LOVE'S ROOTS: ON THE REDACTION OF GENESIS 30:14–24

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In his massive commentary to the *Canticles*, the scholar to whom these pages are affectionately dedicated annotated v. 14 of the Song's chapter 7 with much arcane lore connected with the mandrake [*Mandragora officinarum*][1] We need not multiply the ancient testimonies in order to conclude that the mandrake [Hebrew: *dûday* (pl. *dûdā'îm*)] was sought primarily for its aphrodisiacal qualities; nor need we debate its erotic and curative powers in light of modern pharmaceutical knowledge. Rather, the biblical passage which contains the only other mention of mandrake, Gen 30:14-24, will retain our attention. By means of textual, but primarily literary, and folkloristic analyses, we aim to show that the episode commonly labelled "Reuben's mandrakes" is of signal importance not only because it permits us to highlight an important moment in the "biography" of Jacob, but because it also allows us insight into the purpose and method of the Genesis redactor(s), as (t)he(y) selected, shaped, and ordered inherited traditions that were concerned with patriarchs and eponymous ancestors.[2] In order not to overload the annotations for this paper, information commonly available in the commentaries is recalled only when it supplements, emphasizes, or contradicts specific or generally accepted opinions.[3]

THE TEXT [GEN 30:14–24]

[14]Once, when Reuben[a] went out during the wheat harvest,[b] found mandrakes[c] in the fields, and fetched them to his mother Leah, Rachel said to Leah: "Give me some[d] of your son's mandrakes." [15]"So, taking away my husband is not enough for you, you would even take my son's mandrakes?" she reacted. "Very well," replied Rachel, "he shall sleep with you in return for your son's mandrakes."

[16]As Jacob was returning from the field at evening time, Leah went out to meet him saying: "You are to sleep with me tonight, for I have secured you with my son's mandrakes."

That night he slept with her, [17]and God fulfilled her wish. When she conceived and bore a fifth son to Jacob, [18]she said: "God has provided me with means to obtain an engagement, just as[e] I provided my maidservant to my husband." She therefore named the child Issachar.[f]

[19]Conceiving again, Leah bore a sixth son to Jacob, [20]and stated: "since God has endowed me with a worthy gift,[g] this time my husband will surely honor me,[h] for I bore him six sons." She therefore named him Zebulun.

[21]Subsequently, she bore a daughter and named her Dinah.[i] [22]Meanwhile, God, paying attention[j] to Rachel, fulfilled her wish by making her fertile. [23]She then conceived, bore a son, and said: "God has removed my disgrace." She therefore named him Joseph,[k] adding: "May God supply me with another son."

1. TEXTUAL COMMENTS

a. As it will be shown, the choice of Reuben as the gatherer of mandrakes is not because "[he was] the only child old enough to follow the reapers in the fields" (Skinner, 388; note also Driver, 275: ". . . a child of seven or eight; Jacob, 597: ". . . who could not have been more than four to five years old at that time"). In such narratives, the age of a child is stated only if something particularly unusual is associated with his/her deeds. It might not be accidental, however, that the Leah section of this episode (vv. 14/21) emphasizes the word for "son," *bēn*, whence is derived the simplest etymology for the name "Reuben" [but cf. the grammatically impossible derivation of Gen 29:32], repeating it seven times.

b. The mention of the wheat harvest need not be taken as highlighting an agricultural background, which would supposedly show that "the episode is out of place in its present nomadic setting" (Skinner, 388), but only to establish a time factor, since both the wheat and the fruit of the mandrake ripen in late spring.

c. Interesting remarks regarding the Mesopotamian Etana legend's "plant of birth" and its relation to Reuben's mandrakes are made by E. I. Gordon, *JCS* 21 (1967): 80, n. 27. For Akkadian allusions to the mandrake, see W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* p.863 (sub *pillû*). Additions to Pope's own bibliographical collection on mandrakes can be had by referring to R. C. Campbell *A Dictionary of Assyrian*

1 Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB 7c; New York, 1977): 647-50.

2 To avoid cumbersome English, we shall henceforth speak of the singular, readactor, without implying that not more than one person was involved in the task.

3 Those mentioned in our paper are: Driver = S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (Westminster Commentaries, 12th ed.; London, 1926); Gunkel = H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament, 2nd ed.; Göttingen, 1969); Jacob = B. Jacob, *Das Erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* (KTAV reprint of the 1934 edition; New York, 1974); Skinner = J. Skinner, *Genesis* (International Critical Commentary, 2nd ed.; Edinburgh, 1956).

Botany, 217-19; to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* 11.870 (s.v.) and to the Genesis commentaries.

d. *middûdā>ēy benēk*, "*some* of your son's mandrakes," implies that Leah might have partaken of the remainders.

e. *>ašer* is understood here as equivalent to *ka>ašer*; cf. *BDB* 83 (8,e). Others render "because," reinforcing the notion that *>ašer-nātattî šipḥātî le>îšî* is a redactional addition to E (Skinner, 389, notes to 18aβ). But the etymology for Issachar requires a connection between *śekārî* and *>îšî*, now spread out between the two clauses.

f. The variation in writing and punctuating the name [ben Asher: *yiśśā(ś)kār* (with a quiescent second *śin*); ben Naphtali: *yiśśākār/yiššākār*] has given rise to a number of etymologies. Verse 18 stoutly connects with *>îš śākār*, "a hireling," while the spelling might suggest **yeš śākār*, "a loan/reward is at stake." Both are obviously folk etymologies to explain a name whose "real" meaning was apparently lost to time, but we do have evidence that a number of Hebrew personal names exhibit an *>/y* alternation in initial position (e.g., *yišay/>išay*; *yesar>ēlāh/ >asar>ēlāh*; on this phenomenon, see C. Isbell, "A Note on Amos 1:1," *JNES* 36 (1977): 213-14). Albright, *JAOS* 74 (1954): 227, is followed by many scholars who analyze as an Š-stem verbal form **yašaśkir* and render something like "May (God) grant favor." The root *śkr*, "to hire," occurs in Ugaritic; cf. Gordon's *Ugaritic Textbook*, 19:2415.

g. The root *zbd* occurs in Hebrew only here. Its meaning has been posited mainly through Syriac. Some have suggested that it is merely a dialectal variant for *zbl* (e.g. Skinner).

h. Diverse renderings have been proposed. They are conveniently collected in M. Held's "The Root *ZBL/SBL* in Akkadian, Ugaritic and Biblical Hebrew," *JAOS* 68 (1968 = *Essays in Memory of E. A. Speiser*): 90-92. Our rendering matches his "This time my husband will exalt/elevate me." Further on *zbl* is found in J. Gamberoni's entry for *TWAT* 2.531-34.

i. Jacob (599) rightly points out that the mention of Dinah's birth allows Leah's own children to reach the optimal number 7.

j. This translation for *zākar >et* PN tries to avoid the negative connotation implicit in the usual rendering "remember," a connotation which could not have been intended by the Hebrew. On the usage, see H. Eising, *TWAT* 2.578-81 (sub *zākar*, II, 3).

k. On the various attempts to find ancient Near Eastern equivalents to this name, see R. de Vaux, *The Early Traditions of Israel*, 314 n. 87.

2. Literary Considerations

As a literary genre, the biography is not unknown to the Old Testament.[4] In consonance with tenets which became better known to us through the works of Aristotle's peripatetic students, e.g., Theophrastus, Heraclides Ponticus, and Aristoxenus of Tarentum (ca. 4th century B.C.), legendary materials, polemics against foreign nations, genealogical asides, scandals, etc., were woven into the accounts concerning a heroic character who was often chosen because of his prototypical personality.[5] Through a recounting of his deeds—and even of those associated with him—the "biographer" was able not only to reflect upon the moral quality of a man who helped shape his nation's destiny, but also to underscore the manner by which the nation's destiny was fulfilled and actualized, in microscopic fashion, by an ancestor's activities. It is not of immediate concern to us whether, in light of recent research, a more specialized label, such as "historical biography," "fictional biography," or even "biographical fiction" ought to be attached to some of the accounts concerning the biblical examples; we need only note at this stage that, in addition to countless biographical "torsos," the OT contains at least three examples of full-fledged "biographies," those of Jacob, Moses, and David, and one example, that of Samson, of a particular manifestation of the genre.

A full-fledged dramatic biography would feature the following: 1. An interest in the birth and death of the hero that goes beyond mere biographical notices; 2. A certitude that the historical realities, important to the biographer's own generation, were shaped by events associated with the subject of the account; 3. An awareness that the heroic character is not static, but one which develops and deepens as recollections of his deeds are mounted upon the biographical canvas; and 4. A tendency to undergird a narrative and reduce the episodic nature of the accounts by often allowing the secondary characters to repeat paradigmatic patterns established by the chief protagonist's own activities.

The biography of Jacob spans chapters 29:19–50:21 of Genesis, and is clearly blocked out by two narratives, both featuring dim-eyed patriarchs giving blessings and birthrights to the younger of two brothers (Jacob/Esau; Ephraim/ Manasseh), and strikingly recalling parallel themes and vocabulary. Within this biography are placed

4 Skinner, xx-xxix, speaks of the "biography" of Jacob, Abraham, and Joseph without, however, establishing criteria for usage of the term. We shall try to show, below, that the term can be applied only to a limited number of narratives in the Old Testament.

We hope to return to this topic on a much wider and deeper basis in a future monograph.

5 Much has been written on this topic in the recent past; cf. Arnaldo Momigliano's text of his Jackson lectures at Harvard, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge, MA, 1971) and his *Second Thoughts on Greek Biography* (Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde, Nieuwe reeks: deel 34, Mo. 7; Amsterdam, 1971). Still a source of much information and written in an elegant style is D. R. Stuart's *Epochs of Greek and Roman Biography* (Berkeley, 1928). The subject has hardly been touched, at least in a comprehensible manner, by ancient Near Eastern and biblical scholarship. See now J. Blenkinsopp's rambling attempt in *JSOT* 20(1981): 27–46.

accounts which either tie it to past generations (26:1-33) or future ones (38; 50:1-21). A biographical "torso," concerned solely with a circumscribed number of years in the life of Joseph, occupies 39–41. The circumstances that led Jacob—and thus Israel—into Egypt are made the subject of other chapters (37, 42–48) and are to be judged as equally concerned with the activities of Jacob and his sons as those of Joseph. Two biographical notices regarding Joseph's life are placed outside the "torso" devoted to his youthful deeds (39–41). The second of these is concerned with his death and burial, given mostly to satisfy genealogical and chronological requirements (50:22-26), and links Jacob's biography to that of Moses (Exod 1ff.). The first, attesting to the unusual nature of Joseph's birth, occurs in the episode under consideration.

The mandrake episode feeds upon an account of the strife between two sisters, married to the same husband. This motif is not unconventional, even to the Old Testament.[6] In order to sustain interest in a narrative that would otherwise be scarcely dramatic, the presentation of birth etiologies is interrupted by a highly charged dialogue between Rachel, the preferred wife, and Jacob (30:1-3). This permits the audience to share in the anxiety of women whose sense of well-being and fulfillment depended upon the production of (male) children. The mandrake episode, however, entertains a more complex agenda by recalling a direct confrontation, unique to the whole patriarchal narratives, between the two sisters. This is followed by a terse statement which Leah makes to Jacob.

As sketched by the narrator, the characters involved in the drama fit into pre-determined stock roles, assigned by biblical conventions whenever such themes are developed (cf. Abraham and the Sarah/Hagar episodes). The hero (Jacob) whose attention is desperately sought, is passive and is willing to abide by whatever decision is presented by the antagonists. The supplicant (Rachel) is polite and eager to accept her rival's offer. Center stage is assigned to the aggrieved (Leah) who does not allow the occasion to pass without hurling choice invectives at her lifelong nemesis. From the audience's perspective—but *not*, as we shall see, from that of the redactor—Reuben's role is important only as that of a catalyst for the confrontation; he says nothing. A presence, however, hovers over this section of the narrative and exerts a deterministic influence, that of Rachel's unborn child, Joseph.

From a literary perspective, as distinguished from a narratological or redactional one, the time sequence is imprecise and retroactively open-ended. The episode could be moved back and forth without affecting the presentation, development, or impact of the account. This feature is quite consonant with biblical narrative tenets where precise temporal settings are established only when specific characteristics associated with the main protagonist are thereby highlighted.

3. Folkloristic Considerations

The mandrake episode will allow us to focus on the manner in which two of the four features of full-fledged biographies, listed above as numbers 2 and 4, operate with regard to Jacob's life history.

In a wide ranging article, "The Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong," J. Goldin takes up a theme that is shared by Near Eastern and biblical literatures, one in which the younger/youngest son eclipses the older/oldest.[7] On the life and fortunes of Reuben, Goldin has this to say: "[Reuben] may not be the smartest person in the world, [but] he is basically one of the most decent characters in Genesis . . . . Reuben is no Ishmael, no Esau, not an unworthy successor to Jacob the Patriarch."[8] To account for the loss of his primal position, Goldin, however, can only cite the well-known incident in which, before his father's death, Reuben slept with Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant and Jacob's handmaid. Thus, Reuben earned for himself his father's damning testament (Gen 49:3-4). "So much for that nice boy who brought his mother mandrakes," adds Goldin.[9]

We ought to recall, however, the manner in which Jacob's biography opens with two acts by which Esau is supplanted by his younger twin. In the first, Jacob and Esau have a *direct* confrontation at the end of which the birthright (*bekōrāh*) becomes Jacob's (26:27-34). In the second, in which the blessing of the favored (*berākāh*) is grasped by Jacob, it is through the schemings of Rebekah that the goal is achieved. We note here that, in this second episode, there is no direct meeting between Esau and Jacob, and that the bestower of blessings, Isaac, is unwittingly used for Rebekah's purposes. These transfers of rights and privileges usually reserved for the elders, are the result of acts of trickery successfully negotiated by a hero who, moreover, retains the sympathy of narrator and audience despite the underhanded manner in which he obtains his goal. I have elsewhere written on this motif that is so generally prevalent in Genesis, particularly in Jacob's biography.[10] By selecting and allocating episodes which detail its presence throughout the Jacob saga (e.g., Laban's trickeries; Jacob's responses; Rachel's absconding with the idols; Jacob's sons conniving to rid themselves of the Schechemites; of Joseph; Joseph's own cat-and-mouse games with his brothers, etc.), the narrator was able to fulfill one of the four tenets of our

6 B. O. Long, *The Problem of Etiological Narrative in the Old Testament* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, No. 108; Berlin, 1968): 311-34.

7 *JBL* 96 (1977): 27-44; cf. pp. 30ff. and note 22 on p. 30. On the rights and privileges of the first-born, see J. Milgrom in the *IDB, Supplement,* 337-38.

8 *JBL* 96 (1977): 37.

9 *Ibid.*, 41.

10 J. M. Sasson, *Ruth, A New Translation; with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (The Johns Hopkins Near Eastern Studies; Baltimore, 1979): 231-32.

biographical requirements (see above) and thus succeeded in bracing his life-history with repeated underpinnings.

In the case of Reuben, we are dealing with the reverse of what happened to Jacob. Here the matter is not one in which the younger/youngest succeeded in obtaining the birthright and blessing not normally due him, but one in which the oldest *loses* those rights and privileges. We are therefore not given accounts that clearly delineate how Joseph and Benjamin obtained them through direct or indirect acts of trickery, but ones in which, again directly and indirectly, Reuben forfeits their bounties. His dalliance with Bilhah, registered in Gen 35:22, was a *direct act of confrontation* with his father; and this only earned him, if not the loss of the choicest blessing (*berākāh*), certainly the unwelcome curse of his father. Note that this event is in opposite presentation to the one in which Jacob gained his own *berākāh*. The mandrake episode, I believe, offers an explanation for the manner in which Reuben lost his birthright, the *bekōrāh*, and this is also made in a presentation that reverses the one by which Jacob obtained the birthright from his twin, Esau.

Reuben fetches mandrakes for his mother. His role is minimal beyond that. But Rachel, desperate for sons from her own womb, approaches her sister. Leah finds in this situation an excellent opportunity to renew her birth-givings. It is not necessary for our purpose to detail whether the characters, the narrator or his audience—or even medieval Rabbis and contemporary scholarship—believed that mandrakes had effective fertilizing powers.[11] But what we ought to take into account is that by means of the mandrakes, Leah sought to trick her sister in order to find more favor with Jacob. But in doing so, she was only partially successful. She did manage to bear two more sons and a daughter; but she also gave Rachel the opportunity to conceive Joseph and then Benjamin. With the birth of these two—last among Jacob's sons, but first from his beloved Rachel—a reversal of the pattern, which had obtained in the accounts concerning Jacob's appropriation of Esau's birthright, is again at stake. Reuben unwittingly and innocently becomes the victim, as Jacob's affection is drawn from the "first fruit of strength" to the last ones.

The manner in which the mandrake episode fulfills the second of our biographical propositions, by which events associated with a protagonist's life predict or help shape the historical realities as known to the biographer, remains to be discussed. Far from being "so curtailed as to be shorn of its original significance,"[12] our brief narrative adequately fulfills its purpose. By selecting a tradition which accounts for Reuben's loss of the birthright in favor of Rachel's sons, and by allocating it at the earliest moments of tribal geneses, the redactor—i.e., Jacob's biographer—makes an important prediction concerning the evolution of Hebrew kingship. Reuben's tribe, which might rightfully have produced Israel's first kings, is supplanted by Benjamin's. The last's descendant, Saul, will be God's first anointed king. The manner in which Judah and Joseph (Ephraim) will share in ruling the promised land, is also entertained in the Jacob saga. But this will await his narratives which recount the sack of Schechem, and those which give Judah and Joseph prominent roles in the entry into Egypt.

4. The Role of the Redactor

Our episode was located by the redactor roughly midway between the accounts of Jacob's flight to Upper Syria and his return to the promised land. This centering becomes more dramatic when Jacob's birth and death narratives are added to the tabulation of verses: 130 and 127 verses flank the mandrake episode.[13] With respect to the accounts (chapters 25–49) which span the entire block of narratives regarding Jacob—including the ones concerned primarily with Joseph—our episode is also centrally placed. In locating it in this slot, the redactor may have paid heed to the following considerations: *a. contextual.* By ending with Joseph's birth, and by picking up the narrative of Jacob's struggles with Laban at precisely that moment ["As Rachel bore Joseph, Jacob said to Laban: 'Give me leave to go towards my own area and land' " (v. 25)], the redactor resorted to a well-known technique by which the entire birth narrative is highlighted by making it seem independent of, and only marginally important to, the course of actions which took Jacob out of Harran. Beginning with the introduction of Reuben into the mandrake sodden wheatfields, however, the section succeeds in breaking a pattern which had monotonously unraveled succeeding births and established name etymologies. Reinvigorated by a folkloristic detail, the narrative pursues its course until the birth of Joseph. *b. genealogical.* Except for that of Benjamin, reported in Gen 35:18 but already foreshadowed in this episode, the births of Jacob's children are set within Gen 29:31–30:24. But it is worth noticing that in its final redacted shape, the narrative has given Joseph special attention by having him as Jacob's 12th child (count includes Dinah), and by placing him as the 7th son born to Jacob after Rachel took up the challenge of her sister and entered Bilhah into the fray (Gen 30:1ff.).

Our treatment of the mandrake episode has been concerned neither with establishing the origin of the traditions behind Gen 30:14-24, nor with detailing their permutations as they were transmitted through time and space. It has focused, instead, on the role played by the redactor in selecting this tradition, doubtless from among many which recalled the acts of Jacob and of his sons,

11 The *Testament of Issachar* clearly recognizes the power of the mandrake to bring about fertility. See further, J. Feliks in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* 11.870.

12 Skinner, 388.

13 This estimate, of course, depends on a division into verses which did not obtain until the common era.

and in assigning it to its present slot. That role, we have tried to indicate, was not static or passive. For even if critical scholarship has determined that two separate strands, commonly labelled J and E,[14] were available to him, it is nevertheless the redactor who infused life into a narrative which, if isolated, was likely to have proved of interest solely to collectors of arcane motifs. But in locating it in its present position, the redactor established for it a purpose which transcended the merits of its contents and the quality of its style. In this respect, the redactor proved himself to be as creative as the originators of this tradition. Moreover, in framing it within its present confines, the redactor forced attention away from the immediate unfoldings of birth narratives, and invited those who shared his interest in Israel's past to appreciate the manner in which the present and the more recent past have already been coded within the distant activities of heroic patriarch and eponymous ancestors. In this respect, the redactor, even when obviously didactic in his goals, managed to make a philosophical (for him, read: theological) statement: that the humblest of accidents (Reuben finding mandrakes), the most mundane of human interactions (two women agonizing over their husband's favor), ought to be considered as adumbrative of more significant events. Concomitantly, he would suggest, one would only have to explore past traditions and explore their mysteries, to be guided accurately in charting the future.

On closer inspection, therefore, the redactor compares favorably with most other ancient historiographers who collected traditions and juxtaposed them in such a way as to give them meaning beyond their immediate contents. In stringing out the various episodes concerned with Jacob and his sons, the redactor can be singled out for his biographical skills. In the task that he laid out for himself, in his ideals and vision for his nation's welfare, he does not differ much from those of other generations and cultures who likewise sought to entertain similar agenda. Witness the oft-quoted program outlined by Thomas Fuller, English divine and shrewd biographer, as he introduced his *History of the Worthies of England* (1662):

> Know then, I propound five ends to myself in this Book: first, to gain some glory to God; secondly, to preserve the memories of the dead; thirdly, to present examples for the living; fourthly, to entertain the reader with delight, and lastly (which I am not ashamed to publicly profess), to procure some honest profit to myself.

14 The most concentrated discussion about source division for this episode is to be found in the following: S. Lehming, "Zur Erzählung von der Geburt der Jakobssöhne," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963): 74-81; Gunkel, 329-36; Jacob, 997-1000 (Anhang: Quellenscheidung). Generally speaking, the sources regarded as behind the mandrake episode are assigned to J and E, with "redactional intrusions," e.g., at v. 18. The etymological "doublets" are respectively allocated to J and E, even if, in most cases, the Hebrew etymology cuts across the two strands. See now, also, G. G. Nicol in *Journal of Theological Study* 31 (1980): 536–39; G. Brim in *Tarbiz* 48 (1978): 1–8.

The episode has received its share of absurd interpretations, the largest selection of which is collected in H. W. Hogg's article in the 1903 *Encyclopedia Biblica* 4.4088-4091.

For Rabbinical elaborations, one might look at the handy compendium of Kasher's *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation,* s.v. An interesting article on Rabbinic elaborations regarding Gen 30:15 is D. Daube's "The Night of Death," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 629-32.