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The Study of Involuntary Migration as a Hermeneutical Guide for Reading the Jacob Narrative

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Abstract:

The patriarch Jacob is an involuntary migrant. Jacob lives as an asylum seeker from Esau's threat of violence and then as a refugee under Laban's protection. Eventually, Jacob returns 'home' to Canaan, but he finds there a society totally different than the one he remembers or imagines. Jacob resembles involuntary migrants from other cultures in all of these ways. The experiences of other involuntary migrants can and should, therefore, guide interpretation of this narrative. This article, therefore, exegetes the texts concerning Jacob in Genesis 25–33 by utilizing findings from the social scientific study of involuntary migration, James C. Scott's work on subaltern resistance, and studies on the role of trickster narratives in the Hebrew Bible. By generating new interpretive solutions to perennially problematic passages and showing the prominence of the experience of involuntary migration in Genesis, this article outlines an important new hermeneutical approach relevant not only for this text but also for a large number of texts in the Hebrew Bible concerned with involuntary migration.

Keywords: Genesis; migration; exegesis; hermeneutics; Esau; Jacob

1. Introduction

Consider this atypical summary of the ancestral narrative in Gen 12–36.

The narrative begins with Abraham,[1] who migrates to Canaan. On arrival in Canaan, famine forces Abraham to flee to Egypt (Gen 12:10). Abraham eventually returns to Canaan, where his son Isaac also faces a famine that forces him to migrate (Gen 26:1). Rather than leave

1. For ease, I shall use Abraham throughout, though the first patriarch's name is Abram from his introduction until it is changed by YHWH in Gen 17:5.

Canaan, Isaac drifts within its boundaries, residing in various places to survive. Isaac's son Jacob grows up in Canaan, but spends his early adulthood as an asylum seeker avoiding the aggression of his brother Esau by taking refuge with his family in Mesopotamia. After 20 years, Jacob returns to Canaan to find a transformed, unrecognizable society. The conciliatory attitude of Esau—who seeks to reconcile with Jacob instead of kill him—exemplifies Jacob's reverse culture shock. Throughout a *Leitwort* is *gēr*, 'sojourner,' a term that connotes transitory residence, difference from the host population, and limited legal protection.

One might summarize the narrative with terms used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: Abraham is an environmentally induced externally displaced person, Isaac is an environmentally induced internally displaced person, and Jacob is an asylum seeker who subsequently repatriates by choice. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are all self-settled involuntary migrants.

When framed this way, there is little doubt that Gen 12–36 invites the commentator to employ social scientific research on involuntary migration. Though social scientific approaches to Genesis are not new,[2] very little work on the ancestral narrative foregrounds the issue of migration. Perhaps the first to recognize the prominence of this theme in Genesis was John Van Seters, though it informs his approach tangentially.[3] Recent volumes by David Frankel and Elizabeth Robertson Kennedy and an article by Guy Darshan give a larger role to migration in Genesis,[4] but none draws on the sub-discipline of the social sciences often

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2. Inter alia, E. Theodore Mullen, *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1997), John Van Seters, *The Pentateuch: A Social-Science Commentary*, Trajectories (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), and Anselm C. Hagedorn, "Huasmann und Jäger (Gen 25,27-28). Aus den jugendtagen Jakobs und Esaus," in *Die Erzväter in der biblischen Tradition: Festschrift für Matthias Köckert* (BZAW, 400; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009). Beyond Genesis, the best examples are John Ahn, *Exile as Forced Migrations: A Sociological, Literary, and Theological Approach on the Displacement and Resettlement of the Southern Kingdom of Judah* (BZAW, 417; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), Jill Middlemas and John Ahn, *By the Irrigation Canals of Babylon: Approaches to the Study of the Exile* (LHBOTS, 526; New York: T & T Clark, 2012), and Katherine E. Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9–10* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

3. For Van Seters most extended discussion of the issue, see *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1992), 209-14.

4. David Frankel, *The Land of Canaan and the Destiny of Israel: Theologies of Territory in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), Elisabeth Robertson Kennedy, *Seeking a Homeland: Sojourn and Ethnic Identity in the Ancestral Narratives of Genesis*, (BINS, 106; Leiden: Brill, 2011), and Guy Darshan, "The Origins of the Foundation Stories Genre in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Eastern Mediterranean," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133:4(2014). Frankel does not draw on the social sciences in a substantial way. Kennedy relies upon the work of Anthony D. Smith; this is helpful and her book offers important new ideas, but she sees migration as merely a precursor to a landed, national, static form of identity that fails to really engage with the lived experience of forced migration of the research on that phenomenon. Darshan does not employ the social sciences, though his comparative method further underscores the potential for this approach to enhance our

known as refugee studies in order to deal with this theme.

To some extent, this lacuna arises from the youth of forced migration studies. Some trace its origin to the 1951 UN convention relating to the status of refugees,[5] but a vast number place its foundation in the early 1980's.[6] Still in its infancy, the field of involuntary migration studies continues to grow and define its methods, only recently being capable of delivering findings that can be used in other disciplines. Bearing these limitations in mind, the preceding summary of the ancestral narrative indicates that Biblical Studies—especially work on the Hebrew Bible—offers a prime area for such interdisciplinary work.

There are two potential contributions of this approach. First, the insights that the study of forced migration provides on the migratory experience suggest new interpretations of difficult texts in the ancestral narrative. In other words, there is a role for the study of involuntary migration to inform a reading of the text in a synchronic mode. Second, one may build upon that exegetical work to consider questions of textual fractures indicating separate sources. This source analysis may be complemented by examining the attitudes exhibited towards the experience of involuntary migration contained in these textual sources, thus enabling one to develop fresh explanations for the diachronic growth of the book.

This article shall focus on the Jacob narrative (Gen 25:19–33:20), using it as a case study to demonstrate the first of these potential contributions. This study works at a synchronic level, which should not to marginalize the importance or benefit of diachronic analysis. Rather, the focus on exegesis alone seeks to serve the goal of clarity, allowing readers to appreciate its contribution without possible confusion from a correlated diachronic analysis.

The Jacob narrative serves as the case study for this article because Gen 25–33 presents a full 'lifecycle' of involuntary migration. In stage one, Jacob lives as an asylum seeker from Esau's threat of violence, receiving refuge in Haran/Padan-aram. In stage two, though Jacob is welcomed and protected by Laban, he remains an indentured labourer with limited rights. Typical of subordinated persons, Jacob does not acquiesce to this situation, but eventually finds a way to subvert his domineering host, even to benefit financially from the

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understanding of not only the biblical but also classical material.

5. Richard Black, "Fifty Years of Refugee Studies: From Theory to Policy," *International Migration Review* 35 (2001): 57-78; for the UN document see http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html.

6. Dawn Chatty, "Anthropology and Forced Migration," in E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long, and N. Sigona (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 74-85.

situation. In stage three, Jacob returns 'home' to Canaan. Anxiety consumes Jacob when he considers the hostility he will face from Esau when he returns, but upon arriving he finds, to great astonishment, that Esau wants to reconcile with him. 'Home' is totally different than Jacob remembers or imagines. Nonetheless, the patriarch proceeds with caution and a lack of trust for Esau, the same strategies that proved successful during his time as a refugee. In all three stages, Jacob resembles involuntary migrants from other cultures, whose experiences can, therefore, enhance our understanding of this narrative.

Prior to the starting the exegetical discussion, a brief prolegomenon on the methodology underlying the hermeneutical approach I shall employ is necessary.

2. Prolegomenon: Using Social Scientific Models of Migration for Exegesis

Engaging with the social sciences in order to inform and to enhance the exegesis of a text is now widespread in Biblical Studies. This follows from the increasing range of social scientific research available, the refinement of social scientific models, and an increasing focus on inter- and mutli-disciplinary approaches. Nonetheless, when moving into a new area of social scientific interpretation like the study of involuntary migration it is worth stating explicitly how one understands this approach.

Philip Esler helpfully outlines what constitutes the use of social scientific models for biblical interpretation and some of the most important limits of this method.[7] He observes that '[t]hose who employ [social scientific models] in exegesis know they are merely tools available to enable comparison.'[8] Although the accuracy of a model to actual experience—in the contemporary world or the ancient one—is relevant, the claim is not that one can reconstruct ancient experience or thought entirely accurately with the insights of the social sciences. Instead, in a fashion similar to comparative studies focused entirely on the ancient world, the central question about a model is 'whether or not it is helpful.'[9] Among biblical scholars employing social-scientific models, there is broad agreement 'that if a model is not helpful, it should be modified or even replaced with one that is helpful.'[10]

7. Philip Esler, "Social-Scientific Models in Biblical Interpretation," in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 2006), 3–14.
8. Esler, "Models," 3.
9. Esler, "Models," 4.
10. Esler, "Models," 3-4.

Esler further observes that social scientific models enable '"abduction"—the process of shuttling back and forth between model and data.'[11] This may sound like an overly complex interjection into the interpretative process, but Esler also notes that '[w]ithout models, we still deploy concepts such as [identity, ethnicity, religion, kinship...], but this presents the danger that our use of such concepts will be influenced by unexamined prejudgments and presuppositions that may (not must) reflect an ethnocentric embedding in our culture.'[12] Above all other aspects of Esler's methodological reflections, this one highlights why it is so important to engage with models from the study of involuntary migration in the interpretation of Genesis.

The growing awareness that migration is a central theme in the ancestral narrative has begun to influence the secondary literature on Genesis. Yet, the scholars who have engaged with this theme fail to appeal to what is known about the experience of migration from ethnographies of migrants, longitudinal studies of the experience, or models of behavior and response developed from analysis of such studies. In the absence of such critical scholarship, Esler underscores that scholars are (unconsciously) drawing on their 'unexamined prejudgments and presuppositions'[13] about the experience of migration. There is an important sense in which this article simply advocates for an honest effort to avoid such unconscious application of concepts through the well documented and widely accepted process of interrogating a text in dialogue with rigorously evaluated, relevant models from the social sciences.

Returning to the summary of the ancestral narrative that opens this article, one sees that migration—indeed, involuntary migration—plays a central role in the plot. Every one of the protagonists in the story is an involuntary migrant at some point in their life. To incorporate that insight into a fresh hermeneutic that is robust and scholarly, one cannot simply rely upon their innate understanding of migration, no matter how much and what type of migration one might have undertaken. Responsible scholarship requires critical understanding of the best scholarship on the experience of involuntary migration, allowing some preconceived notions to be confirmed and enhanced while others are undermined and

11. Esler, "Models," 4.
12. Esler, "Models," 4.
13. Esler, "Models," 4.

discarded. This means interdisciplinary work with the social scientific study of migration.

Challenges remain, of course. Not only does this approach require a critical knowledge of the social scientific material, it also involves the danger of anachronistically applying even the best research on migration developed over the past 50 years to an ancient text. Accepting that point, the only logical response is the same defense Esler offers: evaluate the exegesis informed by the social sciences based upon whether or not it opens up new insights into a familiar text.

In lieu of further abstract methodological reflection that attempts to catalogue the relevant social scientific theory and findings in the abstract, the more effective approach to advocating this hermeneutic lies in the actual exegesis. The reader must bear in mind the key evaluative question of whether or not what follows is helpful in adding to our understanding of the Jacob narrative since the argument for this approach is made inductively.

3. Jacob the Involuntary Migrant (Gen 25:19–29:14a)

The Jacob narrative begins in Gen 25:19 with the *Toledot* formula and a description of the struggle between Esau and Jacob during their birth. The continual nature of their conflict with one another is highlighted by the stew-birthright negotiation story in 25:27-34.

After the story of Isaac's and Rebekah's time in Gerar briefly interrupts the focus on Esau and Jacob, the narrative returns to the brothers. The details of Rebekah and Jacob's ruse to gain the patriarchal blessing for Jacob instead of Esau are familiar, but it is worthwhile to look at the end of Gen 27 where the circumstances of Jacob's departure from Canaan are enumerated. Esau's bitterness towards Jacob produces homicidal intentions, which Rebekah discovers. She counsels Jacob to flee Canaan and seek safety with Laban in Haran for 'a while'—this amounts to recommending that Jacob seek asylum and become a refugee. 'A refugee,' as defined now, 'is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence,'[14] and it is likely she or he 'cannot return home or are afraid

14. http://www.unrefugees.org/site/c.lfIQKSOwFqG/b.4950731/k.A894/What_is_a_refugee.htm (accessed on 15 April 2014, 13:00 GMT). Cf. Article 1, 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which says 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.'

to do so.'[15]

Staying with the final form of the text despite the clear indications of compositional complexity here, Gen 27:46–28:5 explains how Rebekah facilitates Jacob's departure by expressing her disgust at the idea that he would marry a Canaanite woman. From the perspective of involuntary migration studies, it is entirely logical that Jacob's mother would use her influence and knowledge to gain safe passage for her son. Caution is necessary to avoid anachronism, but research in various areas shows that asylum seekers and refugees—like all manner of marginalized people—see their claims succeed far more often when a qualified person takes forward their case.[16] Today, this generally involves legal counsel; in antiquity, influential people played similar roles, though they did not have a professional qualification *per se*. Often, these people had a social status that allowed influence with a powerful person (e.g., Nathan's influence with David; Rehoboam's counsellors in 1 Kgs 12:1-17). It is not at all extraordinary that Jacob relies upon his mother for this support: ethnographic research indicates that 'the *only* person a man can *really* trust is the one person who will not stand to gain by his death. This person is neither his wife nor his children; it is his mother.'[17]

Rebekah is a powerful figure by any estimation. Mark Brett notes that this story 'serves to emphasize her agency,'[18] and John Anderson remarks that 'the narrative presents Rebekah as much more than a simple housewife.'[19] Indeed, the narrative of her marriage in Gen 24 informs the audience that no one knows better than Rebekah that Isaac's life was shaped by the requirement of an endogamous union. Furthermore, though discussion of Gen 26 has been elided here, the story of Isaac and Rebekah involuntarily migrating to Gerar and its vicinity in order to survive a famine underscores that these characters are intimately familiar with the sort of events that cause distrust for the local population. Rebekah acts in a

15. http://www.unrefugees.org/site/c.lfIQKSOwFqG/b.4950731/k.A894/What_is_a_refugee.htm (accessed on 15 April 2014, 13:00 GMT).
16. See Eleanor Acer, "Making a Difference: A Legacy of Pro Bono Representation," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17 (2004): 347-66, and Katia Bianchini, "Legal Aid for Asylum Seekers: Progress and Challenges in Italy," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24 (2011): 390-410, for discussion and further references.
17. Eftihia Voutira and Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, "In Search of the Locus of Trust: The Social World of the Refugee Camp," in *Mistrusting Refugees*, ed. E.V. Daniel and J. C. Knudsen (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995), 208.
18. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity*, 88-89.
19. John E. Anderson, *Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and Yhwh's Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in Jacob Cycle* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 70.

way that is likely to persuade Isaac to allow Jacob's departure. She operates like a political figure or legal advocate, using her knowledge, access, and influence to aid her 'client.'

Note the similarities between Rebekah's approach here and Isaac's pragmatic tactics with the men of Gerar in Gen 26. Both Isaac and Rebekah exhibit a willingness to bend the truth and to use deception. It is relevant to note, then, that Barbara Harrell-Bond and Eftihia Voutira quote an involuntary migrant source remarking that: '[t]o be a refugee means to learn to lie.'[20] Necessity, not deficient morality, drives dishonesty. A deceptive act enables Jacob to flee from physical violence and to evaluate his opportunities for the future. The characters and actions depicted here correspond closely to behaviors observed among involuntary migrants facing similar challenges in other times and places.

As Jacob sets out for Canaan (28:10), he spends a night in the place that he will name Bethel. His vision into the divine realm provides an etiology for the sanctuary at Bethel, to be sure. However, approached from the perspective of involuntary migration, Jacob's vow forms the critical aspect of the experience (Gen 28:20b-22):

> [20b] If God remains with me, if he protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, [21]and *if I return safe to my father's house*—YHWH shall be my God. [22]And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be the house of God; and of all that you give me, I will make a tithe to you.

This scene does far more than offer a *hieros logos*;[21] rather, it conveys the hopes and fears of an involuntary migrant fleeing mortal danger by traveling into an unknown place, without assurance things will be better there.

4. Jacob the Refugee (Gen 29:14b–32:1)[22]

Upon arrival in Haran, Jacob meets Rachel, who then introduces him to her father, Laban. Laban welcomes Jacob into his house, where Jacob explains what has prompted his departure

20. Eftihia Voutira and Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, "In Search of the Locus of Trust: The Social World of the Refugee Camp," in *Mistrusting Refugees* (Berkley: University of California, 1995), 216.
21. Erhard Blum, "The Jacob Tradition" in C. Evans, J. Lohr, and D. Petersen (eds.) *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (VTSup 152; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 181-211.
22. This division of the sections follows the Masoretic view that Gen 29:14a concludes the preceding material and Gen 29:14b opens a new movement in the narrative.

from Canaan to Laban (29:13b), who declares his willingness to protect Jacob by calling the newcomer 'my bone and my flesh' (29:14a). Recognized as family, Jacob falls under Laban's protection. He is, in an ancient form, granted asylum from his bloodthirsty brother Esau.[23]

The relationship between Laban and Jacob is not one of full equality. After a month of service 'Laban said to Jacob, "Just because you are a kinsman, should you serve me for nothing?"' (Gen 29:15a) Despite inviting Jacob to set the wage, the text leaves Laban's motivation ambiguous. Wenham remarks that Laban keeps 'his options open' and concludes that the extraordinarily large commitment Jacob is willing to make for Rachel suggests that he will pay handsomely for her.[24] Without disregarding that interpretation, one may add to it from the perspective of involuntary migration: Jacob's extended commitment assures him of protection for the foreseeable future. From one perspective, seven years constitutes an extraordinarily long term of service for a bride; from another, it affords Jacob security, assuring he retains protection against the violent retribution he seeks to avoid.

Moreover, bearing in mind Jacob's 'refugee status' illuminates the power dynamics at play. Asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, for instance, do not choose where they live, cannot work legally, and must survive on about £6 a day in vouchers. Life is complicated by the constant threat of deportation. Even after receiving refugee status, forced migrants remain at the mercy of the government: they do not live as citizens, but on time limited and revocable visas.[25] Without uncritically applying modern circumstances to the ancient context, one may still highlight the fundamental dynamic that does cross cultures: the one granting protection to the asylum seeker possesses tremendous power over them. So long as the threat of expulsion exists, so does an asymmetric power relationship.

This model explains Laban's duplicitous behavior. When Laban takes advantage of Jacob's status as a refugee, Jacob has little recourse. 'Benevolent' Laban, remarks von Rad, is 'a master of deceit:'[26] even though Laban agrees that seven years of service from Jacob will warrant a daughter in marriage (29:19), without warning or regret he gives Jacob the

23. Cf. cities of refuge, e.g., Num 35; Deut 23:16; Josh 20:2, 21:13, 21, 27, 32, 26.
24. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 235.
25. For a discussion of the experience of migrants in another cultural context, see Daniel M. Carroll R., *Christians At the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), which addresses relevant issues in the United States of America.
26. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary,* (trans. John H. Marks; OTL; London: SCM Press Ltd, 1961), 292.

older, unwanted daughter Leah. 'Laban said, "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older. Wait until the bridal week of this one is over and we will give you that one too, *provided you serve me another seven years*"' (Gen 29:26-27). Westermann remarks that 'Jacob agrees; he has no option.'[27]

Westermann is correct, but he neither elaborates on the reasons why nor considers the implications of the situation. Because Laban assures Jacob's livelihood and safety, Jacob lives in an asymmetric power relationship with him. He is, like all refugees, in a subordinate position to the one who grants this status. The refugee is marginalized, disempowered, and circumscribed in their ability to pursue their rights for fear of expulsion. All of this is compressed into the short, dismissive comment with which Laban begins his explanation: 'It is not done thus in *our* place' (לא יעשה כן במקומנו; Gen 29:26a). Even though Laban has welcomed Jacob like family and granted him asylum, he remains an outsider, not a part of the host community.

Jacob has severely limited options in this situation. His stated desire to marry Rachel is not irrelevant, for sure, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Jacob accepts Laban's one-sided offer to serve another seven years for Rachel without resistance or negotiation because of the asymmetric power relationship between them. Without status or grounds on which to protest, what else can he do?

Jacob serves the additional seven years of service, sees the birth of twelve sons, and then requests permission to leave (Gen 30:25). Even after almost twenty years (cf. 31:38), Laban politely declines, suggesting instead that Jacob specify another 'wage.' This is not generosity, writes Westermann, but 'a rejection of Jacob's request.'[28] Laban imitates a loving father, but leverages his power to compel Jacob into yet another term of service that will benefit him far more than Jacob.

Whereas commentators interpret the confusing set of statements between Laban and Jacob in Gen 30:25-34 through their kinship, it is far more helpful to examine it through migration studies. Jacob expresses the desire to live on his own, to manage his own affairs, and to be treated as a fully capable agent (30:25-26, 30b). This desire is common to

27. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary (*trans. John K. Scullion S.J.; Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 467.
28. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 481.

involuntary migrants, who prefer to self-settle and to survive by their own agency.[29] When Laban refuses Jacob's request (30:31a), the patriarch resorts to a tactic common among subordinated groups across cultures: he employs Laban's paternalistic language against him, utilizing it to construct the ruse whereby he will acquire the majority of Laban's livestock.

American sociologist and political scientist James C. Scott has demonstrated that subaltern groups resist and deceive dominant groups in their daily practices.[30] In *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, he establishes that dominated groups assert their rights through disguised behaviors that push the established boundaries of obedience for their benefit without breaking them so blatantly as to provoke punitive measures from the authorities. Particularly relevant to the Laban-Jacob relationship, Scott observes that when dominant powers portray themselves with 'paternalist flourishes about care, feeding, [and] housing,'[31] subaltern groups happily employ this rhetoric in requests that suit their needs. Jacob's scheme against Laban depicted in Gen 30:25-43 fits this profile.

Daniel Smith-Christopher previously suggested the relevance of Scott's work for interpreting the Jacob narrative, though he did not note the particular connection to Jacob's use of Laban's language. Smith-Christopher concludes that trickster narratives contribute to a 'subcultural ethics' that emerges from the social circumstances of exilic subordination, extol the subaltern's ability to successfully navigate problematic circumstances,[32] and exhibit a willingness to use truth and falsehood to survive. Or, as Harrell-Bond and Voutira recall from their source, '[t]o be a refugee means to learn to lie.'[33]

The importance of the asymmetric power structure between Laban and Jacob is highlighted by what happens when it is undone. Compare the final conversation between

29. See, for instance, Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid*, Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and the synthesis in Elizabeth Colson, "Forced Migration and the Anthropological Response," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 16 (2003), 7-10; for an anecdotal overview, cf. the recent lecture by Jeff Crisp at the Refugee Studies Centre in Oxford: http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/news/in-search-of-solutions-refugees-are-doing-it-for-themselves-refugee-voices-opening-plenary-jeff-crisp (accessed on 22 April 2014).
30. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); idem, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 110-25.
31. Scott, *Domination*, 18.
32. Daniel Smith-Christopher, *Biblical Theology of Exile* (OBT; Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 167.; cf. Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2000).
33. Voutira and Harrell-Bond, "In Search," 216.

Jacob and Laban in Gen 31:25-54. Although Laban feigns his desire to celebrate Jacob, still Jacob confesses that 'I was afraid because I thought you would take your daughters from me by force' (31:31).[34] Furthermore, when Laban cannot prove his accusation that Jacob has his household gods, Jacob feels free to respond with anger (31:36). Now outside of Laban's home and his protection, Jacob is forceful, unafraid to assert his rights, and even accusatory. This is not the same man who accepted a seven-year term of service for Rachel without negotiation because this is no longer a refugee dependent upon a protective power. Laban recognizes as much: though he wants to claim all Jacob possesses as his own (31:43), even he knows this is not possible, so he settles for a treaty that includes curses on Jacob should he mistreat Leah or Rachel (31:50).

5. Jacob's the Return Migrant (Gen 32:2–33:20)[35]

The narrative immediately pivots towards Canaan, and Jacob's demeanor changes as he contemplates returning 'home.' Jacob dreads what he will find when he meets Esau; he lives with a nightmare of return, not the more common utopian dream of home called the myth of return.[36] On the night prior to crossing the Jordan, Jacob struggles with a divine being (Gen 32). The fight dislocates his hip, but also provides him the courage to face Esau. Thus, Jacob's assessment that 'I have seen god face to face yet my life has continued' (Gen 32:31) evokes the traumatized involuntary migrant remarking that 'if I can deal with this, I can deal with anything.' Jacob's encounter at the Jabbok does not so much change his character as it underscores his ability to endure even the most fearful circumstances.[37]

The positive reinforcement to Jacob's courage comes to the fore when he encounters Esau again (33:1-11). Jacob's comment that 'to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably'[38] (33:10) creates an explicit echo of 32:31: no less

34. It is not only Jacob who considers himself an outsider at this stage. Note that Rachel and Leah self-identify as נכריות just prior to this interchange (31:15), claiming that their own father surely 'regards us as outsiders, now that he has sold us and used up our purchase price' (JPS translation).
35. The UN defines a returnee as a refugee who has returned to his or her home country. See http://www.unrefugees.org/site/c.lfIQKSOwFqG/b.4950731/k.A894/What_is_a_refugee.htm (accessed on 15 April 2014, 13:00 GMT).
36. Jesse Newman, "Narrating Displacement: Oral Histories of Sri Lankan Women," *Refugee Studies Centre Working Papers* 15(2003), 18-59.
37. Cf. the discussion in Anderson, *Jacob and the Divine Trickster*, 160-69.
38. JPS translation; cf. Westermann, *Genesis*, 522-23.

surprising than seeing the divine countenance and surviving, Jacob's confession to Esau asserts equal astonishment that he has confronted his aggrieved brother without open hostility and physical harm. Lest the point escape notice, this suggests that the experience of involuntary migration remains absolutely central to the narrative even in the the two divine visions (Gen 28:10-20 and 32:23-33) that provide the *hieros logos* for Bethel, Mahanaim, and Penuel. At the same time as providing etiologies, these texts offer assurance and hope to those facing the frightful trial of living among potentially hostile outsiders.

Jacob does not face his nightmare when he meets Esau, but that does not mean his return 'home' fails to be disorienting. Nothing resembles either Jacob's memory or expectation of Canaan; he is left confused that Esau seeks reconciliation and not revenge. One expects that Jacob will now behave differently toward Esau, but the radical changes mean that Jacob faces yet another unfamiliar place with yet another unfamiliar host. Laban appeared benevolent to Jacob initially; will Esau be any different*?*

Katherine Southwood examines Ezra-Nehemiah and not Genesis in her work, but she establishes convincingly that return migrants re-apply the strategies they used to survive away from 'home' to navigate the unfamiliar circumstances they find when returning there.[39] It is not unusual, therefore, that Jacob responds to Esau in the same way he dealt with Laban. First, Jacob offers a material payment that is exceedingly large (Gen 33:1-11), indeed apparently unnecessary (33:9), to his unfamiliar host. Second, Jacob treats Esau's generous offer to provide assistance for his journey to Seir with suspicion: wary of having Esau's representatives with him, Jacob refuses their help. The logic of his refusal replicates his final dealing with Laban: Jacob recognizes the generosity offered (compare the 'wage' negotiation in 30:31 with 33:15), but refuses to accept it as proposed.[40] With Laban this behavior provides Jacob the opportunity to deceptively acquire wealth; with Esau it provides Jacob protection by creating separation between him and someone he does not trust. Jacob acts the same way in circumstances that appear remarkably different on the surface, but are alarmingly similar to an involuntary migrant.

39. Southwood, *Ezra 9–10*. For the social scientific research basis of her argument, see pp. 49-56.
40. In 30:31 Jacob says 'pay me nothing!' and in 33:15 'Oh no, my lord is too kind to me!'

6. Conclusion

The Jacob narrative, this article has shown, foregrounds the experience of involuntary migration. It is logical, therefore, that the social scientific study of that same phenomenon will illumine the meaning of the text when employed as a hermeneutical guide. The subsequent discussion briefly outlined the methodological foundation for this hermeneutical approach, after which a case for its validity and an indication of its contribution was made through an inductive argument constructed as a fresh, synchronic interpretation of the material in Gen 25–33.

In the course of the exegesis, appeals were made to a range of findings from the social scientific study of migration. To expound the narrative of Jacob's departure from Canaan, the argument invoked germane findings on the role of professional advocates in asylum cases. This section also noted how Rebekah's personal experience generated a high level of empathy for Jacob. Arguing from literary resonances and not from social scientific research, this portion of the argument underscores that fresh approach advocated here sits hospitably beside and can be employed in conjunction with existing interpretative methods. Exploring Jacob's time in Haran under Laban's protection next, the exegesis drew on research both specifically about involuntary migrants and also broader studies of how subaltern communities resist the dominant powers ruling over them. Doing so enabled new interpretative solutions for previously problematic passages. Specifically, where commentators have struggled to comprehend the convoluted relationship between Jacob and Laban through the framework of kinship, this article showed that they interact like a refugee (Jacob) and a protective host (Laban). To investigate the final stage of the narrative that presents Jacob's return to Canaan, attention turned to research explaining that involuntary migrants re-apply strategies successful in establishing reciprocal trust relationships in other contexts even after they return 'home.' Here, the appeal to the social sciences was made in a once-removed fashion by referencing existing work on the Hebrew Bible. The mediated connection was intentional, one way to show that aspects of the hermeneutic advocated here are already producing beneficial insights on other biblical texts like Ezra-Nehemiah.

This article's explicit aim was to use the Jacob narrative in Genesis 25–33 as a case study to demonstrate that a hermeneutic informed by the social scientific study of migration—especially involuntary migration—is legitimate and holds potential for enhancing

understanding of the ancestral narrative in Genesis. Insofar as it has been successful in this aim, it may simultaneously justify this approach to a far wider range of texts in the Hebrew Bible touching on migration. Even thought that ambitious objective was not the specific aim of the article, insofar as this case study does persuade scholars about the potential of the hermeneutic, then by implication it also emphasizes the opportunities to adopt a similar hermeneutic to interpret the wide range of texts in the Hebrew Bible addressing the experience of involuntary migration.