

JACOB AND THE WIFE-SISTER STORIES

MARIAN KELSEY

The phrase ‘*What is this you have done?*’ and the similar ‘*What have you done?*’ appear in the Bible only around a dozen times. About half of these are in Genesis. Either variation is a declaration of dismay and confrontation. This is apparent in the first two uses: the first in Genesis 3:13, when God speaks to Eve after she and Adam have eaten of the tree, and the second in Genesis 4:10, when God addresses Cain after his brother’s murder. There are five other appearances of the phrase in Genesis, and it is quickly apparent that three of them have similar contexts. The phrases appear in Genesis 12:18, 20:9 and 26:10 – in other words, in the three wife-sister stories. In each case the question is addressed to a patriarch by a foreign king. The king asks the question on discovering that the patriarch has presented his wife as his sister. Moreover, a fourth appearance of the phrase in Genesis is in the mouth of Jacob when he finds out that he has been given the wrong sister as his wife (Gen. 29:25). That story involves a similar duplicity between sister and wife. The appearance of the same question in this story leads one to wonder whether there are other similarities between Jacob’s tale and the wife-sister stories of his forebears Isaac and Abraham. There are indeed parallels between the stories, and they are extensive enough to suggest that Jacob’s experience with his two wives is a deliberate inversion of the wife-sister pattern.

The wife-sister stories all begin with the patriarch travelling to a foreign land. Abraham *went down to Egypt to sojourn there* (Gen. 12:10), Abraham later *journeyed... to the region of the Negeb* (Gen. 20:1), and Isaac *went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar* (Gen. 26:1). Jacob too travels away from home and family, although he travels north and east to Paddan-aram, quite the opposite direction from that taken by his fathers (Gen. 28:5). Movements to and from the promised land are a common theme in the patriarchal stories, and it is not surprising to find Jacob also fitting the mold. Even so, in addition to travelling in the opposite direction from normal, there are other indications that Jacob’s story has inverted the usual pattern from wife turned sister to sister turned wife. Abraham and Isaac are both sojourners in

Marian Kelsey has degrees in biblical studies from the University of St Andrews, Scotland and from Durham University in England. She is currently researching the book of Jonah at the University of St Andrews.

their new locations, and fear for their safety there (Gen. 12:10, 20:1, 26:3). Jacob, however, is among kinsmen, and has been sent there because it is a place of safety, away from the anger of his brother (Gen. 29:13-14).

Abraham and Isaac claim that their wives are in fact their sisters because they fear for their own safety. In each case the deception, directly or indirectly, leads to the security and enrichment of the patriarch. In Genesis 12, Pharaoh takes Abraham's so-called sister into his palace and Abraham is rewarded with sheep and cattle and slaves. Genesis 20 is a little different; when Sarah is returned to Abraham he is compensated with sheep, cattle, slaves, silver and the choice of settling wherever he pleases in Abimelech's land. In Genesis 26 there is no such direct link between the patriarch's deception and his acquirement of wealth and safety. Nonetheless, after discovering the lie, Abimelech orders his people to leave Isaac alone and Isaac subsequently prospers, until he becomes so wealthy that Abimelech orders him away from the land.

In contrast to this, Jacob is the victim of dishonesty. He wishes to take Rachel for a wife, but by deception is wedded to her sister (Gen. 29:25). The trickery perpetrated by his fathers results in their security and enrichment, but the deception practised on Jacob results in his being bound in service for fourteen years. During that time, he finds himself enriching the host who deceived him: *the little you [Laban] had before I [Jacob] came has grown to much* (Gen. 30:29). Fortunately for Jacob, he is able to strike a new deal with Laban that allows Jacob to amass great wealth (Gen. 30:31-43). However, he never finds security. Laban is always changing the terms. Even in gaining wealth, Jacob only creates rivalry between him and his father-in-law (Gen. 31:1-2, 7). Eventually Jacob must flee unbeknownst to Laban, unlike Abraham and Isaac who are set on their way (or given land to settle) by the king concerned.

One final element that binds Jacob's story to those of Abraham in Genesis 20 (though not in Genesis 12) and Isaac in Genesis 26 is the subsequent forging of a covenant, a *berit*, between the two parties. It is exceedingly rare in the Torah for a covenant to be formed with anyone but God. In fact, the only other exception to this rule is in Genesis 14:13 when Abraham allies with other tribal leaders. Nonetheless, in two of the wife-sister stories, a covenant is necessary to resolve the remaining tensions between the patriarch and his

host. Abraham and Isaac initially find security after the deception that they each practised on Abimelech. Abimelech says to Abraham '*Here my land is before you; settle wherever you please*' and of Isaac '*Anyone who molests this man or his wife shall be put to death*' (Gen. 20:15 and 26:11). However, in each case Abimelech is aware that God is with the patriarch, and thus wary of the patriarch's potential threat. Therefore Abimelech subsequently insists on a covenant with the patriarch to ensure continued peace between them (Gen. 21:22-34 and 26:26-31). As far as Jacob and Laban are concerned, Jacob might feel he had more to fear from Laban than vice versa. Even so, the (rather more significant) remaining tensions between Jacob and Laban are finally resolved with a covenant, after Laban is warned by God not to do Jacob any harm (Gen. 31:29, 43-54).

What is the purpose in inverting the wife-sister stories like this? One possibility may lie in the discomfiting nature of the wife-sister stories themselves. In these stories, the patriarchs of the nation behave dishonestly and in doing so endanger the people's matriarchs. Zakovitch suggests that there are tendencies in biblical narrative to punish transgression and to mitigate guilt when it is an ancestor who has transgressed.¹ He argues that these tendencies are evident in the wife-sister stories themselves. For example, the (re-)telling of the story in Genesis 20 lightens Abraham's guilt by allowing him to explain his actions to Abimelech and by specifying that nothing untoward happened to Sarah. In terms of punishment, Zakovitch describes the multiple connections between Genesis 12 and Israel's enslavement in Egypt and suggests that the time in Egypt is implicitly presented as punishment for Abraham's behavior. With this framework in mind, the inversion of the wife-sister stories in the Jacob narrative could serve similar purposes. It serves as a kind of 'ancestral poetic justice,' as the wife presented as a sister becomes a sister presented as wife.² When Jacob exclaims, as did the foreign kings, '*What have you done?*' the author perhaps reveals to the reader that here, in Jacob's story, his fathers' transgressions have been repaid.

Why, though, would Jacob be made to pay the price for his fathers' dishonesty? A better explanation for the inversion of the wife-sister stories concerns Jacob's own acts of deception. In Genesis 27, Jacob presented himself as his elder brother to gain his father's blessing, though the blessing properly belonged to Esau. It is often suggested that the swapping of Rachel and Leah is

payback for the swapping of Jacob and Esau. The question *'What have you done?'* ensures that the readers make the connection. By skilfully inserting into Jacob's mouth the cry of dismay his forefathers once provoked, the author draws attention to patriarchal acts of deception, in the very moment when our sympathies are with Jacob as the victim of deception. We are reminded that the patriarchs did not always act with the utmost probity, and this has included Jacob.

Furthermore, there is a contrast between Jacob's deception in Genesis 27, which was practised against his own brother for personal gain, and Abraham's and Isaac's deceptions, which were done from fear for their safety in a foreign land. That being the case, Abraham and Isaac were not explicitly reproved for their actions. In fact, God acted to defend the patriarchs from the potential consequences of their actions (Gen. 12:17, 20:3, and implied in 26:28-29). Jacob, however, receives no such protection. God is silent when Laban deceives Jacob. Thus, Jacob is punished for his usurpation of his brother by Laban's swapping of Leah and Rachel. One sibling-switch is repaid by another. In a final twist of irony, Jacob's punishment is also the mirror image of his fathers' actions, in that sister is swapped for wife, as well as sibling for sibling. Jacob the trickster is made the victim of the thrice-attempted trick of his ancestors. The consummate trickster has himself been tricked.

Nonetheless, even this literary requital has limits. Jacob does in the end make his fortune, and he returns in prosperity to his own land. God's protection was withheld in one moment so that Jacob's lie may be repaid, but it is subsequently extended again to Jacob, including in his further dealings with Laban (Gen. 31:24). Ultimately, the inversion of the wife-sister stories continues the ties between Jacob's life and the lives of Abraham and Isaac. Each patriarch discovers that, even when he stumbles, God's favour persists. Moreover, although Laban provides the narrative comeuppance to Jacob's actions, the readers are not encouraged to feel sympathy for him. Laban is not the righteous Abimelech of Genesis 26, who is horrified that one of his people might have slept with a married woman. Nor is he even the intimidated Abimelech of Genesis 20, who is prevented by God from sinning in such a way. Laban is himself a trickster who behaves deceitfully again and again toward Jacob. He too finds his dishonesty repaid, at his own daughter's hand.

And when Laban later catches up with Jacob, his exclamation of indignation is, of course, *'What have you done?'*

NOTES

1. Yair Zakovitch, "Disgrace: The Lies of the Patriarch," *Social Research* 75 (2008) pp. 1035-1058.
2. Gad Dishy, *Jacob's Family Dynamics: Climbing the Rungs of the Ladder* (Jerusalem: Devora, 2010) p. 64.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

October	Psalms	57 – 85
November	Psalms	86 – 113
December	Psalms	114 – 141
January	Psalms	142 – 150
	Proverbs	1 – 19
February	Proverbs	20 – 31
	Job	1 – 16

