Article

Stolen Gods and Stolen Blessings? The Narrative Significance of Rachel's Theft in the Intertextual Mapping of the Jacob Cycle

Matthew Michael
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2264-3547
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
Nasarawa State University, Nigeria
rabbimikhail@yahoo.com

Abstract

Rachel's theft of her father's teraphim has generated little interest in modern studies of the Jacob cycle. The reason for this particular lack of attention comes partly from the obscurity of Rachel's theft, and the perceived insignificance of this theft in the mapping of the Jacob stories. However, this treatment of Rachel's theft often ignores the web of subtle intertextual connections between Rachel's theft and Jacob's earlier deception of his father. Drawing on these intertextual links, the present article engages the literary clues within the two stories that directly suggest the placement of Rachel's theft and deception of her father in the same character zone with the earlier story of Jacob's deception of his father. Consequently, the study provides a fresh engagement with an obscure theft by Rachel, and underscores its overall narrative significance to the Jacob cycle.

Keywords: intertextuality; Rachel; Jacob; theft; biblical narrative

Introduction

In recent times, modern studies of biblical narratives have suggested the presence of literary webs of intertextuality—and of thematic connections between various biblical stories.[1] In these studies, it has become increasingly important to show how the biblical

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[1] Robert Alter has described a complex intertextuality between texts of biblical narratives. He coined the word "typescene" to describe this literary device. On the use of "typescene" in biblical narrative see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 87–117; also see

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narrative anticipates, foreshadows or even allusively connects itself to preceding and subsequent narratives.[2] These intertextual studies have largely presented the intertextual artistry, literary devices and compelling stylistics in synchronic readings of the different parts of the Hebrew Bible.[3] For example, Yitzhak Berger has shown the subtle allusions of the book of Esther to Saul narratives.[4] Similarly, Ammon Bazak has described several allusions to the book of Ruth in the Abigail story.[5] Mark E. Biddle has investigated the allusive use of ancestral motifs in the patriarchal stories of Genesis and its importance in the composition of David's stories in the books of Samuel.[6] In addition, Paul Noble

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Jonathan Kruschwitz, "The Type-Scene Connection between Genesis 38 and the Joseph Story," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 4 (2012): 383–410.

2 In modern times, literary theorists have underscored the intertextual character of every literary work (see Mohammed K. Shakib, "Inevitability of Arts from Inter-textuality," *International Journal of English and Literature* 4, no. 1 [2013]: 1–5). While the term "intertextuality" was first coined by Julia Kristeva (see "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi [Oxford: Blackwell, 1986], 34–61), it has played an important role in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes, particularly in Bakhtin's "heteroglossia," or multiple meanings, in his study of dialogism, and in Barthes's perspective on the death of the author since a work could have intertextual connections to another work without the expressed knowledge of the author. The death and absence of the author in Barthes naturally creates webs of intertextual possibilities because each literary work "is a space of many dimensions … [and] is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture." [See Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), 170–171; see Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 276–422; Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist and trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 1–9]. Similarly, Gérard Genette has used the term "transtextuality" to describe the inclusive character of various types of intertextuality (see Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997]). For Genette, transtextuality is further divided into five sub-categories: (1) intertextuality is the presence of one text in another text; (2) paratextuality describes the relationship between a text and its paratexts, that is, its titles, subtitles and notes; (3) architextuality presents the relationship of a particular text to its genre; (4) metatextuality is the commentary of a text on another text; and (5) hypertextuality is the relationship between a text and preceding texts (Genette, *Paratexts*, xviii–xix). These preceding literary studies have impacted the study of intertextuality in modern scholarship on the Hebrew Bible.

3 The works of Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg and Shimon Bar-Efrat have exercised an important influence in the studies of biblical narrative along the lines of intertextuality. See Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*; Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

4 See Yitzhak Berger, "Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 4 (2010): 625–644.

5 See Amnon Bazak, *Parallels Meet: Literary Parallels in the Book of Samuel* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 2006), 132–135.

6 See Mark E. Biddle, "Ancestral Motifs in 1 Samuel 25: Intertextuality and Characterization," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 4 (2002): 617–638. See also Gary A. Rendsburg, "David and His Circle

has suggested the inner allusive connections between Esau, Joseph and Tamar.[7] In this evolving field of intertextuality, Jonathan Grossman has also demonstrated the presence of "dynamic analogies" and "allusion" in the book of Esther, particularly the representation of the characters in the book in order to reflect the characters of Joseph, Daniel, Jacob/Esau, and Ahab/Jezebel respectively.[8]

In spite of this general quest to connect the various parts of the Hebrew Bible together, Rachel's story has received little or no attention, especially regarding its intertextual connection to the larger Jacob narrative.[9] Unfortunately, modern scholarship has clearly

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in Genesis XXXVIII," *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 438–446; Craig Y. S. Ho, "The Stories of the Family Troubles of Judah and David: A Study of Their Literary Links," *Vetus Testamentum* 49, no. 4 (1999): 514–531.

7 Paul R. Noble, "Esau, Tamar, and Joseph: Criteria for Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions," *Vetus Testamentum* 52, no. 2 (2002): 219–252.

8 Grossman, "'Dynamic Analogies' in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 59, no. 3 (2009): 394–414, has described the intertextual links to Aaron and Moses, and even to the inauguration of the temple from this same book.

9 The story of Rachel's theft of her father's idols is perhaps one of the biblical stories that have received little attention by way of independent studies in modern scholarship. Even though there are contemporary studies that underscore certain aspects of Rachel's representations in Genesis, the full importance of her representation and connection to the stolen teraphim in the context of the Jacob cycle has not been underscored (For example see Benjamin D. Cox and Susan Ackerman, "Rachel's Tomb," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 1 [2009]: 135–148; see also Benjamin D. Cox and Susan Ackerman, "Micah's Teraphim," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 12 [2012]: #11). The general lack of scholarly attention to this story is partly due to three related reasons. First, this lack of attention comes from the imposing presence of Jacob's character in this part of the patriarchal narratives. In this regard, there is a tendency to focus on the significance of Jacob, a major character, and to neglect Rachel, a minor one. Until recent times, the studies of major characters in biblical narrative have largely preoccupied the attention of modern scholarship, and there is in this traditional scholarship the quest to assert the significance of these major characters in the theology and general study of the patriarchal narratives. However, this preoccupation with major characters of the patriarchal narratives has unfortunately denied us the significance, presence and artistic beauty of the minor characters in the representations of the patriarchal narratives. Secondly, the pericope itself is shrouded in obscurity because one wonders: What is the true significance of Rachel's theft on the surface? Why the fuss about idols or about the taking of one's father's cultic objects? Why should Rachel take idols as a parting souvenir from the house of her father? Why does she take idols and not gold or silver from her father? The obscurity of this pericope and the perceived meaninglessness of this act itself have naturally led to the paucity of attention given to this passage. For example, Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Treasures Old and New: Essays in the Theology of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 152, wondering about the reason for this theft, says "he [Jacob] is assisted by some subsidiary trickery on the part of Rachel in her theft of Laban's household gods (31:19, 33–35), perhaps with the idea of promoting fertility or assisting in childbirth." Similarly, Moshe Greenberg, "Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 239–248, has suggested that Rachel steals the teraphim to provide protection for her family on their way back to Canaan. Dismissing the Nuzi tablets as a source in understanding this theft, Greenberg, "Another Look," 239–248, has suggested the use of a story in Josephus which also describes the secret theft of a household god by a

ignored the close web of intertextuality between the blessings stolen by Jacob and their relationship to the theft of the household gods by Rachel.[10] In fact, apart from a few passing comments, no treatments of Rachel's theft are available in modern studies of the Jacob cycle.[11] Considering this gap, the present study describes narrative parallels between Rachel's theft of her father's teraphim, and Jacob's theft of his father's blessings.[12]

The Intertextual Mapping of Rachel's Theft

The story of Rachel's theft occurs in the report of Jacob's journey back to Canaan (Gen 31:1–55). It is at this point of farewells that the narrator of Jacob cycle slows down the general tempo of his story in order to describe Rachel's theft of her father's teraphim. In his reticent manner, the biblical narrator often quickly summarises stories that have no immediate importance to or direct bearing on the larger concerns of his story. In the description of the theft, however, he underscores the importance of this particular scene through the deployment of conversation and the slowing-down of his entire story in order to report this particular incident. More specifically, he presents the conversation between Rachel, the thief, and her father, Laban, whose teraphim were stolen, and also the systematic search of the tents of all the characters in the story by Laban for his teraphim. Here, the narrator describes the movement of Laban from tent to tent in his quest to catch the thief. The climax of this representation occurs in the face-to-face confrontation between the thief and the owner of the teraphim in verse 35. In this

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woman and the protective use of this stolen idol by this same woman while travelling abroad. Lastly, the lack of attention to this pericope comes from the preoccupation of critical scholarship in the past with sources and historical questions which often did not engage or rarely had a place for the literary appreciation of this pericope under study. In fact, the diachronic tendencies in the study of Genesis until recent times have not clearly allowed the synchronic study of the passage and the literary significance of this pericope in the immediate and larger scope of the Jacob cycle.

10 The character of Rachel occupies an important place among the biblical matriarchs. According to Yosef Green, "Our Mother Rachel: *Prima inter pares*," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2005): 166, "Of the four matriarchs, it is Rachel who has inspired the most creative response in art and literature. Without a doubt, she is one of the most beloved figures in Jewish history. Her compelling presence extends beyond the Book of Genesis and appears as well in I Samuel (10:2) and Jeremiah (31:14). Her story is the subject of rich embellishment in the Midrash and mystical literature. Jewish mystics rose up at midnight to recite Tikkun Rachel, in mourning for the exile of the Shekhinah, the Divine presence."

11 The literary status of Rachel as a minor character often does not allow the synchronic engagement of her representation in the Jacob cycle. Concerning the importance of minor characters see Adele Reinhartz, *"Why Ask My Name?": Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Uriel Simon, "Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 15, no. 46 (1990): 11–19. See also Frank Polak, *Biblical Narrative: Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1994), 255–261.

12 Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 164, described Jacob's deception of his father in terms of "the theft of the blessing from the blind Isaac."

important scene, Rachel deceives her father by saying to him she cannot stand up before him because "the way of women has come upon me" while sitting on the stolen objects –thereby seeking to conceal the teraphim from her father.[13] Thus, through this dialogue, the narrator heightens the intrigues and suspense of the story, with the thief seeking to manoeuvre and conceal the stolen items from their owner. Concerning this theft, Esther Fuchs observes,

> One wonders in this context, why the narrator prefers to provide us with a somewhat detailed description of Rachel's alleged actions and words in a way that he deemed unnecessary in the scene describing the theft of the idols. Just as he simply claimed that Rachel stole the idols, he could also briefly state that she hid them. But the narrator prefers to describe in some detail just *how* Rachel concealed the idols (v. 34), and how she concealed the fact that she concealed them (v. 35).[14]

According to Ktziah Spanier, "Rachel's [theft] is the only act of thievery which receives no textual explanation. Neither her motive nor the significance of the teraphim is ever discussed."[15] However, to understand the significance of Rachel's theft, we must place her theft in parallel/ to the earlier theft by Jacob of his father's blessings.[16] There are certain important areas in which these two stories connect and bind themselves together. First, both stories describe a deception and the taking of a valuable family object from a father by a son/daughter. Remarkably, the two stories are the only stories in Genesis where a son/daughter deceives a father in order to take away a valuable family property. In the story of Jacob, he deceives his father and steals his blessings; Rachel also deceives her father, and steals his idols. In the ancient world, the idols of the family were inherited by the eldest son, and diligent care was taken to pass this family property from the father to the firstborn of the family.[17] According to David L. Petersen, the idols that "Rachel

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13 Esther Fuchs, "'For I Have the Way of Women': Deception, Gender, and Ideology in Biblical Narrative," *Semeia* 42 (1988), 78–80, presupposes that the "the way of women" in the speech of Rachel does not mean she is experiencing menstruation but that this phrase is a powerful idiom in the context of Genesis where women tricksters deceive their male counterparts. Therefore, "the way of women" in Genesis connotes deception.

14 Fuchs, "'For I Have the Way of Women,'" 79.

15 See Ktziah Spanier, "Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim: Her Struggle for Family Primacy," *Vetus Testamentum* 42, no. 3 (1992): 404.

16 Blenkinsopp, *Treasures Old and New*, 150, describes the scene of Jacob's deception of his father, with the help of his mother, as "the theft of the paternal blessing by mother-son team of Rebekah and Jacob."

17 In the Nuzi tablets, the *Adoption of Shennima*, the text reads: "Nashwi from the household of Ar-shenni hereby adopts Wullu from the household of Puhi-shenni. In return, Wullu must provide Nashwi with food and clothing for as long as he lives. When Nashwi dies, Wullu shall inherit his land. If, subsequently, Nashwi has a natural son, Wullu and this must divide the land of the household equally. The natural son of Nashwi, however, shall receive the statues of the divine patrons of the household. If, however, Nashwi dies without a natural son, then Wullu shall receive the statues of the divine patrons of the household." See Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 47.

took almost certainly represented familial deities, perhaps divinized ancestors."[18] Similarly, Robert A. Kraft observes, "[c]are for the representations of the household gods was important in the world in which Jacob and the patriarchs of Israel are represented."[19] Gordon Wenham also observes that "ownership of the ancestors' images involves inheritance rights."[20] In addition, Spanier says,

> The teraphim have been described as emblems of authority. A Nuzi adoption document indicates that the chief heir was to receive the family gods. Their possession distinguished him from his siblings, and empowered him to conduct the family ritual. All other family members had to come to him in order to participate in the worship of the family gods.[21]

For E. A. Speiser, Rachel's theft "derives from underlying social practices as they bear on the nature of the patriarchal narratives in general."[22] Situated within this cultural background, Speiser further observes, "[a]ccording to the Nuzi documents, which have been found to reflect time and again the social customs of Haran …, possession of the house gods could signify legal title to a given estate, particularly in cases out of the ordinary, involving daughters, sons-in-law, or adopted sons."[23] From this particular viewpoint, the deities in a family were traditionally in custody of the head of the family.[24] In the immediate context of this story, Spanier adds, "Rachel's action was part of her continuing struggle for primacy within Jacob's household. Since Jacob was never aware of the theft, it seems unlikely that it was for his sake she acted. Her objective was to prevail over her sister in the contest for family supremacy."[25] She also observes, "[t]he ultimate expression of her success would be the appointment of her son as his father's chief heir. Since Leah had borne several sons, including Jacob's firstborn, Rachel perceived that the teraphim would invest her own son, Joseph with a mantle of authority which would override all other considerations."[26] Consequently, by taking the idols of her father, Rachel is indirectly claiming the right of the firstborn child for herself

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18 Petersen, "Genesis and Family Values," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 1 (2005): 13.

19 Robert A. Kraft, "Para-mania: Beside, Before, and Beyond Biblical Studies," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 1 (2007): 25.

20 Wenham, Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Dallas: Word, 1994), 273, dismisses this possible reason for Rachel's theft since "it would not seem likely that stealing the symbols of inheritance would actually convey the property itself." He opts for the interpretation provided by Josephus that the theft by Rachel was primarily for her to serve as a patron of protection during the journey. Similarly, Greenberg, "Another Look," 239–248, suggests that Rachel's theft has much more to do with fertility than with concerns of inheritance.

21 Spanier, "Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim," 406.

22 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*. Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), 250.

23 Speiser, *Genesis*, 250.

24 Speiser, *Genesis*, 250.

25 Spanier, "Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim," 405.

26 Spanier, "Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim," 405.

and her lineage just as Jacob's stealing or taking of his father's blessings reflects this act. Seen from this perspective, in both stories Jacob and Rachel seek to claim for themselves the right of primogeniture by stealing a family object.

Secondly, the two stories describe a case of sibling rivalry between two family members—with the eldest son/daughter favoured by the father against the younger one.[27] The two stories share the same plot in this theme of sibling rivalry. In these two stories, the siding of the father with the eldest child leads to a scheme by the youngest child. The scheme works and the father is deceived, thereby leading to the younger daughter/son obtaining the family property which the father wants to pass on to the eldest child. In the story of Jacob, he is the youngest son and the underdog, and his father, Isaac, wants to pass on the family blessings to Esau, the eldest child, rather than to him. To avert this, Jacob, with the help of his mother, disguises himself as Esau in order to get his father's blessings. In this story, Jacob is the unfavoured one because the attachment and love of Isaac is directed to Esau rather than to him. The narrator explores the same plot in the subtle placement of Rachel in the same character zone as Jacob.[28] First, the narrator suggests the preference of Leah, the eldest daughter of Laban, over Rachel. According to this story, Rachel is to marry Jacob, but her father, Laban, changes this particular order, and instead gets Jacob to marry Leah, thus showing his apparent preference for her over Rachel. Secondly, the rivalry between Rachel and Leah subtly mirrors the rivalry between Jacob and Esau. It is in the context of this highlighted rivalry between the two sisters that the narrator reports the theft of the teraphim by Rachel. Consequently, the theft of the teraphim appears to tilt the balance of power in Rachel's favour.[29]

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27 Spanier, "Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim," 407, observes that "[t]he textual account of the formation of Jacob's family is depicted in terms of the fierce competition between the two sisters" and the same competition also characterises the relationship between Esau and Jacob. Concerning the general description of sibling rivalry in Genesis see Norman J. Cohen, "Two That Are One—Sibling Rivalry in Genesis," *Judaism* 32, no. 3 (1983): 331–342.

28 The phrase "character zone" is used differently in literary discourse. First, character zone could be defined as the defining features or artistic qualities shared by two or more characters in the same story. Second, it could also refer to a character's narrative territory and sphere of influence in a story. I have opted for the first understanding of this phrase in this article. Concerning the definition of character zone see Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 434. For the application of character zone in the study of biblical characters see Barbara Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen: A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 176–322. Also see Keith Bodner, "Eliab and the Deuteronomist," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28, no. 1 (2003): 10–24.

29 The description of Rachel as a "shepherdess" further adds to her representation as a self-assertive character who in comparison to her sister Leah tends the family flocks, and possibly justifies Rachel taking over the family teraphim in order to compensate for her dominant participation in looking after the family property. See Morton H. Seelenfreud and Stanley Schneider, "Leah's Eyes," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1997): 18–22.

Thirdly, there are several intertextual connections between the stories of Jacob and Rachel. The story of the theft itself echoes motifs from Jacob's earlier deception of his father. It seems Rachel is the feminine version of Jacob. For example, the word משש occurs only in these two stories in the entire book of Genesis. The word means to "feel through" or "grope."[30] The word appears twice in Genesis 27:12, and 22 to describe the character of Isaac groping blindly to "feel" the body of Jacob.[31] The first occurrence of משש in verse 22 reads: "Jacob went close to his father Isaac, who touched [משש] him and said, 'the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.'" In verse 12, the second occurrence of משש appears in Jacob's fears that his father's touch will lead to the failure of the scheme. He says to his mother, "What if my father touches [משש] me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing." Describing this use of משש here, Gordon H. Johnston says:

> Jacob is afraid to impersonate Esau because his blind father might "feel, examine" (*mšš*) his skin to determine whether or not he is his hairy son (Gen 27:12). When Isaac thinks he hears Jacob's voice, he feels (*mwš*) his skin as a test to determine whether he was Esau or Jacob (27:21). When Isaac felt (*mšš*) his hairy disguise, he concluded it was Esau (27:22).[32]

The same word, משש, only appears again in Laban's search for his idols in Genesis 31:34, 37. It describes the groping of Laban in the tents where he blindly "felt/searched" for his idols twice. In this other occurrence of משש in Genesis, the text reads, "Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched [משש] through everything in the tent but found nothing." Jacob himself said, "Now that you have searched [משש] through all my goods, what have you found that belongs to your household? Put it here in front of your relatives and mine, and let them judge between the two of us." Interestingly, the narrator compares Isaac's groping to feel Jacob, and Laban's search and "touching" of the different objects in the tents to see if the objects in the tents hid his teraphim. Considering this connection, Michael Fishbane observes:

> Both Jacob and Rachel deceive their fathers and flee from home. Rachel deceives Laban by misappropriating his household gods, which represent the patriarchal blessing and

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[30] See Gordon H. Johnston, "משש," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament and Exegesis*, vol. 2, ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1145–1147. Also see Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament,* study ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), s.v. "משש".

[31] According to Johnston, "משש," 1146, "Every occurrence of" משש "is used in reference to a person who is operating in blindness, darkness, or without the help of visual aid. It describes the act of feeling something in darkness (Exod 10:21), feeling around for something without being able to see it (Gen 31:34, 37; Judg 16:26), groping around in darkness (Job 5:14; 12:25) or blindness (Deut 28:29), or feeling something to identify it without the aid of sight (Gen 27:12, 22)."

[32] See Johnston, "משש," 1146.

> inheritance. She also lies to him when, having caught up to her, he "felt" ([משש]; vv 34, 37) for them like a blind man. It will be recalled that precisely the same verb is used in 27:22, when Isaac felt Jacob's hands during the latter's attempt to misappropriate the patriarchal blessing.[33]

Ironically, the narrator underscores the narrative connection between these two stories by the placement of these two fathers feeling and seeking for an object/person in a complicated scene of deception. In addition, the verb גנב ["to steal"] is directly applied only to Rachel and Jacob in the patriarchal narratives.[34] In the story of Rachel's theft, גנב appears in 31:19, 20, 26, 27, 30, 32, 39.[35] According to W. R. Domeris, "Rachel had stolen [גנב] the household gods of her father (v. 19), while Jacob had deceived Laban by leaving secretly (lit., stole away, a figurative use of … גנב)."[36] To create this association, 31:19 reads: "When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole [גנב] her father's household gods." Immediately in the next verse (20), it is also said of Jacob, "and Jacob deceived/stole away [גנב] from Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away." Therefore, the narrator connects Rachel's act of stealing her father's idols and Jacob's leaving secretly to run away or literally "steal" away from Laban.[37] Fuchs adds: "The use of the verb גנב in reference to both Rachel's and Jacob's actions … suggests an analogy between them."[38] The use of גנב in this context appears ironic particularly with the magical transfer of Laban's property to Jacob at this point of the story (31:1–21). In verse 43, Laban specifically mentions his daughters, grandchildren, and the flocks of Jacob as belonging to him, thus Laban himself could perceive Jacob as a thief who has taken his daughters, and flocks as plunder from him.[39] This reading is

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33 Fishbane, *Text and Texture* (New York: Schocken, 1979), 56.

34 W. R. Domeris, "גנב," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament & Exegesi*s, vol., 1. ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 879, states: "Within the semantic field of stealing or robbing, [גנב] carries the sense of secretive stealing and cheating (e.g. Gen 31:27; 2 Sam 19:3[4], as opposed to taking something by force …" To underscore the importance of גנב in the present story, Domeris observes that "the word גנב occurred 8 times in Genesis 31:19–32."

35 See Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. "גנב".

36 Domeris, "גנב," 879.

37 See Fuchs, "'For I Have the Way of Women,'" 74.

38 Fuchs, "'For I Have the Way of Women,'" 74.

39 See John E. Anderson, "Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and YHWH's Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in the Jacob Cycle," (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2010), 158. He also adds (Anderson, "Jacob and the Divine Trickster," 159), "Rachel's theft occurs immediately after Jacob's speech to his wives (vv. 5–13) and their assent (vv. 14–16). There Jacob had stated (and YHWH agreed) that it was YHWH who had taken Laban's possessions and granted them to Jacob. Laban's daughters, then, affirm the same in v. 16, only this time claiming that all the wealth YHWH has "caused to be stripped away" (הציל) belongs not to Jacob but to them and their children. Against this broader backdrop, one may construe Rachel's theft of the *teraphim* as her acting in accordance with YHWH's words reported by Jacob in vv. 5–13. If she understands *all* (כל) of her father's property to belong to her and her sister, and YHWH is the mechanism by which this property is transferred from Laban to them, then Rachel's deception of her father extends beyond her insistence that she is

suggestive in the context of the earlier confrontation and trickery between Jacob and Laban. Thus, it seems a comparison is subtly made here between Rachel's stealing of her father's idols and Jacob's taking over of the properties of Laban and secretly running away from him. Through this connection at this point in his story, the narrator places Jacob and Rachel in the same literary mould.[40] In this way, the narrator underscores the similarities between these two characters in his placement of these two characters in the same character zone.

In addition, the important verb נכר also occurs in these two stories. The word means to "discern" or "recognise" a person or an object.[41] In the story of Jacob, it appears in Genesis 27:23.[42] It reads, "[h]e did not recognize [נכר] him, for his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; so he blessed him." In the same way, in Genesis 31:32 the text reads: "'But if you find anyone who has your gods, he shall not live. In the presence of our relatives, see [נכר] for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it.' Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods."[43]

Similarly, the presence of the verb מצא ("find/search") links the two pericopes together.[44] In the story of Jacob, מצא appears in Genesis 27:20 when Isaac asked his son, "'How did you find [מצא] it so quickly, my son?' 'The Lord your God gave me success,' he replied." In the same way, the verb מצא is repeated several times in Genesis 31:32, 33, 34, 35, and

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menstruating in v. 35. Just as YHWH had taken all Laban's flocks and given them to Jacob, so too the narrative hints that YHWH has some hand in Rachel's stealing of her father's *teraphim*." From this perspective, Rachel and Yahweh are placed in the same character zone.

40 The motif of search and the word גנב appears again in the Joseph cycle where Benjamin, a child of Rachel, is accused and associated with the theft of the silver cup (see גנב in Gen 40:15 and 44:8). According to Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 267, "the search for Laban's teraphim has similarities with the search for Joseph's cup (44:1–3)" because both contexts seek to fish out a thief. See also Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 215.

41 Concerning the importance of נכר in the Judah/Tamar story and the Joseph stories see Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6–10.

42 See Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. "נכר".

43 Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 304, has connected this particular scene to the story of Joseph's accusation of his brothers of theft in Genesis 44:1–44. In particular, the response of the brothers that whoever the cup is found with should die and that the other brothers be enslaved echoes the statement of Jacob here where he also says that whoever has stolen the gods of Laban should die. Sternberg observes, the "response" of Joseph's brothers "looks even more impressive against the background of Jacob's hyperbolic outburst—'any one with whom thou wilt find thy gods will not live in the presence of our brothers' (31:32)—when accused by Laban of having stolen his figurines. A thief envisaged as falling in the presence of his brothers as against brothers falling together with the thief" in the Joseph story.

44 Concerning the semantic nuances of in the Hebrew Bible, see Michael A. Grisanti, "מצא," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament & Exegesis*, vol. 2, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1061–1063. See also Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. "מצא".

37. Remarkably, while Esau went to "find" game for his father, in the story of Rachel, it was her father who went about to "search" for the stolen idols. Similarly, the word נשק ("to kiss") appears in both of these two pericopes. Laban desires to kiss his children goodbye in Genesis 31:28, and Isaac asks Jacob who is disguised as Esau to come close so that he can kiss him (Gen. 27:26, 27). In both texts, the two fathers desire to kiss their children, that is, Isaac wants to kiss Esau, and Laban wants to kiss his daughters and grandchildren. In addition to these preceding intertextual links, there are other minor connections between these two stories. First, there is the use of the word שׁכל in Jacob's speech in Genesis 31:38 when he says, "I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried [שׁכל], nor have I eaten rams from your flocks." The word שׁכל means "to be bereaved," or "bereft" of one's children.[45] The word appears in Rebekah's speech to Jacob in Genesis 27:45 when she partly says, "Why should I lose [שׁכל] both of you in one day?" Apart from its two other occurrences in Genesis 42:36 and 43:14—to describe the bereavement of Jacob—the word שׁכל occurs only here.[46]

Similarly, the phrase רְחֵלֶיךָ וְעִזֶּיךָ ("ewes and goats") in Genesis 31:38 echoes the name of Rachel and the additional presence of "goat" in this same verse alludes possibly to the use of "goat's skin" to cover the hands and neck of Jacob in Genesis 27:9, 16. In addition, the presence of the word קום further connects these two pericopes. The word קום appears in Genesis 31:35 to describe Rachel's polite plea to her father asking that she should be allowed to sit—and not to rise [קום]—in his presence. Similarly, in Jacob's story, both Jacob and Esau politely plead with their father to rise up [קום] and to eat of the game they have prepared for him (Gen. 27:19, 31). In the same vein, the word לקח appears in Genesis 27: 9, 13, 14, 15, 35, and 36 to describe the scheming and taking of Esau's birthright by Jacob. In verse 35, for example, Isaac says, "Your brother came deceitfully and took [לקח] your blessing." In Rachel's story, לקח appears to describe Rachel's taking or stealing of the idols (31:32, 34). In verse 34, the text also reads: "Now Rachel had taken [לקח] the household idols and put them in the camel's saddle, and she sat on them." In these various echoes, it seems the narrator closely connect the story of Rachel's theft with the story of Jacob's stealing of his father's blessings.

Lastly, the story of Rachel's theft of her father's idols forms an important closure to the earlier theme of rivalry between Leah and Rachel. In the story of Jacob and Esau, the stealing of his father's blessings by Jacob brings to an end the original rivalry between the brothers since Jacob runs away from home as a result of the heated tension between these two characters. Similarly, Leah and Rachel are also represented by the narrator as rivals, with the same degree of rivalry which characterises the relationship between

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45 See Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. "שׁכל".

46 See Victor P. Hamilton, "שָׁכֹל," in *New* International *Dictionary of Old Testament and Exegesi*s, vol. 4, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 105–107.

Jacob and Esau. The stealing of her father's idols somehow asserted Rachel's superiority over her sister. In this way, the intense rivalry between the two sisters came to an end after this particular incident. Consequently, the two stories cohere in the temporal resolution of the sibling conflicts through the usurping of a contending sibling's primogeniture rights. Within these different intertextual links, it seems the narrator has crafted the story of Rachel in order to echo and to underscore almost the same intention in the characterisation of Jacob. Seen from this angle, the theft of Rachel and the stolen blessings of Jacob are two sides of the same coin. Betsy Halpern-Amaru observes, "Indeed, played over against Jacob's own deception of his father, the entire biblical story of Jacob's stay with Laban is filled with deceits and betrayals—Laban of Jacob and of his own daughters; Jacob of Laban; and with the theft and hiding of Laban's household idols, Rachel of her father."[47]

Beyond this description, Rachel's theft of her father's gods bears another resemblance to the story of Jacob's stealing of his father's blessings in terms of its representational structure. Even though the pericope of Jacob's blessings is longer when compared to the few verses that describe Rachel's theft, the intertextual links bind these stories together particularly when one views Jacob's stealing of his father's blessings as beginning the cycle in Canaan, and Rachel's theft of her father's teraphim as closing his sojourn at Paddan-Aram. Consequently, there is an important inclusio that binds these two stories together within this narrative scheme.

The following is a tabular representation of the similarities identified above:

Table 1: A Summary of the Intertextualities Connecting Jacob and Rachel

Jacob	*Rachel*
Jacob steals his father's blessings (27:1–46)	Rachel steals her father's gods (31:1–35)[48]
Jacob steals the birthright of Esau, the firstborn (27:36).	The household gods also belong to the firstborn by hereditary right. Consequently, in stealing these same objects, Rachel also subtly steals the birthright of the firstborn (31:19, 34).

47 See Betsy Halpern-Amaru, "The Empowerment of Rachel in the Book of Jubilees," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division A (1997): 191.

48 Fuchs, "'For I Have the Way of Women,'" 74, asks, "Why is it Rachel rather than Leah who is shown to steal Laban's idols?" and she answers, "A possible answer to the last question is that having Rachel steal Laban's idols dramatizes more vividly the *lex talionis* principle which controls the Jacob cycle. For it was Rachel whom Laban stole from Jacob, when the latter came to ask for her in return for his

Isaac is blind. He cannot recognise the right heir/son standing before him. He “feels” (משש) with his hands (27:12, 22). The word משש appears only in these two stories of Jacob and Rachel in Genesis.	Laban searches blindly and cannot find the person who has stolen the household gods even though Rachel is sitting on them in the open and before his eyes. The narrator also describes Laban as “feeling” (משש) through Rachel’s tent in search of the idols (31:34, 37).
The word נכר is used to describe Isaac’s inability to recognise Jacob (27:23).	The word נכר is also used to describe Laban’s search for his idols (31:32).
Jacob deceives his father (27:22–23).	Rachel also deceives her father (31:34–35).
Jacob uses disguises to deceive his father (27:23).	Rachel also employs a disguise to deceive her father. She disguises the theft of the teraphim using a veiled reference to her menstruation (31:35).
There is rivalry between Jacob and Esau (25:22–34).	There is also rivalry between Rachel and her sister Leah (29:25–30:24).
Jacob covers his smooth skin with goatskins (27:16).	She conceals the stolen gods in a camel’s saddle (31:34).
The story centres on the transfer of the household blessings (27:1–4).	The story also concerns itself with the transfer of the household property, particularly the idols (31:1 cf. vv. 34–35).
Jacob gets the blessings (27:23 cf. v.33).	Rachel gets the household gods (31:35).
Jacob runs away from home (27:41–43).	Rachel is also running away from home in the company of her husband (31:14–21).
Jacob is discovered (27:35–36).	Rachel is never discovered (31:35).

Considering these similarities, it seems the narrator has deliberately placed these two stories together in the same work in order to mirror and underscore the similarities between them. He appears to echo literary motifs from his earlier representations of

seven years’ labor (Gen 29:20–23). It is therefore all the more fitting to present Rachel, the object of Jacob’s desire, as the one who steals from her father his own objects of desire.”

Jacob in his descriptions of Rachel—thus, like Jacob, the youngest who steals his father's blessings, Rachel, the youngest daughter of Laban, also steals her father's gods. Seen from this perspective, there is a subtle attempt to connect Jacob to Rachel, his favourite wife.[49] One also finds the earlier statement of Laban to Jacob a bit ironic when he says, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one" (29:26). This statement itself is a rebuke of Jacob's earlier deception where, though he is the youngest, he steals the blessings intended for his older brother. In stealing her father's idols, Rachel directly goes against the wisdom of Laban's statement because she covets for herself a sacred object which naturally belongs to the eldest child or the father's favourite. With this echo, too, the narrator appears to subtly connect the story of Rachel to that of Jacob, thus placing Jacob and Rachel in the same character zone.

The Significance of Rachel's Theft in the Jacob Cycle

Based upon the preceding observations, it is perhaps pertinent to underscore the literary significance of Rachel's characterisation in the pericope under study. Three significant aspects of this characterisation are hereby underscored. First, Rachel's characterisation in this pericope operates in its complementary function to the characterisation of Jacob particularly in that it is supportive and parallel to the earlier representation of Jacob. By presenting Rachel in similarity to Jacob, her narrative status helps to enrich the representation of Jacob, thereby lending a certain degree of subtlety and depth to this patriarchal story. In this way, the characterisation of Rachel directly mirrors Jacob's earlier characterisation as a usurper, a thief and a cheat. Connected to this point, the characterisation of Rachel subtly turns her into the feminine version of Jacob. Interestingly, Jacob and his beloved wife are here cast in a similar literary mould through their placement in the same character zone. In doing this, the narrator enhances the sophistication of this story since this placement naturally situates Leah and Esau in the same character zone. Thus, through the echoes of Jacob's deception in Rachel's story, the narrator imbues Rachel's story with the same literary dynamism and artistry. In placing Rachel in the same character zone as her husband Jacob, the narrator also alienates Leah since she is clearly placed at the margin. Through these different echoes, alignments, characterisations and negotiations among characters, the narrator of the patriarchal stories propels and moves his story forward. Since Rachel is the future mother of Joseph, this narrative importance accorded her here has deeper significance in the rhetoric of Genesis. Interestingly, the last son of Rachel, Benjamin, will also be

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[49] There are also contrasts between the two stories in spite of their seeming similarities. In Jacob's taking of his father's blessings, for example, the story largely deals with the transfer of the patriarchal blessings, while in the case of Rachel's theft, it is primarily the transfer of the family gods. Secondly, Jacob's story describes an elaborate scheme to deceive his father; in Rachel's story the scheme appears simple or even straightforward. Lastly, in the story of Jacob, a male character's deception is emphasised, and in the story of Rachel, a female character is the deceiver.

indicted for the stealing of Pharaoh's silver cup (44:1–13). It seems the stealing of the silver cup bears important connections to the stealing of the teraphim since Rachel and her son Benjamin are the only suspects of theft in the entire book of Genesis.[50] Considered in this way, the characterisation of Rachel bridges an important gap between Jacob's past, his present and future. Within the scope and framing of this story, the characterisation of Rachel helps to move Jacob's story backward in the different streams of intertextual flashbacks to earlier motifs encountered in the Jacob's story. Stylistically, these intertextual kinds of flashback connect the story of Jacob to the earlier ones through the narrative vehicle of the Rachel story. But Rachel's story is not merely retrospective; it also moves the Jacob narrative forward, and thereby impacts the narrative plotting of this important story. For instance, the representation of Rachel's theft motivates Laban's pursuit, and the pursuit itself directly moves the Jacob's story forward by helping to stage the farewell scene which reports the sober parting of these two iconic deceivers.[51] In addition, the placement of Rachel's theft here showcases the artistic skills of the narrator, who treats Rachel as a parallel character within the same character zone as Jacob. As in the earlier story of Jacob fleeing from Esau, the narrator this time places Rachel and Jacob in the same flight mode with Laban in hot pursuit. Within this second flight, the narrator connects his story to Jacob's first flight, but he now introduces two deceivers who are trying to outsmart Laban, namely Jacob and Rachel. Similarly, the narrator artistically looks back to the original events that led to Jacob's flight from home and thereby shapes the reader's perspective in the process. Consequently, this flight from Laban coheres with Jacob's earlier flight from home, and there is a kind of inclusio binding these two stories together. Of course, the scene of covenant here between Laban and Jacob also connects with the later scene of reconciliation between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 33. However, the forward-looking importance of this representation of Rachel's theft—as already suggested—climaxes in the story of Benjamin's theft of the silver cup, in which a child of Rachel is accused of theft—an event leading to the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. With these allusions to the events of the past and the flash-forwards to the anticipated events in subsequent narrative, the skilful narrator invests his stories with charged and intense representations. In these intertextual links and motifs, he creatively echoes earlier and later events within the patriarchal tradition, and here skilfully turns them into powerful tools of important characterisation.

In addition to these highlighted observations, Rachel's theft of the household gods appears strange and odd in several ways. Unfortunately, the strangeness of this act has very seldom featured in mainstream discourses on the patriarchal narratives. However,

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[50] The Hebrew word גנב binds the two incidents together. Apart from its figurative use to describe the stealthy action of Jacob in running from Laban, Rachel and Benjamin are the only characters in Genesis associated with the word גנב.

[51] On the intrigues of this parting see Petersen, "Genesis and Family Values," especially 18–20.

looking at this anti-social act by Rachel, there are four further significant aspects of this pericope in biblical thought. First, this pericope is the only story in the entire Hebrew Bible about a woman who steals a god. The closest narrative to this one is the story of the Danites who steal the gods in Micah's house (Judges 18:1–26). In this story, the tribe of Dan steals and takes by force the gods of Micah's house.[52] However, in Rachel's case, she steals the household gods of her father, Laban, and secretly keeps this stolen property without the knowledge of Jacob and other characters in the story. Even though she sits on these objects in public view of the characters in the story, Laban does not know she has them. Known only to the omniscient narrator, Rachel's theft also takes the readers into the mimetic, crafted universe of biblical characters with its epistemological dynamism. In this horizon, biblical characters are engaging in secret acts and trying to keep these deeds secret from other characters in the same narrative space. Secondly, the pericope describes an aggressive representation of Rachel, particularly in her quest to possess or even defile an important symbol of male authority in Laban's household.[53] Thirdly, Rachel's theft provides intriguing perspectives on gender relationships in the patriarchal narratives in her quest to rob and dispossess her father of his powerful male religious relic/artefact. Lastly, this particular representation of Rachel contributes to the narrative pool of tricksters in the ideological landscape of Genesis. In the same literary role as Rebekah, Tamar and Sarah, Rachel also shares this important literary representation as a female trickster in the matrix of Genesis, who, against all odds, stages a plot to sabotage and to undermine the unpleasant patriarchal arrangement in which the female characters find themselves.

Significantly, however, the picture of Rachel in possession of the family idols also carries with it a polemic intention. It seems a mocking representation of the idols is here envisaged in the description of a woman sitting down on some helpless idols. Speiser underscores Rachel's resoluteness here:

> [Rachel is] in a position to know, or at least to suspect, that in conformance with local law her husband was entitled to a specified share in Laban's estate. But she also had ample reason to doubt that her father would voluntarily transfer the images as formal proof of property release; the ultimate status of Laban's daughters and their maidservants could well have been involved as well. In other words, tradition remembered Rachel as a resolute woman who did not shrink from taking the law—or what she believed to be the law—into her own hands.[54]

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[52] See Cox and Ackerman, "Micah's Teraphim."

[53] See Victor H. Matthews and Frances Mims, "Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 12 (1985): 185–196, especially 189.

[54] Speiser, *Genesis*, 250.

Concerning the subversive character of this theft, Newsom and Ringe observe, "Covert woman's power in this one brief scene dominates man's overt authority."[55] Similarly, Cassandra M. Klyman observes, "Laban's paternal and therefore male authority—an authority related to his ownership of his own household gods—is undermined by his female offspring's clever exploitation of that which makes her most markedly female."[56]The appropriation of this subversive spirit of Rachel becomes urgent on the continent of Africa where patriarchal structures have often denied the worth and dignity of the African woman. Thus, African women could explore the exhilarating significance of Rachel in her strange encounter with, and possession and appropriation of these patriarchal cultic objects. Ironically, the theft itself renders the house of Laban disempowered in the absence of its most cherished cultic objects. According to Fuchs,

> this scene punishes Laban in two complementary ways: on the one hand, the deceiver is deceived, the exploitative father is being deceptively exploited by his own daughter. On the other hand, the idols, symbolic of Laban's idolatrous beliefs (beliefs that implicitly explain his greed, deceptiveness, and relentless exploitation) are being desecrated.[57]

The symbolic importance of this theft has far reaching implications in modern calls by feminist activists for subversion, sabotage and confrontations of patriarchy and its cherished religious paraphernalia. Here, the theft of patriarchal idols by Rachel offers important imagery of radical negotiations and reordering of gender relationships. In recent time, the post-Genesis representations of Rachel have generally invoked the image of a sorrowful mother weeping for her children. For example, Jeremiah 31: 15-22 and Matthew 2:16-18 presented the image of Rachel as a weeping mother who laments for her children.[58] However, the image of Rachel has been transposed from the symbol of a sorrowful character to that of consolation and hope in contemporary times. It could also provide hope for most African women who are subjected to the ideological controls of patriarchal deities and traditional institutions. In particular, Rachel's theft resonates with the need to frustrate the existing patriarchal arrangement with its inherent cultural powers that have often undermined the worth and the aspirations of the female gender.

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[55] Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds, *Women's Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition with Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 24.

[56] Cassandra M. Klyman, "A Psychoanalytic Perspective of Women in the Bible," *Crosscurrents* 64, no. 1 (2014): 139,

[57] Fuchs, "'For I Have the Way of Women,'" 78.

[58] Michel S. Kamanzi, "The Consolation of Mother Rachel: Jeremiah 31:15–17," *Hekima Review*, no. 48 (2013), 119–131.

Conclusion

The story of Rachel's theft appears to be a marginal distraction in the general mapping of characters and events within the Jacob's story. This marginality is also apparent in the lack of works in modern scholarship that engage the literary significance of this short story.[59] Against these trends, the present article underscores the important intertextual connections of this story to Jacob's earlier deception of his father. As in this scene of deception, Rachel also seeks to assert and claim for herself the birthright of Laban's family through the stealing and possession of the family idols, which are usually the birthright of the firstborn. Through the deception, usurpation and aggressive claims of Rachel, the story places her closely in the same character zone as her husband, who also deceived, usurped and claimed the birthright of his brother for himself.

Beyond this literary significance, the representation of Rachel underscores an ideological function, particularly with the possession of a male and patriarchal symbol by a woman. In most ancient societies, the male and cult symbols of the deity are often designated a tabooed and forbidden space to which women are not allowed entrance, admission or participation. However, going against these cultic restraints and family restrictions, Rachel aggressively seeks to possess, control and appropriate the cultic symbols of patriarchy. In doing this, Rachel becomes a revolutionary symbol who penetrates the patriarchal restricted space and robs this space of its cherished symbol of power. Seen from this perspective, Rachel becomes like another Eve who takes the forbidden fruit because she penetrates the gender-restricted space of Laban's religious world and asserts control over the cultic symbol of the deity. Without fear, Rachel sits down on the family idols, and possibly defiles this cultic symbol by a seemingly mocking reference to her menstruation in the process. Engaged from this cultic angle, Rachel's theft showcases a liberational symbol of a woman who asserts her power over the patriarchal symbol of power. She robs her father's family of the symbolic power of its deity, and forces her father to enter a new covenant of respect and care for the welfare of the female members of Laban's family. Interestingly, while Jacob, her husband, magically robs Laban of his cattle on the one hand, Rachel, on the other hand, robs her father's household of its most cherished symbols that have often in the course of human history contributed to the patriarchal domination of the female gender. Located within this space of gender struggles, the importance of Rachel's theft goes beyond its narrative scope and thus provides ideological motivation for women in every class and social space, who eternally wait and eagerly look forward to the ultimate collapse of the present patriarchal structures and their formidable cultic symbols. In this way, the

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[59] In recent times, the post-Genesis representations of Rachel have generally invoked the image of a sorrowful mother weeping for her children. For example, Jeremiah 31: 15–22 and Matthew 2:16–18 present the image of Rachel as a weeping mother who laments for her children. However, the image of Rachel has become transposed from the symbol of sorrow to that of consolation and hope in contemporary times. See Kamanzi, "The Consolation of Mother Rachel."

narrative importance of Rachel's theft transcends the patriarchal borders of the Jacob stories to our world of gender marginalisation and control.

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