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

PUNS AND PUNDITS

WORD PLAY

IN

THE HEBREW BIBLE

AND

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN LITERATURE

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Scott B. Noegel

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"visual word play," perhaps the subtlest type of word play that authors/ scribes employ, from an ancient Egyptian text.[71]

DRINKING FEASTS AND DECEPTIVE FEATS: JACOB AND LABAN'S DOUBLE TALK

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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.[1] R. Alter explains:

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1. With the exception of Dinah. For puns on these names see Stanley Gevirtz, "Of Patriarchs and Puns: Joseph at the Fountain, Jacob at the Ford," *HUCA* 46 (1975): 33–34. For the psychology and belief system behind these associations, see I. Rabinowitz, *A Witness Forever: Ancient Israel's Perception of Literature and the Resultant Hebrew Bible* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993).

...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 redactor'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 *wĕhinnēh Rāḥēl bitô bā'āh ʿim haṣṣōʾn*, "Behold, Rachel, his daughter, is coming with the sheep" (Gen 29:6). The English cannot possibly capture the puns. Not only does the name Rachel suggest "ewe lamb" in this context, but the verb *bāʾāh*, "come," conveys the sound of

2. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 161.

3. J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (International Critical Commentary 1; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), p. 383; B. Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* (Berlin: Shocken, 1934), p. 589; N. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp. 202–3.

4. See, e.g., J. Stetkevych, "Name and Epithet: The Philology and Semantics of Animal Nomenclature in Early Arabic Poetry," *JNES* 45 (1986): 89–124.

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 *kî rōʿāh hûʿ*, "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 foreshadowed 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 unawares. Yet his own words in 29:21, specifically the phrase "go in unto her," *wĕʾābôʾāh ʾēlêhā*, suggest the name "Leah" (*Lēʾāh*). The *nomen omen* is realized after the wedding feast when Leah is brought to Jacob and he "unknowingly" "goes in unto her," *wayyābôʾ ʾēlêhā* (29:23).

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 (*bôʾ ʾēlêhā... wĕʾibbāneh gam ʾānōkî mimmennāh;* 30:3), a line that puns not only on the name "Bilhah,"[7] but also on *ʾāb*, "father," *ben*, "son," and *ʾeben*, "stone." The latter three puns are especially significant for they both recall Jacob removing the stone (*ʾeben*) off of Laban's well (29:10) and subtly remind us that Jacob's own "family" (*bayit*) must be "built" (*bānāh*) with "sons" (*bānîm*) as an Israelite "house" (*bayit*) is "built" (*bānāh*) with "stone" (*ʾeben*). 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 onomatopocia "ba-a" to describe the bleating of a sheep is found in the form βᾶ in the work of Hermippus. See *Comicus*, 19. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 202, suggests that the addition is a gloss.

7. Observed by Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991), p. 221.

will Jacob fulfill the words of the God of his *'āb* "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 *'eben* "stone" (29:2, 29:3 [2X], 29:8, 29:10), *'āb*, "father" (29:9, 29:12 [2X]), *bēn*, "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,[8] a scene that concludes with the narrator's note that Laban *wayĕbíy'ēhú 'el bêtô*, "brought him (Jacob) into his house" (29:13).

The allusive phrase *'ēlêhā* again occurs when Jacob consents to sleeping with Bilhah and *wayyābô' 'ēlêhā*, "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 (*'ēlay tābô'*) for I have hired you (*śākor śĕkartíkā*) with my son's mandrakes (*bĕdûdā'ê bĕnî*)" (30:16). The repeated puns between *'ēlêhā* and Leah and the use of *śākar*, "hire," 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 *dûdā'îm*, "mandrakes," with *dôd*, "love,"[9] and Jacob's angry remark to Rachel: "Who has denied you the fruit of the womb (*pĕrî bāṭen*)?!" (30:2).

The puns involving the expression *bô' 'ēlêhā* 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" (*bô' '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" (*tābô' 'al*) his wages.[10] While the switch of *'al* for *'el* probably is required by the technical idiom,[11] its closeness to *tābô' 'el* also recalls Jacob's request for

Rachel, Rachel's plea to Jacob, and Laban's act of deception (cf. *'ênennû 'imô* in 31:2 and *'ênennú 'ēlay* in 31:5).[12] The phrase *tābô' 'al* 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 hammaqlôt*, "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" (*'ēlêhā*), 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]

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8. The repeated word *bĕ'ēr* "well" is an additional stroke of paronomasia.

9. Cf. the same well-known pun in Song 7:14.

10. The textual witnesses treat this phrase in a variety of ways.

11. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), p. 236, considers it "Evidently a technical use of the phrase..."

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!'"

13. For a detailed explanation and new interpretation of what transpires in this pericope, see Scott B. Noegel, "Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster in Gen. 30:31–43," *JANES* 25 (1997): 7–17.

14. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 212.

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 you serve me" (29:27). The pi'el imperative of the root *māla'* occurs here for "fulfill." Its form (*mallē'*) echoes Leah's name. The verb again appears in the pi'el form in the next verse "and Jacob did so, and fulfilled (*wayēmallē'*) 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 *māla'* 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 (*milLē'āh*); a subtle reminder of how Laban did not "fulfill" (*millē'*) 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 *rākak*), and this accords with the Targum and rabbinic opinion.[16] 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-

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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 Onqelos reads *ya'ăyān* "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* (Gottingen: 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."

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chant for animal puns and the Aramaean setting of the story, we may find cause to hear in this word the Aramaic root *rĕkak*, "soft, tender," a usage that occurs in reference to animal skins.[18] The connection of the word *rakkôt* to animal hides must be seen as another play on *Lē'āh* as "cow," and suggests that we hear in the phrase the ancient equivalent of "bovine eyes." The expression would have been complimentary in antiquity, a view that accords with the rabbis who remarked: *lāmmāh hāytāh śĕnu'āh? lô' śĕhāytāh kĕ'ōrāh miRāḥēl, 'ālā' śĕhāytāh yāpāh kĕRāḥēl...* "Why was she (Leah) disliked? Not because she was uglier than Rachel, rather, in fact, she was as beautiful as Rachel."[19] Soon after hearing about Leah's eyes (*wĕ'ênê Lē'āh*), Leah is put into sharp contrast with Rachel by the narrator's comment that Jacob's seven-year wait for Rachel seemed but a few days "in his eyes" (*bĕ'ênâw*) (29:20).

The connection of both sisters to flocks continues in 31:38 when Jacob tells Laban "these twenty years have I been with you, your ewe lambs and your she-goats have not cast their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks." Jacob alludes to Laban's daughters by punning on their names; the word *rĕḥēlêkā*, "ewe lambs," suggesting the name Rachel,[20] and the construct form *wĕ'êlê*, "rams (of)," hinting at the name Leah by way of an anagram. In this subtle way, Jacob's words remind us

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18. For this usage, see T.Y. Sabbath, VIII, 11b. We might have here a subtle example of "style-switching." For other Aramaic words in the Jacob cycle, see Jonas C. Greenfield, "Aramaic Studies and the Bible," in J. A. Emerton, ed., (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum; Congress Volume, Vienna, 1980; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), pp. 110–30. On style-switching, see S. A. Kaufman, "The Classification of the North West Semitic Dialects of the Biblical Period and Some Implications Thereof," in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Panel Session: Hebrew and Aramaic Languages* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1988), pp. 55–56; Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Strata of Biblical Hebrew," *JNSL* 17 (1991): 81–99; "*Kabbir* in Biblical Hebrew: Evidence for Style-switching and Addressee-switching in the Hebrew Bible," *JAOS* 112 (1992): 649–51; "Linguistic Variation and the 'Foreign' Factor in the Hebrew Bible," *ISO* 15 (1996): 177–90.

19. Midrash Tanḥuma B *wayyēṣē'* 12, (S. Buber, ed.; Wilna, 1885), p. 152.

20. This pun, but not the others, is noted by Robert D. Sacks, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 6; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), p. 252.

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 ʾākāl, "eat," a well-known euphemism for sexual intercourse in the Bible.[21]

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" (haśśādēh) and the explicit reference to ʾel ṣôʾnô, "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 ʾel ṣôʾnô, "to his flock," 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,[22] 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 Garsiel notes, the prophet Jeremiah invokes the connection as well.

A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel (Rāḥēl) weeping for her children... I have surely heard Ephraim (ʾEprayim) bemoaning himself: 'You have chastised me, and I was chastised, like a calf (ʿegel) untrained...'" (Jer 31:14–17).[23]

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

the name of an animal and that of a person.[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,[25] but another, quite significant animal pun has escaped attention. To bind the oath in the treaty at Gilead, "Jacob swore by the terror (paḥad) of his father Isaac and... offered a sacrifice" (31:42, 31:53–54). The word paḥad, "terror,"[26] conceals a play on the widely attested pḥd, "flock, tribal clan, thigh."[27] The word paḥad is a purely Aramaic form, since, based on the Arabic and Modern South Arabian cognate (faḥid),[28] the Hebrew reflex would be paḥaz (cf. Gen 49:4).[29] 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.

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21. W. Herzberg, *Polysemy in the Hebrew Bible* (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1979). I would add Gen 31:38 to his list of other examples (i.e., Gen 39:6, Exod 2:20, 32:6, Dan 10:3, Prov 30:20). See also the article by G. A. Rendsburg in this volume, pp. 150–52.

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

23. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, pp. 180–82, who also points out the play between *ʾEprayim* "Ephraim" and *pārim* "bulls."

24. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, pp. 73–75. For punning on animal and people's names elsewhere in the ancient Near East, see Suzanne Pickney Stetkevych, "Sarah and the Hyena: Laughter, Menstruation, and the Genesis of a Double Entendre," *History of Religions* 36 (1996): 13–41.

25. *Encyclopedia Biblia* (Thomas Cheyne, ed.; New York, N.Y.: MacMillan Co., 1899–1903), pp. 409ff.

26. Cf. Everett Fox, *Genesis and Exodus: A New English Rendition with Commentary and Notes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), p. 135, who notes: "the intent of the Hebrew is unclear: it could mean something like 'Yitzhak's champion' or 'the One who inspires terror in Yitzhak'."

27. It is a visual play since the Proto-Semitic phoneme ḥ would not be confused with ḫ. The lexeme in question is found in Ugaritic (pḫd), and Akkadian (puḫādu). C. H. Gordon. *Ugaritic Textbook* (AnOr 38; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), p. 467, *s.v. pḫd (im pḫd* 2 Aqht: V:17, 22–23) and *AHw*, p. 875, *s.v. puḫādu*, respectively.

28. See, T. M. Johnstone, *Mehri Lexicon and English-Mehri Word-List* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1987), p. 110; *Jibbali Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 67; *Harsusi Lexicon and English-Harsusi Word-List* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 37.

29. The word also is related to the Aramaic *paḥădin* "testicles" (e.g., Targum Onqelos 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" (yērāk) 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 *pahad* of Isaac, prepares an animal sacrifice (31:54). Moreover, since the word *pahad* also suggests "thigh," a word not without its sexual[30] and national significance;[31] 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 surnamed "Israel" after being struck *bĕkap yĕrēkô*, "in the palm of his thigh" (32:26). Binding these associations is the act of swearing an oath that requires that one touch the *membrum virile* (*yārēk*) 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.

31. On this point see Stephen A. Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok: The Uses of Enigma in Biblical Narrative," *JANES* 14 (1982): 50-51.

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" (*nāgaʿ*) can refer to sexual relations (p. 52, n. 44).

33. Alter, *Genesis*, p. 155.

34. W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1973), p. 249.

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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 (*Lābān*) that his animals will include *kôl ʾăšer lābān bô*, "every one with white on it" (30:35). In 30:37 Jacob proceeds to manipulate Laban's flocks by employing "a fresh rod of poplar" (*maqqal libneh lah*).[37] The text then reinforces the puns on Laban's name by adding that Jacob peeled *lĕbānôt*, "white streaks," in them so as to reveal their *hallābān*, "whiteness" (30:37). As J. P. Fokkleman notes, in the same way Jacob deceives Esau (i.e., *ʾĔdôm*) from his birthright with *hāʾādôm*, "porridge" (25:30), "He fights with Laban, and the goats with *lābān* 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 *ʿăṭûpîm* "weak" and *qĕšūrîm* "strong" as denoting "late born" and "early born," respectively.

36. On this feature generally, see Philip J. Nel, "The Talion Principle in Old Testament Narratives," *JNSL* 20 (1994): 21-29. See also Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, pp. 248-50 for what he calls the "measure for measure" principle.

37. Noted already by F. M. T. Böhl, "Wortspiele im Alten Testament," *JPOS* 6 (1926): 207-8.

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 *šāqah*, "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 (*yēšqû*) 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 (*wĕhišqû*); 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 *hašqû haṣṣô'n*, "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, *wĕhišqînû haṣṣô'n*, "may we water the sheep" (29:8). Jacob then rolls the stone off the well and "waters" (*wayyašq*) 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 *šāqah*, "water"; the first in 29:11 when Jacob "kisses" (*wayyiššaq*) Rachel and the second in 29:13 when Laban "kisses" (*wayĕnaššeq*) Jacob.[40]

The imagery of watering flocks is invoked again when we are told that Jacob's wedding is a *mišteh*, "drinking feast," to which men (29:22), like the flocks at the well (29:3, 29:8), must be "gathered" (*'āsap*). 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 30:35-43. In the same way that Laban "brought" (*wayyābê'*) a "cow" instead of an "ewe lamb" when Jacob came to the "drinking feast" (*mišteh*) (29:22-23), Jacob switches one animal for another to alter the sexual activity of Laban's flocks when "they came to drink (*tābô'nā haṣṣô'n lištôt*)" by *bĕšiqătôt*, "water troughs," (30:38). Moreover, just as Jacob arranges it so that the Laban's flocks do not conceive when they came to drink (*bĕbô'ān lištôt*) (30:38), Rachel, the "ewe lamb" remains barren (29:31).

Other key words also bind the two pericopes. Both stories involve the prolific birthing (*yālad*; e.g., 29:34-35, 30:39) of unintended offspring. In 30:16 Leah "hires" (*śākar*) Jacob with mandrakes with the hope of

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

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conceiving. This recalls both Laban's original negotiation with Jacob over what his wage (*śākar*) shall be (29:15) and Jacob's manipulation of the flocks in which we twice hear that the animals are his *śākar*, "hire," (30:28, 30:33). Further, Laban must "serve" (*'ebed*) Laban for his wives and "serve" (*'ebed*) him for his flocks (29:25, 29:27).[41] Later Jacob reinforces these parallels by telling Laban "You know well how I have served you (*'ăbadĕtîkā*) and how your livestock (*miqneh*) 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 *miqneh*, "livestock," a metaphorical reference to Laban's daughters. Jacob continues by telling Laban that "...Yahweh has blessed you wherever I turned (*lĕraglî*)" (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 (*wayyiśśā' Ya'ăqob raglâw* [lit. "Jacob lifted his leg"]) Haran (29:1). On the other, when read as a sexual euphemism (i.e., "for my loins!"),[42] 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" (*mē'ābînû lānû*) and in the expression "our children's" (*ulĕbānēnu*). The subtle pun on Laban's name also foreshadows their father's remark to Jacob:

> The daughters are my daughters (*habbānôt bĕnôtāy*), and the sons are my sons (*wĕhabbānîm bānāy*), and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. Yet, what can I do now about the daughters (*wĕlibnôtāy*) or the sons (*libnêhem*) they have borne (31:43)?

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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. *wayyignōb Yaᶜăkob ʾet lēb Lābān*, 'stole the heart of') the Aramaean, in that he did not (*bĕlî*) tell him that he was fleeing" (31:20). As Garsiel has shown, two paronomastic elements play upon the name Laban.[43] The first is the expression "stole the heart" (*wayyignōb...ʾet lēb*) and the second is the use of the negative particle *bĕlî*.[44] Just a few verses later, when Laban reaches Jacob in protest he asks "What have you done, that you have deceived me (*watignōb ʾet lĕbābî*) and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword?" (31:26). We hear Laban's name echoed both in the repeated idiom for deception and in *bĕnôtāy*, "my daughters." When Jacob does not reply, Laban presses him further:

> Why did you flee in secrecy and mislead me (*watignōb ʾōtî*) 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 (*lĕbānāy*) and daughters (*wĕlibnôtāy*) good-bye! It was a foolish thing for you to do" (31:27-28)![45]

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" (*lēb*), 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.

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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 excellance* 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.

Shocked, he asks Laban: "Why did you deceive me?!" The question not only alludes to Jacob's wresting of the birthright from Esau (the verse employs the same verb as 27:35),[46] but also equates Laban with trickery by way of a play between *wĕlāmmāh rimmîtānî*, "Why did you deceive me?" and the phrase *Lābān hāʾĂrammî*, "Laban the Aramaean" (e.g., 25:20, 28:5, 31:20, 31:24).[47] Such puns again force the reader to draw parallels between Jacob and Laban and their repeated acts of deception.

The notions of thievery suggested by the expression *gānab ʾet lēb* also serve as a subtle indictment of Jacob's behavior, despite Jacob's own reminder that he bore Laban's loss when his flocks were robbed (*gĕnubtî*) (31:39 [2X]). The expression recalls Jacob's remark to Laban before manipulating him out of livestock: "...Any goat in my possession that is not speckled or spotted, or any sheep that is not dark-colored, got there by theft (*gānub*)" (30:33), an assertion that E. A. Speiser notes "clearly presupposes adverse testimony."[48] Though he is innocent, Laban later will accuse him of "stealing" (*gānabtā*) his gods (31:30). Though nothing Jacob does can rightly be called "theft," the constant repetition of the key verb *gānab*, "steal,"[49] in association with his name draws attention to his deceptive behavior. Indeed, as A. Alonso-Schökel has shown, the very name "Jacob" suggests "robbery" by way of the consonants that comprise his name (e.g., *qābaᶜ* means "rob"),[50] but in Genesis we need only recall Esau's observation: "Is not he rightly named Jacob (*Yaᶜăkob*)? For he has supplanted me (*wayyaᶜqĕbēnî*) these two times; he took away my birthright and, behold, he has now taken away my blessing" (27:36). Brueggemann's comment is apropos: "In interpreting the narrative, attention should be given to the ambiguous and

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46. Noted by Alter, *Genesis*, p. 154

47. Exploited already in Midrashic literature. See, *Gen Rabba* 63:4, 70:1; *ʾÔr ha-Ḥayyîm* on Gen 25:20; and *Baᶜal ha-Ṭûrîm* 25:20.

48. Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 237.

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 pontificio Istituto biblico, 1988), p. 31, demonstrated this in Mal 3:6-9, where the root *qābaᶜ* "rob" is exploited for its similarity in sound to Jacob (*Yaᶜăkob*).

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 (*yeš lĕ'ēl yādî*) 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-normative orthography, often signals the presence of word play. In this case, the phrase anticipates the events of Genesis 32 by suggesting the metonym "Israel" (*Yiśrā'ēl*) 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 shows 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 (*biglālêkā*)" (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 (*ḥinnām*) "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" (*biglālêkā*) punfully recalls how Jacob rolled (*gālal*) the stone off Laban's well

(29:3, 29:8, 29:10, 30:27, 31:46, 31:48, 31:51, 31:52).[55] Thus, Laban's words suggest that God has repaid Jacob for his help at the well, i.e., since his arrival in Haran. As with many of the puns discussed here, these examples also anticipate what is to come in the story. When Jacob and Laban conclude their relationship with a treaty at Gilead (31:45-49), which also provides an occasion to pun (*gal*, "heap," and *ʿēd*, "witness," are combined to create *Galʿēd*, "Gilead"), the text recalls by way of the words *gal*, "heap," and *'eben*, "stone," how Jacob rolled (*gālal*) the stone (*'eben*) off of Laban's well (29:10). The result is a punning *inclusio*.

S. Geller 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).[56] 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.

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51. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 251. The italics are the author's.

52. See, e.g., Scott B. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job* (JSOTS 223; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 146-47.

53. The pun is noted by Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 142.

54. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 142.

55. For similar plays on the root *gālal* in the Hebrew Bible, see Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, pp. 178-79; Noegel, *Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job*, pp. 71-73.

56. Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok: The Uses of Enigma in Biblical Narrative," pp. 37-60; Noegel, "Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster in Gen. 30:31-43."