

# Sex, Sticks, and the Trickster in Gen. 30:31–43

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Jacob's manipulation of Laban's flocks (Gen. 30:31–43) has long stood as a crux to biblical scholars. Several lexical difficulties exist, the account is confusing and its interpretation is elusive. According to C. Westermann, the passage "has presented exegetes with great difficulties, above all because from Jacob's offer to Laban right up to the very last act it is not clear what is going on."<sup>1</sup> The story reports how Jacob deceives Laban out of his share of animals by altering the breeding pattern of Laban's flocks. Jacob does this by placing a series of sticks (מקלות) in the ground near the watering troughs, and consequently, the size of Jacob's herd increases.

Just how this is accomplished is vague. Following S. R. Driver,<sup>2</sup> J. Skinner believes that "the ewes saw the reflexion of the rams in the water, blended with the image of the parti-colored rods, and were deceived into thinking they were coupled with parti-colored males."<sup>3</sup> C. Westermann, on the other hand, sees this passage as depicting "the widespread notion that visual impressions at the moment of conception . . . can affect the progeny of animals."<sup>4</sup> W. Brueggemann is content to describe the pericope as "a series of actions which are beyond explication."<sup>5</sup> R. Sack comments that the "language of this passage is intended to reflect its magical character."<sup>6</sup> Others merely gloss over the difficulties.<sup>7</sup>

Various explanations have been offered for the story's lack of clarity. G. von Rad and J. Wellhausen suggest that the narrative is the result of combined folk stories.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, J. Skinner and J. Scharbert find the story replete with insertions.<sup>9</sup> In a more literary vein, J. P. Fokkelman, M. Fishbane, and G. A. Rendsburg see in the account an allusion to the story of Reuben's mandrakes (30:14–18), which compares

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1. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. J. J. Scullion (Minneapolis, 1981), 479.

2. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (Leiden, 1907), 279, n. 1.

3. John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, ICC* (New York, 1910), 393.

4. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 483; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1972), 302; D. Stuart Briscoe, *The Communicator's Commentary: Genesis* (Waco, TX, 1982), 256; Everett Fox, *Genesis and Exodus: A New English Rendition* (New York, 1990), 131.

5. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, 1973), 257.

6. Robert D. Sack, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Lewiston, 1990), 244.

7. See, e.g., C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, trans. J. Martin (Edinburgh, 1878), 1.293; John T. Willis, *Genesis* (Abilene, 1984), 344–45.

8. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 302; J. Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin, 1963), 41.

9. Skinner, *Genesis*; Josef Scharbert, *Genesis 12–50* (Stuttgart, 1986), 208–10.

the fertility of Jacob's flocks with the fecundity of his wives.<sup>10</sup> While the parallel is apt, it does not address the difficulty of the passage itself.

Several factors contribute to the story's confusion. Among them is the pericope's often ambiguous wording. The word צאן "flocks," for example, occurs frequently and often without a modifier. Consequently, the reader is often perplexed as to whose flocks are being discussed, those of Jacob, of Laban, or of the combined pool. As C. Westermann put it: "Jacob's dexterity is a most complicated process and in part incomprehensible."<sup>11</sup> In addition, five different adjectives are used for multi-colored animals, for which the precise meanings are now obscure.<sup>12</sup> Another factor which renders the passage enigmatic is the flexibility of the Hebrew prepositions employed in the story, making it difficult to define precisely the actions involved.

Yet another stumbling block to understanding the narrative is the confusing manner in which Jacob uses the מקלות "poplar rods" (30:37–43). As the text informs us, the rods are taken, peeled in order to expose their לבנה "whiteness," and placed in the gutters, (and) in the watering troughs, so as to inspire the "heating" of the flocks. The commonest explanation for the function of the poplar rods is that they serve as aphrodisiacs—hence, the parallel to Reuben's mandrakes. In this view, the animals become stimulated by the mere sight of the rods, or through the supposed medicinal properties of the rods,<sup>13</sup> and somehow, either through a miracle, or through a now-lost breeding practice, conceive young. Such a reading was already suggested by Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Malbim, who at a crucial juncture (30:39) inserted the gloss אל מראות המקלות "at the sight of the rods." We can understand their glosses only within the context of a belief in fertility-magic, a view that is best summarized by J. Trachtenberg.

There existed a strong conviction that things seen before and during conception make so powerful an impression on the mind that their characteristics are stamped on the offspring . . . If, on the way home from the ritual bath to which she repaired after her period (a procedure preliminary to intercourse), a woman encounters a dog, her child will have an ugly dog-face, if she meets an ass, it will be stupid, if an ignorant lout, it will be an ignoramus.<sup>14</sup>

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10. J. P. Fokkerman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen, Amsterdam, 1975), 147; Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture* (New York, 1979), 40–62; Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, IN, 1986), 165–66. To their observations I would add that the pericope's allusions are not limited to that of Reuben's mandrakes. For example, Jacob tricks Laban by producing for him an abundance of "weaker" animals (30:42). This may recall the episode of Laban duping Jacob into receiving the "weak-eyed" Leah and not the "ewe-lamb" Rachel (29:24). Further, Jacob's trickery with the flocks occurs when they come לשתות "to drink" (30:38), may allude to the replacement of Leah for Rachel, which occurred after a משתה "feast" (29:22).

11. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 480.

12. The Hebrew words are נקדים, ברדים, טלואים, עקדים, and חום and are usually translated as "spotted, speckled, variegated, striped, and brown." See, e.g., Athalya Brenner, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament*, *JSOT* Supp. 21 (Sheffield, 1982), 169.

13. See, e.g., Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia, 1989), 212.

14. J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 187. See also von Rad, *Genesis*, 297, who believes that the passage is "based on a belief in the magical effect of certain visual impressions"; and Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield, 1981), 101.

As appealing as this theory might be, there are several reasons it should not be used to explain the events in Genesis 30. First, the earliest sources for this magical belief do not appear to antedate the fifth century CE.<sup>15</sup> Although we possess numerous Egyptian, Ugaritic, Mesopotamian, and Aramaic magical texts, nowhere, to my knowledge, do the ancient texts reflect this belief. For example, one might expect to find a reference to such a belief in the numerous Mesopotamian potency incantations and teratological omen texts, where anomalous births are mentioned frequently, but one does not.<sup>16</sup>

Second, if one followed the logic (or perhaps, “illogic”) of this belief, one would conclude that the offspring of Jacob’s flocks would look like poplar rods, or at least as white as them. This, of course, is absurd. The point here is that according to the medieval belief, the visual impression must be of a living human or animal, and not an inanimate object, such as a stick.

Finally, if we accept the notion of fertility magic, it remains to explain why Jacob would put Laban’s stronger animals within the sight of the rods (Gen. 30:41–42) if he thought they would provide fertility. This would be counter-intuitive. Instead, one would expect Jacob to put them in front of his own flocks. Thus, we should refrain from eisegetically reading the belief in fertility magic into this text.

Another contributing factor to the narrative’s confusion is the word רהטים (30:38, 30:41) often translated “gutters” or “runnels.” Just how Jacob employs the רהטים is vague, if not redundant. As the narrator tells us, Jacob set “the rods which he peeled in the רהטים, in the watering troughs (בשקתות)” (30:38). If the רהטים are “gutters” or “runnels,” then the verse places them inside the watering troughs!<sup>17</sup> Targum Onkelos notes the redundancy by treating בשקתות המים “in the watering troughs” as a gloss, and by rendering the verse “he set up in the troughs opposite the flock—the site of the area for watering. . . .”<sup>18</sup> The apparent redundancy has had a similar effect on some modern exegetes who see שקתות as “probably an explanatory gloss which elucidates the word רהטים. . . .”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the enigmatic aspects of the narrative, a solution for the crux is possible. In my view, there are two keys to understanding what transpires in this story: a more accurate and literal interpretation of the phrase אל המקלות (30:39), and an

15. See, e.g., Midrash *Tanḥuma* נשא 13:4, 5. I would like to thank Prof. Marc Bregman of the Hebrew Union College-Jerusalem for bringing this text to my attention. See also Ibn Ezra on this verse: “Many are amazed at what is reported in our verse and say that it can only be described as an out of the ordinary phenomenon (i.e., that the sheep would be influenced merely at the ‘sight of the rods’). Really what Scripture describes is indeed one of the wonders of nature. However, it is a natural law. Even a woman who is created in the image of the angels affects her fetus by what she looks at while she is pregnant.” For additional sources on this view, both ancient and modern, see Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 303, n. 11.

16. See, e.g., Robert D. Biggs, *ŠA.ZI.GA Ancient Mesopotamian Potency Incantations* (Locust Valley, NY, 1967) and Erle Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu* (Locust Valley, NY, 1970).

17. Thus, also the LXX: ἐν τοῖς ληνοῖς τῶν ποτιστηρίων “in the hollows of the watering troughs.”

18. Translation of Bernard Grossfeld, *The Targum Onkelos to Genesis: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* (Wilmington, DE, 1988), 110.

19. See, e.g., Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 483.

awareness of the redactional paralleling between the stories of Jacob and his flocks (Gen. 30:25–43) and Jacob and his wives (Gen. 29:15–30:1–24).<sup>20</sup>

First, concerning the phrase **אל המקלות** (30:39). Although it is frequently translated “at the sight of the rods,”<sup>21</sup> this is not an accurate rendering and seems to have been influenced by the assumed notions of fertility magic discussed above and by the expression **לעיני הצאן** “before the eyes of the flock,” used in reference to the placement of the rods in 30:41. However, unlike 30:41, nowhere in 30:39 do we find a suitable adverb (cf. **לנכה** in 30:38), or a reference to “eyes” or “seeing.” This suggests that we are dealing with an altogether different act. Therefore, I would suggest that the pericope is intelligible only if we take the phrase literally, i.e., “upon the rods.”

It is well known that the preposition **אל**, often translated here as “to,” can also mean “on,” “against,” or “upon.”<sup>22</sup> To list just a few examples: Gen. 4:8, “Cain rose up against (**אל**) Abel”; Exod. 29:12, “. . . then pour out (the rest of the blood) upon (**אל**) the base of the altar”; Lev. 5:9, “. . . and what remains of the blood shall be poured out against (**אל**) the base of the altar”;<sup>23</sup> 1 Sam. 5:4, “. . . (Dagon’s hands and head were) cut off, (and laying) upon (**אל**) the floor”; and 2 Sam. 2:23, “He smote him in/on (**אל**) the belly.” When we read Gen. 30:39 in this vein the passage depicts Jacob employing the poplar rod not as a fertility symbol or aphrodisiac, but rather as a type of “*phallus fallax*.” That is, Jacob allowed only the animals which he did not want to sire offspring to “become heated upon the rods.”

Herders and veterinarians acquainted with the breeding patterns of sheep and goats are well aware that while in estrus, ewes often are inclined to rub their vulvas on trees or sticks.<sup>24</sup> This habit has given rise to the creation of artificial estrus detection mechanisms such as the Chin-Ball mating device and others.<sup>25</sup> Like Jacob in Gen. 30:40, animal breeders often employ such devices along with “teaser animals,”<sup>26</sup> i.e., male animals which are introduced into the flock, to inspire the females into early estrus. This practice is precisely what Jacob exploits in Gen. 30:39–41. Moreover, when in estrus female sheep and goats form clearly identifiable groups even at night, when most of the mating occurs.<sup>27</sup> This behavior would seem to have facilitated Jacob’s trick and may lie behind the mention of only the females of the flock in 30:38: **ויחמנה בבאן לשתות**, “their mating occurred when they came to drink.”<sup>28</sup>

20. See, e.g., Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis*, 165–66.

21. **במקלות** in 30:41.

22. E. Kautzch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 18th ed. (Oxford, 1988), 378.

23. As proposed by Ziony Zevit, “Philology, Archaeology, and a Terminus a Quo for P’s *hattā’t* Legislation,” in David P. Wright et al., eds., *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, IN, 1995), 29–38, esp. 32.

24. Dr. Katherine Haupt and Dr. Doug Hogue, professors of animal behavior, Cornell University, personal communications, August 2, 1991; February 2, 1995.

25. See, e.g., Thomas J. McDonald, *Preparation and Performance of Teaser Animals and Performance of Commercially Available Aids to Estrus Detection* (Ph.D. diss. Cornell University, 1978), 18–24.

26. *Ibid.*, 21–24.

27. *Ibid.*, 16.

28. Though the verb is problematic, I take it to be feminine in gender in agreement with Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 128.

The scenario in Genesis 30, therefore, unfolds as follows.

1) 30:32:

אעבר בכל צאנך היום הסר משם כל שה נקד וטלוא וכל שה חום בכבשים וטלוא ונקד בעזים והיה שכרי

Let me pass through your whole flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted lamb, every dark-colored lamb, and every spotted and speckled she-goat, and such will be my wages.

First, Jacob offers the terms of his contract which Laban subsequently accepts (30:34). Note the careful wording involved. Jacob's request leaves to Laban all the speckled, spotted, and dark-colored ewes and all the spotted and speckled he-goats.

2) 30:35:

ויסר ביום ההוא את התישים העקדים והטלאים ואת כל העזים הנקדות והטלאות כל אשר לבן בו וכל חום בכשבים ויתן ביד בניו

But that same day he removed the striped and spotted he-goats and all the speckled and spotted she-goats, every one that had white on it, and all the dark-colored sheep, and left them in the charge of his sons.

Next, to make matters difficult for Jacob, Laban singles out for himself all of the goats that might produce speckled, spotted, and dark-colored young for Jacob. Laban takes them from Jacob's portion of the animals, but not from his own, for we learn later in 30:40 that Jacob possesses a few oddly colored animals among Laban's flock.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Laban's action leaves Jacob with speckled and dark-colored he-goats, striped and brown she-goats (which must belong to Laban),<sup>30</sup> speckled and spotted male lambs, and speckled and spotted ewes, as well as some dark-colored lambs, presumably of both sexes. From this pool he must produce his desired flocks.

3) 30:36:

וישם ררך שלשת ימים בינו ובין יעקב ויעקב רעה את צאן לבן הגותרת

And he put a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban's flock.

4) 30:37:

ויקח לו יעקב מקל לבנה לח ולוז וערמון ויפצל בהן פצלות לבנות מחשף הלבן אשר על המקלות

Jacob got the fresh shoots of poplar, and of almond and plane, and peeled white stripes in them, laying bare the white of the shoots.

Using Laban's distance to his advantage, Jacob peels white streaks into the poplar rods. Because the poplar was fresh, the white streaks were clearly visible. Interestingly, J. Skinner identified the wood used for the rod as "*styrax officinalis*" (Arabic *lubnāy*), so-called from its exuding a milk-like gum.<sup>31</sup> Skinner's identification both explains the Hebrew מקל לבנה (30:37) by way of a cognate and also provides us

29. The word צאן in 30:40 is ambiguous. I take it to refer to both the sheep and goats among Laban's flocks.

30. They do not constitute Jacob's wages in 30:32.

31. Skinner, *Genesis*, 392, n. 37.

with additional evidence that Jacob constructed a *phallus fallax*. E. Ullendorff's remark is apposite here:

No audience in this day and age nurtured on those Freudian concepts which seem assured, needs to be reminded of the significance of such sexual symbols as sticks and poles and trees, on the one hand, and apples, fruits, woods, hills and thickets, on the other.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the ancient audience would also have picked up on the connection between the מקל "rod" and the phallus, as Hos. 4:10–12 demonstrates:

Truly, they shall eat (ואכלו), but not be sated; they shall be fornicate (הזנו), but not be satisfied, because they have forsaken obeying Yahweh; fornication (זנות), wine, and new wine take the mind of my people: it consults its rod (בעצו), its phallus (מקלו) directs them.

The purpose of the mock phalluses in Gen. 30:37 is clear. Jacob uses them to alter the breeding pattern of Laban's flocks, and thus increase his wages at Laban's expense.

5) 30:38:

ויצג את המקלות אשר פצל ברהטים בשקתות המים אשר תבאן הצאן לשתות לנכח הצאן ויחמנה בבאן לשתות

The rods that he had peeled he set up in the troughs, the water receptacles, from which the flocks came to drink. Their mating occurred when they came to drink.

Jacob places the poplar rods near the watering hole to lure Laban's female animals.<sup>33</sup> Given the constitution of the flock left to him in 30:35, the only female animals to which this verse can refer are the speckled and spotted ewes and the striped and dark-colored she-goats. The next verse rules out three of the four groups.

6) 30:39:

ויחמו הצאן אל המקלות ותלדן הצאן עקרים נקרים וטלאים

and since the flocks mated against the rods, the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted young.

Since the animals brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted young, the animals that mated on the poplar rods must have been Laban's dark-colored she-goats. They, of course, did not bear any offspring. Conversely, only the few speckled and spotted ewes, and the striped she-goats that were not placed near the rods, brought forth young. From these, Jacob took for himself the spotted and speckled ewes, and the spotted and speckled he-goats (cf. 30:32).

7) 30:40:

והכשבים הפריד יעקב ויתן פני הצאן אל עקד וכל חום בצאן לבן וישת לו עדרים לבדו ולא שתם על צאן לבן

But Jacob dealt separately with the sheep; he made these animals face the striped and all the wholly dark-colored animals in Laban's flock. And so he produced special flocks for himself, which he did not put with Laban's flocks.

32. E. Ullendorff, *BSOAS* 42/3 (1979), 449.

33. It is clear in 30:36 that the flocks involved are Laban's.

As for the sheep that were produced, the narrator informs us that Jacob then separated them and made them face the striped and dark-colored animals in Laban's flock. The expression used in 30:40, פְּנֵי הַצֹּאֵן, does not mean that Jacob placed the animals "face to face," for which we would expect פְּנֵים אֶל פְּנֵים, but rather that Jacob stationed them behind Laban's animals in a position more conducive to mating.<sup>34</sup> This explains the author's use of the preposition עַל in 30:40: "he did not put these animals upon (עַל) Laban's flocks."<sup>35</sup> Note also that the implication here is that Jacob did not do this with Laban's goats, but rather compelled them to mate only on the rods. This is precisely what we deduced above in reference to 30:39. Thus, the key to Jacob's success was that he exploited Laban's striped and dark-colored sheep to produce his wages.

8) 30:41–42:

והיה בכל יחם הצאן המקשרות ושם יעקב את המקלות לעיני הצאן ברהטים ליחמנה במקלות: ובהעטיף הצאן לא ישים והיה העטפים ללבן והקשרים ליעקב

Moreover, when the sturdier animals were mating, Jacob would place the rods in the troughs, in full view of the animals, so that they mated against the rods; but with the feeble animals he would not place them there. Thus the feeble ones went to Laban and the sturdy to Jacob.

In addition, Jacob distinguishes from Laban's flock those sheep which bred early (stronger) and those which bred late (weaker) and allows only the former to mate against the poplar rods. Thus, Laban receives an abundance of feeble animals.

Unlike the theories of magic and aphrodisiac, which fail to explain why Jacob would put Laban's stronger animals within sight of the rods if he thought they would provide fertility, the interpretation proposed here provides an answer. Jacob allows the stronger of Laban's animals to mate upon the rods so that they produce no young, while allowing the weaker of Laban's flock to produce without interruption. This naturally resulted in a proliferation of Laban's weaker animals. As Gen. 30:42 informs us, "the feeble ones went to Laban and the sturdy to Jacob." Since Laban's animals and Jacob's animals would not have been confused (they were distinguished already in 30:32), Jacob's sturdier animals in 30:42 cannot have been obtained from Laban's flocks. Instead, the mention of Jacob's sturdier animals must refer to those animals that resulted from natural reproduction among his own flocks.

Some support for the interpretation proposed here also comes from the use of רהטים, typically translated "runnels." The word is rare, occurring only three times in the Bible (Gen. 30:41, Exod. 2:16, Song 7:6). Of these, its appearance in Song 7:6 deserves mention because of its figurative use to describe a king's captivation with דלת ראשך "locks of your hair." The translation of רהטים as "flowing (hair)" is not unreasonable and may be also what is suggested in our story. Indeed, in Song 6:5 the poet describes the woman's hair by blending the imagery of sheep and flowing water: "Your hair is a flock of goats streaming down from Gilead." According to

34. So also the Targum's ויהב בריש ענא כל דרגול וכל דשחום בענא דלבן "And he placed at the head of the flock every streaked and every dark-colored of Laban's sheep."

35. It is of interest in this regard that the Magna Parva of manuscript Jerusalem, National and University Library MS Heb 24<sup>a</sup> 5720, formerly MS Sassoon 507, reads: "על צאן לבן ד דחזי להון עם" (One of) the four cases in which עם is wrongly suggested (for על)."

M. Pope, the mention of a king in Song 7:6c can be applied to the tresses of hair “bound with ribbons rather than the king tangled in the tresses.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, he relates this verse to Song 4:1 where “the lady’s hair is related to the action of moving water. . . .”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the sensual connotation of this word can be seen by the fact that it appears both in a love song (Song 7:6) and in a mating scene (Gen. 30:38).

As mentioned above, Jacob quite redundantly sets “the rods which he peeled in the רהטים, in the watering troughs.” If the רהטים are runnels, then the verse would place the runnels in the watering troughs. However, if “flowing ([goat?] hair)” is implied here, then the passage would describe how Jacob fashioned models of goats’ genitalia or of entire animals. Indeed, Rashi notes that the לוז “almond tree” grows אגוזים דקים “small nuts” (30:38).<sup>38</sup> The construction of mock animals also would explain the mention of three types of wood in Gen. 30:37 about which G. von Rad remarks: “Less clear is why he mentions at once three different kinds of trees in describing a secondary circumstance.”<sup>39</sup> This peculiarity forces C. Westermann to conclude that the various types of wood “have no function in the narrative and may well be part of the expansion.”<sup>40</sup> However, the construction of models with wood that has aromatic properties also explains the appeal of the sticks to the flocks.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, the proposed reading of רהטים as “flowing (hair)” also fits the use of goats and goat hair as established motifs for trickery in the Jacob narrative. For example, Jacob deceived Isaac by putting goat hair on his hands (27:16). Later, Jacob’s sons tricked him into believing that his son Joseph was killed by painting his tunic with the blood of a he-goat (37:31). When Judah is duped into sleeping with Tamar, a kid from the flock is also involved (38:17, 23). Jacob’s use of goat hair in an act of trickery, therefore, follows an established leitmotif.

Nevertheless, even if one is inclined to read רהטים only as “runnels,” the interpretation proposed here finds additional support in the story’s frequent allusions to Reuben and his mandrakes and Laban’s wedding trick. In the light of Jacob’s manipulation of the flocks, for example, the mandrakes and the rods are understood better not as aphrodisiacs, but rather as “fertile items of irony.” The mandrakes are eaten by the barren Rachel, but it is Leah who conceives. The rods perform a similar function. They are meant to inspire Laban’s older animals to copulate, but to no effect.

Moreover, as W. Brueggemann observes—and this takes us back to the second key to understanding this story—Jacob’s manipulation of Laban’s herds also mirrors Laban’s deception of Jacob in 29:21–30.<sup>42</sup> Just as Laban deceives Jacob into receiving Leah (lit. “strong/wild cow”) instead of Rachel as a wife, it is the “stronger” of Laban’s flocks which Jacob places before the impotent rods. Similarly, just as Laban tricks Jacob into receiving the fertile but “weak-eyed” Leah (29:14–30), Jacob

36. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs, AB* (New York, 1977), 630.

37. Loc. cit. Ibn Ezra also connects the two passages.

38. Is it possible that Rashi used דקים “small” instead of קטנים “small” in order to bring out the word’s connection with bowels? Cf. Talmud Yerushalmi, *Berakhot* 2:4d.

39. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 297.

40. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 483.

41. The aromatic nature of the various types of wood involved also may play a role in attracting the animals (cf. the use of לבנה as incense). Dr. Doug Hogue, personal communication, February 2, 1995.

42. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 249.

avenges Laban by allowing only the “weaker” of the flocks to reproduce.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, both the mandrakes and the rods serve similar literary functions.

When we add to this observation the fact that רחל “Rachel” means “ewe lamb” and לאה “Leah” can also mean “wild cow,” we may see in Jacob’s manipulation of the flocks additional evidence for the allusion to the story of how Laban tricked Jacob into mating with Leah. Indeed, the meanings of their names are played upon quite often in the story in order to underscore the connection between the two pericopes.<sup>44</sup> For example, when Jacob first sets his eyes on the “ewe lamb” Rachel, the narrator informs us that רחל באה עם הצאן “Rachel came with the sheep” (Gen. 29:9). Of note here is an attempt to portray Rachel as a bleating lamb, i.e., he sees her as a “ewe lamb baa-ing with the sheep!”<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, Rachel and Leah are equated with flocks in 31:4 where we read: “and Jacob called Rachel and Leah to the field unto his flock.” The word שדה “field” is clumsy here, lacking a preposition. The Hebrew is somewhat ambiguous, permitting the reading “and Jacob sent and called (to) Rachel and Leah (in) the field, to his flock” (meaning Rachel and Leah).

Moreover, additional support for the use of the preposition אל as “in/against/upon” in reference to the sexual activity of Jacob’s flocks (Gen. 30:39), is foreshadowed when Jacob says to Laban: “Give me my wife for my days are fulfilled, that I may go into her (אליה)” (29:21). Herein also lies a subtle pun on Leah’s name, which occurs again in 29:23.

We may add to this other puns on Rachel and Leah’s names in Gen. 31:38, where Jacob complains to Laban: “these twenty years have I been with you, your ewes (רחליך)<sup>46</sup> and your she-goats have never miscarried, and the rams (אילי צאנך) of your flock have I not eaten (לא אכלתי).” Jacob alludes here to the fact that all the years that he was with Laban, Rachel did not produce children, and yet he had little interest in Leah. The allusion to his lack of interest in Leah perhaps is underscored by the use of the root אכל “eat,” a well-known euphemism for sexual intercourse (e.g., Hos. 4:10 above).<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, whether a pun on אכל exists here or not, the parallel remains striking.

Therefore, by manipulating the breeding patterns of Laban’s flocks in Gen. 30, Jacob repaid Laban according to the principle of *lex talionis*.<sup>48</sup> In Genesis 29 Laban tricks Jacob into receiving the “wild cow” Leah instead of the “ewe lamb” Rachel. In Genesis 30, Jacob tricks Laban into giving him the lambs of his desire.

43. This parallel is brought out by Rashi, who notes that the Targum treats the words עטפים “weak” and קשרים “strong” as denoting “late born” and “early born,” respectively.

44. For a similar use of animal names in Arabic literature, see J. Stekevych, “Name and Epithet: The Philology and Semiotics of Animal Nomenclature in Early Arabic Poetry,” *JNES* 45 (1986), 89–124.

45. This pun may perhaps be found in Gen. 29:6 as well. Note how the pun in both verses is brought out by a change in accent. In 29:6 we have a feminine singular participle with the accent on the second syllable. In 29:9 it is a third person feminine singular perfect verb with the accent on the first syllable. For a similar portrayal in Greek literature using βᾶ see Hermippus, *Comicus*, 19.

46. This pun, but not the others, is noted by Sacks, *Genesis*, 252.

47. See also Gen. 39:6; Exod. 2:20; 32:6, Dan. 10:3; Prov. 30:20.

48. Cf. Philip J. Nel, “The Talion Principle in Old Testament Narratives,” *JNSL* 20 (1994), 21–29.

Support for this allusion also comes from the very item used in the trickery—מקל לבנה לח “a fresh rod of poplar” (30:37), which plays on the name לבן “Laban.” Indeed, the text goes out of its way to tell us that Jacob peeled white streaks (לבנות) in the rods so as to reveal their whiteness (הלבן) (30:37).

There are additional parallels. Note, for example, the similarity between Laban’s underhanded switch of Jacob’s wives, which occurs at a משתה “drinking feast” (29:22), and Jacob’s switch of Laban’s flocks, which occurs when they come לשתות “to drink” (30:38). Both stories also involve birthing (ילד; e.g., 29:34–35; 30:39). Also, in 30:16 Leah “hires” (שכר) Jacob with her mandrakes with the intention of conceiving. Twice in the story of Jacob’s manipulation of Laban’s flocks are his animals referred to as “wages” (שכר; 30:28, 33). In addition, Jacob must “serve” (עבד) Laban for his wives (29:25, 27) just as he must “serve” (עבד) Laban for his flocks (30:29). Moreover, we are told that after the mandrake episode Jacob sleeps with Leah at night (30:15–16). Nighttime is when most mating occurs among animal herds.<sup>49</sup> We may add to this the fact that Rachel is the younger, and Leah the older (29:18), which is an obvious parallel to his giving of the later bred animals to Laban, while keeping those earlier bred for himself (30:41–43).

These puns and linguistic parallels strongly suggest that we connect the story of Jacob and his wives with the that of Jacob and his flocks, and that we see in their parallels an illustration of *lex talionis*. As N. Sarna remarked, we may see the similarities and wordplays as conveying “the idea of Jacob beating Laban at his own game.”<sup>50</sup>

The somewhat bawdy subject matter of this passage may have contributed to the obscuring of its interpretation. It is well known that euphemism can be a factor in shaping the biblical text. For example, the word שיניהם “their urine” occurs twice in the Bible (2 Kgs. 18:27; Isa. 36:12), both times with a Qere מימי רגליהם “water of their legs.” Though no Qere form occurs in our text, the deviant sexual act suggested by the expression אל המקלות “upon the rods,” may have appeared as unsavory to later commentators, or perhaps more likely, was at that time already misunderstood. The latter is what C. Westermann considered when he opined that the text was “handed on in an incomplete state because herdsmen’s skills of this sort were no longer understood or of interest.”<sup>51</sup>

One final note regarding the confusion and ambiguity in this pericope; it may be intentional. S. Geller has convincingly shown enigma to be a literary device elsewhere in the Jacob cycle (32:23–33).<sup>52</sup> It may be that the same feature is exhibited here to impress upon the reader a sense of deception.<sup>53</sup> As W. Brueggemann notes: “In interpreting the narrative, attention should be given to the ambiguous and ambivalent *character of Jacob*. He is at times an unseemingly deceptive man.”<sup>54</sup> There-

49. McDonald, *Preparation and Performance of Teaser Animals*, 16.

50. Sarna, *Genesis*, 212.

51. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 480.

52. Stephen A. Geller, *JANES* 14 (1982), 37–60.

53. Note also that the לוז “almond” of Gen. 30:37 also suggests “deception” by its very meaning (cf. Isa. 30:12; Prov. 2:15; 4:24).

54. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 251. The italics are the author’s.

fore, we may see the author's apocopated and vague style as representing Jacob's quick and confusing actions. The clever use of ambiguity forces us to rethink at every step both Jacob and Laban's double-talk. We are tricked just as Laban is tricked, and thus, we participate in the story. This is humor at its best. Indeed, as Brueggemann remarks, the story's "inherent playfulness is heightened by the fact that it is partisan lore. It permits the Israelites not only to laugh with the success of their hero, but to laugh at Laban."<sup>55</sup> And laugh we must, when we realize that the solution to the crux rests on a literal interpretation of אל המקלות as "upon the rods."

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55. Ibid., 250.