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“Drinking Feasts and Deceptive Feats: Jacob and Laban's Double Talk.”

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*Puns and Pundits: Wordplay in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature*  
“visual word play,” perhaps the subtlest type of word play that authors/scribes employ, from an ancient Egyptian text.  

This and many additional examples of word play and alliteration in Shipwrecked Sailor are presented in G. A. Rendsburg, “Literary Devices in the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor” JAOS 120 (2000), in press.

There is an element of deception inherent in word play. It masks other meanings and when employed frequently in close proximity, it can confuse readers and compel them to interpret the ambiguity in ways that might mislead. Moreover, word plays manipulate memory by forcing readers to recall through association and to bring into contrast figures, themes, and events. Perhaps not surprisingly these characteristics of word play can be found in the stories of the Bible’s most cunning and manipulative figures, Jacob and Laban (Gen 28:10–32:3). The characters, who constantly are deceiving and being deceived, both pun, and are the victims of puns.

The narrator too cannot be held guiltless in this regard. He frequently puns, especially on the names of the main characters in our story. In fact, the narrator gives Jacob and all of his children punning etymologies for their names.  

...the name is taken as a trigger of sound associations, releasing not absolute meaning but possible meaning, and in some instances, a cluster of complementary or even contradictory meaning.2

Nevertheless, while the punning etymologies of Jacob and his children have received some scholarly attention, the narrator and characters' employment of word play beyond the punning etymons has been noted only periodically, and then mostly in brief footnotes. Moreover, a thorough study of the word play phenomenon in the Jacob cycle has never been undertaken, nor has any effort been made to place the more well-known examples of word play in their literary contexts. Thus, despite the frequent appearance of the device in Gen 28:10–32:3, scholarly knowledge of word play in the Jacob cycle has had little hermeneutical impact. In what follows, I shall attempt to remedy this situation, at least in part, by illustrating how the extensive use of word play in the Jacob cycle establishes a pattern that elucidates for us the rector's role and interest in the phenomenon.

To demonstrate, I begin with the well-known observation that Rachel and Leah's names mean "ewe lamb" and "wild cow," respectively.3 While the names represent a common Semitic naming practice,4 they also provide the author of the Jacob cycle with opportunities to pun. For example, the text frequently portrays Rachel in ways that recall the meaning of her name. When Jacob arrives at the well of Haran, the men there inform him הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָלַח הָאָl

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a sheep's bleating, as if to quip: "a ewe lamb is baa-ing with the sheep." In case this pun escapes the reader, the same verb is repeated in 29:9 with a slight variance in inflection.5 These puns are edified in turn at the end of 29:9 with the narrator's seemingly superfluous addition of ki רֹדָה הָיָה, "for she was a shepherdess" (with Qere perpetuum). While typically it is translated "for she was a shepherdess," the line also suggests, "she was grazing." The total effect is undeniably intentional.6

As with Rachel, Leah's name also is the target of puns. We hear it fore-shadowed when Jacob demands: "Give (me) my wife for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her" (29:21). While shortly afterward the narrator alerts the reader that Laban has switched Leah for Rachel (29:23), Jacob remains unaware. Yet his own words in 29:21, specifically the phrase "go in unto her," וְאָבֵלָה וְאָבֵלָה, suggest the name "Leah" (לָאָו). Theomenomen is realized after the wedding feast when Leah is brought to Jacob and he "unknowingly" "goes in unto her," וַהֲיַבְּלָו וַהֲיַבְּלָו וַהֲיַבְּלָו וַh

The same pun haunts Rachel, albeit in a different way. Desperate to have children associated with her name, she offers a plea to Jacob: "Behold, my maid Bilhah, go in unto her... that I also might have children (lit. "be built") through her (בּ אָבֵלָה... וְאָבֵלָה וְאָבֵלָה וְאָבֵלָה וְאָbֵלָה וְאָvֵלָה) and subtly remind us that Jacob's own "family" (bayit) must be "built" (בֵּית) with "sons" (בּאָn) as an Israelite "house" (bayit) is "built" (בֵּית) with "stone" (בּאָn). Only then

5. In 29:6 it appears in the feminine singular participle form with the accent on the second syllable. In 29:9 it is in the feminine singular perfect form with the accent on the first syllable.
6. The earliest known onomatopoeia "ba-a" to describe the bleating of a sheep is found in the form יָא in the work of Hermippus. See Comitatus, 19. Sarna, Genesis, p. 202, suggests that the addition is a gloss.
will Jacob fulfill the words of the God of his 'ab "father" (28:13) and become the father of a multitude (cf. 28:14). These connections are made apparent by the repeated interplay between the words 'ohen "stone" (29:2, 29:3 (2X), 29:8, 29:10), 'ab, "father" (29:9, 29:12 (2X)), bën, "son" (29:1, 29:5, 29:12, 29:13), and "Laban" (29:5, 29:10 (3X), 29:13) in the betrothal scene at the well, a scene that concludes with the narrator's note that Laban wayēb'yēhā 'el bētā, "brought him (Jacob) into his house" (29:13).

The allusive phrase 'elēhā again occurs when Jacob consents to sleeping with Bilhah and wayyābō 'elēhā, "goes in unto her" (30:4). In 30:16 Leah also uses the phrase emphatically when she commands Jacob: "You are to sleep with me ('elāy tābō') for I have hired you (šākor šēkārētā) with my son's mandrakes (bēdu'ā'im ū bēnī)" (30:16). The repeated puns between 'elēhā and Leah and the use of šākar, "hirc," draw attention to Leah as the focus of Rachel's vexation and poignantly underscore Jacob's role as an employee of Laban's family. Moreover, Leah herself parallels Rachel's taking of her husband, with her request for her son's mandrakes (30:15), a parallel that derives its impact from the association of dīdā'ūm, "mandrakes," with dōd, "love," and Jacob's angry remark to Rachel: "Who has denied you the fruit of the womb (pērī bāṭēn)!" (30:2).

The puns involving the expression bō' 'elēhā serve yet another literary function in Gen 30:31–43, which reports how Jacob manipulated Laban's flocks. The narrator and the characters have repeated the idiom "go in unto" (bō' el) so often in the earlier pericopes that changing the idiom slightly demands our attention. In 30:33 Jacob first tells Laban that he will be found innocent of theft should Laban "go over" (tābō' el) his wages. While the switch of el for 'el probably is required by the technical idiom, its closeness to tābō' el also recalls Jacob's request for Rachel, Rachel's plea to Jacob, and Laban's act of deception (cf. 30:22). The phrase tābō' el is put into Jacob's mouth to subtly prepare the reader for his scheme of revenge. Jacob then proceeds to encourage the stronger females of Laban's animals to mate 'el haammāqātō, "on the rods" (30:39), instead of with the males of the flock. 13 The result leaves Laban with a greatly diminished flock of feebler animals. These puns force us to link the story of Jacob and Laban's daughters with that of Jacob and his flocks and to see in them, along with N. Sarna, "the idea of Jacob beating Laban at his own game." 14

The puns on Leah come full circle when Rachel finally conceives. The narrator appositely comments: "And God remembered Rachel, and hearkened to her" (30:22). The words "to her" ('elēhā), again remind the reader of Leah, but this time the effect is different. Since Rachel has a son, the pun now serves to remind us that Rachel has overcome Leah. Indeed, God has allowed both Jacob and Rachel to overcome their adversaries, and the redactor has suggested this skillfully for the attentive reader by way of anagrams. While the prepositional phrase is common enough in the Hebrew Bible so as not to provoke comment elsewhere, its frequent distribution in this pericope in such close proximity to Leah's name and in a story where Leah is such a key figure suggests that the puns are deliberate. 15

12. J. P. Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis (Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1975), p. 152, remarks: "In my opinion this is not just a variant, but, on the contrary, something that reveals the change in Jacob's situation. Once Jacob has discovered that the one party Laban is not 'with him' any longer, the other party, God, assures him: 'but now I am with you!'"


15. A statistical analysis bears this out. We first hear the name Leah in Gen 29 (6X) and the prepositional phrase (2X). In our chapter (30) the name Leah appears far more frequently (12X) and the prepositional phrase (3X). There is a marked decline in usage of both the name and the prepositional phrase.
Other puns on Leah's name also underscore Laban's deceptive switch of Leah for Rachel. Immediately after Jacob perceives that he has been deceived, Laban strikes up another deal with Jacob: "fulfill the week of this one, and we will give this (other) also for the service that you will serve me" (29:27). The pi'el imperative of the root màla' occurs here for "fulfill." Its form (mîla') echoes Leah's name. The verb again appears in the pi'el form in the next verse "and Jacob did so, and fulfilled (wayémâlle') her week" (29:28). The use of the pi'el form makes the pun possible, and it is interesting to note that when the verb màla' first appears in connection with Jacob and Laban's contract (29:21), it is in the qal-form. The puns are strengthened in 29:29 when the narrator informs us that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah (miîla'âh);" a subtle reminder of how Laban did not "fulfill" (miîla') his end of the bargain as expected.

The text also exploits the reader's knowledge of the meaning of Leah's name in 29:17 in the famous crux: "Leah's eyes were weak (rakkôt)." Translators typically render the word rakkôt as "soft, weak, tender," or the like (from the root rakkô), and this accords with the Targum and rabbinic opinion. Still, in Alter's words...

...there is no way of confidently deciding whether the word indicates some sort of impairment ("weak" eyes or perhaps odd-looking eyes) or rather suggests that Leah has sweet eyes that are her one asset of appearance, in contrast to her beautiful sister.17

The uniqueness of this expression gives us pause to contemplate the semantic range of the word rakkôt. Keeping in mind the author's pen-

beginning with the next chapter. Though the name Leah appears in chapter 33 (3X), 34 (1X), and 35 (2X), the prepositional phrase does not appear again until Gen 38:2, and then only in conjunction with Judah.

16. Targum Onqeis reads ya'âyôn "soft, dainty." See also T.B. Baba Bathra 123a; Gen Rabba 70:16.

17. Alter, Genesis, p. 153. For the interpretation that Leah's eyes lacked luster, note Sarna, Genesis, p. 204; and the (now politically incorrect) statement of G. von Rad, Das Erste Buch Mose (Göttingen: 1953; London: 1961), p. 286: 'The Oriental likes a woman's eyes to be lively, to glow, and therefore eye makeup was used from most ancient times.'
that during the years he labored for him, Rachel did not produce children, and yet he had no love interest in Leah. The puns are underscored by the verb *nāhag, “drive,” a well-known euphemism for sexual intercourse in the Bible. The narrator again equates Rachel and Leah with flocks in 31:4: “and Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah (to) the field to his flock.” The Hebrew is ambiguous. The lack of a preposition attached to the word “field” (haṣṣādèth) and the explicit reference to *et šōʾnō, “to his flock,” permit us to read the line: “...and Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah (in/from) the field to his flock (meaning Rachel and Leah).” This reading is supported by the fact that though Jacob calls her to his flock (meaning Rachel and Leah), his wives collectively respond (31:14-16).

These puns are bolstered in 31:26 when Laban overtakes the fleeing Jacob and asks: “What did you mean by deceiving me and driving off (nāhag) my daughters like captives of the sword?” Laban’s use of the verb *nāhag, “drive off,” a lexeme usually used for driving herds, both recalls the narrator’s words in 31:17-18 and “drives home” yet another pun connecting Laban’s daughters with his flocks.

The author’s punning exploitation of the names of Laban’s daughters must have been realized already in antiquity since, as Garsicl notes, the prophet Jeremiah invokes the connection as well. A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel (Rāḥel) weeping for her children... I have surely heard Ephraim (‘Eprayim) bemoaning himself: “You have chastised me, and I was chastised, like a calf (ṭegel) untrained...” (Jer 31:14-17).

The examples of word play noted here in the Jacob cycle add to a growing collection of puns that exploit the similarity in sound between


22. Noted by Alter, *Genesis*, p. 170, but not explained as a pun.

23. Garsicl, *Biblical Names*, pp. 180-82, who also points out the play between *Eprayim* “Ephraim” and *pārīm* “bulls.”

24. Even in our pericope puns on animal names are not restricted to Rachel and Leah. The association of some of Leah’s children’s names with animals (e.g., Reuben, Simeon, and Levi) is well known, but another, quite significant animal pun has escaped attention. To bind the oath in the treaty at Gilad, "Jacob swore by the terror (paḥad) of his father Isaac and... offered a sacrifice" (31:42, 31:53-54). The word paḥad, “terror,” conceals a play on the widely attested plfd, “flock, tribal clan, thigh.” The word paḥad is a purely Aramaic form, since, based on the Arabic and Modern South Arabian cognate (faḥid), the Hebrew reflex would be paḥaz (cf. Gen 49:4). Given the widespread use of the word and that the flock and clan are important motifs in the narrative, it is likely that the ancient reader would have made the connection.


27. It is a visual play since the Proto-Semitic phoneme ū would not be confused with ū. The lexeme in question is found in Ugaritic (plfd), and Akkadian (puḫdu)...


29. The word also is related to the Aramaic paḥādin “testicles” (e.g., Targum Onquios to Lev 21:20, Targum to Job 40:17). There is an obvious semantic connection between one’s “thigh,” meant euphemistically, and one’s “clan.” Cf. the “thigh” (yārāk) of Jacob from which issue the tribes of Israel (Gen 46:26; Exod 1:5).
The effect of the pun is enhanced when Jacob, immediately after swearing upon the ṭeḥaḏ of Isaac, prepares an animal sacrifice (31:54). Moreover, since the word ṭeḥaḏ also suggests “thigh,” a word not without its sexual⁴⁰ and national significance;⁴¹ we may see in the oath both a fertile reminder of Jacob and Laban’s sexual pranks and an anticipation of the incident at the Jabbok in which Jacob is renamed “Israel” after being struck ḏēqāp ṭeṛēḵā, “in the palm of his thigh” (32:26). Binding these associations is the act of swearing an oath that requires one to touch the membrum virile (ṭeṛēḵā) of another.³²

The constant identification of Rachel and Leah as animals of the flock fits well into the redactor’s literary and theological agenda by serving to parallel Jacob’s deception of Isaac, an act that required the skin of an animal from the flock (27:16), with Laban’s switch of the “cow” for the “ewe lamb.” As Alter remarks:

> It has been clearly recognized since late antiquity that the whole story of the switched brides is a meeting out of poetic justice to Jacob—the deceiver deceived, deprived by darkness of the sense of sight as his father is by blindness, relying, like his father, on the misleading sense of touch.³³

Nevertheless, Laban’s switch of brides also anticipates what is to come in the narrative. As W. Brueggemann observes, Jacob’s manipulation of the flocks in 30:31–43 mirrors Laban’s deception of Jacob in 29:21–30.³⁴ Yet, this parallel has a greater impact when we recall that Rachel

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³⁰. In Mehri and Jibbali the root of this word also appears as a verb meaning “arrange a woman’s thighs for sexual intercourse.” See, Johnstone, Mehri Lexicon, p. 110; Jibbali Lexicon, p. 67.
³². These punning associations confirm Geller’s observation in “The Struggle at the Jabbok: The Uses of Enigma in Biblical Narrative,” p. 50, n. 37, that Gen 32:25–33 recalls the birth of Benjamin since “To touch the thigh may mark the end of the issue of progenitors from the patriarchal seed.” He also notes that the verb “touch” (nuḏa’) can refer to sexual relations (p. 52, n. 44).
³³. Alter, Genesis, p. 155.

means “ewe lamb” and Leah means “cow.” In Genesis 29 Laban deceives Jacob into receiving the fertile but older and weak-eyed Leah (“cow”) instead of Rachel (“ewe lamb”). In Genesis 30 Jacob allows only the younger and weaker of Laban’s flocks to reproduce.³⁵ In this way Jacob tricks Laban into giving him the lambs of his desire. This is more than a literary parallel, for by connecting Jacob’s wives with Laban’s flocks and by mirroring one act of deception with another, the redactor administers a lesson in lex talionis.³⁶

Puns also connect the means of Jacob’s manipulation with the manipulator Laban. When Jacob establishes with his uncle which animals will constitute his wages, he tells Laban (Labān) that his animals will include kāl ʿāšer labān bō, “every one with white on it” (30:35). In 30:37 Jacob proceeds to manipulate Laban’s flocks by employing “a fresh rod of popular” (maqqalīṯ ṭibnē ṭālēṯ).³⁷ The text then reinforces the puns on Laban’s name by adding that Jacob peeled ṭibānōt, “white streaks,” in them so as to reveal their ḥaṭṭābān, “whiteness” (30:37). As J. P. Fokkelman notes, in the same way Jacob deceives Esau (i.e., Ḥādōm) from his birthright with ḥaṭṭābān, “porridge” (25:30), “He fights with Laban, and the goats with ṭābān on them are rightfully his.”³⁸

The text further underscores the connection by employing key words that parallel the acts of manipulation.³⁹ We already have seen how puns on Rachel and Leah’s names tie Laban’s act of deception with Jacob’s.

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³⁵. Rashi brings out this parallel by noting that the Targum treats the words “ṭiḡāpīṯ slim” and qešārīṯ “strong” as denoting “late born” and “early born,” respectively.
³⁸. Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, p. 150.
³⁹. For a comprehensive study on the literary structuring of these pericopes and the use of other key words, see Gary A. Rendsburg, The Redaction of Genesis (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1986).
Another parallel is established by the verb šāqūh, “water,” which we first encounter in 29:2-3.

There before his eyes was a well in the open. Three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for the flocks were watered (wēṣiqū) from that well. The stone on the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, the stone would be rolled from the mouth of the well and the sheep watered (wēṣiqū); then the stone would be put back in its place on the mouth of the well.

Shortly afterward, Jacob tells the men of Haran to ḥaṣṣā ḥaṣṣō’ū, “water the flock” (29:7). They respond by telling him that they are unable to do so until all the flocks have been gathered. Only then, they assert, ṭēḥiṣṭūn ḥaṣṣō’ū, “may we water the sheep” (29:8). Jacob then rolls the stone off the well and “waters” (wāqā) the flock of Laban (29:10).

Here again a parallel is drawn between Laban’s flocks and Laban’s daughters by way of two puns on the root šāqūh, “water”; the first in 29:11 when Jacob “kisses” (wāyīṣṣāq) Rachel and the second in 29:13 when Laban “kisses” (wāyēnāšeq) Jacob.40

The imagery of watering flocks is invoked again when we are told that Jacob’s wedding is a miṣṭēh, “drinking feast,” to which men (29:22), like the flocks at the well (29:3, 29:8), must be “gathered” (ṭāṣāq). These key words reinforce the punning associations with animals conveyed by the names Rachel and Leah. These puns also anticipate Jacob’s manipulation of Laban’s flocks in which we twice hear that the animals are his šāqūr, “hire,” (30:28, 30:33). Further, Laban must “serve” (ṣābed) Laban for his wives and “serve” (ṣābed) him for his flocks (29:25, 29:27).1 Later Jacob reinforces these parallels by telling Laban “You know well how I have served you (ṭābdēlīṭāq) and how your livestock (mīqneh) has fared well with me” (30:29). The frequent plays on the meanings of Rachel and Leah’s names permit us to hear in Jacob’s use of the word mīqneh, “livestock,” a metaphorical reference to Laban’s daughters. Jacob continues by telling Laban that “...Yahweh has blessed you wherever I turned (ṭārāqī)” (30:30), an expression that has a two-fold impact. On the one hand, it reminds us of the start of Jacob’s journey when he first set out for (wāyāyēśāq ḥaṣṣō’āq Yaʿaqob ṭāqāw [lit. “Jacob lifted his leg”]) Haran (29:1). On the other, when read as a sexual euphemism (i.e., “for my loins!”), it reminds Laban that he is responsible for increasing the size of his family and flocks.

The demonstrations of deceptive one-upmanship reach a climax when Jacob reveals to his wives his secret plan to leave Haran. His wives’ complaints about their father also suggest their father’s name: “...God has taken away from our father, (all) that is ours and our children’s” (31:16). One cannot help but hear the name “Laban” both in the words “away from our father” (mēḥāhenā ḥānā) and in the expression “our children’s” (ḥālāhāmen). The subtle pun on Laban’s name also foreshadows their father’s remark to Jacob:

The daughters are my daughters (ḥābbānīṯ bēnāhāy), and the sons are my sons (wēḥābbānīṯ bēnāhāy), and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. Yet, what can I do now about the daughters (wēḥīnāhāy) or the sons (ḥūnāhen) they have borne (31:45)?

40. Noted by Sarna, Genesis, p. 203.

41. This key word is espied by Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, p. 142.

42. The rarity of this usage again causes us to contemplate its meaning. For other uses of this euphemism, see 2 Sam 11:8 and the article by Gary A. Rendsburg in this volume.
Laban's selfishness is underscored both by the repeated first person singular suffix pronoun, and by the repetition of the words “daughters” and “children,” which resound the consonants of Laban’s name.

Similar puns obtain when the narrator informs us that Jacob repaid him for his maltreatment: “And Jacob deceived Laban (lit. wayyiqvōb Ya’ākob ‘et lēb Lābān, “stole the heart of”) the Aramaean, in that he did not (bēl) tell him that he was fleeing” (31:20). As Garsiel has shown, two paronomastic elements play upon the name Laban. The first is the expression “stole the heart” (wayyiqvōb... ‘et lēb) and the second is the use of the negative particle bēl. Just a few verses later, when Laban reaches Jacob in protest he asks “What have you done, that you have deceived me (wayiqvōb ‘et lēḇāḇ) and carried away my captives like captives of the sword?” (31:26). We hear Laban’s name echoed both in the repeated idiom for deception and in bēnōtāyī, “my daughters.” When Jacob does not reply, Laban presses him further:

Why did you flee in secrecy and mislead me (wayiqvōb ‘ōti) and not tell me? I would have sent you off with festive music, with timbrel and lyre. You did not even let me kiss my sons (lēḇāḇāyī) and daughters (wēḇāḇātāyī) good-bye! It was a foolish thing for you to do” (31:27–28).

Once again we hear the name Laban repeated, and it is noteworthy that this time Laban omits the word lēb, “heart” (in the idiom “steal the heart”). In effect, part of “Laban,” his “heart” (lēḇ), the seat of his intelligence, is missing.

Deception and theft are associated with Laban in another punning way, in 29:25, when Jacob first realizes that he slept with Leah and not Rachel.

43. Garsiel, Biblical Names, p. 221.
44. Similar puns on these consonants occur in the pericope involving Nabal (1 Samuel 25) where there is evidence that the puns were intended to invoke an analogy between Nabal and the deceiver par excellence Laban. See Garsiel, Biblical Names, p. 221; and also more fully in Moshe Garsiel, The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1985), pp. 127, 130–32.
45. Noted also by Garsiel, Biblical Names, p. 221.
46. Noted by Alter, Genesis, p. 154
47. Exploited already in Midrashic literature. See, Gen Rabba 63:4, 70:1; Ḥr ha-Ḳaḥayim on Gen 25:20; and Baʿal ha-Ṭūrīn 25:20.
49. Noted as a key word also by Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, p. 167.
50. A. Alonso-Schökel, A Manuel of Hebrew Poetics (Subsidia Biblica 11: Rome: Editrice pontificia Istituto biblico, 1988), p. 31, demonstrated this in Mal 3:6–9, where the root qāḇār “rob” is exploited for its similarity in sound to Jacob (Yaʿākob).
ambivalent character of Jacob. He is at times an unseemingly deceptive man. 51

These sentiments reach a fever pitch when after catching up with the fleeing Jacob Laban threatens: “It is in the power of my hand (yes ṭēḇēl yāḏāl) to do you hurt” (31:29)! The difficulty of the passage has given rise to a multitude of interpretations, but as we know from so many other examples, 52 including 31:4 above, the awkward choice of words, like non-native orthography, often signals the presence of word play. In this case, the phrase anticipates the events of Genesis 32 by suggesting the metonym “Israel” (Yēṣrāʾēl) and thus, it underscores Laban’s boast of power over all that is Jacob’s.

Throughout the Jacob cycle we have seen how word play functions to demonstrate the principle of lex talionis. Yet—despite the preponderance of negative demonstrations of the principle, the redactor also uses word play to show that good acts, like deceptive ones, receive retribution and that the principle can serve as a corrective to transform one’s inner self. Laban admitted as much before Jacob’s flight from Haran when he conceded: “If now I have found favor (ḥēn) in your eyes—I have learned by divination that Yahweh has blessed me on your account (biglālēḵa)” (30:27). Laban’s words represent a turning point in the story, for in them we hear punning concessions. The man who had allowed Jacob to work an entire month for “nothing” (29:15), now requests Jacob’s grace (ḥēn). 53 His statement also implies that his prosperity is not the result of his own behavior. Moreover, as Fokkelman observes, these words are most revealing: “From the enemy’s mouth we now hear that God’s blessing has accompanied Jacob all the time.” 54

In addition, Laban’s use of the phrase “on your account” (biglālēḵa) punfully recalls how Jacob rolled (gālal) the stone off of Laban’s well (29:10). The result is a punning inclusio.

S. Gener has shown how enigma can function as a literary device in the story of Jacob at the Jabbok River (32:23–33), and elsewhere I have argued the same for the pericope involving Jacob’s confusing maneuvering of Laban’s flocks (Gen 30:31–43). 55 The web of puns and deceptive speech serve a similar literary function. It is through their deceptive words that the characters convey their deceptive intentions and we, as readers, are tricked along with their victims. This enables us to empathize with the deceived and to define the characters’ behavior. Yet, the literary device also belies a theological agenda. Since the narrator/redactor also engages in punning, we must see the word play phenomenon as an authorial tool to force the reader’s participation in the story, a narrative that can be clarified only as it unfolds. All along he reminds his readers through word plays that God repays both deception and acts of kindness in kind.

51. Brueggemann, Genesis, p. 251. The italics are the author’s.
53. The pun is noted by Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, p. 142.
54. Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, p. 142.