Transformation and Demarcation of Jacob's "Flocks" in Genesis 30:25-43: Identity, Election, and the Role of the Divine

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THE RATHER STRANGE STORY of Jacob and the speckled flocks in Gen 30:25-43, a tale usually dismissed as simply reflecting "primitive" notions of maternal impression, communicates a message that, at heart, concerns the very nature of Israelite identity. In this essay I examine the ways in which the formal elements of the story, most notably the numerous wordplays and puns, generate semantic correspondences and oppositions. These ultimately convey and then attempt to diffuse the tensions involved in the definition of Israel. I will try to show that this ostensibly simple story about Jacob's magical transformation of his flock, when closely examined, involves deeper issues about election and the role of the divine in Israel's formation and identity.

I. Brief Overview of Previous Scholarship

Commentators have put forth various explanations concerning the nature of Jacob's trick. Gerhard von Rad thinks that these verses reflect an "ancient and widespread belief in the magical effect of certain impressions which in the case of human and animal mothers were transferred to their offspring and can decisively

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influence them."[1] Hermann Gunkel also believes that this tale mirrors an actual method of animal husbandry and states that such breeding techniques were known in antiquity.[2] Commentators such as Nahum Sarna and Victor P. Hamilton, noting the phenotypes and genotypes of the animals, give scientific reasons for the success of this magical trick.[3] Indeed, Claus Westermann sees in Jacob's ruse a transition from a magical to a scientific way of thinking.[4] As is evident, most commentators, when approaching this text, attempt to uncover the actual animal husbandry technique that they believe is reflected in Gen 30:25-43; the significance of animal breeding in small farming communities such as Israel would have accounted for the telling and transmission of this story.

While all the above explanations seem reasonable, I believe that such commentators have wrongly emphasized the "scientific" and historical nature of Jacob's ruse. Regardless of whether this story refers to some actual belief or technique, the key to the story's decipherment does not lie simply in understanding *how* Jacob's ruse was successful or *how* it was that monochrome animals actually bore speckled and colored ones. Rather, one needs to shift attention away from questions concerning the historicity reflected in the tale and toward deciphering why the narrative is told the way that it is. As Michael Fishbane explains, "Such a view considers a tale or narrative less from a linear perspective, whereby the separate parts are isolated and their development 'explained,' and more from the integrative consideration of a narrative as a seamless web of interanimating components."[5]

II. Wordplays and the Nature of Jacob's Trick

Although scholars such as E. A. Speiser, von Rad, Sarna, Gunkel, and Wellhausen have briefly noted the puns on the word *lābān* ("white") with the name Laban, none has expounded on the pervasiveness of other wordplays in this story or drawn out the significance of the use of these linguistic devices.[6] Hamilton gives

[1] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. John H. Marks; rev. ed.; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 302.

[2] Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (1901; trans. Mark E. Biddle; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997) 329.

[3] Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 284; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis:* בראשית. *The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 212.

[4] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 483.

[5] Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979) 58.

[6] Gunkel, *Genesis,* 329; Sarna, *Genesis,* 212; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 239; von Rad, *Genesis,*

one of the more extended commentaries on the wordplays, noting the prominence of the word "white" in Genesis 30: Jacob peels "white stripes" to expose the white of the shoots of the poplar (לבנה) in v. 37, and Laban, "the white one," removes from Jacob those animals that are not totally *lābān* (v. 35).[7] Despite noting the frequency, Hamilton fails to delineate the implications of this repetition.

Von Rad correctly observes in his commentary that such a tale of trickery seems "like a burlesque farce and could be . . . considered by itself, as a humorous story."[8] The wordplays, then, are puns used to add comedy to the narrative. Similarly, Marc Zvi Brettler has explained the presence of puns and wordplays in the story of Ehud (Judg 3:15-30) as evidence that the tale is a political satire.[9] Humor, of course, is very difficult to decipher, especially in cross-cultural writings. Therefore, while I am not completely convinced that Gen 30:25-43 is a farce *sensu stricto,* Brettler and von Rad do correctly point to the connection between the form of writing, the linguistic devices that are used, and the meaning of the story. How a tale is written can often help to elucidate or draw out the meaning of the text.

With these ideas in mind, it is important to remember that the wordplays in Gen 30:25-43 are not haphazard or without significance. Indeed, they shed considerable light on the nature of Jacob's trickery. Setting aside the debates concerning the details of Laban and Jacob's pact, and how it is that Laban changes this deal "ten times" (31:7), the agreement between the two men, at least in 30:32-43, seems simple. Jacob will remove from Laban's flock all the dark-colored (חום) sheep and all the spotted, speckled, and streaked (טלוא, נקד, עקד) goats as his wage. The deal fits the names of the characters: Jacob (יעקב) will receive all the goats that are נקד and עקד. Gunkel, noting the Arabic word *ʿuqâb* (striped and speckled clothing), states that an earlier version of this tale probably contained a more evident wordplay on the name Jacob.[10] Laban (לבן), on the other hand, seemingly will keep all the animals that are לבן—all the goats that are not spotted (נקד) or streaked (עקד) with white (לבן) spots, and all the sheep that are not dark (or not *lābān*). In other words, those that are purely *lābān* are Laban's; those that are not are Jacob's. The sheep and the goats, therefore, belong to the man whose name phonetically and semantically matches the animal's appearance. In this story, then, appearance, sound, and meaning are interrelated.

One can now understand Laban's ready acceptance of this agreement with Jacob. As Gunkel and others have noted, since Laban is greedy, he would willingly

302; Westermann, *Genesis,* 483. Fishbane, however, has eloquently located the pervasiveness of other key words and double entendres such as the term ברך in the Jacob cycle.

[7] Hamilton, *Book of Genesis,* 283.

[8] Von Rad, *Genesis,* 301.

[9] Marc Zvi Brettler, "Never the Twain Shall Meet? The Ehud Story as History and Literature," *HUCA* 62 (1991) 285-304.

[10] Gunkel, *Genesis,* 329.

assent to these terms because few animals would be speckled in the first place, and "monochrome animals surely would not produce multicolored young."[11] Apart from Laban's inner motivations, however, the division of the flocks appears to be textually understandable as well. The flock will go to the owner with whom it visually, semantically, and phonetically corresponds; like will match up with like.[12]

It is this simplicity that lends drama to Jacob's trick, for, as we all know, with a trickster what you see is *not* what you get. Although it is unclear why Laban removes the speckled and dark-colored flocks into the hands of his sons (it could be that Laban is suspicious of Jacob and therefore desires to sequester the animals, or perhaps Laban is trying to prevent the flock from mating with his monochrome animals by removing them), the removal of these animals sets the stage for Jacob's magical ruse. Jacob takes fresh stakes of white poplar (לבנה), almond, and plane trees, and peels *white* peelings (פצלות לבנות) off them to expose the *white* of the shoots. He then sticks the stakes into the drinking vessels of Laban's flocks because he believes that when the flocks come to drink, they will also mate. The goats will look at the spotted shoots of the trees while they drink and mate, and, hence, will produce spotted offspring (30:37-39). As for the sheep, Jacob simply has them face the streaked or dark-colored animals (v. 39). Reflected is the belief that the animals will reproduce according to what they see.

Now the amazing results of this ruse follow. The flocks that mate are Laban's, in terms of both ownership and appearance; the flocks produced, however, are Jacob's, again in terms of both ownership and appearance. Another wordplay that highlights this ruse concerns the term חום, which sounds similar to the verb יחם (vv. 38 and 39). Likewise, the semantic and phonetic connections among חום ("dark-colored," "sun-burned"), חמם ("to become warm or hot") and יחם ("to be in heat, conceive") are quite evident. When Laban's white flocks come to drink, they are not only conceiving (יחם) but, semantically and phonetically speaking,

[11] Ibid. Sarna writes, "In the Near East, sheep are generally white and goats are dark brown or black. A minority of sheep may have dark patches, and goats white markings. It is these uncommon types to be born in the future that Jacob demands as wages for his unpaid service. Laban readily agrees, believing that he is getting a bargain on account of their rarity" (*Genesis,* 212).

[12] As noted above, my emphasis is on a literary analysis of the tale, not on the story's historicity or scientific logicality. If one applies too literal a reading to this pericope, some ambiguities do emerge. One can argue, for example, since it is never explicitly stated that all the animals Laban receives are "white," that Laban might have gotten dark goats or spotted sheep. But this is an overly literal reading of the story. Rather, as I have argued, what is important are the multiple instances of punning on "white," "dark," "spotted," and "streaked" in a tale that centrally concerns an interfamily battle between someone named Laban, or "the white one," with someone named Jacob, a name that sounds similar to the words for "streaked" or "speckled" in Hebrew. It is evident that "Laban," or "white," is placed in contradistinction to "Jacob," or "streaked," "speckled," or "dark (not-white)." As I will argue later in this article, the key to the narrative centers on this very contradistinction of the characters as exemplified in the contradistinction of the colors of the flocks.

are blackened or "made" not white (חום). In other words, a deliberate correspondence is set up between יחם and חום by the choice of this verb. Jacob uses Laban's *lābān* flocks and the *lābān* shavings of the twigs to produce a flock that is not *lābān* and not Laban's, but *nāqōd* and Jacob's. The flock is transformed from white (לבן) to black (חום), from white (לבן) to speckled (נקד and עקד), and from Laban's (לבן) to Jacob's (יעקב). The message conveyed with these puns is that Jacob is not stealing Laban's flocks but that Laban's flocks are being *transformed* into Jacob's.

III. Correspondences, Relationship, and National Identity

The significance of these formal elements becomes evident when we further examine the relationship between the form and the content. As I have stated above, regarding both the form (wordplays) and the plot of Genesis 30, Jacob is neither stealing Laban's flocks nor taking what is rightfully his (Jacob's), but is using what is Laban's to produce what is his (Jacob's). This transformation—the use of one thing to make another—reflects the uncertainty that exists between that which belongs to Jacob and that which belongs to Laban. These wordplays, with their shifting meanings, correspondences, and transformations, convey the ambiguous relationship between Laban and Jacob. This is especially true in this particular case because Jacob is Laban's nephew, son-in-law, and employee. In this complex web of relationships, not only is the identity of the flocks in flux, so to speak, but it is unclear whether Jacob's wives and children really belong to him or to Laban.[13]

Robert A. Oden writes about the tension implicit in the avuncular relationship. Indeed, anthropologists such as Robin Fox have noted the importance and particularity of both the avuncular relationship and cross-cousin marriages in a variety of cultures.[14] Oden states that cross-cousin marriage is the "logical alliance if one wished to avoid the extremes of too much endogamy on the one hand and too much exogamy on the other hand." Hence, the avuncular relationship is the "comprehensive 'atom' of kinship" because it contains a "relationship of consanguinity, affinity and descent." Thus, it is only when Jacob marries his mother's brother's daughters that "a complete kinship system is described, and thus Israel properly speaking is born."[15]

The comprehensive and vital nature of the avuncular relationship, however, makes it especially problematic with reference to Israel. The theological notion of

[13] Genesis 31:43 seems to imply that Laban thinks that Jacob's children and wives are his and not Jacob's.

[14] Robert A. Oden, "Jacob as Father, Husband, and Nephew: Kinship Studies and the Patriarchal Narratives," *JBL* 102 (1984) 189-205; Robin Fox, *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 50; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

[15] Oden, "Jacob as Father," 199, 202.

Israel walks a fine line between endogamy and exogamy, universality and particularity. Israel is a kinship group that is descended from and related to other groups of people, yet at the same time it is a group separated by God whose very existence depends on its contradistinction from other peoples. It is both like other nations and also separated and unique. It is both part of humanity and also marked off from humanity as distinct or elected. Therefore, on the one hand, the avuncular relationship is necessary to complete the kinship system and, consequently, is indispensable to Israel's becoming Israel. On the other hand, because of the complicated nature of such a bond and because of the numerous ties involved in such a relationship, the lines between uncle and nephew and their respective families cannot be cleanly distinguished. In this manner, the relationship and ties between Laban and Jacob, especially if we view these figures as eponymous ancestors, endanger the realization, the coming-into-being, of Israel itself. The question is: Are they different peoples, families, and groups (the Israelites and the Arameans), or are they the same, since they are related by blood and by marriage?

Therefore, the issue of the demarcation of the animal flocks in Gen 30:25-43 undergirds the problem of the ambiguous nature of Jacob and Laban's familial "flocks." While the terms "speckled" and "dark" are set up as opposites of the word "white," the "creation" of one from the other connotes the existence of certain relationships between the two objects. Just as Jacob uses Laban's flocks to produce his own flock, it can be seen that Jacob "uses" his wives, Laban's children, to produce his (Jacob's) own family; note that the animals that belong to Jacob have white streaks and spots—in other words, they contain little bits of Laban. This raises the question, To whom do Jacob's wives and family really belong? As Susan Niditch asks, "Are the women his wives or still Laban's children?"[16] As I have stated above, a division between Jacob and Laban's "flocks" is absolutely necessary for the existence and identity of the Israelite people.

This underlying question of kinship and identity thus elucidates the reason for the particular placement (and inclusion) of Gen 30:25-43 within the larger Jacob narrative. Immediately preceding the story of the flocks is a narrative that also concerns the "birth" of Israel: the story about the birthing contest between Leah and Rachel, the sister-wives of Jacob, and the births of Jacob's sons, who will later constitute the tribes of Israel (30:1-25). Just as the birth of Isaac endangered Ishmael's status, so the births of Jacob's sons make crucial a clarification of their status. In both cases the births raise a question concerning identity: Who and what will constitute the nation of Israel? To answer this question, an elucidation of the position of Jacob's family in relation to Laban's family—a demarcation within the family group—is necessary. It is at this point, when such identity issues

[16] Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (New Voices in Biblical Studies; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 109.

are raised by the births of Jacob's sons, that one encounters the tale of Jacob and the speckled flock. The separation of the flock in 30:25-42, therefore, serves as an important symbol for the separation and demarcation of Jacob (Israel) as a separate entity from Laban (Aram)—a demarcation that, we will see, must happen in order for Jacob to get on his way to the land promised to his forebears and thus truly to become the nation of Israel.

Now we can understand why this story of Jacob and the speckled flocks begins with Jacob's request to leave so that he can go back to his own land. The births of his sons necessitate that Jacob's period of exile come to an end as soon as possible. Fishbane writes as follows: "As soon as Rachel gives birth, Jacob plans his return home. The continuity of the line of Abraham and Isaac is therewith assured through Jacob's favorite wife; and a reversal in spatial and interpersonal action now follows."[17] Genesis 30:25-43 follows Fishbane's rubric of the three primary issues in the Jacob cycle—birth, blessing, and land. It is only after the births of Jacob's sons that Jacob is blessed via his trick. These actions all set the stage for Jacob's desperate return to his patrimonial land.[18]

IV. Divine Demarcation and Election

In Gen 31:6-9 Jacob informs the reader that it was God who actually "altered" these flocks; Jacob states that God was the one who took what was Laban's and changed it into what was Jacob's. Speaking to his wives, Jacob even declares, "God has taken away your father's livestock and given it to me" (v. 9).[19] This acknowledgment draws attention to earlier contrasting statements of relational blessedness. Previously, Laban stated, rather surprisingly, that he has learned through divination that it is on account of Jacob that he has been blessed by God (30:27). Von Rad writes that "this is one of the strangest confessions of Yahweh and his blessing in the Old Testament."[20] This idea is seconded and repeated by Jacob in 30:30: "For the little you [Laban] had before I [Jacob] came has grown to much, since the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned." The idea that a person is blessed because of a connection to one of the ancestors is not a new theme. What is important, however, is that this concept is asserted twice in this story through these beginning statements. Both Jacob and Laban state that they understand that Laban is being blessed because he, in some way, is connected to Jacob. In other words, at the beginning of this story, both characters note that God is blessing both of them together or one via the other and that therefore, in divine eyes, at least initially, Jacob and

[17] Fishbane, *Text and Texture,* 58.
[18] Ibid., 60.
[19] All quotations from the Bible are from the *NJPSV* translation.
[20] Von Rad, *Genesis,* 300.

Laban are correlated somehow. In other words, even in the eyes of God an ambiguous line exists between Jacob and Laban, and their respective families.

I have already observed how this story phonetically and contextually concerns the transformation of Laban's flock into Jacob's and how this transformation centers not only on animal property but also on human "property." What is so powerful is the role of God in this transformation. Although in the beginning of the story God blessed Jacob and Laban together, Gen 30:25-43 is about God making a distinction between Laban and Jacob, blessing Jacob over against and at the expense of Laban. It appears that God plays a crucial role here. At the point when the identity of Israel is threatened with murkiness and ambiguity, God steps in to draw the lines firmly around the chosen group. God does so by "contrasting" and distinguishing Jacob and his family from another group: Laban or white (לבן) is contrasted and distinguished from that which is Jacob, נקד, עקד, or dark (חום). Not only will God make such a distinction; the proof that this is already being done is shown by the fact that Jacob is now being blessed to the detriment of Laban. Even Laban's sons recognize this shift: "Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from that which was our father's he has built up all this wealth" (Gen 31:1). As Jacob used the לבנה and the white peelings to turn what is Laban's into his, the reader is told initially in chap. 30 and more conclusively in 31:10-12 that it was really God who made those things that were לבן and Laban's into those that are נקד, עקד, and Jacob's. The demarcation of Jacob's family is shown in God's demarcation and transformation of the flocks in Gen 30:25-43.

V. The Role of the Unseen God

God's invisible yet significant role in this tale might reflect another theme—the theme of vision or sight—that seems to echo throughout the ancestral narratives. Niditch has rightly noted the parallels among the trickery tales of the speckled flock, the wife switching (Genesis 29), and the stealing of the birthright (Genesis 27): "The pattern of trickery/trickster-duped/reverse-trickery and plays on older-younger rivalry are ways in which the author ties together the Jacob narrative into a beautifully balanced whole."[21] The theme of *seeing* ties the whole trickery and reverse-trickery business together. In chap. 29 the trick played on Jacob is that he thought he was working seven years for Rachel, the girl whom Jacob saw (ראה [v. 10]) as beautiful, and not Leah, whose *eyes* were weak (רכות [v. 17]). On the night of the wedding, Jacob was probably too drunk or too blinded by darkness to *see* the person with whom he was cohabiting until the following morning. Similarly, in chap. 27, Isaac, who cannot *see,* is duped into blessing Jacob, the younger son, over Esau. The triumphant son is not the one who *appears* as the natural inheritor and superior.

[21] Niditch, *Underdogs,* 107.

I tentatively suggest that the motif of "trickery-involving-sight" is subtly at play in the flock tale as well. As I argued earlier, the initial agreement between Laban and Jacob consisted of simple semantic, phonetic, and visual correspondences. The animal's appearance, its visible color, testified to its ownership. Hence, what one saw is what one got. This idea of seeing is reflected also in the nature of Jacob's trick—what the animals were looking at while drinking and mating was reflected onto the visage of their offspring. Again, what one saw was what one got/begot. This simple correspondence, however, is turned upside down by the fact that the vision of the animals is used to transform, to reverse, these initial natural correspondences of Laban and לבן ("white"), and Jacob and עקד/נקד ("streaked and striped"). Unfortunately for Laban, what one saw was not what one got. Seeing, therefore, is *not* believing, and in the context of the Jacob cycle, where like is suppose to match up with like, Jacob's transformation of the flock shows that correspondences and expectations are not direct but complicated and capable of metamorphosis—there is always more at work than what is directly seen.[22] The repetition and use of homonyms highlight this theme; the phonetic, semantic, and visual correspondences are only superficially unequivocal.

It is through this second theme of vision or sight that we can truly understand the role of the divine in this tale. God, who is *unseen,* is said to have *seen* the unfair treatment of Jacob by Laban and is said to be the true actor behind the ruse (31:10-13).[23] As is evident in Exod 3:7, this is a deity who sees the oppression of the divinely chosen one. The actor whom the reader *sees* on the scene is not God, however, but Jacob. The message to the reader is, again, what one sees is not what is really happening; there is more at work than meets the eye.

The question then is, Who is the entity truly responsible for this trick? Is it the unseen God or the seen human being? The trick was that the flocks would produce according to what they *saw;* however, behind this trick was an unseen magic that somehow transformed the prenatal flock according to the visage of the parents. Therefore, on the one hand, Jacob is the one who goes through the necessary procedures and, thus, is the author of this ruse; on the other hand, in chap. 31, Jacob states that it is God who is ultimately responsible for Jacob's increasing wealth.

[22] Although the idea of *seeing* appears to be a theme of the entire ancestral narrative, as people of limited vision interact with an all-seeing God (Genesis 16; 21:18; 22:13), it must be conceded that the word "to see" does not occur in the flock story. Hence, as I have tried to argue, this theme is present only subtly in this narrative. Likewise, though words for sight are not explicitly used in the flock story, the theme of vision is an important leitmotif of the entire Jacob cycle, of which the flock tale is a part.

[23] Jacob, being a trickster, could of course be lying about the fact that, in his dream, God claimed responsibility for the increase in Jacob's wealth and transformation of the flock. Indeed, it is difficult to know how much to believe Jacob's statements, since he is such a dubious trickster. What is important, however, is not the ethical characterization of the characters but the effect of this claim, whether dubious or not, on the reading of this tale.

The question again is, Who or what is really responsible for the success of the trick? The answer seems to be ambivalent. Although *seeing* is contrasted to *not-seeing* (the unseen God who sees all using unseen magic versus the seen character Jacob using a trick involving sight), the two categories are interrelated, for the seen has to work with the unseen to make the ruse successful.

Here again the notion of contradistinction/interrelatedness reflected in the theme of seeing/not seeing is tied to questions of national identity: What is the role of humans and what is the role of God in Israel's election? Who, in other words, is truly responsible for the demarcation of the animal and the human "flocks" and, hence, the identity of Israel? Fishbane correctly notes these tensions when he writes about the "ambilateral givenness and hiddenness of divine grace":

> The final irony, not lost on the narrator, albeit handled with circumspect silence, is that all the interpersonal machinations of the protagonists and antagonists are but the actualization of a predetermined fate, of a forecasted divine determination . . . those whom God has chosen succeed. But in the thickness of historical time, and because of limited divine interventions, realization of the divine promises appears to rest with human action.[24]

What one sees are human actions as work: Jacob, the trickster, is the one who works to get the birthright and blessing and follows the necessary procedures to turn Laban's flock into his. Hence, initially it appears that Jacob is the primary actor who takes for himself the blessings promised to his forebears. What is truly at work, however, is something unseen, for in the moments when the ancestors and their progeny are threatened, the unseen God who has ordained the victory of the chosen ones steps in and intervenes to ensure their success (chaps. 12; 20; 26; 31). God is the power, the force, behind Jacob's trick (chap. 31). While Jacob works via his limited vision for his own good, behind him at work is an all-seeing God who has already predetermined Jacob's success.[25]

Fishbane is correct to point out that what is in contention is the idea of predetermination and volition. Somehow in the formation and identity of Israel, both of these elements are present and needed. The existence of Israel is both chosen by God and thus assured of success and yet also dependent on the visible actions and choices of human beings. Both humanity and God played and continue to play a part in the formation and identity of Israel. It was Jacob who duped Laban, and Jacob who finally fled after he became wealthy in Genesis 31. It was God, however, who made Jacob's trick successful and God who appeared in a dream to Laban after Jacob fled to command Laban to leave Jacob alone. Hence, the visible and the invisible, the limited and the all-knowing, and the human and the divine

[24] Fishbane, *Text and Texture,* 62.

[25] For a recent work on election, especially as it relates to the Jacob cycle, see Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

are contrasted. Yet they are also coworkers in ensuring a fate that is both predetermined and also volitionally made.

VI. Conclusion

The theme that what you see is *not* what you get subtly undergirds the manner in which the narrative espouses both predetermination and volition, as well as the way in which God chooses. Even God is a type of trickster who favors the underdogs.[26] In other words, God does not pick the readily apparent, the character who *appears* to be the likely hero. As is evident in the choice of Jacob, Saul, and David, the characters who are unseen and unlikely are the ones chosen by God. Reflected in God's choices, again, is that what you see is *not* what you will get. The older, stronger, and more apparent hero is not the one who will be selected by God and, ultimately, is not the victor. In other words, the Israelite God is not one who abides by natural or easy correspondences. God chooses the unlikely heroes precisely because their weaknesses so emphatically contrast and emphasize the strength of the deity. Hence, only with such unlikely heroes is it possible for both humanity and God to work together without lessening God's power.[27] It is no surprise, then, that underdogs are often tricksters, for tricksters change and fulfill their destinies not through strength but through subversion. Only with tricksters can both God and humanity be given a role in such grand theological narratives as those found in the Bible without the sacrifice of either volition or predestination.

Therefore, there is always more at work than what can be directly seen. The repetition and use of wordplays in Gen 30:25-43 highlight the fact that the phonetic, semantic, and visual correspondences are related in complex ways when one looks deeper into this simple tale of Jacob and the speckled flock. What one sees, phonetically speaking, is not what one gets, semantically speaking. In this story, then, form and content work together to elucidate and to resolve, at least temporarily, the deeper tensions implicit in Israel's national identity. After all, at the end of this story Jacob and his clan are on their way back to the land promised to Abraham, their forefather, to continue on in their transformation into Israel, the people chosen by God.

[26] For a detailed explanation of this theme, see Niditch, *Underdogs*.

[27] I address only superficially here the topic of underdogs. Reflected in this motif are important concepts of worldview and self-perception that require further research.