1

Jacob's Bargain

During the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when John the Baptist began to clear a way for the Lord in the desert by calling Jews to repentance,[1] paths of a different kind were being cleared on the other side of the world, in the coastal desert of what is now Peru. The Nazca people were moving dark volcanic rocks aside to form what at first appear to be walkways across the light-colored sand. Viewed from an airplane the pathways form immense figures called geoglyphs, which include simple geometric shapes as well as drawings of animals hundreds of feet in length.

Author Erich von Daniken once claimed that the geogliphs marked off landing areas for extraterrestrial spacecraft.[2] A more credible theory is that they were drawn as a devotion to various Nazca gods who were thought to be looking down from the sky. While it is not clear just how these lines were created, no one attributes them to accident. The random appearance of the lines to a grounded observer only makes their large-scale orderliness more impressive.

Typological coding poses a mystery that in certain ways resembles the Nazca Lines. The Bible consists of scores of separate documents, varying widely in style and purpose and composed in three languages over the course of at least six centuries. The words, phrases, and narratives of these documents form connected patterns that can only be seen clearly from above, that is, by comparing the texts in a way only possible after the last of them had been written.

---

1 Isa. 40:3; Matt. 3:3.

2 Erich von Daniken, *Chariots of the Gods?* (New York: Putnam, 1970), 32–33.

Are these patterns and their common theme regarding the Jewish Messiah proof of divine inspiration or instead the product of coincidence magnified by wishful thinking? Could common cultural themes or myths have influenced the writers, perhaps subconsciously, to concoct stories that seem to portray future events? Were later Bible writers, in particular the "evangelists" who wrote the gospels, prepared to falsify history to create the appearance of inspired harmony between what they wrote and what had been recorded centuries earlier?

The last explanation is favored by commentators such as Randel Helms, who popularized historical criticism of the Bible in the books *Gospel Fictions* and *Who Wrote the Gospels?*[3] Modern critics generally see Jesus as a wandering rabbi, exorcist, and faith healer who somehow ran afoul of Roman authorities and was crucified. We have no way of knowing the details of his life beyond those bare facts and neither did the early Christians who elevated him to the status of Messiah. Having little to draw upon, the gospel writers combed through the Scriptures—specifically the Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible—lifting out words, phrases, and even whole stories and then stitching them together to create a fictional account of Jesus' life.

A common example of how this might occur has to do with King David of Israel, who is identified in the Hebrew Scriptures as both a forefather and forerunner of the promised Messiah. Hypothetically, in order to reinforce the resemblance of Jesus to David the writers of the gospels of Matthew and Luke imagined circumstances that led to the birth of Jesus in David's hometown of Bethlehem. The writers created their stories about Jesus' birth independently of one another, so the two nativity accounts differ in their details.

I will leave the question of Jesus' birth to one side until a later chapter, but it serves to illustrate the approach of an entire generation of scholars influenced by the late German theologian Rudolf Bultmann. Another member of that contingent was Robert Funk, organizer of the scholar's forum known as the Jesus Seminar, who claimed that the gospel writers used their stock of Jewish tradition and material from the Septuagint Greek Bible to flesh out a portrait of Jesus as the Messiah.[4]

---

3 Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988); *Who Wrote the Gospels?* (Altadena, CA: Millennium Press, 1997).

4 Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 4.

Perhaps, since the Hebrew Bible has Moses miraculously feeding Israel in the desert, the evangelists needed to invent a story about Jesus supernaturally feeding the crowds; since Elijah and Elisha were believed to have performed resurrections, yarns had to be spun about Jesus raising the dead; and so on.

What "demythologizers" have proposed looks plausible on its face. They argue that the gospel writers were not being deliberately dishonest but were simply using their ingenuity to reconstruct events that their faith told them must have taken place. What these scholars fail to notice is that the Hebrew Scriptures encode the coming of Jesus as Messiah and Savior in ways that would have been difficult or impossible for the evangelists to have exploited. To demonstrate this, I first have to make some observations about Jesus as the gospels present him.

The Shepherd's Mottled Flock

One of the intriguing characteristics of Jesus from a historical perspective is his association with sinners. Jesus ministered even to the least-regarded members of Jewish society, including tax collectors (notorious for their corruption) and prostitutes. His ministry to the disreputable did not mesh well with Jewish expectations about the coming Deliverer. In various places the Hebrew Scriptures confirm that all human beings are sinners before God, and one passage in Isaiah does say that God's "servant" would atone for the sins of Israel. But neither Scripture nor Jewish tradition predicts that the Messiah would gather to himself a crowd of persons shunned by respectable society.

Before Jesus no Jew would have considered it appropriate to describe the Messiah as "a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners.'"[5] And it was not only Jews who found such an association scandalous. The pagan critic Celsus chided Christians because their leader had surrounded himself with "sailors and tax-gatherers of the most worthless character" and because rather than targeting the most virtuous citizens for recruitment, as did other religions, Christianity appealed instead to "everyone . . . who is a sinner, who is devoid of understanding, who is a child, and, to speak generally, whoever is unfortunate."[6]

5 Matt. 11:19.

6 Origen, *Against Celsus* 1:62; 2:46; 3:59.

From Jesus' unusual career we turn to a biblical oddity of a different sort, an event from the life of the patriarch Jacob, whose alternate name "Israel" later became the national designation for his descendants. A story from the Old Testament book of Genesis tells how the rivalry between the young man Jacob and his twin brother, Esau, becomes so heated that Jacob is forced to leave his father's household and seek refuge with his uncle Laban in Syria. Like the rest of Jacob's family, Laban is a herder of sheep and goats. Jacob ends up marrying Laban's two daughters and working for Laban as a herdsman for twenty years. The odd episode is the negotiation of Jacob's pay, in which Jacob asks Laban for certain animals in order to form his own small flock, namely, "every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-colored lamb and every spotted or speckled goat."[7]

Genesis goes on to devote a surprising amount of space to Jacob's acquisition of spotted livestock. Why? One of the features not only of Genesis but of the historical Scriptures in general is their brevity. Several years can be passed over between sentences. A few lines might summarize decades or more. Certain events such as the journey of Abraham to Canaan or God's covenant declarations have such significance that their inclusion seems natural, while innumerable minor happenings necessarily are omitted. In one or two sentences the writer of Genesis could have conveyed the information that Jacob, while working for Laban, acquired "flocks and herds" through the blessing of God.[8] Instead, something made him lavish the equivalent of several paragraphs on it.

Does the story in Genesis 30 contain coded symbolism, and if so what meaning could it have? A correspondence might be suspected between Jacob as a peaceful herder of sheep and the promised Messiah, future King of Israel, who is likened to a shepherd of God's people. Genesis says that in contrast to his aggressive brother Esau, "Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents." Decades after their rift, Jacob encounters Esau, who, true to character, has acquired an entourage of armed men. Jacob reconciles with his brother but begs off from accompanying him. "My lord knows that the children are tender and that I must care for the ewes and cows that are nursing their young," he says.

7 Gen. 30:31–32.

8 Cf. Gen. 26:12–14.

"So let my lord go on ahead of his servant, while I move along slowly at the pace of the droves before me and that of the children."[9]

Jacob's tender care of his flock and family anticipates God's promise that eventually he will place over his people "one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them."[10] "I will put my Spirit on him," God says of the messianic shepherd, "and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed [the sick] he will not break, and a smoldering wick [the weak] he will not snuff out."[11]

"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."[12] The last verse is a description of Israel's God, Yahweh (Jehovah) himself, yet the prophetic context leaves little doubt that Yahweh carries out the shepherding of his people through his "arm," that is, his Messiah.[13] To these references may be added one in which God's special servant is in fact called by the name "Israel," the other personal name of the man Jacob:

> "[God] said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor. . . . It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob. . . I will also make you a light to the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.'"
>
> —Isaiah 49:3–6

The one here described cannot be simply a personification of the Jewish nation, since he is said to gather back the various tribes of that nation. Yet another passage from Isaiah confirms that the one given as "leader" of the Gentile nations is the greater David, the promised Shepherd King.[14] In the New Testament, Jesus assumes this role, saying, "I am the good shepherd."[15]

---

9 Gen. 33:13–14.
10 Ezek. 34:23.
11 Isa. 42:1–4.
12 Isa. 40:11.
13 Cf. Isa. 40:9–10; Mic. 5:4.
14 Isa. 55:3–4.
15 John 10:14.

Deciphering the Narrative

If typological coding is present in the tale of Jacob and his sheep, it must concern the Messiah and the people who constitute his flock. What then is the significance of Jacob's asking for streaked and spotted animals? We find the key in the New Testament book of 1 Peter. Besides casting Jesus as a shepherd in chapter five, verse four, 1 Peter pictures him as a sheep when it reminds first-century believers that they "were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot [Gr., *aspilos*, 'unstained' or 'unsoiled']."[16] Jesus' state of sinlessness, in contrast to that of humankind as a whole, is represented here as a lack of "blemishes" or "stains." The passage necessarily implies that a spot on a sheep can stand for sin in a human being.

Jacob's request was for those goats, ordinarily solid black, that had white markings and for sheep that were either spotted or uniformly dark in contrast to their usual color of light gray. This dappled or charcoal coloring did not in Jewish tradition constitute a defect barring such animals from sacrificial use, as was the case with injury, sickness, or deformity. However, when we carefully study the images of purity contained in both Old and New Testaments, the possibility that any kind of spot on a sheep's coat could stand for sin begins to emerge:

> " 'Come now, let us reason together,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool.' " —Isaiah 1:18

> "The Ancient of Days [God] took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool." —Daniel 7:9

> Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it . . . That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.
>
> —Ephesians 5:25–27, KJV

> His [Christ's] head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow.
>
> —Revelation 1:14

16 1 Peter 1:18–19, *New King James Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983).

If white sheep's wool is ideal for portraying sinlessness, then in a symbolic context even a natural mark on such wool could stand for sin. Spots or stains are equated with sins in the Old and New Testaments.[17] In the story of Genesis 30, this symbolism would mean that the messianic shepherd claimed sinful mankind—the spotted and speckled animals—as his own. This is precisely what the New Testament says about Jesus. "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners," he says in answer to the derisive comments of his opponents that "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them."[18] We find it written in 1 Timothy that it is "a trustworthy saying" that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."[19]

Jesus' association with the "dregs" of Jewish society is not an example of tolerance of sinful behavior, but a reminder that all men and women need cleansing of their sins through Jesus and none are so stained as to be past reclaiming. Jesus said that the virtue of tax collectors and prostitutes was that large numbers of them were painfully aware of their flawed natures and were ready to accept spiritual assistance, while those suffering from more subtle kinds of sin were not.[20]

The story of Jacob and the spotted sheep appears to be a coded prophecy that the Messiah would reach out to sinful humanity, but it is not the only one in the Hebrew Bible. The other concerns an even more prominent messianic type, David. Before ascending the throne of Israel, David spent years on the run from his predecessor, King Saul. During that time David's fugitive status served to attract the lowly and rejected class of Israelite society. "All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around [David], and he became their leader."[21]

The New Testament likens sin to indebtedness. Jesus uses the words *hamartolos*, sinner, and *opheiletes*, debtor, interchangeably in Luke 13:2–4. Elsewhere he teaches the disciples to ask God for forgiveness of their "debts," meaning their sins.[22] The symbolic equivalence of "debt" and "sin" allows us to see Jesus' ministry as a fulfillment of debt-ridden men being gathered to David. The other terms from 1 Samuel describe men

17 Jer. 2:22; cf. *spiloo,* "to spot," in the sense of "to defile" at James 3:6.
18 Mark 2:17; Luke 15:2.
19 1 Tim. 1:15.
20 Matt. 21:31–32.
21 1 Sam. 22:2.
22 Matt. 6:12; cf. 18:21–35; Luke 7:41–47.

who are "in difficulty" and "embittered" (literally, "bitter of soul"), the latter term capable of meaning either "resentful" or "distraught." Again, the correspondence with Jesus' appeal to troubled humanity is easy to see. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened," Jesus tells the crowds, "and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."[23]

I cannot be accused of inventing symbolic meanings regarding sin in the service of prophetic speculations about Jacob's sheep and David's army of outcasts. The comparison of spots on sheep's wool with sins in human beings is established by verses that cannot have been written to rig the significance of the Genesis story. The same may be said for passages that suggest a resemblance between debtors like those who joined David and sinners who come to Jesus for salvation.

These examples demonstrate an important principle of typological coding—that key symbols must be confirmed objectively from the Scriptures. The second-century apologist Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, correctly observes that Jacob represents Christ and the animals stand for mankind.[24] Justin weakens his interpretation, however, by speculating that the spotted appearance of the sheep typifies humanity's mixture of different races and nationalities, rather than the universality of human sin.

Justin and other believers from the first few centuries of Christianity may be forgiven a degree of laxness, since they made do without the modern concordances, lexicons, and computer programs that allow for word studies. They lacked what we would consider basic conveniences, as well. Bible books at first circulated as independent documents or small compilations, and few believers would have had the means to acquire a single book much less all those that comprise the Bible as we know it. For those who did have ready access to the sacred writings, finding a particular text in a scroll of the Hebrew Scriptures meant tedious spooling past one page at a time. Even when the scroll gave way to the codex, or leaved book, modern chapter and verse divisions did not exist to aid in the location of passages. Analysis of biblical types today is easier than ever not only due to the abundance of biblical study tools but even, as we will see later, because of archaeological discoveries.

23 Matt. 11:28–29.

24 Justin Martyr, op. cit., 134.

If our interpretation of the story of Jacob's sheep avoids the wholesale subjectivity sometimes evident in the writings of the church fathers, it can be explained in only one of two ways. The first of these is that God, having planned in the remote past to send his Son to lay claim to the fallen human family, moved Jacob to make his strange proposal to Laban. God then saw to it that the story was preserved, first through oral tradition and afterward in the writing of Genesis. Finally, he inspired later writers to record those clues necessary to unlock the episode's meaning.

The second explanation is coincidence. Coincidences occur in literature and history as in everyday life, which is why, at this point, some of us may be tempted to meet cost of disbelief by writing a check against the Long Odds account at the Bank of Statistical Probability. They ought to realize that that we have just begun our survey of prophetic episodes. Does coincidence have reserves enough to cover them all? Chance will have to be tapped more heavily even before we leave the subject of Jacob's sheep, since the story contains further symbolic meaning.

Bringing Sins to Light

As the account in Genesis continues, Laban agrees to Jacob's seemingly modest request for the spotted animals of the flock. In an effort to deny Jacob any breeding stock, and thereby reduce his financial exposure, Laban violates the agreed-upon terms by removing all existing sheep and goats with unusual coloration. He and his sons herd these animals, which rightfully belong to Jacob, to a distant location. "And he put a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks." Jacob responds by attempting a crude form of genetic engineering. "Then Jacob took fresh rods [Hebrew, *maqqel*] of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white stripes in them, exposing the white which was in the rods." Jacob places the rods in the watering troughs where the livestock drink, " . . . and they mated when they came to drink. So the flocks mated by the rods, and the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted."[25]

25 Gen. 30:34–39 NASB.

Jacob incises the bark of tree branches in the mistaken belief that if the sheep and goats are forced to stare at a streaked pattern, similar marks will be generated sympathetically in their offspring. The trick seems to work, but Jacob himself later admits that it is really the hand of God that has caused his flocks to increase.[26] If the rods are introduced as part of the allegory, they should not be difficult to decode. In Bible times the rod as a symbol most often represented legal authority. Proverbs 22:15, for example, refers to parents wielding the "rod of discipline" within the family. In turn, "discipline," from the Hebrew *musar*, denotes not simply correction but direction in a broad sense. In Deuteronomy 11:1–2, the Israelite nation is reminded that they have received God's laws and experienced his *musar*, his discipline.

Down through the centuries, the rod in the form of the king's scepter continued to stand for the rule of law.[27] Several biblical Hebrew words with overlapping meanings can be translated as "rod," "staff," "scepter," or the equivalent, all having an association with governmental and legal power, as the following passages illustrate:

> The scepter [*shebet*] will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff [*chaqaq*] from between his feet. —Genesis 49:10

> "Mourn for [the kingdom of Moab], all who live around her, all who know her fame; say, 'How broken is the mighty scepter [*matteh*], how broken the glorious staff [*maqqel*]!'" —Jeremiah 48:17

> "Fire spread from one of [Judah's] main branches and consumed its fruit. No strong branch [*matteh*] is left on it for a ruler's scepter [*shebet*]. —Ezekiel 19:14

> "As I judged your fathers in the desert of the land of Egypt, so I will judge you, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will take note of you as you pass under my rod [*shebet*], and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant." —Ezekiel 20:36–37

26 Gen. 31:7–9.

27 The rod as a symbol of law also can be seen in, for example, the bundled rods of the Roman *fasces*.

Among these roughly synonymous terms is the same one, *maqqel*, used of the rods made by Jacob. Another of them, *chaqaq*, though clearly referring to a rod or staff in Genesis 49:10, is from a root word meaning "to engrave," specifically to engrave laws or statutes on tablets; the King James Version translates *chaqaq* as "lawgiver." The equivalence of the various terms for "rod" is clear from the ancient Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, which uses the same Greek word, *rabdos*, to describe Jacob's rods in Genesis 30:37 and the rod associated with the Mosaic law covenant in Ezekiel 20:37.

Jacob set his rods in the water troughs for the livestock, and it turns out one of water's metaphorical meanings also has to do with law. At Amos 5:24 God advises his people, "Let justice [*mishpat*, legal verdict, ruling] roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"[28]

God caused the rods placed in the water troughs to have the effect of multiplying animals with spots and streaks. If the rods stand for law, then the meaning, paradoxically, must be that law placed before people causes sins to multiply. Anyone familiar with what the New Testament says about law and sin will immediately be reminded of a statement made by Paul in his letter to the Romans: "The law was added so that the trespass [or, sin] might increase."[29] Paul is speaking about the law God gave Israel through Moses in the "desert of Egypt," a law that included the Ten Commandments.

How could the law, an instrument for promoting honest behavior, instead cause transgressions to multiply? Paul explains in the seventh chapter of Romans that the Mosaic law set a high standard intended to make the Israelites aware of sins they were committing in ignorance. Paul uses the example of the tenth commandment, which condemns coveting the possessions of someone else. "Coveting" or envying is not committed externally, but in the mind. The tenth commandment revealed that while a person might be adhering to a strict code of conduct outwardly, he could yet be sinning in the confines of his private

28 Amos not only commands that justice is to pour forth like a river but also that it must be "maintained" or "established" in Israel (5:15), employing the seldom used verb *yatsag* that also describes the placing of the rods in front of the flocks in Genesis 30:38.

29 Rom. 5:20.

thoughts. The law therefore caused sins to multiply in the sense of exposing them. "I would not have known what sin was," Paul says, "except through the law."[30]

Paul made the same point when writing to Christians in Galatia, asking rhetorically, "Why, then, the law?" and answering, "It was added for transgressions, until the descendant [Jesus] came to whom the promise had been made."[31] Admittedly, the Greek phrasing of this verse, Galatians 3:19, is vague. It may only point to a general connection between sin (transgressions) and the introduction of the law. On the other hand, it may mean that the law "caused" or promoted transgressions.

Some Bible translators understandably hesitate to make God's law a source of sin. As we have seen from Romans, however, Paul believed that the law caused sin to spread in that it caused guilt, the recognition of sin, to spread. Various translators have seen this as the most likely meaning in Galatians 3:19 as well:

> Then what of the law? It was added to make wrongdoing a legal offense.[32]
>
> What was the purpose of the law, then? It was added in order to show what wrongdoing is.[33]
>
> Why then was the Law necessary at all? It was introduced to show what transgressions are.[34]
>
> Then what about the Law? Well, it was interpolated for the purpose of producing transgressions.[35]
>
> Then what about the Law? It was a later addition, designed to produce transgressions.[36]

30 Rom. 7:7.
31 Gal. 3:19, *The New American Bible.*
32 *The New English Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971).
33 *Today's English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1971).
34 *Translator's New Testament* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1973).
35 James D. Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible* (NY: Harper, 1935).
36 Edgar Goodspeed, *The Complete Bible: An American Translation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1939).

> What is the point of the law then? It was an extra dispensation, introduced in order that transgressions might be brought to light.[37]

The *New American Bible*, noteworthy for its scholarship, comments that in light of Paul's other arguments concerning the law, Galatians 3:19 implies "that the law in effect served to produce transgressions."[38] The exposing of sin is preparatory to faith, part of a process of claiming sinners that began long before Jesus' earthly ministry.

The spots on the sheep in the Genesis story are merely symbols of sin. Real sins also were connected with the animals—the sins of Laban, who tried to defraud Jacob of his wages. Laban compounded his original transgression by repeatedly amending his agreement with Jacob, hoping to restrict the size of Jacob's flock. Jacob complains to his wives about Laban's shameless double dealing but admits that he has prospered in spite of it. "If [Laban] said, 'The speckled ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks gave birth to speckled young; and if he said, 'The streaked ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks bore streaked young. So God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me."[39]

As the symbolic marks of sin multiplied, the sins of Laban increased as he attempted to keep as many animals as possible in his possession. Yet God's blessing upon Jacob more than compensated for Laban's maneuvering. Uncannily, the outcome corresponds again with a statement of Paul's respecting sin, law, and the purpose of God. Just after observing that the law caused sins to multiply, Paul continues, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."[40] "Grace" simply refers to favor or kindly treatment. Divine grace pushed aside everything in Jacob's way, and through God's grace, Jesus' redemptive work overcame every obstacle raised against it.

---

37 F. F. Bruce, *An Expanded Paraphrase of the Epistles of Paul* (Exeter, NJ: Paternoster, 1965).

38 *The New American Bible* (NY: Catholic Book Pub. Co., 1986).

39 Gen. 31:6–9.

40 Rom. 5:20–21.

Another detail concerns Laban's first effort to keep Jacob from collecting the animals that were due him. Laban gathers the animals with markings, put his sons in charge of them and then herds them to a place three days removed from Jacob. A fairly obvious parallel is evident in what happened to Jesus. Even in the context of his arrest and impending death, Jesus' disciples are described as sheep of his flock. "This very night you will all fall away on account of me," Jesus tells the apostles, "for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' "[41] The gulf between life and death is infinite, but because Jesus rose again it also is true that he was separated from his flock by an exile in the grave of approximately three days' duration. (Although this part of the story occurs out of chronological order of fulfillment, we will see later that such disjunctions are common in illustrations.)

Further Parallels in Jacob's Story

So far, we have established objectively from the Bible itself that the "sheep" story of Jacob and Laban makes sense as a coded portrayal of sin, law and guilt, and further, of the redemptive role of Jesus, the "greater Jacob." In this prophetic drama, Laban acts as antagonist, standing in for all the individuals, both Jewish and Gentile, who would later oppose Jesus. One of those turned out to be Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who appeased the demands of Jewish priests and other leaders by ordering Jesus' execution. We should not be surprised, then, to find that what Laban says to Jacob at their parting reflects what happens as Pilate is deciding Jesus' fate.

When Jacob furtively departs for Canaan, his father-in-law gives chase, but God comes to Laban "in a dream" to warn him, according to Genesis 31:24. "It is in my power to do you harm," the offended Laban tells Jacob upon overtaking him, "but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to speak either good or bad to Jacob.' "[42] Compare these words with passages from Matthew and John about Pilate:

41 Matt. 26:31.
42 Gen. 31:29 NASB.

> While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat [with Jesus before him], his wife sent to him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him." —Matthew 27:19

> "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not granted from above . . . " From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar."
>
> —John 19:10–12

The caution given to Laban not to "speak either good or bad" had to do not only with speaking but with taking any action against Jacob. It is the equivalent of what Pilate is told about Jesus: "Have nothing to do with that man." In both cases the warning is associated with a dream, in Pilate's case coming through his wife as intermediary. Both Laban and Pilate insist that they have power over God's chosen one even as it becomes obvious that each is able only to allow him to proceed along his ordained course.

The typological meaning we have so far discovered in one small portion of the book of Genesis is more remarkable for defying the limited value placed on the books of the Bible by critics. Genesis is widely supposed to be a collection of legends calculated to engender a sense of ethnic superiority in the ancient Hebrews. The Law of Moses is an artifact preserving the practical ethics and customs of the Israelite people, while the writings of the prophets are an archaic form of social commentary. The gospels reflect the beliefs of early Christian sects projected back onto the man Jesus, about whose life relatively little can be said with confidence. The New Testament letters document the sometimes conflicting schools of opinion that typically develop within a new religion.

Put differently, modern scholarship lays the Bible before us dissected like a laboratory specimen. Moreover, dissection, including dissection of a human body, may be performed for various reasons. Autopsy is dissection for the purpose of gathering information. The coroner may

sense a residual sacredness still attached to the object before him, but for the most part, his work is a cold disembowelment of something no longer alive. A surgeon, by contrast, cuts into the body in order to keep it alive, to determine the cause of the patient's illness, and to separate diseased and healthy tissues. Even in surgery, however, the body lies prostrate while the surgeon wields power over it.

Some biblical scholars are cast in the mold of coroners, others in that of surgeons. Graham Stanton belongs in the second category. In his book *Gospel Truth?*, Stanton affirms his own Christian faith and makes the case for a core of historical fact at the heart of the gospels. At the same time, he argues that the tools of literary analysis expose certain gospel passages as being in all probability "legendary expansions," giving as one example the report in Matthew of the dream of Pilate's wife.[43]

It is fascinating that Stanton should identify as fiction the warning given to Pilate. We saw above that this very text, when set alongside a statement of Pilate to Jesus from John's gospel, forms a parallel to Laban's confrontation with Jacob. Since the prophetic fulfillment may be seen only by combining passages from different gospels, no possibility exists that it was noticed, let alone fabricated, by the evangelists themselves. The resemblance might be passed off as an intriguing coincidence if it were not for many other texts that forge a solid link between Jacob and Jesus, and between Jacob's actions and the New Testament themes of law, sin, and the need for redemption.

Typological Coding Outside the Bible?

As will become more evident, in the light of typological study the sacred canon lying corpse-like under the scalpel of the specialist undergoes a transformation. The parted bones and severed tendons mend themselves. The body opens its eyes and leaps off the examining table. Unexpectedly but undeniably, the Word of God is again "living and active." Once alive, the inspired Word itself becomes the examiner who wields a razor's edge to divide "soul and spirit, joints and marrow" and expose "thoughts and attitudes of the heart."[44]

43 Graham Stanton, *Gospel Truth?* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1995), 54.
44 Heb. 4:12.

In the next chapter I will examine the characteristics of literary symbolism that ordinarily lead us to conclude that it is planned rather than accidental. Even if biblical typology exhibits those same characteristics, readers who are sufficiently motivated will find reasons to reject its implications. By definition, so the argument goes, a Scriptural passage has no meaning outside its historical context nor does it have a meaning that points toward supernatural inspiration. It might be conceded that a divine influence acted upon the minds of the writers from a cosmic distance like a breeze wafting ocean waves imperceptibly toward the shore. The idea that God would actively direct the writing of the Scriptures, however, is for many critics unthinkable. Evidence of divine authorship is ruled inadmissible before the trial can proceed, so the verdict is never in doubt.

Coded prophecy is likely to be classed along with other conjunctions that inevitably occur between sacred stories from one historical era and those of another or between folktales and real events. Who is to say that our imaginations are not more ingenious than we realize at exaggerating such conjunctions out of all proportion to their true significance? In the eyes of skeptics, typology is best likened to stage magic, combining illusion with an audience's desire to be dazzled.

If typological coding is a trick, it should be easy enough to expose. The raw material of such prophecy ought to be available outside the Bible. The Jews are not the only ethnic group with a written tradition that includes history, legend, poetry and proverbial wisdom. Among others the cultures of Greece, Persia (modern Iran), Arabia, North Africa, China, and Japan are obvious candidates. The thousands of stories, proverbs and historical memories contained in these traditions should yield patterns just as apparently mysterious as those we may find in the Bible.

Exactly what would typological coding from extra-biblical traditions have to portray in order to duplicate the Scriptural evidence? It would prove nothing to find types from non-Jewish sources that seem to reflect what the Bible says about Jesus. Jesus, according to the New Testament, is the Savior of the world and the focal point of all history before and since. In preparing the way for Jesus' coming, God revealed

himself primarily but not exclusively to Israel. No one can say that amid the distortions of other religious traditions some seeds of prophetic truth were not sprinkled as well.

Instead of seeming to focus on Jesus, the literary heritage of another culture would have to give the appearance of predicting the life and contributions of a prominent person who later arose within that same culture. After all, Jesus is not the only man revered either as a source of divine wisdom or as the savior-hero of a particular people. A list beginning with Buddha, Plato, Confucius, Mohammad, and other spiritual/philosophical figures could extend to Solon, Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, Queen Elizabeth I of England, Napoleon, Simon de Bolivar, Peter the Great, Abraham Lincoln, Charles de Gaulle, Gamal Nasser, and dozens of others.

Embedded in Arthurian legends and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* could be a symbolic portrayal of the career of Winston Churchill. Or we might examine the mythology in the Hindu Vedas for depictions of Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi. Someone could even attempt to show that the Hebrew Scriptures can be made to appear just as predictive of the medieval Jewish rabbi Maimonides as of Jesus of Nazareth. If they could do so we would have to conclude that prophetic "codes," no matter how compelling, fall short as objective evidence of inspiration.

For counterexamples to be of value they must exhibit the same economy of distribution and interrelatedness as those from the Bible. This has to do with how many type sketches are identified relative to the length of the body of literature in which they are found and whether they are interconnected by shared symbols and concepts. If the Hebrew Bible contained scores of personal histories and incidents to choose from, then the appearance of coded alignment in a few instances could more easily be explained as accidental. In fact, we are talking about documents with the combined length of a bulky novel. If we can relate many of its narratives to Jesus in surprising yet specific ways, as with the example of Jacob, then the phenomenon we face will be that much more difficult to duplicate elsewhere or to account for except as divine revelation.

We have glimpsed the case for typological coding in the Bible, but it

remains no more than a promising suggestion insofar as we have looked at a small fraction of the relevant material. Before considering other examples, I will make some general observations about typology and metaphor in the Scriptures.