

# Scandalous tales of deception

Anthony Phillips reads an analysis of one of the Old Testament's racier narratives

**Jacob: Unexpected patriarch**  
Yair Zakovitch  
Yale £18.99  
(978-0-300-14426-0)  
Church Times Bookshop £17.10

THERE is no racier narrative in the Hebrew scriptures than the story of the patriarch Jacob, known nowhere outside the Bible. From its inception, it is a catalogue of deceptions, in which all the main characters participate.

Smooth Jacob dupes his father by disguising himself as the hairy Esau; Laban places the wrong daughter in the marriage tent; Jacob tricks Laban over sheep-breeding to maximise his herd; Rachel feigns menstruation to hide Laban's household gods; Dinah's brothers persuade the Shechemites to be circumcised to facilitate their massacre; and Joseph's brothers produce his bloodstained coat to fool Jacob over his supposed death.

All these narratives are masterly explored by Zakovitch who argues that each deceiver gets his or her comeuppance. He recognises, though, that the text has different layers, and so engages in what he

describes as "literary archaeology".

Going back to oral tradition, Zakovitch seeks to discover what has been discarded and what added, and follows the development of the tradition in later biblical, extra-biblical, and rabbinical literature. So, for instance, he believes that, while Genesis derives Jacob's name from the Hebrew for "heel", originally tradition held that he was born before his brother and was named from another Hebrew word meaning Deceiver, or Cheat.

As Zakovitch points out, this is one of the narrator's many attempts to exonerate Jacob and tone down any blame that might attach to him. So Esau's sale of his birthright is presented in such a way as to condemn Esau as unworthy. Rebekah is pictured as the instigator of the plot to disguise Jacob and gain the blessing intended for Esau. God is credited with securing the increase in Jacob's flocks. And it is Rachel who is blamed for the theft of Laban's household gods and ironically sentenced to death by her adoring husband, ignorant of her action — a prophecy later fulfilled.

Similarly, Zakovitch digs away at the hidden layers in the story of Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok with the stranger of the night, and of the rape of Dinah. He notes the many parallels in the narratives, some being mirror images, others showing an inverse relationship. He also spells out in transliteration the various allusions between Hebrew words, enabling the non-Hebraist to



Jacob and the ladder: a wall-painting reproduced on the cover of *Jacob: Unexpected patriarch*

appreciate the subtleties of the text.

Further, he notes that much of the Jacob narrative reflects later issues such as the conflict with Edom, and attempts to blacken Shechem, centre of Samaritan worship. Similarly, later political wranglings between the northern and southern kingdoms are reflected in different claims for the sites of Rachel's and Jacob's burial places.

Zakovitch concludes that the narrator offers the story of Jacob's

deceptions without comment of his own or indeed any reflection on the participants' thoughts. Although he argues that it was important for educative purposes that the authors of the various deceptions should be seen to be punished, in my view, this and the attempts to improve Jacob's image dull the impact of the original tales. When first told, would not the tricksters have been applauded for their ingenuity, and their gullible victims have been

seen as receiving their just deserts?

What the story of Jacob teaches is that we do not have to be saints for God's purposes to be achieved. That is a cause for celebration, as is this masterful treatment of an engaging rogue who is renamed Israel "Upright", and becomes father of the nation.

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## Reason-and-revelation debate

Andrew Davison on a book that illuminates but misunderstands

**The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture**

Yoram Hazony  
Cambridge University Press £18.99  
(978-0-521-17667-5)  
Church Times Bookshop £17.10

YORAM HAZONY invites us to read the Hebrew Scriptures as works of philosophy on two accounts: because they address many of the questions that later philosophers would address, and because the component books can be read as works of reason.

Over the first question, that of Old Testament topics, Hazony is at his best. Various books do indeed deal with ethics, faith, political philosophy, and epistemology — all good philosophical subjects — and they present a certain account of the way things are, which we could call metaphysics.

Hazony also makes a good claim for the importance of reason to many Old Testament writers. For all that they present God as being beyond sewing up — ineffable, transcendent, elusive — that is no celebration of irrationality. God, the revelation of God, and the quest for God are all associated with understanding and insight.

Moreover, faithfulness to God involves using one's *lev*, which Hazony argues should be translated as "mind" (and not as "heart", as it frequently is).

Further still, the prophets are thinkers, not simply mouthpieces. Jeremiah, for instance, is praised for having "excelled in seeing". His role was not "simply to look at ready-made images that God placed before him", since "in that case, it would be God who had excelled in presenting", not Jeremiah in seeing. No: God praises the prophet for his clarity of perception; Jeremiah had to notice, and he noticed well.

This otherwise excellent book comes unstuck when Hazony sets out to situate "reason" in relation to "revelation". His principal concern is to refute those who see the Bible as "revelation" rather than "reason". He may to some extent have Jewish commentators in mind, but, by and large, Christians are in view.

Unfortunately, Hazony's reading of the Christian tradition is spectacularly skewed. He assumes that a Christian theologian thinks of revelation along the lines of snippets of information being fed down from heaven on a telegraph wire. Just as problematic, his account of what "reason" meant for the medievals (taken as the definitive case) looks like nothing so much as Enlightenment empiricism, and very little like the Platonic-Aristotelianism provided by high scholasticism (which could, in fact, be squared far more

readily with the rest of Hazony's argument).

In so much as Hazony knows Christian intellectual life, it seems that he has in mind either contemporary Protestantism at its most pietistic, or Roman Catholicism in the grip of a sharp distinction between reason and revelation which emerged only towards the end of the Middle Ages (and, even then, was only held by some), and which has been much criticised over the past century.

Hazony also seems himself to be strangely bound to the logic that he claims to oppose. At certain key moments, he perpetuates just that "opposition between God's word and the pronouncements of human reason when it is working as it should" which he otherwise wants to deny.

In certain important ways, then, this is a flawed book. Yet, as an approach to the Old Testament as philosophy, worthy to be placed alongside any "reasoned" later work, it is something of a masterpiece. Any reader of this newspaper interested in either philosophy or the Old Testament, or both, is likely to find it enormously stimulating.

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## Take up and read

Peter McGeary looks at a programme for discovering the Bible

**The Bible Challenge: Read the Bible in a year**

Marek Zabriskie, editor  
Canterbury Press £19.99  
(978-1-84825-291-2)  
Church Times Bookshop £18

HOW did you start reading the Bible? I started furtively, with a torch, hiding under the bedclothes at night, starting at Genesis, and doggedly working my way through to Revelation. Not the best way; but I did it.

Another question could be: "Did you start reading the Bible?" For many Christians, their only experience of scripture is when it is declaimed liturgically. Nothing wrong with that, of course, but inevitably this will restrict one's knowledge of the rich, diverse, baffling, and sometimes repellent things that can be found between the covers of our Bibles.

Marek Zabriskie wants us to read our Bibles daily, and to read them from cover to cover. *The Bible Challenge* has 365 sections, each of which has an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, and a New Testament reading. The cycle assumes that the reader will begin on a Monday: every seventh day it assumes that the reader will be in church, listening to the scriptures.

Brief comments and questions and a prayer, from a great variety of Anglican writers from both sides of the Atlantic, assist, clarify, or challenge as appropriate.

Lovers of the Apocrypha will be disappointed here, as there was no space to include any of its material. Nevertheless, this is an imaginative way of getting people to read the Bible systematically and not selectively — something that ought to be a thoroughly Anglican exercise, given what Thomas Cranmer did with the lectionary in the Book of Common Prayer.

As the collect has it, all holy scriptures are written for our learning. If we do not read them, how shall we learn the music of God? And if we do not learn, how then shall we sing the Lord's song in our strange land?

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SEL CARADO, in **Matty and Matt: A conversational approach to Matthew's Gospel**, imagines a church study group discussing the Gospel. Melanie has just taken over leadership of the group; the weekly meetings are depicted in the third person, but through her eyes. Group members raise questions, share experiences, and learn together; their deliberations (and the text of the Gospel) make up the main body of this book (Resource Publications, £14.99; 978-1-61097-432-5).