Psychological Forces and Spiritual Encounters: The Bruising and Breakthrough of Jacob

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ABSTRACT

Jacob was shaped in his formative years by his manipulative mother and passive father. His father, in turn, had been significantly bruised by the trauma of the Akedah. The effects of this horrific event are interpreted through psychological theories, along with Winnicott's notion of the "False Self" (to understand the impact of his dominant mother on Jacob). The turning point in Jacob's life is his encounter with the "angel of God" at Peniel, which leaves him lame physically but "straightened out" in his relationship with God, thus, enabling him to take on the role of the father of the nation of Israel. He lived to 147 years and passed on to his descendants the blessing he had inherited. This study shows how psychological pressures may negatively influence (and be rescinded in) the life of someone who plays a critical role in the purposes of God.

KEYWORDS: Psychology, trauma, Jacob, spiritual encounter

A INTRODUCTION

Psychological Hermeneutics is an area of growing interest in biblical studies. Although the emotions and relationships of biblical characters are not always clearly defined, some new understanding of the text can be gained through psychological theories. This study is of particular interest to me as Jacob, despite having had various psychological problems in his youth, seems to emerge as a significant leader in the purposes of God. If one looks for a defining moment when his character was "changed," the experience at Peniel, wrestling with (an angel of) God, seems to be critical.

I have been studying biblical lament for many years, and have observed the ego strength that emerges when one is prepared to engage with God authentically, which includes "wrestling through" when God seems to be inactive in one's life. Perseverance, that is, not being prepared to give up the relationship (with God), is vital. And as I did a close reading of the Jacob account

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in Genesis, I noticed the same spirit of perseverance, first in Jacob's labour for Laban, and then when refusing to give up the wrestle with "the angel of God."

Thus, this study seeks to engage in "a close reading" of Genesis (particularly, 21-35) to validate my hypothesis. Jacob's early, formative years left him twisted by the influence of destructive family relationships, particularly as a result of his manipulative mother and passive father.[1] In the following sections, the impact of each of these relationships on his "self-identity" is discussed. Finally, the re-shaping of his essential person is considered through his encounter with "the angel" at Peniel, the crisis which left him forever with a limp, a symbol of his new relationship with God and his new identity. It would seem that, indeed, a person with a poor beginning in terms of relationships was able to become the father of nations. As hypothesised, the critical experience, which undid the trauma of the Akedah and its impact on him through his father, was another momentous occasion – when God met him in a face-to-face encounter, transforming him and enabling him to become the recipient of the great blessing he so earnestly sought.

B THE AKEDAH AND ITS IMPACT ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The binding of Isaac on the altar by his father, Abraham, impacted not only Isaac but also the next generation. The biblical text does not indicate whether either parent helped Isaac deal with the effects of the trauma. There is no indication that Sarah helped or that Abraham even explained to his son why he was behaving in such an appalling way. It has been shown that older adults may have less intense emotional reactions to interpersonal tensions than younger people[2] and appraise daily events as less stressful than do younger adults.[3] Consequently, both parents may have downplayed (or under-estimated) the emotional scarring of the Akedah on Isaac.

First, we will consider the effect of trauma of the Akedah on Isaac. His age is not mentioned in the biblical account of the "near sacrifice." The English translation suggests that Isaac was "a boy" at the time; the Hebrew word can mean anything from an infant to a young man of military age (cf. 1 Chr 12:28).

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1 Jacob's character was, of course, also shaped by his twin-brother, Esau, his uncle Ishmael, his uncle Laban, the absence of his paternal grandmother Sarah and by his children (particularly Joseph). Space precludes the discussion of all these relationships in this article.

2 Kira S. Birditt, Karen L. Fingerman and David M. Almeida, "Age Differences in Exposure and Reactions to Interpersonal Tensions: A Daily Diary Study," *Psychology and Aging* 20/2 (2005): 330–331.

3 David M. Almeida and Melanie C. Horn, "Is Daily Life More Stressful during Middle Adulthood?" in *How Healthy Are We?* (ed. Orville G. Brim, Carol D. Ryff and Ronald C. Kessler; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 425–451.

However, a tradition that goes back to Josephus[4] claims that Isaac was at least thirty years' old because Abraham, being aware of his own decreasing physical power, required Isaac to "carry the wood" (22:6).[5]

If we consider Isaac to be child or a young boy, psychological theories indicate that he would have been highly traumatised by the realisation that his main care-giver (his father) was prepared to inflict violence upon him. Traumatic experiences impact the development of the neurons and their ability to function. Common responses to trauma in children include physiological hyper-arousal and dissociation.[6] Further, the risk of developing a variety of neuropsychiatric symptoms in adolescence and adulthood is significantly increased.[7] Children who have undergone such traumas tend to be hyper-reactive and overly sensitive as a result of being in a constant state of fear[8] and if they were exposed to "sudden, unexpected man-made violence" (as Isaac was), they tend to be more vulnerable to anxiety.[9] The text (22:7) makes clear that Isaac had no prior understanding of what was to happen to him that day or why and father did not seem to be hesitant to commit this act; he "rose early in the morning" (22:3), seeming almost eager to obey the command he had been given (v.2). Thus, it would have indeed been experienced as an "unexpected man-made violence" with all the resultant ill-effects.

Other possible negative consequences on a child who has experienced abuse are severe attachment problems.[10] Although Abraham and Isaac "do the right thing" (as expected by God), there is no indication of a particular personal relationship between them. Even at the time of the Akedah, Abraham seems to exult more in God's *provision* than in the *deliverance of his son* (22:14). Later, when the servant of Abraham brings Rebekah to Isaac, the text does not indicate that Isaac introduces her to his *father*. Rather, he "brought her into the tent of Sarah, his (deceased) *mother*" (24:67). Again Abraham "does the right thing" and sends away his other children so that they would not be a threat to Isaac (21:14; 25:6b) and similarly Isaac does the "right thing," when together with

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4 Isaac is also thirty years' old in the South English Legendary but the principle medieval conduit for Josephus seems to have been Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*. See Minnie Wells, "The Age of Isaac at the Time of the Sacrifice," *Modern Language Notes* 54 (1939): 575–582.

5 All biblical references are to Genesis, unless otherwise indicated.

6 Bruce D. Perry, Ronnie A. Pollard, Toi L. Blaicley, William L. Baker and Domenico Vigilante, "Childhood Trauma, the Neurobiology of Adaptation, and 'Use-dependent' Development of the Brain: How 'States' Become 'Traits'," *Infant Mental Health Journal* 16/4 (1995): 271.

7 Eitan D. Schwartz and Bruce D. Perry, "The Post-traumatic Response in Children and Adolescents," *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 17/2 (1994): 311–326.

8 Perry et al., "Childhood Trauma," 278.

9 Ibid., 273.

10 Ibid., 276–277.

Ishmael, he buries his father (25:9). After Abraham's death, there is no indication that Isaac mourned, in contrast to his grief after his mother's death (24:67b). Thus, there does seem to be a non-relationship (lack of emotional attachment) with his father.

In contrast, Isaac seems to have enjoyed an over-protective relationship from his mother, Sarah, who insisted that Abraham send away Hagar and Ishmael (21:10). This probably resulted in Isaac having an unhealthy "over-attachment" to his mother and could have been the result of the Akedah. As Perry et al. point out,[11] if the parent is the cause of a significant distress, the child moves along the dissociative continuum. "Dissociation" is described as "disengaging from stimuli in the external world and attending to an 'internal' world."[12] Putnam[13] adds that "daydreaming, fantasy, and depersonalization" are all characteristic of this state. Dissociation could account for Isaac's passivity as is evident in his failure to choose his own wife (24:1–9) and his lack of involvement in the life of his one son (25:28).

If at the time of the Akedah Isaac was older (in his 20s), the effects of the trauma would have been somewhat mitigated. Rabbinic literature[14] suggests that at the time of the Akedah, Isaac was 26 years' old. Support for an older age for Isaac at the Akedah is suggested by the order of events in the biblical account. Just before the Akedah in Gen 22, Ishmael (14 years older than Isaac, 16:16; cf. 21:5) had married (21:21). Sarah died after the Akedah at 127 years, at which time Isaac would have been 37 years. Further, Isaac was 40 years' old when he married Rebekah.

However, the impact of the Akedah on even an adult Isaac would have been significant, shaping his life thereafter. The psychologist, Peter Levine[15] argues that being "physically restrained" results in trauma, causing intense fear and a sense of "overwhelming helplessness." Even the few minutes in which Isaac may have lain on the altar contemplating his death would have aroused the physiological changes associated with trauma. Such physiological arousal is accompanied by "profound and lasting changes in emotion, cognition, and

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11 Ibid., 279.

12 Ibid., 270.

13 Frank W. Putnam, "Dissociative Disorders in Children and Adolescents: A Developmental Perspective," *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 14 (1991): 519–531.

14 Seder Olam Rabbah 1. https://www.sefaria.org/Seder_Olam_Rabbah.1?ven=Sefaria_Community_Translation&vhe=Seder_Olam,_Warsaw_1904&lang=bi.

15 Peter A. Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 48.

memory."[16] Assumptions that "the world is safe" are destroyed and the person loses a positive sense of the self.[17] As Frechette notes, "The victim's moral compass [is confused]" leaving him with the (often unconscious) feeling that he "deserves to be mistreated."[18] Even long after the event, the person may experience unrealistic anxiety, fear, helplessness and shame associated with beliefs about the self as being worthless.[19] Trauma also leaves the victim unable to relate to others with trust.[20]

Intergenerational relations (as between Isaac and his parents) lie on a continuum of "solidarity" through "ambivalence" to "conflict."[21] The concept of "solidarity" describes and explains the development of emotionally close bonds among family members as well as the role of former attachment experiences from childhood.[22] Ambivalence implies a dynamic interplay between "difference" and "communality" along with autonomy and dependence.[23] Ambivalences are conflicting experiences that are relevant for personal identity or for the personality.[24] The emergence of basic differences in the lifestyles of children can be a source of ambivalence in their relationships with their parents. However, this need not be seen as negative; rather ambivalence can have liberating and socially creative consequences.[25]

In terms of the impact of a traumatic experience (such as the Akedah) on different generations, research shows that the oldest generation generally reports less "negative-quality relationships" than the middle and younger generations.[26]

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16 Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 33–34.

17 Herman, *Trauma,* 51.

18 Christopher Frechette, "Destroying the Internalized Perpetrator: A Healing Function of the Violent Language against Enemies in the Psalms," in *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions: Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond* (ed. Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Dochhorn and Else Holt; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2014), 72.

19 Frechette, "Destroying the Internalized Perpetrator," 76.

20 Ibid.

21 See Vern L. Bengtson, Roseann Giarrusso, J. Beth Mabry and Merril Silverstein, "Solidarity, Conflict, and Ambivalence: Complementary or Competing Perspectives on Intergenerational Relationships?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64 (2002): 568–576.

22 Eva-Maria Merz, Carlo Schuengel and Hans-Joachim Schulze, "Intergenerational Solidarity: An Attachment Perspective," *Journal of Aging Studies* (2007): 177.

23 Kurt Lüscher, "Ambivalence: A 'Sensitizing Construct' for the Study and Practice of Intergenerational Relationships," *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 9/2 (2011): 194.

24 Lüscher, "Ambivalence," 195–196.

25 Ibid., 199.

26 Kira S. Birditt, Lauren A. Tighe, Karen L. Fingerman, and Steven H. Zarit, "Intergenerational Relationship Quality across Three Generations," *The Journals of Gerontology* 67/5 (2012): 627.

This suggests that Abraham (and possibly Sarah, as earlier mentioned) might have underestimated the negative effects of the Akedah, relative to Isaac's perception[27] (and that of his son, Jacob, in years to come). On the impact of the Akedah on Jacob, it has been shown that emotional reactions [to previous family events] are transmitted from older to younger generations.[28]

The one redeeming feature of the Akedah is that God stopped the execution of the killing of Isaac. In traumatic events, "survivors often have the greatest contempt for passive bystanders,"[29] including God (for having allowed the violation to occur or as having intended it). Such a notion may suggest to the survivor that God allowed the horrific event because God does not value him/her. In Isaac's case, we are not sure that Abraham explained afterwards why he had bound his son on the altar; and if he did, that could complicate Isaac's ability to trust God and relate to God.

C JACOB'S FATHER, ISAAC

Jacob's behaviour was significantly shaped by his parents, Isaac and Rebekah. As discussed, Isaac must have been significantly impacted by the trauma of the Akedah and the effect of this event continued to shape his life and those of the next generation.

1 Isaac, the passive patriarch

With his father being the one who received the covenant from YHWH and passed on YHWH's special blessing to his descendants (12:2–3), and with his son being the founder of the nation of Israel (Gen 48–49), Isaac is sometimes "lost in the middle." Indeed, Alter[30] refers to Isaac as "the most passive of all the patriarchs . . . the pale and schematic patriarch . . . preceded by the exemplary founder, followed by the vivid struggler." In Alter's opinion, the only action Isaac initiates

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[27] Solidarity theory emphasises positive qualities of the tie between different generations; see Karen L. Fingerman, Jori Sechristb and Kira Birditt, "Changing Views on Intergenerational Ties," *Gerontology* 59/1 (2013): 65. It suggests that parents are more emotionally invested in the relationship with their children than vice versa. Parents see their children as continuations of themselves, whereas children desire greater independence from their parents; see Adam Shapiro, "Revisiting the Generation Gap: Exploring the Relationships of Parent/adult-child Dyads," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 58 (2004):127–146.

[28] Gerald R. Patterson, Lew Bank, and Mike Stoolmiller, "The Preadolescent's Contributions to Disrupted Family Process," in *From Childhood to Adolescence: A Transitional Period?* (ed. Raymond Montemayor, Gerald R. Adams and Thomas P. Gullotta; Newbury Park: Sage, 1990).

[29] Frechette, "Destroying the Internalized Perpetrator," 81.

[30] Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton and Co., 1996), 115, n.11; 131.

is to pray for his wife in her barrenness (25:21). Apart from that, he is "presented as a bound victim, and then a blind old man."[31] Reiss[32] also contends that Isaac appears to be "the embodiment of passivity, even at critical moments, such as when his father Abraham was about to sacrifice him." Again, Isaac is not even present at the "betrothal scene" when his future wife is encountered (the only example in the biblical text in which the future bridegroom is not present). This suggests that he would be the passive party in the marriage.

Isaac's physical passivity might not have been characteristic of him in his younger years, although it is true that he was a rich man (26:13) with many servants to do much of the physical work in his life (as the owner of many animals, 26:14). His passivity indeed could have been an after-effect of the trauma of the Akedah. Reiss[33] argues that Isaac could no longer trust others (such as his wife and son, Jacob) as a result of having been deceived by his father, Abraham, at the time of the Akedah. Indeed, much of who Isaac became could possibly be linked to that trauma.

In his later years, Isaac clearly became physically inactive as a result of his blindness. He would have been 100 years' old[34] when his eyes became "dim so that he could not see" (27:1) and thus could not distinguish visually between his two sons. However, he was still able to think well and voiced his doubts about the speed at which "Esau" returned with the meat (27:20a) and about "Esau's" voice. Soon after Esau returned to receive the blessing, Isaac understood that he had been deceived by Jacob (27:35).

1a Isaac's fearful temperament (and lack of faith in God?)

In Gen 26:2, YHWH appears to Isaac and instructs him on where to live. However, Isaac does not trust that YHWH will protect him and his wife in that place (Gerar) and thus he lies to the local men, saying his wife is in fact his sister (26:6). After he moves to Beersheba, YHWH appears to him again (26:24) and emphasises again to Isaac that he must "not fear for I am with you and will bless you" (26:24).

Associated with his possible lack of faith in God is his apparent slowness, spiritually. Although his father had ensured that Isaac marry a woman from their own community (i.e. not a pagan), Isaac does not take the same care concerning the marriage of his son Esau, resulting in life being "bitter" for Isaac and his wife

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31 Alter, *Genesis*, 131.

32 Moshe Reiss, "Esau, Son of Isaac and Grandson of Abraham: The Model of a Faithful Son," *The Asbury Journal* 69/2 (2014): 150–151.

33 Reiss, "Esau," 152.

34 Isaac was 60 years' old when the twins were born (after 20 years of marriage without children, 25:20, 26) and assuming that 26:34–35 precedes chronologically the next verse (27:1), the twins were at least 40 years' old when Isaac gave his blessing (to Jacob).

(26:35). Further, Alter suggests that Isaac may have been a man of strong physical appetites, as is apparent in his love of wild meat (25:28) and his reckless display with his wife (supposedly his sister) in public (26:8).[35] This hedonistic motivation seems to have swayed his judgement.

Nevertheless, Isaac does seem to be diligent in ensuring that he gives the blessing to the son he understands to be the rightful recipient. Although Esau's marriage to a Hittite woman causes trouble for his parents (26:34), Isaac recognises him as the "first-born" (27:1) and thus seeks to verify that he is fulfilling God's plan by blessing the older son. Also, although Isaac shows spiritual laxity, allowing Esau to take a pagan wife, he remedies his error when he insists that Jacob's wife should not come from the surrounding heathen nations.

2 Isaac's favouritism of Esau

Esau might have reminded Isaac of his older brother, Ishmael, who was exiled for reasons perhaps incomprehensible to the half-brothers. Reiss[36] suggests that possibly as a result, Isaac was drawn towards Esau. Again, "attraction of opposites" would draw Esau (with his masculine personality) to Isaac, complementing his own. Reiss argues also that Esau grew up in Isaac's tent with his father and did the cooking for his father. Both of them seemed to have an almost animal drive for food: a major reason why "Isaac loved Esau" is "because he ate of his game" (25:28) and Esau is said to have requested to "gulp down this red stuff" (25:30), using crude language usually reserved for the feeding of animals.[37]

In terms of his relationship with Jacob, it would seem that Isaac did not trust him (questioning him four times when he was trying to verify that the person about to receive the blessing was indeed Esau, 27:18, 21, 24 and 26).

3 Isaac's marriage to Rebekah

Isaac married when he was 40 years' old and Rebekah was 14 years, which means he was much older than his wife. It appears that they did not have a close relationship, for the biblical text does not indicate that she shared the prophecy that "the older shall serve the younger" (25:23) with Isaac.[38] If she had done so, the outcome could have been totally different.[39] For example, as Abraham (the origin of the blessing) was still alive at the time the prophecy was given, he could

35 Alter, *Genesis*, 133.
36 Reiss, "Esau," 151.
37 Alter, *Genesis*, 129, n.30.
38 However, it is of interest that the blessing which Isaac gave to Jacob (27:29) is almost precisely what Rebekah had been told (25:23).
39 Reiss, "Esau," 158.

have helped the parents teach the children their different roles. The Book of Jubilees (Jub 19:17–21) actually imagines this scenario: Rebekah consults with Abraham and he confirms that Jacob is "the righteous son." According to Reiss,[40] two 19th-century rabbis maintain that Isaac and Rebekah did indeed discuss the situation but disagreed on the appropriate strategy: Isaac wanted to "separate" the blessing (Jacob leading spiritually and Esau leading in the material/warrior sphere) but Rebekah disagreed. In the biblical account, Rebekah's motivation is not explicitly explained. She is just presented as an agent in covenantal history.[41]

Further, Reiss[42] suggests that the couple did not share a tent and this must have had repercussions on both boys—the fact that each parent took one of the twins to be their "special son" (living in different tents) must have increased the rivalry between the twins and meant that Jacob grew up largely without a close father figure.

Reiss questions whether Isaac did trust Rebekah.[43] Indeed, his ability to trust anyone was seriously impaired by the Akedah and he even questioned his own intuition (when what he heard – Jacob's voice – did not match the hairy arms, which were supposedly those of Esau).[44]

D JACOB'S MOTHER, REBEKAH

1 Supernatural choice of Rebekah as a wife for Isaac

The choice of Rebekah as the wife of Isaac is the consequence of a prayer in which Abraham's servant set a "test" (24:12). Alter notes that this is a typical "betrothal type-scene."[45] However, the interference of Rebekah's brother, Laban, in the fulfilment of the betrothal is a complicating factor and signals future problems. Despite the miraculous way that Isaac's servant encountered Rebekah, and that her family members (brother and father) agree that he should "take her and go" (24:52), it is more than 20 years before Laban finally releases Jacob and his wives to leave, and that only under duress.

2 Rebekah's forceful personality

The first indication of Rebekah's forceful personality is that she is introduced (and referred to four times: 24:16, 28, 55, 57) as הַנַּעֲרָ (ʻyouth, masculine). Next, she breaks the normal pattern seen in "betrothal-type scenes," which typically included the notion of "hurrying" (מָהַר ʻhasten' as in 29:13 or רוּץ ʻran'), linked

40 Ibid., 159.
41 Betsy Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 81.
42 Reiss, "Esau," 151.
43 Ibid., 152.
44 Ibid., 152–153.
45 Alter, *Genesis*, 115, n.11.

with the bringing of news. However, in this case, it is Rebekah who does the "hurrying" (מָהַר 24:18, מָהַר v.20, רוּץ v.28, מָהַר v.46), suggesting that she would be the forceful and enterprising partner in the marriage. Further, she is asked her opinion about the marriage (24:58), which seems unusual in such a highly patriarchal society.

From the start, Rebekah is seen as "the matriarch" of the family, filling the emotional gap left by Sarah's death, as Isaac brought her "into the tent of Sarah his mother . . . So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (24:67). Moreover, Rebekah was the one to whom God talked directly about the roles of the children (25:23), not Isaac.

3 Did Rebekah have an identity issue?

When Rebekah became pregnant with the twins, she cried out "Then . . ."[46] or "If it is thus . . ." (ESV), followed by "Who am I?"/"Why me?"(25:22).[47] Certainly, she was experiencing pain with the pregnancy but her question to God was unusual. Alter,[48] noting the terseness of her cry, suggests that her question could indicate an identity crisis. Traditionally, it was considered a great curse to be childless,[49] particularly for such a long time but after 20 years, this strong woman might have established another identity which motherhood would destabilise. Nevertheless, Rebekah's pregnancy was an answer to Isaac's plea to YHWH and it had a divine purpose (25:21).

4 Rebekah's favouritism of one son over the other

No reason is given for why Rebekah preferred Jacob. One assumes her maternal instinct to protect (the weaker) might have been activated. Reiss[50] suggests that perhaps Jacob's resemblance (in nature) to Isaac, the "near-sacrificed son," called forth her protective instinct. Perhaps she considered also that Jacob was more pliable and she hoped to mould him into what she looked for in a son. A third possibility is that she believed that Esau was the cause of her difficult birth. Perhaps Rebekah assumes that it was Esau, who being stronger and more robust, kicked in the womb and caused her pain,[51] so that she became biased her against him.

46 Alter, *Genesis*, 127.
47 Ibid., 127.
48 Ibid., 127, n.22.
49 Ibid., 128, n.26.
50 Reiss, "Esau."
51 Ibid., 150.

5 Rebekah's manipulative personality

The over-riding characteristic of Rebekah, in her dealings with members of her family, was her manipulation of them for her own ends. She clearly had learned manipulation as "a way of being" from her own family, for her brother Laban was also extremely manipulative[52] (in the way he repeatedly deceived and tried to trick Jacob). As part of her manipulation, she tried to "fulfil the prophecy" she had received by favouring Jacob when the blessing was to be transmitted. This not only shows her deceitful character, but also her lack of faith in God's ability to fulfil the prophecy without her aid. She seemed to be "convinced of her mission from God,"[53] although she lacked the spiritual maturity to let God be in control.

Her manipulation and deceit is suggested throughout the text. For example, does Rebekah's "listening" (when Isaac spoke to his son Esau) imply "accidentally overhearing" or is there an element of deceit? She then convinced Jacob to deceive his father, strengthening the allure of the blessing by (deceitfully) changing the words she heard Jacob say (27:4; cf. 27:7). When initially he seemed reticent to do so, his mother allayed his fears by assuming total responsibility for the deception (27:13) since she was the one who put it into effect (27:14–17). It seems that she had planned this deception for some time – she must have gone into Isaac's house to retrieve the best garments of Esau, for they "were with her in the house" (27:15).

Rebekah's self-centredness (or duplicity) is seen also in her attitude to her Hittite daughters-in-law (wives of Esau). She complained, "I loathe my life because of [them]" (27:46). It seems to be emotional blackmail: if Jacob marries one of these local girls, "what good to me is life?" (27:46). Alter asserts that this is part of Rebekah's manipulation – giving an excuse for Jacob to leave (and thus flee Esau) but also a criticism of Esau (and his marriage to Hittites). There is no "plain meaning" in Rebekah's words![54]

Once Rebekah recognised how upset Esau was at being deceived,[55] she continued to plot and direct Jacob's life. Her decision to send Jacob away to her brother (Laban) not only removed him from Esau's anger but also enabled him to further learn guile, manipulation and deceit. She told Jacob to stay away "a while, until your brother's fury turns away from you and he forgets what you

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[52] Laban's greed is also apparent from his first mention. He is captivated by the treasures which Abraham's servant has given to his sister (the nose ring and bracelets, 24:30). This should have been a warning that the sister could exhibit similar behaviour.

[53] Reiss, "Esau," 151.

[54] Alter, *Genesis*, 145, n.46.

[55] Esau supposedly said these words "to himself" (27:41) but they were "told to Rebekah," thus, must have been overheard by a sympathiser to Jacob and Rebekah's cause.

have done to him" (27:44). She seemed to think that Esau would "forget" this major theft relatively quickly, for she followed up her instruction with, "Then I will send and bring you from there." In fact she was never to see Jacob again,[56] neither is she ever mentioned in the text again. Her death is not noted, perhaps because of her repeated deception.

Rebekah seems to be the epitome of a driven woman, determined that her younger son should succeed. However, according to Jewish thinking, the blessing that Jacob received from his father ("the older will serve the younger") was not clear-cut.[57] Indeed, when the two estranged brothers meet again after Jacob's experience at Bethel, the roles have been reversed, with Jacob describing himself as "the servant" of Esau.[58] Was then Rebekah's conniving in vain? Whether or not her manipulative acts achieved her desired ends, they seriously impacted the development of Jacob's selfhood, as discussed below.

5a The impact of Rebekah's manipulative personality on the development of Jacob's selfhood

The fact that Esau was raised largely by his father and Jacob by his mother is significant in many respects. For example, research shows that mothers give more support to their grown children and report stronger bonds than do fathers.[59]

Although the biblical text does not indicate Rebekah's relationship and response to Jacob's needs as an infant besides the comment that "Rebekah loved Jacob" (25:28), the fact that he grew up to be "a quiet man" (25:27) suggests that his selfhood (or personality) was not openly expressed. For a child to learn to relate positively to others, the child (as well as the parent) needs to be an active agent, who together with the parents, creates their emerging relationship through continuous transactions.[60] With a forceful mother seizing the initiative and

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56 Reiss, "Esau," 155, 159.

57 Sacks notes that the Hebrew text contains several ambiguities. For example, a part of the blessing Isaac gives to Esau says: "You will live by your sword. And you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck" (27:40). This implies that the older will not serve the younger in perpetuity. Jonathan Sacks, "Toldot (Genesis 25:19–28:9): Between Prophecy and Oracle." https://www.aish.com/tp/i/sacks/178620051.html.

58 Jacob calls Esau "my Lord" (seven times!) and refers to himself as "your servant" (five times).

59 Karen L. Fingerman, Lindsay M. Pitzer, Wai Chan, Kira S. Birditt, Melissa M. Franks and Steven Zarit, "Who Gets What and Why: Help Middle-aged Adults Provide to Parents and Grown Children," *J Gerontol B Soc Sci.* 66B (2011): 87–98.

60 W. Andrew Collins, Eleanor E. Maccoby, Laurence Steinberg, E. Mavis Hetherington and Marc H. Bornstein, "Contemporary Research on Parenting: The Case for Nature and Nurture," *American Psychologist* 55 (2000): 218–232.

directing the child's decisions, probably even from an early age, it would seem that this was not the case in Jacob's development.

Further, the early narratives we have of his interaction with his brother suggest that a manipulative personality was emerging – when Esau was totally exhausted, Jacob's response was not to care for him out of empathy but to take advantage of his brother's desperation, for his own benefit. This manipulative approach to others is very apparent also in his mother's behaviour (e.g., 27:5–10) and one can deduce that this was her parenting style and what Jacob learned to mirror. As a forceful mother, it is likely that Rebekah did not show great empathy towards the needs of the young Jacob (when they conflicted with her own desires) and this would have had a negative impact on his own relationships.[61]

The fact that Jacob was not able to express freely his own emotions, for fear of annoying his mother, meant that he developed a False Self. The consequence, as discussed below, is that he became vulnerable in later life to the manipulations of others (as is apparent in his being repeatedly deceived by Laban). This important concept, part of Object-Relations Theory, is now discussed.

5b "The False Self" theory

According to Object-Relations Theory,[62] a child who is passive and compliant (with the mother always initiating) does not develop a strong ego but rather a "False Self." This term describes the defensive mechanism formed by the infant/child as a result of "inadequate mothering" or failures in empathy. If the infant's early environment is "not good enough,"[63] the infant's sense of self becomes split, leading to the development of a protective shell for the self, "the

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[61] See Grazyna Kochanska, Amanda E. Friesenborg, Lindsey A. Lange and Michelle M. Martel, "Parents' Personality and Infants' Temperament as Contributors to Their Emerging Relationship," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 86/5 (2004): 744.

[62] Donald W. Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self" in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*: *Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1965). See also J. Richard Middleton, "God's Loyal Opposition: Psalmic and Prophetic Protest as a Paradigm for Faithfulness in the Hebrew Bible," *Canadian-American Theological Review* 5/1 (2016): 57.

[63] In the case of "not good-enough" mothering, the mother repeatedly fails to fulfil the infant's omnipotence and substitutes her own gesture for the infant's; Kyubo Kim, "False Self, True Self, and Self-Denial: The Contribution of Object-relations Theory to Christian Self-denial," *Journal of Counseling and Gospel* (2014): 52.

False Self."[64] In contrast, an empathic parent is a "mirror,"[65] reflecting back to the child so that he can perceive the totality of his/her own experience.[66]

Winnicott[67] states that the infant's compliance "is the earliest stage of the False Self, and belongs to the mother's inability to sense her infant's needs."[68] Thus, the False Self develops as the infant is repeatedly subjected to maternal care that intrudes upon, rejects or abandons his/her experience. Through this False Self, the infant builds up a false set of relationships.[69] As a result, the growing child increasingly loses the sense of initiative and spontaneity, as "there is a growing sense in the individual of futility and despair."[70] Since the False Self protects the True Self and compliantly reacts to what the environment requires, the child may grow to be just like the mother (or the one dominating the situation).[71] Further, a child with a False Self feels validated only by conforming to the needs and wishes of his/her mother. This may result in the person having an image of God as a "conditionally available" figure who may abandon him/her.[72]

Since such a child dreads a deeper emotional life and is anxious about how well the mother will manage his negative emotions, addressing these issues may lead to a new "holding relationship."[73] This is what was needed in Jacob's life, if he would be able to fulfil God's purpose for his life.

E JACOB'S PERSONALITY

1 Passive but calculating

In some ways, Jacob appeared to be like his father, Isaac. He also appeared to be a more passive child and "easier to handle."[74] However, even from birth, he resembled his mother, conniving and calculating, and seeking to obtain the best

64 Kim, "False Self, True Self," 51.
65 To "mirror," the parent allows the infant to see himself or herself through the eyes of the mother; Winnicott, "Ego Distortion," 145.
66 Klaus Kleiger, "Emerging from the 'Dark Night of the Soul': Healing the False Self in a Narcissistically Vulnerable Minister," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 7/2 (1990): 212.
67 Winnicott, "Ego Distortion," 144.
68 Daehnert notes that the key features of the False Self are compliance and accommodation; Christal Daehnert, "The False Self as a Means of Disidentification: A Psychoanalytic Case Study," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 34 (1998): 268.
69 Winnicott, "Ego distortion," 145.
70 Ibid., 133.
71 Ibid., 146.
72 Kleiger "Emerging," 220–221.
73 Kenneth M. Newman, "A More Usable Winnicott," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 33 (2013): 67–68.
74 Reiss, "Esau," 150.

for himself. His father noticed that, although he was the second-born, he seemed to be struggling to be the first-born (clinging onto his older brother's heel) and he therefore named him *Ya'acov* (akev = "heel").[75] Again, his calculating nature is observed when he tried to get Esau to "sell" his birthright (25:31): he ensured that the "sale" was confirmed by an oath (25:33). This leads Alter[76] to comment that "Jacob is a man of legalistic calculation." We are also told that he is smooth skinned (27:11), which may suggest that he is "slippery," attempting to slip past his brother,[77] as indicated by his grip on Esau's heel at their birth.

His calculating nature is seen also when he claimed to be the "firstborn" (27:19). His father focused on the identity of the boy before him (27:18, "Who are you, my son?"). As Alter[78] points out, this question "touches the exposed nerve of Jacob's identity and moral fitness" and his answer reveals his false claim.

2 An indoorsman (compared to Esau an outdoorsman)

The text contrasts Esau and Jacob in terms of where they spent most of their time (once they were grown up). Esau is described as "a skilful hunter, a man of the field" (25:27a ESV) while Jacob is said to be "a quiet man, dwelling in tents" (25:27b ESV). The account of their birth also suggests that Esau was physically stronger (25:25 ESV, "all his body like a hairy cloak") whereas Jacob is said to "[come] out with his hand holding Esau's heel" (25:26). The fact that Jacob was the second-born of the twins suggests, too, that he was less physically developed and weaker than his brother. However, he is described as תָּם ('sound, wholesome' according to TWOT) but Alter[79] translates this as "simple" and others interpret it as "mild."[80] It seems that his role was to cook[81] for the family,[82] perhaps helping his mother who carried this responsibility.[83]

3 Easily influenced by his mother

As he stayed in his mother's tent, he was exposed to her way of obtaining things through guile and manipulation.[84] It seems that he lacked the ego strength or

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75 Alter (*Genesis*, 128, n.26) maintains that the original meaning of the name Jacob was probably "God protects" or "God follows after."

76 Ibid., 129, n.31.

77 Reiss, "Esau," 150.

78 Alter, *Genesis*, 139 and n.19.

79 Ibid., 128, n.27.

80 Alter adds that *tam* may be ironic since Jacob's behavior is far from simple when he deceives his father for the blessing.

81 This is an "inside the house" job, compared to Esau's role of *hunting* for the food.

82 However, Jacob seems to prefer vegetarian dishes, which were not to his father's taste.

83 Reiss, "Esau," 151.

84 Ibid., 149.

assertiveness to object to his mother's deceitful plan. This is the result of his having developed a False Self in response to his manipulative mother (as discussed in section 5b).

As he lived away from his father, he might have longed for greater emotional connection with him and perhaps his desperate need for paternal affirmation caused him to easily acquiesce to his mother's plan (to "feed his father," 27:10), the precursor to the deception to get his father's blessing.[85]

4 Fearful of consequences

Jacob hesitated to deceive his father, not from a sense of integrity, but out of fear of being discovered and consequently cursed (27:11–12). However, when his mother declared that she would bear any curse (27:13a), he was ready to deceive his father repeatedly about his identity (27:19, 24). He also invoked the name of God as part of his defensive lie (27:20).

5 Tenacity

Jacob showed tenacity in working for Laban for 20 years so that he could obtain his chosen wife (31:38, 41), despite being misused and deceived.

6 Recognition of the power of God's blessing

On his return journey home, Jacob became afraid of Esau and cried out to God, using the name "God of my father, Abraham, and God of my father, Isaac" (32:9). He recognised that he was part of a chosen dynasty though initially he seemed to show a "half-hearted commitment" to God.[86] Indeed, it seems that Jacob did not yet consider YHWH to be his (personal) God. In 28:20–21, Jacob had vowed, "If God will be with me and will keep me . . . so that I may come again to my father's house in peace, then, YHWH shall be my God." Here he is now in 32:9, reminding YHWH of the promise made to him "YHWH, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good') and yet he was not ready to call YHWH *his own God*.

However, despite his flawed character and spiritual ambivalence, Jacob did also show a hunger for God and (perhaps as a result) God appeared to him several times (28:13, 32:1, 32:28, 35:1, 9). His encounter with the "angel of God" at Peniel was life changing.

F TURNING POINT IN JACOB'S CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT: SEEING GOD "FACE TO FACE"

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85 Ibid., 155.

86 Duncan Heaster, "Patriarchs: Abraham, Jacob, Job" (Aletheia Publications, nd), 136.

Jacob had two supernatural encounters with angels—first his dream on the way to Laban (28:10–17, at Bethel) and second, his wrestling with the angel of God after leaving Laban (32:24–30, at Peniel).[87] At Bethel, Jacob was given promises by YHWH in a dream (28:13–15), whereas at Peniel he saw God face to face (32:30). This transformed him. As he wrestled with the "angel of God" (32:24), he realised that God would not abandon him, even when he behaved non-compliantly. This was an important discovery for him as he entered into "a new holding relationship" (with God) which enabled him to cope with all that lay before him.

Such a supernatural experience as he had at Peniel was necessary if Jacob's twisted personality was to be straightened out, enabling him to become the father of the twelve tribes and thus the founder of the Jewish nation. One can interpret his "hanging on to God, and refusing to give up until God blessed him" as a form of lament. Brueggemann[88] asserts that "Where there is lament, the believer is able to take initiative with God and so develop over against God the ego-strength that is necessary for responsible faith." Indeed, this act of Jacob showed that he had developed "the necessary ego-strength" and was ready for a new stage in his walk with God.

It seems that Jacob was familiar with the idea of wrestling with God as being related to prayer. In 32:24, he wrestled (אָבַק) with an angel in prayer. Perhaps he learned this from his (second) wife, Rachel, who also spoke of her "prayer for a child" as a "wrestling (פְּתַל 'twisting') with God" (Gen 30:8). Indeed, Jacob's tenacity, as seen in his striving with God, was memorialised in his new name, Israel (יִשְׂרָאֵל 'contender'), implying "striver and prevailer with God and men."[89] A reference in Hosea (12:4) indicates that Jacob's "striving" and "weeping" (the two verbs being in parallel) led to him prevailing (which is in parallel with "seeking God's favour"). His deep desire for God's favour was the key which transformed his life and gave him a new identity.

A set of Midrashim claims that the angel with whom Jacob wrestled was in fact "his own angel." Having been dominated by his mother (as a youth) and his father-in-law (in the previous twenty years), Jacob did have an identity problem. He lived in the shadow of a very famous grandfather, a great man of faith. Perhaps also he was embarrassed by his father, "the equivalent of a holocaust survivor,"[90] who preferred his brother Esau. The struggle with the angel seems to indicate a struggle for self-identification. The "angel" asked Jacob, "what is your name?" Perhaps he was really asking Jacob: "who do you think you are?" Without allowing Jacob to answer, the "angel" continued, "Your

87 Bethel means "house of God" and Peniel means "face of God."

88 Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 103.

89 Heaster, "Patriarchs," 140.

90 Reiss, "Esau," 156.

name shall no longer be 'Jacob' but 'Israel' since you have striven with god and men and have prevailed" (32:29). 'Israel' can be translated as "God-fighter" or 'perseverer' (from שָׂרָה 'persist'). Now Jacob is fit to reconcile with Esau and move on in his life, having had his crookedness transformed.

After his declaration of having seen God "face to face" (32:31), Jacob commented that he came out "delivered" (נָצַל). Jung[91] asserts that "everyone carries a shadow." Thus the deliverance Jacob experienced may include the idea that, in the wrestling with the "angel," he became united with his own shadow. That is, he became the person he was meant to be, now truly תָּם ('whole'), as suggested earlier (25:27).

The effects of his encounter with "the angel of God" are seen in the sudden spiritual maturity that Jacob displayed when he reconciled with Esau. In 33:10, he mentioned the numerous animals he was to give his brother, using the word *minkhati* ('a gift'). However, it seems he realised he owed a debt, which he then refers to in the next verse as *birkhati* (meaning both 'birthright' and 'blessing').[92] He had come to a new place of spiritual maturity, acknowledging his former deception and seeking to make it right.

G CONCLUSION

Of the patriarchs, Jacob has the most troubled and most difficult life (47:9). His transformation comes when he recognises that the greatest blessing in life is to have, and be, what God has for him. As he "hangs on" to God, he reverses the negative effects of his earlier years. Personalities like Jacob help us to see that "boldness and even resistance toward God" (as apparent in his wrestling at Peniel) may be necessary for a person to shed the False Self[93] and begin to relate with God authentically. This is what we see exemplified in the life of Jacob.

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91 Carl G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East* (eds. Herbert Read and Gerhard Adler; New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 131, defines the shadow as all that lies outside the light of consciousness (both positive and negative). Jung asserts, "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is."

92 Heaster, "Patriarchs," 140.

93 Middleton, "God's Loyal Opposition," 56.

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