



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
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FROM PATRIARCHS TO PROPHETS: READING AND RECEPTION

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The characteristics and reception of Jacob

PETER A A TROTTER

Student No:2020442

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The characteristics and reception of Jacob

Jacob, last in the patriarchal triad, succeeded to the promises given to Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 12:1-3; 26:3-5; 28:3-4, 13-14). These promises are fulfilled, in the Hebrew scriptures, through the nation known by Jacob's God-given name Israel. Its tribes are named after Jacob's sons (Gen. 49:28). Yet Jacob is a figure whose character is prone to conflicting interpretations. This is confirmed by the reception history of the Genesis Jacob narrative, that is its influence, impact, and effect in history and culture. By identifying Jacob's characteristics from significant character defining episodes in his life, and noting examples from their reception history, including in visual art, a biblical portrait will be constructed from which conclusions will be drawn on Jacob's character.

Jacob – characteristics and reception

Esau and Jacob (birth and birthright) [Gen. 25:19-34]

Jacob's struggles *in utero* with his twin, being born 'with his hand gripping Esau's heel' and his name sounding like heel (25:22-26), its co-textual link with Esau selling his firstborn birthright (25:29-34), and their intratextuality with Esau's bitter denunciation that Jacob's actions conform to his name (Gen. 27:36), constitute a triadic hermeneutical lens through which Jacob has been traditionally characterised supplanter, cheat or deceiver (hereinafter 'trickster characterisation').¹ However, considering Genesis 25 by itself, Jacob primarily being 'a theophorous name meaning

¹ For the connotations of Jacob's name see Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p.119, Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.299 and Rodney S. Sadler Jr., 'Genesis', in *The Pentateuch*, Fortress Commentary on the Bible Study Edition, ed. by Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr. and Matthew J. M. Coomber (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), pp.89-136 (p.120). Also footnotes in the NRSV, ESV and NIV.

“May God protect”,² Rebekah’s inquiry eliciting Yahweh’s response ‘the elder shall serve the younger’ (25:22-23), and Jacob likely being aware of this (25:28), permits an alternative interpretation of the birthright sale. Whilst Jacob appears opportunistic, he could be characterised as being driven to fulfil Yahweh’s declared destiny for him (hereinafter ‘destiny characterisation’), in this instance by removing an impediment. This is supported by there being nothing surreptitious about the transaction, Esau consenting and the narrator’s adverse comments against Esau only (25:29-34).

Examples from reception history of the episodes disclose conflicting interpretations of Jacob’s character. The Esau and Jacob narrative *inter alia* influenced Philo to view Jacob an exemplar of ‘an Israelite/Jewish person who strives to obtain wisdom’.³ Selling his birthright identifies Esau as Jacob’s antithesis.⁴ Against reading Jacob as having a dark side, aggadic interpretation portrays the Midrashic Jacob positively.⁵ Struggles in Rebekah’s womb are ‘between good (Jacob) and evil (Esau)’.⁶ The birthright episode is creatively reimagined as Esau mocking the ‘theological concept of resurrection’.⁷ Targum Jonathan’s interpretation of Hosea 12 in respect of Jacob, including his birth struggles (Hos. 12:3), counteracts any negative image by presenting Jacob as a role

² Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), p.183 for quote and Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 19-50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1995) [eBook Version], pp.169-170.

³ Elisa Katariina Uusimäki, ‘A Mind in Training: Philo of Alexandria on Jacob’s Spiritual Exercises’, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, 27.4 (2018), 265-288 (Online Version) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0951820718786198>> [accessed 11/07/23], p.19.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.9.

⁵ David Jeremy Zucker, ‘Jacob in Darkness (and Light): A Study in Contrasts’, *Judaism*, 35 (1986), 402-413 (p.403).

⁶ *ibid.*, p.404.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.405.

model 'for religious transformation and the return to God'.⁸ Conversely, a contemporary approach using 'perpetrator studies' as an interpretative framework, considered reception of Genesis 25 and 27 in popular sermons exonerating Jacob and Rebekah. With the aim of understanding 'the issue of perpetration within the victim's context but from the point of view of the perpetrators', it concluded Esau was the injured party with Jacob the perverter of justice.⁹

Both episodes are represented in visual art.



Lisle Gwynn Garrity, *Gripping*.

Garrity is a contemporary Christian artist. Her description of her poster includes Jacob's hand becoming our hand, 'forcing us to confront the ways in which we, too, grip for power, control, and entitlement.'¹⁰

⁸ Jacques van Ruiten, 'The Image of Jacob in the Targum of Hosea 12', *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 43 (2012), 595-612 (pp.595-596, 604-605, 607-609, 612).

⁹ Gerrie F. Snyman, 'Readers' Disgust in the Case of Rebekah, Jacob, Isaac, and Esau: Perverters of Justice?', *Old Testament Essays*, 33.3 (2020), 445-472 (p.445 for quote).

¹⁰ Lisle Gwynn Garrity, After 2010. *Gripping*. [Online] Available from: <<https://sanctifiedart.org/poster-prints/gripping>> [accessed 3/7/23].



Henderick ter Brugghen, *Esau Sells his Birthright*.

Contrary to Genesis Bruggen envisages Jacob and Esau as identical twins (25:25). Isaac and Rebekah's presence, as bystanders, distorts the birthright narrative from which they are absent raising unnecessary exegetical questions. A dog distinguishes the twins signalling Esau the hunter. Their hands hold a bowl. What appears to bond is the birthright sale which contributes to future rupture and alienation. Esau seems nonchalant. Jacob's facial expression suggests discomfort implying guilt.¹¹ Each painting embodies the trickster characterisation.

Isaac blesses Jacob [Gen. 27]

The alternative trickster and destiny characterisations of Jacob are relevant to this significant character defining episode. Here Jacob is the primary actor in executing a conspiracy of deception against his father Isaac. Hearing that Isaac imminently intends to bestow the primogeniture blessing on Esau, Rebekah initiates a scheme to deceive

¹¹ Henderick ter Brugghen, c.1626. *Esau Sells his Birthright*. [Online] Available from: <<https://mydailyartdisplay.uk/2011/01/11/esau-sells-his-birthright-by-hendrick-ter-brugghe>> [accessed 3/7/23].

Isaac into believing Jacob is Esau and confer the blessing on Jacob instead. Her scheme succeeds. On the trickster characterisation Jacob is confirmed a supplanter in conformity to his name. On the destiny characterisation both Rebekah and Jacob are driven to ensure Yahweh's declared destiny for Jacob is fulfilled. The destiny characterisation furnishes motivation and Yahweh's intentions for Jacob as mitigating factors. It does not exculpate Jacob from being characterised a trickster given his complicity in the deception. An important question is whether Isaac's role in the story permits Jacob's characterisation to be revised.

Isaac can be alternatively viewed as undernoted.

Passive Victim

Old age and blindness contribute to Isaac being regarded weak, dim-witted, confused, and gullible. Contemporary biblical scholarship largely categorises him a fool of the 'theatrical type: the schlemiel'.¹² On this view, in the deception conspiracy, Isaac is a passive victim whose vulnerability Jacob exploits. This substantiates the trickster characterisation of Jacob and exacerbates Jacob's moral culpability.

Stubborn Obstacle

Isaac is the central character of the narrative. His stubborn favouritism towards Esau (Gen. 25:8) is an obstacle to fulfilling Yahweh's declared destiny for Jacob. Isaac's

¹² Anna Rozonoer, 'The Portrait of Isaac in Genesis 27: Between Synchronic and Diachronic Readings of Patriarch's Character', *Verbum Vitae*, 40.2 (2022), 375-385 (p.375).

failure to discharge his patriarchal obligations towards Jacob is the prime cause of Rebekah and Jacob conspiring against him.¹³ This favours the destiny characterisation.

Co-conspirator

Isaac questioning Jacob on whether he really was Esau (27:18-26) demonstrates that he was fully aware of the deception.¹⁴ Indeed, unbeknown to Jacob, Isaac was a co-conspirator with Rebekah, playacting a role to create circumstances that would enable Jacob to fulfil Yahweh's destiny for him.¹⁵ This is a variation on the destiny characterisation.

On the latter two categorisations Isaac's role diminishes the degree of moral turpitude attributed to Jacob. However, given Jacob purposely deceived Isaac, the trickster characterisation remains warranted.

In reception history both Judaism and Christianity have been discomforted by Jacob's deception and have sought to rehabilitate Jacob's moral character. The Sages transformed 'Jacob's voice...and the hands of Esau' (27:22) into a summary of Jewish history in the Roman period, Jacob symbolising persecuted and martyred Jews and Esau symbolising persecuting Rome.¹⁶ Aggadic literature variously views Jacob a reluctant participant in the deception, the deception as heavenly sanctioned and Jacob

¹³ This view is argued and elaborated in Craig A. Smith, 'Reinstating Isaac: The Centrality of Abraham's Son in the "Jacob-Esau" Narrative of Genesis 27', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 31.4 (2001), 130-134.

¹⁴ Rozonoer, 'The Portrait of Isaac', pp.382-383.

¹⁵ This view is argued and elaborated in David J. Zucker, 'Choosing Jacob: The Coded Language of Genesis 27', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 29:2 (2015), 233-240 and David J. Zucker, 'The Deceiver Deceived: Rereading Genesis 27', *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 39.1 (2011), 46-58.

¹⁶ Rabbi Reuven Hammer, *A Year with the Sages: Wisdom on the Weekly Torah Portion*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), pp.29-30.

as deserving the primogeniture blessing.¹⁷ The Book of Jubilees and the Rabbis modify Jacob's responses to Isaac to neutralise the deception and convey a divine plan was behind it.¹⁸ John Chrysostom, concerned that Jacob's deception might provide justification for Christian lies, views Jacob's motivation as 'filial piety' to obtain Isaac's approval and the narrative far-fetched in the absence of divine providence.¹⁹ In Christian tradition, Jacob's success in supplanting Esau has been read as the church being 'heir to the promises fulfilled in Christ' including by Paul and Augustine.²⁰



Alan Falk, *Isaac Blessing Jacob*.

The above watercolour, by a contemporary Jewish artist, accentuates Isaac's old age, blindness, and frailty.²¹ He evokes the dress of hospital patients indicating dependence and vulnerability. Jacob's prominent false hair adds credence to his being Esau

¹⁷ Zucker, 'Jacob in Darkness', pp.405-406.

¹⁸ Yair Zakovitch, *Jacob: Unexpected Patriarch*, Jewish Lives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p.32.

¹⁹ R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010) [eBook Version], pp.256-257.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.258.

²¹ Alan Falk, 2009. *Isaac Blessing Jacob*. [Online] Available from: <https://sinaireno.org/2021/08/21/isaac-follows-in-his-fathers-footsteps/#> [accessed 2/7/23].

confirming deception. Rebekah discreetly looks on witnessing Jacob executing her instructions. Contrastingly, the non-present Esau is portrayed in the background obediently carrying out Isaac's instructions. The red may indicate the slaughter of game hunted to prepare food for his father's enjoyment (27:3-4) and, simultaneously, the death of Esau's expectations from being deprived of the primogeniture blessing. This falls within the passive victim categorisation of Isaac.

Jacob's dream [Gen. 28: 10-22]

En route to Haran, to escape Esau's murderous intentions towards him (Gen. 27: 41-45) and find a wife from his mother's family (Gen. 28:1-5), Jacob stops, falls asleep and dreams. His dream includes a ladder on earth 'reaching to heaven...the angels of God...ascending and descending on it' (28:12). Yahweh speaks to Jacob promising him the land, offspring and blessing as promised to Abraham and Isaac, and undertaking to be with him (28:13-15).²² This is a significant defining moment that inaugurates a change in Jacob's character. By Yahweh speaking to Jacob in a dream-vision, as he similarly spoke to Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 12:1; 15:1; 26:2, 23), what was implied in Yahweh's pre-birth declaration to Rebekah becomes the fully fledged Abrahamic promises that Isaac blessed Jacob with (Gen. 28:3-4). Jacob, who becomes their third bearer, responds by making a vow to honour Yahweh (28:20-22). The *prima facie* conditionality of Jacob's vow evokes the manipulative aspects of Jacob's trickster characterisation. Brueggemann stated 'Jacob will be Jacob'.²³ Against this is conditions are in the nature of Hebrew vows²⁴ and grammar and theology are against

²² cf. Gen. 12:1-3; 17:1-8, 15-19, 21; 22:15-18 (Abraham) and Gen. 26:3-5 (Isaac).

²³ Sadler, 'Genesis', p.121.

²⁴ Arnold, 'Encountering', p.125.

conditionality,²⁵ engendering transformative hopes from Jacob's divine encounter. Scholarly consensus favours a stairway to heaven rather than ladder.²⁶ Another possibility is a 'gradient access road of...the city of gods to the earth'.²⁷ Jacob naming the place Bethel suggests the narrative is a 'temple-orientated text'.²⁸

In reception history Jacob's coming 'to a certain place' (28:11) was understood in aggadic homily and Mishnah as Jacob praying there, confirming Abraham, Isaac and Jacob respectively created the morning, afternoon, and evening prayers 'according to the Tamid offerings in the Temple'.²⁹ Of greater impact in reception is the ladder and angels in Jacob's dream. Philo viewed the ladder as a metaphor for the ups and down of Jacob's future life and life in general.³⁰ Ancient midrashic explanations contain common exegetical motifs. These include a changing of the guard of angels as Jacob moved from Canaan into Paddan-aram, angels in exile on the earth, symbolic representation of the rise and fall of empires and their effect on the Jewish people and being ensnared on the staircase of history.³¹ In John's Gospel Jesus promises his disciples they would see angels ascending and descending upon him (Jn. 1:51). This has been understood as Jesus claiming he 'is now the nexus between God and

²⁵ Hamilton, *Genesis*, pp.227-228.

²⁶ Ellen von. Wolde, 'A Stairway to Heaven? Jacob's Dream in Genesis 28:10-22', *Vetus Testamentum*, 69 (2019), 722-735 (pp.722).

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp.722-723.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p.735.

²⁹ Hammer, *A Year with the Sages*, pp.35-36.

³⁰ James L. Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob: Ancient Interpretations of the Biblical Story of Jacob and his Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p.11.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp.11-24.

humankind'.³² Jacob's dream captured the imagination of William Blake in his Bible illustration.



William Blake, *Jacob's Ladder or Jacob's Dream*.

In Blake's watercolour, the angels are elegant and feminine looking. The majority are not winged. They dance, converse, or embrace. Others carry food, drink, or a book. Some appear like children with their mothers. Blake incorporates ascent and descent, portrays a heavenly stairway, and, notwithstanding earthly activities, imbues his angels with an ethereal quality.³³

³² Hamilton, *Genesis*, p.229.

³³ William Blake, c.1799-1807. *Jacob's Ladder or Jacob's Dream*. [Online] Available from: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1949-1112-2> [accessed 3/07/23].

Jacob's years with Laban and return to Canaan [Gen. 29-32:1-21]

Jacob's 20 years in Paddan-aram disclose commendable characteristics. Love and duty towards family are exemplified by Jacob's love for Rachel, costing him 14 years of service to Laban, and Jacob not neglecting Leah (29:15-35). Despite Laban deceiving, cheating, and exploiting him (as Jacob had acted towards Isaac), Jacob does not reciprocate but shows integrity in their business dealings (29:21-30; 30:35-36; 31:7, 38-39, 41). Yahweh speaking to Jacob, prospering, and protecting him (30:27, 43; 31:3, 6-14, 24, 42) confirms Jacob as successor to the Abrahamic promises. On returning to Canaan and learning Esau will meet him with four hundred men (32:3-6), precautions to protect his family from Esau's potential revenge characterise Jacob as responsible, wise, and pragmatic (32:6-8, 13-20). Jacob's plea for Yahweh to deliver him from Esau evinces humility and is founded on the survival of his offspring being essential for fulfilment of the Abrahamic promises. Humility is authenticated by Jacob acknowledging Yahweh's 'steadfast love and faithfulness' towards him, his unworthiness, and dependence upon Yahweh. The importance of his family's survival to Yahweh's promises is evidenced by Jacob's fear of their annihilation (32:9-12). In terms of character, Jacob has matured from his years in Beer-sheba and now exhibits moral characteristics. The trickster characterisation is no longer apparent. Behaviour *prima facie* open to the trickster charge (30:37-43; 31:20; 32:7-8, 13-20) is more in the character of actions guided by responsibility, wisdom, and pragmatism.

Jacob wrestles near the Jabbok [Gen. 32:22-32]

This ambiguous and mystical episode in which 'a man wrestled with [Jacob] until daybreak' (32:24) is a significant character defining moment for Jacob. The undisclosed

assailant has *inter alia* been interpreted as a hostile 'night or river demon',³⁴ Esau or Esau's guardian angel,³⁵ 'an "everyman" conjuring those with whom Jacob has struggled',³⁶ an angel (Hos. 12:5),³⁷ and God.³⁸ In Jacob's understanding he has 'seen God (*Elohim*) face to face' with his life preserved (32:30) making it a theophany. The focal point of the narrative is, henceforth, Jacob is to be known as Israel as he has 'striven with God and with humans, and...prevailed' (32:28). The change in character inaugurated at Bethel and intensified in Paddan-aram climaxes at Peniel. On God's authority the trickster characterisation is relinquished, corroborated by Jacob being re-named Israel. This evokes Abram's change of name to Abraham (Gen.17:5).

In reception history Jacob being 'struck...on the hip socket' at his thigh muscle, with his consequential limp (32:25, 31-32), has *inter alia* been read by certain Christian faith communities as a paradigm of how God works in believers' lives. God uses struggle to weaken natural strength and facilitate submission to the divine will, thereby moulding character into his likeness.³⁹ Another reading, including in Jewish sources and midrash, views it an assault on Jacob's genitals or other sexual wounding resulting in sexual interpretations.⁴⁰ A contemporary Jewish literary sexual interpretation is Tony

³⁴ Westermann, *Genesis*, pp.229-230. See also Hamilton, *Genesis*, p.297.

³⁵ Sadler, 'Genesis', p.123 and Bradford A. Anderson, 'Jacob, Esau, and the Constructive Possibilities of the Other', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 49:1 (2019), 15-21 (p.19).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Jonathan Grossman, 'Jacob's Struggle at Jabbok – A New Reading', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 34.1 (2020), 134-156 (pp.144-145).

³⁸ Hamilton, *Genesis*, p.295.

³⁹ See, for example, Watchman Nee, *Changed into his Likeness*, (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1967), pp.105-111 (Chapter 14: The Divine Wounding) and Arnold, 'Encountering', p.134.

⁴⁰ S. H. Smith, "'Heel" and "Thigh": The Concept of Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau Narratives', *Vetus Testamentum*, 40:4 (1990), 464-473 (p.427) and David E. Fass, 'Jacob's Limp?', *Judaism*, 38:2 (1989), 143-150 (pp.144-145).

Kushner's Pulitzer Prize winning play 'Angels in America'.⁴¹ Kushner utilises texts from the Hebrew Bible, Jewish mysticism, and other rabbinical writings. It has been viewed as 'a physical and theatrical re-performance of the Jacob cycle' particularly 'Jacob's struggle with the angel'.⁴² Jacob's wrestling is metaphorically compared to the 'unfair battle that closeted gays must wage against their sexual orientation'.⁴³ The visual image of Jacob wrestling an angel is regarded as homoerotic.⁴⁴ Certain artists and sculptors appear to have interpreted the episode sexually. Baudry and Andersen portray feminine angels with respectively Jacob and both Jacob and the angel naked.⁴⁵ Bonnat and Leloir portray masculine angels with respectively the angel and Jacob naked.⁴⁶ Almost puritanical, in light of his later Tahitian paintings, is Gauguin's synthetism inspired painting of the episode.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc, 2013).

⁴² Yair Lipshitz, 'The Jacob Cycle in *Angels in America*: Re-Performing Scripture Queerly', *Prooftexts*, 32:2 (2012), 203-238 (p.204).

⁴³ *ibid.*, p.206.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Paul Jacques Aime Baudry, 1853. *La Lutte de Jacob avec l'ange*. [Online] Available from: <<https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/la-lutte-de-jacob-avec-lange/paul-jacques-aime-baudry/83257>> [accessed 3/07/23] and Hendrik Christian Andersen, c.1900. *The Angel of Life (or Eternal Life)*. [Online] Available from: <<https://www.walksinrome.com/blog/the-hendrik-christian-andersen-museum-rome>> [accessed 3/07/23].

⁴⁶ Léon Bonnat, 1876. *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*. [Online] Available from: <<https://www.daheshmuseum.org/portfolio/leon-bonnatjacob-wrestling-the-angel/>> [accessed 3/07/23] and Alexandre-Louis Leloir, 1865. *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*. [Online] Available from: <<https://gallerix.org/storeroom/154611661/N/634/>> [accessed 3/07/23].

⁴⁷ Paul Gauguin, 1888. *Vision after the sermon*. [Online] Available from: <<https://www.bible.gallery/art/Paul-Gauguin/Vision-after-the-sermon/331/art-info>> [accessed 3/07/23].



Paul Gauguin, *Vision after the sermon*.

This painting of Breton life, and Gauguin's subjective reaction to Jacob wrestling, has been described as 'a subtly dimensioned expression of man's struggle to understand life—his need for reconciliation with his own conscience, with his fellow men, and with God'.⁴⁸

Jacob meets Esau [Gen. 33:1-17]

Jacob meeting Esau commences with fear, centres on reconciliation, and concludes with Jacob settling his family in a different location from Esau. Jacob's fear of Esau's revenge is embodied in his 'bowing himself to the ground seven times' (33:3). Esau unequivocally welcomes Jacob who perceives this as 'like seeing the face of God', evoking the Peniel encounter and further evidencing Yahweh fulfilling his Bethel undertaking to take care of Jacob (Gen. 28:15). This significant episode confirms characteristics already identified in Jacob and defines them further. Integrity appears as candour when Jacob admits his gifts were to secure Esau's favour (33:8). His

⁴⁸ Mathew Herban III, 'The Origin of Paul Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1888)', *The Art Bulletin*, 59:3 (1977), 415-420 (p.420).

obsequiousness and not settling beside Esau, rather than trickster behaviour, demonstrate Jacob subtly employing wisdom and pragmatism to discharge his responsibilities, concomitant with the Abrahamic promises, to ensure his offspring's survival. Esau's present enthusiasm may wane over time. Analysed by reference to politeness theory, Jacob uses slave-master deferential language towards Esau to present himself as Esau's social inferior. This enables Esau to save face and Jacob to achieve his desired objectives.⁴⁹

In reception history Jacob's subservience has caused disquiet in relation to its implications for Isaac's blessing. Judaism found a solution in the blessing's eschatological fulfilment with the early church fathers finding fulfilment in the church.⁵⁰ Jacob's servile behaviour has also been interpreted as Jacob negotiating an ancient Near Eastern Suzerain-Vassal treaty with Esau, himself as vassal, with his gifts representing his returning, or making reparation for, the stolen firstborn blessing.⁵¹ Rabbinical praise for Jacob contrasts with base motives and vile behaviour attributed to Esau.⁵² The New Testament describes Esau as 'an immoral and godless person' (Heb. 12:16). In art, a seventeenth-century Flemish conception of the meeting portrays Esau as armoured supported by a similarly equipped army. Contrastingly, Jacob and his family are portrayed as cowering and defenceless against overwhelming power. Esau appears generous and welcoming but acts from a position of strength.⁵³

⁴⁹ Edward J. Bridge, 'The 'Slave' Is the 'Master': Jacob's Servile Language to Esau in Genesis 33.1-17', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 38.3 (2014), 263-278 (pp.267-268, 277-278).

⁵⁰ Anderson, 'Constructive Possibilities', p.16.

⁵¹ Bridge, 'The 'Slave' Is the 'Master'', pp.264-267.

⁵² Zucker, 'Jacob in Darkness', p.409.

⁵³ Simon de Vos, 1641. *Meeting of Esau and Jacob*. [Online] Available from: <<https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.+paintings/30890>> [accessed 3/07/23].



Simon de Vos, *Meeting of Esau and Jacob*.

Rape of Dinah [Gen. 34] and Joseph story [Gen. 37-50]

Jacob and Esau's reconciliation is the culmination of their story. Jacob's subsequent appearances in Genesis corroborate characteristics identified above. Jacob's reaction to Simeon and Levi's vengeance for the rape of Dinah, by killing the men of Shechem city, *prima facie* is self-centred and displays misogynistic indifference to Dinah's defilement (34:30). However, Jacob fears the ramifications on other tribal groups' attitudes towards him and his family and the endangerment this represents. This is characteristic of Jacob's behaviour prior to and during his meeting with Esau. Jacob is motivated by dual obligations to family and Yahweh. The security of his family is linked to the Abrahamic promises the fulfilment of which is dependent upon his offspring's survival. The gravity with which Jacob viewed this potential jeopardy is expressed in his berating last words to Simeon and Levi (49:5-7). Jacob's favouritism towards Joseph causes a deception to be perpetrated against him by the majority of his sons, redolent

of Jacob's deception of Isaac, and results in Joseph going to Egypt (37: 3-4,12-36). Jacob's clinging onto Benjamin is understandable but wisdom and pragmatism prevail when he permits Benjamin to go to Egypt, motivated by the need to ensure his family's survival (42:4, 38; 43:11-15). In Egypt Jacob's descendants, known as Israelites, are fruitful, prolific, multiply, grow strong and fill the land (Ex. 1:7, 12, 20) thereby fulfilling and perpetuating the patriarchal promises.

Conclusions

This paper has constructed a biblical portrait of Jacob by identifying his characteristics from significant character defining episodes in his life. It has also noted characteristics from other episodes. These, together with examples from the reception history of Jacob including in visual art, disclose that Jacob and events in his life are prone to conflicting interpretations. Jacob's deception of Isaac marred his character and *prima facie* justified Esau characterising Jacob a trickster. Through this hermeneutical lens incidents in Jacob's life have been interpreted as bolstering this negative character assessment. Yet only the deception of Isaac can unequivocally be used to designate Jacob a trickster. Even then there are mitigating albeit not exculpating factors. When Jacob is viewed as being driven by his destiny, declared by Yahweh to Rebekah when Jacob was in her womb, the birthright sale, and even the deception, can be viewed in a more favourable light. Yahweh revealing himself to Jacob at Bethel, making him successor to the Abrahamic promises, inaugurates a change in Jacob's character. Thereafter moral characteristics appear, with Jacob continuing to be driven by his destiny. This now carries with it responsibility to ensure his offspring survive to be the initial realisation of the promises which will continue to be fulfilled by subsequent generations. Jacob being renamed Israel at Peniel is Yahweh's approbation of his

change in character. In this light, behaviour during his years with Laban and on his reunion with Esau, instead of being viewed as the actions of a trickster, can be viewed as authenticating the maturing of Jacob's character, as manifestations of moral characteristics and, above all, as Jacob discharging his responsibilities as the successor to the Abrahamic promises. From the perspective of a person driven by his ordained destiny, the Genesis narrative can be interpreted as portraying Jacob an exemplar of one whose character changes for the better through encountering Yahweh.

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