THE ‘LITERARY’ IN TRICKSTER NARRATIVES:
JOSHUA 9 AND 2 SAM 3:26–27

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Abstract

Biblical texts offer quite a number of stories of trickery, humbug or deception. One can find there a broad panel, going from the simple trick to the elaborate stratagem and from the instant deception to the long-planned ruse. The way the information is given also differs: the deceptions can be recalled briefly in a few sentences, or they can be narrated at length with numerous details provided inside a sophisticated story frame. Through the study of different examples, I will try to discover which relation can be perceived between the complexity of the trick and the mode of its rendering. This will help to establish that, as regards trickster narratives, one can indeed speak of ‘literary.’

Two stories of deceit can be found in the Jacob cycle, in the book of Genesis. In Gen 27:1–39, Jacob takes Esau’s place to receive the blessing from Isaac. In Gen 29:15–30, Laban gives Jacob Leah instead of Rachel for the marriage. Both texts belong to the cycle of Jacob, one as well as the other narrate a substitution of persons, and twice the youngest takes the place of the eldest with Jacob being one of the main characters. There are indeed many similarities in these two stories, as both episodes relate a deceit on identity, with Jacob being involved both times. Jan Fokkelman underlines that in each story exchanges take place “in the darkness of night and behind a veil”1 while Yair Zakovitch points out that they both take advantage of blindness, either actual or due to the absence of light.2 However, despite the similarities, others, such as Zvi Jagendorf, underline that

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Genesis 27 and Genesis 29 have a very different rendering and that their discourses differ greatly.  

*Explaining the Differences in Discourse*

Taking into account the way the trick is narrated in these texts, I have argued previously that there is a reason for such a difference, which is the position of Jacob. This theory was based on a narrative-critical approach, which seems the most suitable manner to draw attention to the difference in the number of characters and the relationship between them. I will recall here briefly the major elements of this analysis. The first is the number of characters: Genesis 27 (hereafter named the blessing episode) displays four strong characters: Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Esau. The episode can be divided in seven scenes, each one involving two members of the family who all interact with one another, each one of them having a place in the plot and a definite role: Rebecca plots, Jacob helps. They both partake in the design and achievement of the plot. Isaac is lured into believing that Jacob is Esau, and Esau has to go without his blessing; thus, Isaac is deceived and Esau is wronged. In Genesis 29 (the wedding episode), the different roles are held by characters who each assume several roles: Laban alone organizes and achieves the plot, and Jacob claims to have been both cheated and wronged. Rachel and Leah are silent and one knows nothing of their relationship to Laban—besides being his daughters. The reader is not told why Laban substitutes Leah to Rachel or how he managed to bring Jacob to believe that it was indeed Rachel that he was marrying. No one knows the part played by either daughter in the plot. There are thus two strong characters (Jacob and Laban) and two mute characters (Rachel and Leah) in the wedding episode. Not only do the two episodes differ in the number and style of the characters, but they also vary in the management of time. In the blessing episode, the trick is

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5 Zakovitch claims that this exchange is a punishment of Rebecca more than of Jacob. Zakovitch, “Through the Looking Glass,” 139–152.