiles experienced by the people of Israel and Judah deals with the historical circumstances of those events. Before the 1980s, studies of exile have focused more on uncovering the particulars of the actual events of those exiles than on how these experiences impacted the lives of the people that experienced them.⁴ Additionally, most of the scholarship that focuses on how experiences

⁴ Brad E. Kelle, "An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Exile," in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritzel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 7.

of exile shaped the formation of the Hebrew Bible focuses on how the Exile affected the prophetic writers. Recently, however, there has been a move towards examining how experiences of exile shaped the Hebrew Bible as a whole, including the Torah.⁵

Postcolonial scholarship is a relatively new field. Broadly speaking, it focuses on the effects of colonization and exploitation of some societies by powerful empires. The field arose in response to European colonialism, particularly in Africa. Two of the foundational texts of postcolonial scholarship are Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. In *Orientalism*, Said posits that the Western world has come to view the Eastern world as something that is completely different from itself. This establishes a system in which the colonial powers of the West continually "other" the Eastern world, making it into something that is exotic and inferior. In *Colonizer and the Colonized*, Memmi paints portraits of colonizing and colonized peoples. Towards the end of the book, Memmi writes, "The point is that the colonized means little to the colonizer."⁶ This results in the dehumanization and depersonalization of the colonized, which leaves two responses for the colonized: to either change entirely, or to reclaim the things that the colonizer has taken away from them.⁷

Postcolonial scholarship has largely focused on works outside of the biblical text, and whenever postcolonial scholarship does address the Bible, it usually critiques the Bible as a tool of oppression used by colonizing forces. Recently, however, scholars have

⁵ David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 226.

⁶ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 83.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

sought to reclaim the biblical text from the forces of colonization, exploitation, and oppression, and have sought to uncover more liberative readings of the Bible that stand in opposition to the forces of imperialism and colonialism. R.S. Sugirtharajah writes, “Postcolonialism is a discipline in which everything is contested, everything is contestable, from the use of terms to the defining of chronological boundaries.”⁸ While postcolonialism as a field is largely disputed, questioned and nebulous, it is most commonly said to have begun in the 1960s “after the demise of formal European colonialism...”⁹ From its inception, postcolonialism has been a discipline that has questioned the very foundations of Western Civilization, due to Western Civilization’s imperialistic and colonial ideology. These principles can be applied to biblical scholarship. A postcolonial reading of the biblical text seeks to question the normative readings and attempts to arrive at a level of understanding that places the marginalized first. The world of the Ancient Near East was not much different from the world that was colonized by the European colonial powers. The Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, and Roman empires may serve as stand-ins for the European colonial powers when we examine the biblical text. Postcolonial scholarship is countercultural, standing in opposition to the forces of imperialism, and seeks to give a voice to the voiceless. Postcolonial scholarship, above all else, seeks to be a liberative discipline that not only questions the status quo, but overturns it entirely.

⁸ R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Charting the Aftermath: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 8.

⁹ Ibid.

Methodology

I will be doing my study of the Jacob narrative and how this narrative bears the mark of exile from a postcolonial perspective, which employs literary as well as historical-critical methods. Simply put, postcolonial scholarship examines the effects of empire on conquered peoples. While there has been a great deal of postcolonial scholarship that examines the Bible as a tool of colonizers, there has not been as much postcolonial scholarship that examines the Bible as an expression of oppressed and colonized peoples. I will be examining the Jacob narrative as a product of a colonized people trying to make sense of their plight. I will be looking at the Jacob narrative as one expression of a colonized people, trying to find potential links between elements of the text and the historical circumstances of the people who composed, redacted, and compiled the biblical text.

Assumptions and Limitations

For the purposes of this study, I will be assuming that the formation of the Torah is in line with the hypotheses of David Carr. Carr believes that the Hasmonean dynasty had the final say in which books were considered authoritative for Jewish religious study.¹⁰ According to Carr, the Hasmoneans were working in response to the emergence of Hellenism in Palestine.¹¹ Carr notes, however, that the Hasmoneans were working with materials that were written before their reign, and that the Hebrew Bible as a whole

¹⁰ Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible*, 166.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

“[speaks] to and from the experience of exile,”¹² with Carr going as far as to describe the Hebrew Bible as a “Bible for exiles.”¹³ This is seen in the ancestral narratives of Genesis, which depicts the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as “landless semi-exiles.”¹⁴

While the theme of exile appears in many of the stories of Genesis, I will be focusing on the Jacob narrative because the Hebrew Bible often depicts Jacob as a representative of the whole nation of Israel.¹⁵ For the sake of this study, I will be focusing on Genesis 29-31, because this section of the Jacob cycle deals with exile most directly. While I will make reference to other parts of the Jacob cycle, the pieces that specifically depict Jacob as living in exile in Laban’s household will be the main focus. While I will be taking historical information into consideration, I will be focusing more on the literary aspects of this text than the composition and transmission history of the text. While many studies of the theme of exile pair this theme with the theme of return, I will be focusing strictly on the theme of exile in the Jacob text.

Thesis Chapter Outline

1. INTRODUCTION
 - A. Exile in the Hebrew Bible
 - B. Thesis Question
 - C. Historical Background of Study
 - D. Methodology
 - E. Assumptions and Limitations
 - F. Thesis Chapter Outline
2. JACOB IN EXILE

¹² Ibid., 226.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ There are numerous examples of this in the Hebrew Bible. Leviticus 26:42 states that God will remember God’s covenant with Jacob, and Israel is collectively referred to as “Jacob” or “the house of Jacob” throughout Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

- A. Jacob's Flight from Home
 - B. Prophetic Conceptions of Exile
 - C. Bethel: Between Beer-Sheba and Haran
 - D. Jacob's Theophany and Judean Ideas About God
3. FROM BETHEL TO HARAN
- A. Jacob's Arrival and Laban's Deception
 - B. Instructions to the Exiles: Jeremiah 29
 - C. Jacob's Labor Under Laban
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 - F. Jacob and Rebekah Deceive Isaac
 - G. Laban as Trickster: The Symmetry of Deception
 - H. Jacob's Revenge
 - I. You Shall No Longer be Called Jacob, but Israel
5. CONCLUSION
- A. Exile, Deception, and Judean National Identity in the Jacob Cycle
 - B. Postexilic and Postcolonial Conceptions of Identity

CHAPTER 2

JACOB IN EXILE

Jacob's Flight from Home

Jacob's story is, most simply put, a story of exile and return. Jacob flees the household of his father Isaac after, with the help of his mother Rebekah, Jacob procures Isaac's blessing that was meant for the older son Esau. Gen 27.41 recounts Esau's rage: "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob."¹ Rebekah is aware of Esau's fury, and tells Jacob that he must leave immediately if he is to save himself from Esau's rage.² After a conversation with his mother in 27.42-45 and a blessing from his father in 28.1-4, Jacob leaves the only home he has ever known. Leaving behind his family and most of his material possessions, Jacob journeys from his life in Beer-sheba and ventures into a world that is unknown to him. This experience mirrors the experiences of the people of Judah in the sixth century BCE. In the wake of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, the Babylonian conquerors took the people of Judah away from their homes into the lands of Babylon. Like Jacob, the people of Judah found themselves in lands that were alien to them, and found themselves subjugated by the people that inhabited those lands. Jacob's experience of exile and return is foundational in the construction of his identity, and the exilic experiences of the Judeans

¹ All scripture citations are NRSV.

² Gen 27.42.

are fundamental to the construction of Jewish identity. Jacob Neusner describes the Babylonian Exile as “the generative and definitive pattern of meaning.”³ He goes on to say that the “framers of the Pentateuch, as we now have it, flourished in Babylonia after 586.”⁴ Put simply, without the Babylonian Exile, the Hebrew Bible would not exist – or it would not look the way that it does today. In this chapter, I will be focusing on the exilic event that Jacob experiences and how this experience mirrors the experiences of and the people of Judah who experienced conquest, deportation, and life in a land that was not their own.

There is some controversy surrounding the exact nature Jacob’s departure from home. Gerhard von Rad sees two accounts of Jacob’s departure from home in Genesis 27-28. In his examination of Jacob’s flight, von Rad writes, “...according to chap. 27, Jacob flees in great haste... [in Gen 28.2-7], he is sent to Laban by Isaac with great ceremony.”⁵ Other commentators, however, do not see a sharp distinction between the two accounts of Jacob’s departure from home. G. Henton Davies notes that both the J and the P redactors are at work in this story. He writes, “The two traditions ascribe Jacob’s departure to the instruction of mother and father separately; but the traditions are not necessarily inconsistent. The P witness obviously did not think so.”⁶ The Priestly source

³Jacob Neusner, “Exile and Return as the History of Judaism,” in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. James M. Scott (New York: Brill, 1997), 224.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 281.

⁶ G. Henton Davies, *Genesis*, The Broadman Bible Commentary 1, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 218.

was the latest source that was involved in the composition of the Hebrew Bible, and P felt the need to preserve the tradition in which Jacob fled from home quickly. With these

The haste in which Jacob makes his departure from the household of his parents reflects the experiences of people who experience forced deportations. Jacob's hasty departure from home reflects the experiences of Judeans who were forced to flee from their homes in the wake of various conquests by foreign powers.

Prophetic Conceptions of Exile

The book of Jeremiah contains many depictions of the conquest of Jerusalem and the aftermath. In chap. 4, Jeremiah, bringing a word from God, says:

Blow the trumpet through the land;
shout aloud and say,
“Gather together, and let us go
into the fortified cities!”
Raise a standard toward Zion,
flee for safety, do not delay,
for I am bringing evil from the north,
and a great destruction.⁷

This passage is an allusion to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. God's command to not delay in finding safety is indicative of the swift might of the Babylonian conquest. While Jerusalem may have been under siege for almost two years,⁸ the invasion itself was swift and brutal. Those who were not killed in the initial onslaught either fled the city or were taken back to Babylon by the Babylonian armies.

In her exploration of the book of Jeremiah, Kathleen O'Connor creates fictional accounts that depict the experiences of the inhabitants of Jerusalem during the

⁷ Jer 4.5-6.

⁸ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 13.

Babylonian siege and conquest of the city.⁹ While these stories are fictional, O'Connor says, "But fiction, too, can be a mode of truth-telling."¹⁰ O'Connor constructs several fictional families that were present during the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. She describes a scene of pandemonium that erupts once the Babylonian army breaches the walls of Jerusalem:

The women and [Peninah's] elderly father were throwing pieces of fruit and grain into a burlap sack, along with a cooking pot. Everyone was shouting at once. Their intent was to run for their lives.¹¹

O'Connor describes further scenes of chaos that would have taken place during the Babylonians' pillaging of the city. She describes families being separated, the razing of the Temple, and the executions of captured Judean soldiers. O'Connor's account of the conquest of Jerusalem, while speculative, is a helpful resource in understanding the traumatic nature of the conquest of Jerusalem and the subsequent deportations. With the traumatic nature of exile in mind, I now turn to the story of Jacob.

Bethel: Between Beer-Sheba and Haran

The journey from Beer-sheba to Haran is no short journey. The biblical text, however, provides very little information about Jacob's travels to Haran. Nahum Sarna notes, "...the narrative provides no details about the adventure or the trials and tribulations of Jacob in the course of his trek, only the bare facts that he set out and that he arrived."¹² For the final redactor, Jacob's journey is not as important as the beginning

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

and end points of that journey. Jacob travels to Haran from Beer-sheba through Bethel. Jacob's experience at Bethel is the only part of the journey itself that the final redactor has felt the need to present to their audience. Why is Jacob's experience at Bethel so important within the context of the Jacob narratives? How would the descendants of the Judeans who experienced the Babylonian exile have received the story of Jacob's experience at Bethel?

In Gen 28, Jacob rests in Bethel, where he has an encounter with God. The text indicates that Jacob uses a stone as a pillow.¹³ This shows that Jacob has brought very few provisions with him on his journey. In his discussion of Jacob's flight from home and subsequent stay in Bethel, Yair Zakovitch writes:

Can it be that, in his rush, he hadn't stopped to gather even a single piece of clothing or blanket? He has brought nothing with which to cover himself or to put under his head and he uses a rock as a pillow, an apt illustration of his lonely circumstances.¹⁴

Jacob lived a life of relative luxury when compared to his brother Esau. The biblical text describes Jacob as "a quiet man, living in tents," while Esau is described as "a skillful hunter, a man of the field."¹⁵ Zakovitch describes Jacob as "a homebody," unlike Esau, who spends most of his time outdoors.¹⁶ Jacob is used to a life of relative ease compared to Esau. He is accustomed to having certain luxuries that Esau can easily do without.

¹² Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 197.

¹³ Gen 28.11.

¹⁴ Yair Zakovitch, *Jacob: Unexpected Patriarch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 47.

¹⁵ Gen 25.27.

¹⁶ Zakovitch, *Unexpected Patriarch*, 47.

While Jacob's exile has most likely deprived him of his material wealth, his separation from the only family he has ever known is undoubtedly a more traumatic experience. Jacob was not adequately prepared for his journey. He does not have the skills of his older brother. During his exile, Jacob experiences a separation from the only family that he has ever known and develops ties with a family that is unfamiliar to him.

In his discussion of the effects of exile, Frank Ritzel Ames notes that one effect of exile "is [the] diminishment of resources and security. Exile separates people from their property..."¹⁷ He goes on to say, "The loss for the person in exile... is not simply material... Exile separates family members, friends and neighbors, and community members."¹⁸ The prophet Ezekiel describes the separation that the exiles experienced when they were separated from their land. Ezekiel 12 is rife with imagery that describes the desolation of the land and separation that the people of Judah experienced. Verses 17-20 in particular are evocative of the impending conquest:

The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, eat your bread with quaking, and drink your water with trembling and with fearfulness; and say to the people of the land, Thus says the Lord GOD concerning the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the land of Israel: They shall eat their bread with fearfulness, and drink their water in dismay, because their land shall be stripped of all it contains, on account of the violence of all those who live in it. The inhabited cities shall be laid waste, and the land shall become a desolation; and you shall know that I am the LORD.

Here, God tells Ezekiel to symbolically eat his bread and drink his water with fear and trembling, and to tell the people of Israel to do the same. The coming Babylonian armies will strip the land "of all it contains, on account of the violence of all those who live in

¹⁷ Frank Ritzel Ames, "The Cascading Effects of Exile: From Diminished Resources to New Identities," in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritzel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 175.

¹⁸ Ibid.

it.”¹⁹ When the conquest happens, the people will be separated from their land, and their cities will be destroyed. Earlier, in v. 14, God says to Ezekiel, “I will scatter to every wind all who are around [the prince who is among them], his helpers and all his troops; and I will unsheathe the sword behind them.” This further references the scattering and dispersion of the people of Judah, while also noting that the royal family will not be spared.

The loss that Jacob experiences during his sojourn is not much different from the loss that untold numbers of Israelites and Judeans experienced during their own experiences of conquest and exile. With the loss of his family, his home, and his possessions, Jacob faces a crisis of identity. He has only known himself as a member of his father’s household. In the wake of his flight from home, Jacob must begin to construct a new identity for himself. The dream that Jacob has at Bethel is the first step in this construction of a new identity.

While he is asleep at Bethel, Jacob dreams of “a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven,” with “the angels of God... ascending and descending on it.”²⁰ In his dream, God stands above Jacob and reiterates the ancestral promise made to Abraham – in a way that refers to Jacob’s specific situation.²¹ Then, God makes a promise meant for Jacob himself: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done

¹⁹ Ezek 12.19.

²⁰ Gen 28.12.

²¹ von Rad, *Genesis*, 285.

what I have promised you.”²² The reiteration of the promise to Abraham is unsurprising, given Jacob’s relationship to Abraham. God’s promise to Jacob, however, is intriguing, especially when read in a postexilic light. God’s promise to Jacob has three parts. These are: (1) to be with Jacob wherever he goes, (2) to bring Jacob back to the land of his ancestors, and (3) to not leave Jacob until the things God has promised have come to pass. When read from a postexilic light, one can see an image of God that travels with exiles in their journeys instead of remaining in the land from which they were taken. One can see a God that works to bring exiles back to their homelands instead of allowing them to be taken into exile permanently. One can see a God who will never abandon God’s chosen people. The prophet Ezekiel, who was active during the Babylonian Exile, encountered God during the Exile. The opening verses of the book of Ezekiel read:

In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin, the word of the LORD came to the priest Ezekiel, son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was on him there.²³

This passage is incredibly repetitive in its description of where this event took place. God appeared to Ezekiel not in the land of Judah, but by the river Chebar, in the land of Babylon. The presence of God outside of Judah is the most striking thing about this passage, because it illustrates the fact that God went into exile along with the people of Judah who were taken there by the Babylonians. This experience mirrors Jacob’s experience at Bethel, as he is fleeing from home.

²² Gen 28.15.

²³ Ezek 1.1-3.

Historically, Bethel was a frontier town north of Jerusalem, and was established as a sanctuary due to its connection to events in the lives of Abraham and Jacob.²⁴ This story may partially exist as an etiological story for a sacred site in Bethel. I would like to propose a broader understanding for this story. When examined in a postexilic light, this story serves to show the people of Judah and their descendants that God has not abandoned them. This story, when viewed in the context of the Jacob narrative, illustrates a shift in thinking about God. Instead of God being bound to the Temple or the land of promise, God can be wherever God's people are residing. In this story, as well as other ancestral narratives, God does not reside in a singular location. God's promise to Jacob implies that God is not tied to a singular location. God will go with Jacob in his journey, and God will ensure that Jacob will return home. This stands in sharp contrast to other conceptions of God in the Hebrew Bible. With the construction of the first Temple in Jerusalem, God is depicted as being confined to this temple. This image of a God who goes into exile with the people stands in contrast to traditional Judean conceptions of God. Deuteronomy 12 warns the people of Israel to "not offer [their] burnt offerings at any place [they] happen to see. But only at the place that the LORD will choose..."²⁵ The Temple in Jerusalem eventually took on this designation. The inclusion of this narrative could, perhaps, be indicative of a later Judean/Israelite understanding of where God resides. Ingrid Hjelm describes the God of Israel and Judah as a homeless God.²⁶

²⁴ Harold Brodsky, "Bethel," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. I, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 710-11.

²⁵ Deut 12.13-14.

Jacob's Theophany and Judean Ideas About God

Before the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem, the people of Judah conceived of a God that was tied to a singular location. With the dispersion of the people and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, this notion of God had to be revised. Perhaps, in the wake of the conquest Judah, the survivors had to consider that God was not confined to the Temple in Jerusalem, but that God could be found elsewhere. The book of Ezekiel contains language that captures both the presence and the absence of God.

After his experience in Bethel, Jacob establishes a monument at that place before continuing on his journey to Haran. The biblical witness to this journey is terse: "Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east."²⁷ The entirety of Jacob's journey from Bethel to Haran is contained in a single verse. The redactor is not concerned with the experiences that Jacob had on his way to Haran, just his experiences in Bethel and Haran themselves. Jacob's experiences in Haran paint a fascinating picture of a life spent in exile. During his time in Haran, Jacob marries, has children, and works for the benefit of his host, Laban, before ultimately leaving Laban's household to return to the land of his ancestors. Jacob's actions in exile reflect the sensibilities of the prophet Jeremiah, who, in Jeremiah 29, encourages the Judean exiles living in Babylon to make lives for themselves in exile.

At the conclusion of Jacob's dream, God speaks to him, saying:

²⁶ Ingrid Hjelm "Exile as Pilgrimage?" in *Myths of Exile: History and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* ed. Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme and Ingrid Hjelm (New York: Routledge, 2015), 82.

²⁷ Gen 29.1.

I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.²⁸

God's promise to Jacob refers back to God's promise to Abraham of land and offspring.

Additionally, God promises to Jacob that God will remain with Jacob throughout his travels. God also promises to Jacob that Jacob will return to the land from which he is departing.

In spite of the fact that Jacob is leaving the land of his birth, God still expects him to return home. God's declaration to bring Jacob back to the land from which he is leaving is an assurance that Jacob will be able to return home one day. There is a twofold expectation here: Jacob must return to the land of his birth, and God will ensure that Jacob will be able to return to his land. When thinking about Jacob's experience of exile and eventual return in the light of the actual experiences of Judean exiles, it is important to remember that the people who returned to Judah from Babylon were not the same people who went into exile. It was the descendants of the exiles who actually had the opportunity to return "home."²⁹ After the Persian conquest of Babylon, many of the Judeans living in Babylon chose to stay there instead of returning to the land of their ancestors.³⁰ Many people of Judean descent continued to survive and thrive outside of

²⁸ Gen 28.13-15.

²⁹ Neusner, "Exile and Return," 226.

³⁰ Irina Levinskaya, "Diaspora," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol II, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 120.

their ancestral lands. Diaspora Judaism is far from monolithic – many Jews living in Diaspora wanted to return to their ancestral lands,³¹ thinking of their present situation as a form of exile. Others, however, had a more positive perspective on their life away from the land of their ancestors.³² Judean culture developed independently outside of the land of Judah, with Diaspora synagogues blending the Judean and Greco-Roman cultures.³³ The Judeans who lived outside of the land of their ancestors still found their identities in the culture of their ancestors. Several texts of the Hebrew Bible, especially the book of Jeremiah, offer guidance to Judeans who no longer live in their ancestral lands.

The biblical text quickly shifts from discussing Jacob’s dream at Bethel to his arrival at Haran, with no description of what happened during Jacob’s journey. This serves to underscore both the importance of the Bethel event and the time that Jacob spends in exile in Haran. The journey is not as important as the destination

Jacob’s story is, initially, a story of exile. He has to flee from deadly circumstances at home towards an uncertain future. He is deprived of his material possessions, his family, and the way of life that he had known. During his sojourn, Jacob ends up working in the household of his uncle Laban, who, like Jacob, is a devious character. Jacob’s experience of exile mirrors ancient Judean experiences of exile. He flees from home in great haste, due to the threat of bodily harm. During his sojourn, he

³¹ James M. Scott, “Exile and Self-Understanding of Diaspora Jews in the Greco-Roman Period,” in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. James M. Scott (New York: Brill, 1997), 211.

³² *Ibid.*, 174.

³³ *Ibid.*, 176.

has an encounter with God, who tells him that God will be with him during his time away from home. God also tells Jacob that, ultimately, he will return to the land of his birth.

CHAPTER 3

FROM BETHEL TO HARAN

Jacob's Arrival and Laban's Deception

After his experience at Bethel, Jacob makes his way to Haran. In typical biblical fashion, the text is terse in its description of Jacob's journey. The focus is on his arrival at Haran and his experience meeting with Rachel at the well, which is a typical betrothal scene.¹ After this incident, Jacob goes to the household of his uncle Laban, where, after a month, Jacob and Laban agree that Jacob will work for Laban for a period of seven years in exchange for the opportunity to marry Rachel, Laban's younger daughter. Through subterfuge, Laban, citing an obscure local tradition, forces Jacob to marry Leah, Rachel's older sister. Laban agrees to allow Jacob to marry Rachel as well if he works for Laban for an additional seven years. During his time in Laban's household, Jacob starts a family, and his wives and their maidservants give birth to twelve children – eleven sons and one daughter. The sons are named for eleven of the twelve tribes of Israel, further cementing Jacob's identity as a literary representation of the nation of Israel. In this chapter, I will focus on Jacob's time in exile in the household of Laban. I will examine Jacob's life in exile through the lens of Jeremiah 29.4-7, which is an excerpt from a letter written by the prophet to the Judean exiles living in Babylon.

¹ For a discussion of type-scenes, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

Instructions to the Exiles: Jeremiah 29

Jacob's time spent living and working in the household of his uncle Laban reflects Israelite and Judean experiences of exile. Jacob's experience in exile may be seen as a model for proper behavior for a person living in exile. The stories of Jacob's time in Laban's household illustrate the instructions of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet who was active during the Babylonian Exile. The convoluted and disjointed nature of the book of Jeremiah poses many challenges to biblical scholarship. Jeremiah's prophetic ministry spans a period of approximately forty years.² Jeremiah 29 consists of a series of letters that Jeremiah wrote to the Judean exiles in Babylon. Jeremiah 29 was likely composed in Egypt for the first wave of Judeans taken into exile in 597.³ In Jeremiah 29.4-7, the prophet exhorts the exiles in Babylon to make the most of their lives in exile, writing:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exile whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Jeremiah's words in this letter to the exiles would dampen any hope for a quick return to Judah from Babylon. He is writing in response to the hopes of a quick return to Judah that

² Pamela J. Scalise, "Jeremiah," in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), 434.

³ Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52* Word Biblical Commentary 27, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 64.

the rebellious prophet Hananiah predicted.⁴ Jeremiah's message from God to the Judeans in exile is that, instead of pausing life, those living in exile should continue to live their lives. This does not mean continuing on as if nothing has happened, but instead creating a new life for oneself in the midst of exile. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles acknowledges that the Babylonian Exile will not be over quickly, and that it is important for the exiles to understand this.⁵ While Jeremiah's words would not have been easy for the Judeans to accept, their acceptance of these words would be crucial if they were to survive the exile, both physically and culturally. If the exiles did not accept that they would be spending a great deal of time in Babylon, they would not form the strong cultural bonds that would be necessary for the continued survival of their culture.

In Jeremiah 29, God makes three basic commands to the exiles through Jeremiah: build houses and gardens, start families, and work for the welfare of the place where they reside. The exiles are not meant to mourn their lost lives in Judah, but to build new ones in the land of Babylon. First, God commands the exiles to build houses and plant gardens, because they will be living in Babylon for a long time. Then, God commands the exiles to take spouses for themselves and their children, so that they may have children and their way of life may continue through future generations. Finally, God commands the exiles to work for the welfare of Babylon, and to "pray to the LORD on its behalf,"⁶ because the welfare of the Judeans is now inextricably connected to the welfare of Babylon. These

⁴ Jer 28.10-17.

⁵ James Leo Green, "Jeremiah," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary 6: Jeremiah-Daniel*, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 142.

⁶ Jer 29.7.

commands do not speak of a passive acceptance of a life in exile, but of a necessity to actively work for the welfare of Babylon.

The keeping of these commands may be seen in the depiction of Jacob's life in exile with Laban. Instead of living as a nomad, Jacob settles down in the household of Laban. Instead of being alone, Jacob takes wives and has children with them. Instead of working to sabotage and defraud Laban, Jacob, at least initially, works for his benefit. Jacob's life in exile is a continuation of the life he had lived before the exile. Jacob's experience of exile, when viewed in light of Jeremiah 29.4-7, can be seen as an illustration of the prophet's commands. Jacob's life in exile is a life in which he works for Laban's well being, because Jacob's well being is linked to the well being of Laban. If Jeremiah 29 contains a command directed towards the exiles in Babylon, then Genesis 29-30 can be seen as a narrative illustration of the prophetic command.

Jacob's Labor Under Laban

While one would think that the Judeans taken into exile by Babylon were used as slaves or treated like prisoners, this assumption does not reflect the reality of the situation of the Judeans living in exile. In his study of the Babylonian exile, Rainer Albertz notes that the Judean exiles in Babylon enjoyed relative autonomy during their time in exile.

He writes:

Despite the metaphor of "Babylonian captivity," it must be stressed that the "exiles" were neither prisoners of war in the modern sense, kept in prison camps, nor slaves in the legal sense, meaning that they could be bought and sold. The overwhelming majority were semifree tenants on state land; tied to their plot of ground, they owed their economic status to the crown, to which they owed service... There is no evidence of oppression on ethnic or religious grounds.⁷

⁷ Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century BCE*, trans. David Green (Boston: Brill, 2004), 101.

For Albertz, the experience of exile is not as harsh as the casual observer would believe. During their exile, the exiles did not experience slavery or imprisonment. While the people of Judah were taken from the land of their birth, they enjoyed relative autonomy in Babylon. While the Judeans living in exile were subservient to the Babylonian crown and owed their livelihood to the Empire, they were not forced into slave labor. The Judean exiles in Babylon enjoyed a degree of freedom that would be unexpected by one taking a cursory glance at the Babylonian Exile. Albertz notes that the Babylonian monarchy employed Judean artisans to continue practicing their crafts. He goes on to say that one of the roots of the trauma of the exilic experience was the expectation for the Judean elite to participate in farming, which was seen as “an almost unbearable social degradation.”⁸ While the Judeans living in exile were forcibly taken from the land of their birth and experienced a loss in social status, they were neither slaves nor forced laborers. In spite of this, the Judeans in Babylon still experienced a loss of status and wealth. They experienced the loss of their homeland, their religion, and their friends and families that they left behind. None of this is to say that the Babylonian Exile was not a traumatic experience. Indeed, the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of many of the city’s inhabitants was a world-altering experience for the people of Judah. The Jacob narrative, however, does provide an illustration of living a semi-free life in exile in service to another entity.

To Serve and to Seek: A Study of עָבַד and שָׁרַשׁ

The Hebrew word that characterizes Jacob’s service to Laban is the word עָבַד, which is rendered in the NRSV as “serve.” It occurs six times in the stories that deal

⁸ Ibid.

Jacob's birth, deception(s), exile, and return. The first use of עָבַד in the Jacob stories occurs in Gen 25.23, when God speaks to Rebekah, saying, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." This particular use of עָבַד is repeated twice in Genesis 27, when Isaac bestows his blessing on Jacob in v. 29 and in Isaac's response to Esau in v. 40. The connotation of עָבַד in Genesis 25 and 27 implies subservience to the younger sibling by the older sibling, in this case, subservience to Jacob by Esau. In Gen. 25 and 27, עָבַד is tied to Jacob's primacy over Esau. עָבַד takes on new layers of meaning in the subsequent chapters of the Jacob narratives.

The next place that עָבַד occurs in the Jacob narratives is in Genesis 29, in which Jacob makes his arrangement with Laban to work in his household in exchange for his marriage to Rachel. עָבַד occurs five times in Genesis 29. Once Jacob has learned of the trickery that he has experienced at the hands of Laban, he says, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"⁹ The irony of the situation is not lost on the commentators. Sarna notes, "[Serve] is precisely the term that conveyed the essence of the blessing that Jacob fought so desperately to obtain."¹⁰ This underscores the symmetrical nature of the deception that Jacob metes out and receives in these stories. While Jacob does maintain supremacy over Esau, he does experience reciprocal deception at the hands of Laban.

During his time in Laban's household, Jacob labors for the benefit of Laban.

When taking a cursory glance at the text, Jacob's labor for Laban seems akin to slavery

⁹ Gen 29.25.

¹⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 203.

or forced labor. However, a closer reading shows that Jacob is not exactly a slave to Laban, and Laban is, in fact, allowing Jacob to work for him in exchange for the opportunity to marry Rachel and Leah. Instead of trying to use deceit to take Rachel away from Laban's household, Jacob works to ensure Laban's welfare, because Jacob's welfare, and the welfare of Rachel and Leah, is tied to the welfare of Laban. In spite of being exploited by Laban in exchange for labor, Jacob is not really a slave. Von Rad notes, "Jacob was neither [a slave] nor [a paid worker]; he was a relative..."¹¹ While עֶבֶד may carry some connotations of slavery with it, thinking of Jacob as a slave in the household of Laban would be inaccurate. This status of being semi-free while still being beholden to a superior entity is illustrative of the Judean experience of the Babylonian Exile.

In Jer 29.7, Jeremiah uses the word נָחַם, which is rendered in the NRSV as "seek." Other connotations of נָחַם include "to examine," "to inquire," or "to visit."¹² Jeremiah's use of נָחַם underscores the active nature of the commands to have children, build houses, and plant gardens. To "seek" the welfare of the city is not to passively live in exile, but to actively work for the welfare of the place in which one is living in exile. Jeremiah's use of נָחַם implies action. The exhortation to "pray to the LORD on its behalf"¹³ further emphasizes the command to actively work for the welfare of Babylon.

¹¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 290.

¹² Karl Feyerabend, *Langenscheidt's Pocket Hebrew Dictionary to the Old Testament* (Berlin: Langenscheidt KG), 73.

¹³ Jer 29.7.

Seeking the welfare of Babylon does not mean to be passive and to not try to harm Babylon, but to actively contribute to the welfare of Babylon.

Jacob's experience in Laban's household reflects God's command through Jeremiah to "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile."¹⁴ The reasoning for this is because Jacob's welfare, as a member of Laban's household, depends upon Laban's welfare. If Jacob were to work against Laban's wellbeing, then he would also be working against his own wellbeing. The command to work for the welfare of the place where one is living in exile is a pragmatic one. If Babylon suffers, the Judean exiles living in Babylon will suffer as well. If Laban suffers, Jacob will also suffer. Jacob's work for the benefit of Laban mirrors the Judean experience of exile in Babylon, as well as the prophetic command to work for the welfare of the Babylonian Empire.

Jacob's Wives and Children: Twelve Children for Twelve Tribes

After his encounter with Laban's daughter Rachel at the well, Laban welcomes Jacob into his household. After Jacob spends a month living and working in Laban's household, Laban asks him, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"¹⁵ Jacob asks for Laban to allow him to marry Rachel. Laban agrees, and binds Jacob to seven years of service in exchange for Jacob marrying Rachel. When the seven years are up, Laban, through subterfuge, forces Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel. Citing a local tradition, Laban tells Jacob that he cannot give his younger daughter in marriage before his older daughter.¹⁶ In order

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Gen 29.15.

¹⁶ Gen 29.26.

to marry Rachel, Jacob must bind himself to Laban's service for another seven-year period.

Jacob prolongs his time in Laban's household in order that he may marry Rachel. Jacob's taking of wives (and their maidservants) during his time with Laban is illustrative of God's command through Jeremiah to "Take wives and have sons and daughters..." in Jer 29.6. Having left the life that he once knew, Jacob builds a new life for himself during his exile in the household of Laban. Jacob fulfills Jeremiah's command to "multiply there, and do not decrease"¹⁷ through the taking of wives and having children with them.

In usual biblical fashion, a long period of time elapses with little record of what happened in that time. The narrative shifts to a description of the births of Jacob's children with Rachel, Leah, and their maidservants. These children (with the exception of Dinah) become eleven of the twelve tribes of Israel, with Benjamin, a twelfth son, being born to Rachel after Jacob and his family have left Laban's household. The growth of Jacob's family in exile is reminiscent of Jeremiah's command to "multiply there, and do not decrease." This reasoning for this command is twofold. First, having children and maintaining a sizable population in exile would be a means for the Judeans to preserve their culture. Another reason for this command would be for the Judeans in exile to begin constructing new identities for themselves. In the wake of the destruction of the land of their birth, the Judean exiles in Babylon had to construct new identities for themselves in a new context. Instead of being paralyzed by nostalgia for the way things used to be, God commands the exiles to make new lives for themselves in the midst of their exile.

¹⁷ Jer 29.6

God's Presence in Jacob's Exile

Throughout the Jacob narratives, God is overtly present some of the time, but is most often at work behind the scenes. God's presence is made known again towards the end of Jacob's exile with Laban, which will be explored in the following chapter. In the Jacob narratives, God first appears in Genesis 25, in which God speaks to Rebekah about the personalities of the twins in her womb. God next appears in Genesis 28, during Jacob's dream at Bethel. God's next appearance in the Jacob narratives is in Genesis 30, in which God "remember[s] Rachel,"¹⁸ and she conceives Joseph. God then appears in Genesis 31, in which God appears to Laban in a dream, urging caution with how he deals with Jacob. The messengers of God appear at the beginning of Genesis 32, and God makes a possible appearance at the end of Genesis 32, in which Jacob wrestles with a divine being.

The most intriguing part of God's work in these stories is that God is not seen acting directly on the events of the story. This may reflect an exilic/postexilic worldview in which God is seen as being unwilling or unable to act directly in history. Albertz writes:

In their private lives, the exiles could clearly still sense the presence of Yahweh: when a child was born without incident, when a family member recovered from illness or work brought prosperity and happiness. In the domain of political history, however, Yahweh appeared to have been distant for so long that they had ceased to expect anything of him. The longer the exile lasted, the more they had to accept the conclusion that they must leave their nationalistic hopes behind and try to find happiness in family life and rewarding work.¹⁹

¹⁸ Gen 30.22.

¹⁹ Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 105.

God, in the Jacob narratives, does not exhibit a great deal of power. Instead of using brute power, God in the Jacob narratives works through human beings through dreams, messages, and subtle influence. In fact, God only physically appears in the Jacob stories in Jacob's dream at Bethel and possibly at the Jabbok in chap. 32.

What do the Jacob narratives say about God? God is largely absent from the story, save from exercising subtle influence and dreams throughout. God also tolerates Jacob's deceptive behavior throughout the narratives. John Anderson writes:

If anything, God's seeming tolerance of Jacob's deceptiveness appears to disclose more about God than many scholars are willing or comfortable to admit, and those choosing to admit at least the plausibility of a deceptive God tend either merely to express how unpalatable such an image is or try to exonerate God.²⁰

It appears, then, that God is also a somewhat deceptive character. While the characterization of God is not the focus of the Jacob narratives, it is still an important piece of the story when considering Jewish identity after the Babylonian Exile. God's presence in this story – or absence – serves to characterize Jacob as being wily and self-reliant, and God as at least tolerant of Jacob's ways.

The portion of the Jacob narrative that focuses on his time in Laban's household mirrors this prophetic declaration to settle down and live one's life in an exilic context. As a representation of the nations of Israel and Judah, Jacob's behavior during his exile in Laban's household serves as an exemplar to the people of Israel and Judah who endured exile and lived in the postexilic Hellenistic era. Instead of pining for the life that he had before his exile, Jacob makes a life for himself in the midst of his exile. During his time

²⁰ John E. Anderson, "Jacob, Laban, and a Divine Trickster? The Covenantal Framework of God's Deception in the Theology of the Jacob Cycle," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 6 (Spring 2009): 4.

in Laban's service, Jacob gets married, works for the benefit of Laban, and ultimately amasses great wealth. Jacob's exile ends through a bizarre scheme by Jacob to increase his wealth and anger Laban. At the end of his exile in Laban's household, Jacob resorts again to trickery and deceit in order to get what he wants. This reappearance of the trickster character, along with the possibility of God acting as a trickster in these stories, will be explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4

THE TRICKSTER: A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE

Jacob as a Representation of Israel and Judah

In his discussion of Palestinian refugees post-1948, Muhammad Siddiq writes of the experiences of Palestinian refugees as “the key for comprehending the Palestinian condition,” and that Palestinian literature offers valuable insight into refugee studies.¹ He goes on to write:

This may be another way of saying that the representation of refugee experience in literary narratives faithfully reinscribes through the metaphor of individual lives the collective historical experience of the Palestinian people. In this sense, Palestinian narratives can indeed be viewed as “national allegories.”²

Palestinian refugee experiences function in a similar manner to the Hebrew Bible with regards to Judean experiences of conquest and exile. The Hebrew Bible, as the story of the nations of Israel and Judah, is composed of the stories of individuals – matriarchs, patriarchs, kings, and prophets – who at various times become representative of the nation of Israel itself. Jacob is the most striking example of a “national allegory” for the people of Israel and Judah, due to his divinely instituted name-change from “Jacob” to “Israel” in Genesis 32. Given the circumstances that the peoples of Israel and Judah faced, it is very appropriate for them to adopt a wily trickster as their national

¹ Muhammad Siddiq, “On Ropes of Memory: Narrating the Palestinian Refugees,” in *Mistrusting Refugees*, ed. E. Valentine Daniel and John Chr. Knudsen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 88.

² Ibid.

avatar/metaphor/symbol.³ The most obvious way in which the Jacob narratives speak from a colonized perspective is their use of the trickster motif.

How does reading Jacob as a representation of Israel and Judah's national identity function during the Babylonian Exile and into the Hellenistic period? In order to address this question, one must examine the origins of the Jacob story. Did the Jacob tradition as recorded in Genesis exist before the Babylonian Exile? Was the composition of this story a reaction to the Babylonian Exile? Is this story a product of the Hellenistic period? These questions cannot be answered with much certainty. The Jacob narratives, however, as a part of the Hebrew Bible, most likely came into their present form during or after the Babylonian Exile, possibly during the Persian and Hellenistic eras.⁴ As a product of these eras, the Hebrew Bible exhibits colonized tendencies – It is a text that comes from a colonized perspective, and therefore speaks for the colonized and the oppressed. Through its representation of exiles and refugees, the Hebrew Bible is a great example of literature that speaks from a colonized perspective. Through its depiction of refugees and exiles, the Hebrew Bible offers a picture of how colonized people may represent themselves.

Imperialistic Violence: Physical and Ideological Components

³ The phrase “House of Jacob” appears sixteen times throughout the prophetic literature, and is used as a means of addressing the people of Israel and Judah. This underscores the notion that Judean and Israelite national identity were closely connected to the figure of Jacob.

⁴ Several scholars have discussed this theory, with different emphases and nuances. For more, see Jon Berquist, “Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 78-95; David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); James A. Sanders, “The Exile and Canon Formation,” in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. James M. Scott (New York: Brill, 1997), 37-61.

The violence of imperialism and colonialism is multi-faceted. In addition to the obvious physical violence that occurs whenever colonization and conquest take place, there are other kinds of violence that occur, with varying degrees of subtlety. With colonization comes the loss of access to resources by colonized peoples, trauma, and other forms of psychological violence. A tried-and-true method of violence employed by colonizers involves the dehumanization of colonized and oppressed peoples.

In the Ancient Near East, there are a multitude of depictions of colonized/oppressed peoples by their conquerors, as well as self-representations of empires. In *Orientalism*, Said discusses the relationships between colonial European empires and colonized peoples. He discusses how colonizing empires used unflattering depictions of colonized peoples to dehumanize them and justify their subjugation. When discussing nineteenth century depictions of colonized peoples, Said discusses ideas of “Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West.”⁵ These stereotypical depictions of colonized peoples are undergirded by the idea of “Orientalism.” Said writes:

For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them”). This vision in a sense created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. Orientals lived in their world, “we” lived in ours.⁶

Orientalism, for Said, is a construct that empires use to denigrate and dehumanize colonized peoples. This construct of Orientalism is what justifies exploitation and conquest. While it would be foolish to assume a one-to-one correspondence between the

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 206.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

colonization of Asia that Said explores and the situation in the Ancient Near East, his concept of Orientalism is helpful in analyzing how powerful empires related to subject peoples, and can allow one to speculate about the possible responses of colonized peoples to their oppressors.

One can see Said's concept of Orientalism at work when examining how the Assyrian Empire depicted conquered peoples. Marian Feldman, in her assessment of Assyrian representations of booty, describes the Assyrian penchant for creating representations of the people they conquered as a "part of an active strategy for maintaining a memory of conquest over the vanquished 'other,' and at the same time neutralizing the other so it could no longer threaten Assyria."⁷ Feldman goes on to discuss Assyrian artistic styles as a means of self-depiction "that actively demarcates between Assyrian and other."⁸ In Assyrian texts, the word for booty, *sallatu*, can refer to captured people as well as goods that conquerors forcibly remove from a captured city.⁹ This treatment of captured people serves to dehumanize them, justifying their conquest and subsequent exploitation. While the Assyrian dispersion of the kingdom of Israel is different from the Babylonian conquest of Judah, both of these forms of conquest and oppression are rooted in the same worldview that dehumanizes the colonized people and justifies their conquest.

⁷ Marian Feldman, "Assyrian Representations of Booty and Tribute as a Self-Portrayal of Empire," in *Interpreting Exile*, ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritzel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

The Oppressed Responds to the Oppressor

How, then, do colonized and oppressed peoples respond to the varying forms of violence that they experience at the hands of their colonizing oppressors? Some colonized peoples resort to violence against their colonizers, with varying degrees of success.¹⁰ A more subtle survival mechanism of colonized and oppressed peoples involves the formation of a strong cultural identity. The Hebrew Bible is a text that works to construct a strong ethnic and cultural identity. In order to differentiate themselves from the other groups of people that lived around them, the people of Israel and Judah imposed (or had imposed upon them) strict cultural laws, including circumcision,¹¹ dietary restrictions,¹² and edicts against intermarriage.¹³ The Hebrew Bible is the product of the construction of a strong cultural identity as well as the means by which that identity is reinforced. In the face of cultural genocide, the people of Judah and Israel constructed national identities for themselves through the rules, rituals, and stories of the Hebrew Bible.

While the modern day experiences of refugees are not perfect analogs to the experiences of the people of Judah before, during, and after the Babylonian Exile, they can provide helpful insights into how the exilic experience may have influenced the composition of the Hebrew Bible. In their examination of refugee experiences, Eftihia Voutira and Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, discuss the conditions of refugee camps, and specifically the experiences of refugees who came to rely on deception to survive. “As

¹⁰ A successful example would be the Maccabean Revolt against the Selucids.

¹¹ Gen 17.10.

¹² Lev 11.

¹³ Deut 7.1-4.

one refugee summed it up,” they write, ““To be a refugee means to learn to lie.””¹⁴ In order to survive, refugees have to resort to less than honest means. This may also hold true for the people of Judah who experienced the Babylonian Exile and its results. Having to resort to dishonest means for survival may help to explain the presence of the trickster motif in the story of Jacob.

In response to denigrating depictions of themselves by colonizers, the people of Israel and Judah begin to represent themselves in ways that counter the narratives of the oppressors. The Jacob narrative, as a product of an oppressed people, serves, in some ways, as a self-representation of those people. The Hebrew Bible as a whole, and the Jacob narrative in particular, can be seen as a counter-narrative to the denigrating narratives of the colonizing empires that surrounded Israel and Judah. While the people of Judah were no longer living in exile in Babylon, they were still living under the auspices of powerful empires, first the Persians, then the Greeks, and later the Romans.

Jacob – and Judah – as Trickster

The Jacob stories are an oft-cited example of the trickster archetype in biblical literature. Jacob’s scheming and cunning are exemplary of this literary form. In addition to Jacob, Rebekah, Laban, and even God can be seen to function as tricksters in the Jacob stories. The characterizations of Jacob and God in particular are of vital importance in understanding Jewish conceptions of divinity – and therefore Jewish identity – during and after the Babylonian Exile. To characterize Jacob and, to a lesser extent, God, as trickster

¹⁴ Eftihia Voutira and Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, “In Search of the Locus of Trust: The Social World of the Refugee Camp,” in *Mistrusting Refugees*, ed. E. Valentine Daniel and John Chr. Knudsen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 216.

characters is to advocate for Judeans who had to resort to less-than-scrupulous means in order to survive their time in exile.

Frederick Greenspahn describes Jacob as “lacking in heroic stature” due to his reliance on deceit.¹⁵ He goes on to say that Jacob is not alone in this lack of heroism, citing Isaac and Joseph as two other examples of less-than-heroic figures. For Greenspahn, however, a lack of heroism on the part of the trickster character does not mean that the trickster character is villainous or malicious. He writes:

The image of a trickster, which pervades so much of the way Jacob and his family are portrayed in the Bible, is often associated with groups that are politically weak. Like trickster tales worldwide, these stories preach resilience to a people whose fulfillment lies ever in the future. The centrality of Jacob thus reflects Israel’s own struggles, and his tactics those on which powerless cultures have always needed to rely.¹⁶

For Greenspahn, the trickster motif is a hallmark of vulnerable and oppressed cultures.¹⁷

The people of Judah experienced great political weakness, before, during, and after the Babylonian Exile and into the Persian and Hellenistic eras. The Hebrew Bible is a product of a politically vulnerable culture. In a manner similar to that of the prophet Jeremiah, the Priestly redactor’s highlighting of the trickster motif in the Jacob story teaches resilience to the people of Judah.

Jacob is a wily character. There are no fewer than three instances in the Jacob cycle in which he relies on his wits and uses underhanded means to get his way. It can be safely said that Jacob fits into the trickster archetype, a “very effective and nearly

¹⁵ Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 131.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

universal literary character...”¹⁸ According to Victor Matthews, there is a spectrum of trickster characters, in which one end of the spectrum portrays the trickster as a fool, and the other as a hero.¹⁹ Jacob is not the only trickster character in this story. Laban, Leah, Rebekah, and even God can all be characterized as trickster characters. In this chapter, I will examine the various instances of trickster imagery in the Jacob cycle, with a focus on the person of Jacob. I will examine other instances of trickery when they serve to characterize Jacob or present an obstacle for Jacob to overcome. I will then discuss some possible motivations for the use and perpetuation of the trickster archetype in the Jacob cycle.

The Birth and Early Lives of Jacob and Esau

From the very beginning of his life, the biblical text portrays Jacob as a person who uses underhanded means to attain his goals. The end of Genesis 25 recounts the birth of Jacob and Esau and Jacob’s acquisition of Esau’s birthright. Verses 24-26a read, “When [Rebekah’s] time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterwards his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob.” This story shows that, from the outset of the narrative, Jacob is a wily character. The early lives of Jacob and Esau are not given much detail. Jacob is characterized as a quiet man who lives in tents, while Esau is characterized as a “skillful hunter.”²⁰ The text notes,

¹⁸ Victor Matthews, “Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 12 (Fall 1985): 186.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Gen 25.27.

“Rebekah loved Jacob.” The text’s emphasis on Rebekah’s love for Jacob foreshadows the trickery that is to come in chap. 27.

The narrative of Jacob and Esau’s birth almost immediately segues into another incident of Jacob acting as a wily character. Verses 29-34 read:

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!” (Therefore he was called Edom). Jacob said, “First, sell me your birthright.” Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

This incident serves several functions. It illustrates the relationship between the people of Israel/Judah and the people of Edom. It also serves to further characterize Jacob as a trickster character. Esau’s declaration, “I am about to die,” can be read as either a statement on “the generally perilous life he led as a hunter” or as a simple exaggeration.²¹ In his treatment of this incident, Gerhard von Rad notes that Jacob may have deceived Esau through feeding him lentil stew. “Perhaps,” he writes, “Esau did not know the red pottage, i.e., he considered it a ‘blood soup’ and is greatly deceived when he finds it to be only a dish of lentils.”²² In addition to connecting the people of Israel/Judah to the people of Edom through Esau, it also characterizes Esau as a somewhat impulsive character, noting that he “despised” his birthright. The text characterizes Esau as an impulsive character in contrast to Jacob’s deliberate, scheming nature.

²¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 182.

²² Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 266.

Jacob and Rebekah Deceive Isaac

The defining incident of the Jacob cycle, which sets the events of the rest of the narrative in motion, comes in chapter 27. Jacob is not the only trickster in this part of the story, because his mother is an active participant in the scheme. “When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim,”²³ he asks Esau to prepare him a meal of game, so that Isaac may bestow his blessing upon Esau before Isaac’s death. With Esau out in the field, Rebekah decides to act. Taking advantage of Esau’s absence, Rebekah says to Jacob:

Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes; and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.²⁴

Jacob notices a glaring flaw in his mother’s plan: Esau is a hairy man, and Jacob is “a man of smooth skin.”²⁵ Rebekah tells Jacob to not worry about this, and do as she tells him. Jacob does as he is told, and Rebekah dresses him in Esau’s finest garments and covers him in the skins of the kids he has killed. It seems that, in this part of the story, Rebekah is the driving force in the deception of Isaac. Jacob is portrayed in more of a passive manner. The text does not say that Jacob came up with this plan to acquire Isaac’s blessing for Esau. The text has already characterized Jacob as an opportunist through his acquisition of Esau’s birthright. This part of the story further emphasizes Jacob’s opportunistic nature, while also painting Jacob as a deceitful trickster.

²³ Gen 27.1.

²⁴ Gen 27.8-10.

²⁵ Gen 27.11.

During the meeting between Jacob and Isaac, Isaac is skeptical of who he is speaking to. When Jacob goes to see Isaac, Isaac remarks on how quickly he was able to acquire the game and prepare it into a savory meal. After Jacob responds that God's favor allowed him to finish the task so quickly, Isaac replies, "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not."²⁶ Isaac even remarks, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau."²⁷ Still skeptical, Isaac asks if he is indeed speaking to Esau, to which Jacob answers in the affirmative. Jacob has had three opportunities in this instance to be truthful to his father, but he has chosen to remain complicit with his mother's scheme. At this moment, Jacob ceases to be a purely opportunistic character, but instead become a deceitful trickster. Seemingly convinced, Isaac blesses Jacob with the blessing meant for Esau, and the events leading to Jacob's flight from home are set in motion.

Laban as Trickster: The Symmetry of Deception

The next incident of trickery in the Jacob cycle comes in chapter 29. After Jacob has resided in Laban's household for seven years, the time comes for Jacob to marry Laban's daughter Rachel. Laban, however, decides to trick Jacob, substituting Rachel for his older daughter Leah. In this instance, Laban essentially repays Jacob for the deception(s) that he participated in while he was at home in Beer-sheba. Sarna writes, "Jacob's masquerading as his brother meets its appropriate counterstroke in the substitution of Leah for her sister."²⁸ Many prophetic texts lay the blame for Israel and

²⁶ Gen. 27.21.

²⁷ Gen 27.22.

²⁸ Sarna, *Genesis*, 205.

Judah's exiles on Israel and Judah themselves.²⁹ Just as the people of Judah found the seeds for their situation in Babylon in the perceived sins of their ancestors, Laban repays Jacob for what he did before leaving Beer-Sheba. Von Rad describes Laban's trickery as "shameless treachery," and he goes on to say that, regarding Laban's insistence that the younger is not given before the older in Haran, "No one understood it better than Jacob, for he himself as the younger son had crossed the finishing line before his older brother."³⁰ Laban deceived Jacob in a similar manner to Jacob's deception of Isaac earlier in the story. The deception that Jacob has suffered here involves a distinction between older and younger siblings, just as his deception of Isaac did. Interestingly enough, this is the only incident in this collection of stories in which Jacob, the trickster, is tricked.

Jacob's Revenge

In Genesis 30, Jacob again uses trickery to get what he wants. This time, however, Laban is the victim of his trickery. In a story that can, at the very least, be described as odd, Jacob is able to procure a sizeable flock due to a bargain he makes with Laban. While Laban thinks that he will come out on top in this deal, Jacob employs a primitive method of genetic engineering to produce an abundance speckled, striped, and spotted sheep. As a result of this deception, Jacob becomes exceedingly wealthy, much to the chagrin of Laban. At the beginning of Genesis 31, Jacob gathers his wives and children together so that they may flee from Laban's household.

Yet another incident of deception can be found in Genesis 31, when Jacob and his family flee from Laban's wrath. Verse 19 briefly mentions that, in the midst of their

²⁹ Ezek 12.3, for one example.

³⁰ von Rad, *Genesis*, 291.

flight, Rachel stole her father's household gods. Jacob and his family have fled from Haran because, in Jacob's words, "I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force."³¹ Jacob even Laban that if Laban finds anybody in the possession of the gods, they "shall not live."³² After Jacob's speech to Laban, the text is quick to point out that Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen Laban's household gods.³³ Sarna speculates that she did this so that Laban could not use them to use divination to learn of Jacob's escape.³⁴ The fact that Rachel has stolen Laban's gods without Jacob finding out is a striking detail in this story. Is Rachel a born trickster, like her father? Has she become a trickster because of Jacob's influence? Whatever the case may be, Rachel acts as a trickster in this incident in order to ensure her family's escape from her father.

"You Shall No Longer Be Called Jacob, but Israel"

Israel's national identity is inextricably linked to the character of Jacob. After making peace with Laban, Jacob and his family travel towards the land of Jacob's birth. Jacob knows that he will have to confront his older brother there. He makes preparations to keep his family safe in the event of a violent confrontation with Esau. The night before meeting Esau, Jacob has an encounter with a divine being. The text is vague in its description of this character. The text simply says, "Jacob was left alone; and a man

³¹ Gen 31.31.

³² Gen 31.32.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Sarna, *Genesis*, 216.

wrestled with him until daybreak.”³⁵ Jacob proves to be too strong for this mysterious figure, and they wrestle through the night. When the mysterious figure realizes that he will not overpower Jacob, he asks Jacob to release him – and Jacob refuses, saying, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”³⁶ Seeing no other way out of this situation, the man blesses Jacob, saying, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”³⁷ Because of this experience, Jacob names the place Peniel, because he has survived an encounter with God.³⁸ The sun rises, and Jacob departs to meet his brother – and his destiny.

³⁵ Gen 32.24.

³⁶ Gen 32.26.

³⁷ Gen 32.28.

³⁸ Gen 32.30.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Exile, Deception, and Judean National Identity in the Jacob Cycle

Jacob's story does not end with his experience at Penuel, but it is at this moment that he becomes the national representation of the nations of Israel and Judah. Through his struggles against human beings and his wrestling with God, Jacob becomes God's chosen people. Through their struggles against other nations and their tumultuous relationship with God, the people of Israel and Judah become Jacob – the trickster, the younger son, and the exile. In spite of Jacob's flaws – and in spite of Israel's flaws – God has chosen them and stood beside them. Greenspahn writes:

By populating so much of biblical narrative with figures who are seemingly undeserving of the positions they have been given, these tales collectively suggest the irrelevance of human merit and God's independence of the values one would expect to find at the heart of biblical literature. God works with these figures because He can and He must. He created them, and He chose them. As things turn out, neither God nor Israel is as perfect as they should be. Perhaps that is why they make such good partners.¹

To choose Jacob as a representative of Judean and Israelite national identity was no accident. The framers of the Jacob narratives wanted their community to understand who they are, where they've come from, and where they can expect to go. In spite of the trauma that the people of Judah experienced during the exile, they still felt that their God

¹ Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 160.

had not abandoned them. The character of Jacob, as a representation of Israel/Judah's national identity, represents what it means to be an Israelite or Judean living in exile.

Postexilic and Postcolonial Conceptions of Identity

The Babylonian Exile permanently altered Jewish identity. Prior to the Babylonian conquest, the people of Israel and Judah thought of themselves – and their God – as inextricably connected to the land that was promised to Abraham and his descendants. The land was inherent to who they were as a nation. The Babylonian conquest of the people of Judah and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem necessitated a radical reconception of Judean identity if Judean culture was going to survive the ordeal. Carr notes that groups that experience trauma find new identities in who they were before the traumatic event.² Refugees, exiles, and other people who experience a forced migration lack stability in their identities because of the precarious nature of their new situations, which results in a focus on the way things used to be.³ The people of Judah, during and after the exile, ultimately found a new sense of identity through the preservation of their culture and their ancestors' culture.

In order to survive the traumas of the Babylonian Exile, the people of Judah and their descendants constructed stories that were intended to create a sense of identity.⁴ Following the Babylonian Exile, the majority of Jewish people lived in Diaspora.⁵ If

² David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 229.

³ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁴ James A. Sanders, "The Exile and Canon Formation," in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. James M. Scott (New York: Brill, 1997), 37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

Jewish culture was going to continue to survive, a strong cultural identity would be necessary. That is the purpose of the Hebrew Bible – including the Jacob narratives: to remind the people of Judah and Israel who they were and what they are called to do.⁶ But what do the Jacob narratives teach those living in exile?

At the beginning of Jacob's exile, he encounters God. God reassures Jacob, telling him that God will be with Jacob wherever he goes. This tells the people of Israel and Judah who were scattered to the winds that God is not tied to the lands of their ancestors. For the people of Israel and Judah who would live in exile and Diaspora, the message of a God who goes with them in their travels is a vital one. The identity-creating story of Jacob is also a story that gives life and hope to the people of Israel and Judah.

In addition to teaching that God will be with the people in exile, the Jacob narratives also teach the people living in exile that they can make lives for themselves in foreign lands. Jacob's life in exile, where he works, marries, and has children, is illustrative of the prophetic command to create a life in exile. Jacob's stories teach the people of Israel and Judah living in exile that a good life can be had outside of the land promised to Abraham.

The Jacob narratives also teach the people of Israel and Judah that the lands of their ancestors will be restored. In his dream at Bethel, God tells Jacob that he will one day return to the land of his birth. At the end of his time in Laban's household, Jacob does indeed return to the land of his birth. For the people of Judah living in Babylon during the exile or those living in Diaspora during the Hellenistic era, this story teaches

⁶ Ibid., 41.

that their desire to return to the land of their birth can one day be fulfilled, and that they should return to their land if they get the opportunity.

After the Babylonian Exile, the locus of Jewish identity shifted from the land of promise to one's own identity and heritage as a Jewish person. This means accepting all of the pieces of one's past, both the good and the bad. This means accepting Abraham's faithfulness to God and Jacob's trickery. It means acknowledging the special nature of the land God promised to Abraham while accepting that God is not confined to that land. It means trying to live the best life that one can, regardless of their present situation.

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