

# Shifting Political Theologies in the Literary Development of the Jacob Cycle

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## *1. Towards a Historical Interpretation of the Jacob Cycle*

Using the Bible as a historical source is discussed widely in biblical studies, but not always with sufficient methodological precision. One of the most important issues for interpreting the Bible historically is to acknowledge the difference between the world of the biblical narratives, on the one hand, and the world of the narrators, on the other. In the Jacob cycle, the world of the narrative is easy to determine: The stories about Jacob are located in the 2nd millennium BCE, playing out in the pre-monarchic, even pre-exodus period. But what is the world of the narrators?

Since the birth of historical-critical scholarship in the eighteenth century, many different answers have been given, and it is especially interesting to consider the history of scholarship over the last 200 years. Julius Wellhausen wrote in his famous *Prolegomena* from 1883:

„Freilich über die Patriarchen ist hier kein historisches Wissen zu gewinnen, sondern nur über die Zeit, in welcher die Erzählungen über sie im israelitischen Volke entstanden; diese spätere Zeit wird hier [...] absichtslos ins graue Altertum projiziert und spiegelt sich darin wie ein verklärtes Luftbild ab.“<sup>1</sup> (“Indeed, we cannot gain any historical knowledge about the Patriarchs here [in Gen 12–50], but only about the time when the stories about them came to be among the Israelite people. This later period [...] is projected into the dim and distant past, and is mirrored there like a mirage.”)

Wellhausen was convinced that there was a significant gap of several centuries between the world of the Jacob narratives and their narrators. However, his approach did not have enduring success. One of the most influential figures for the development in the opposite direction was Hermann Gunkel. His method of *Formgeschichte* allowed him to find what he considered very old individual “tales,” as well as collections of tales, behind the book of Genesis:

„Die Sagen waren, als sie aufgeschrieben wurden, bereits uralt und hatten bereits eine lange Vorgeschichte hinter sich. So liegt es in der Natur der Sache: Der Ursprung der Sage

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<sup>1</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 336 (translation mine).

entzieht sich stets dem forschenden Blick und geht in vorgeschichtliche Zeit zurück.<sup>2</sup> (“The tales were, when recorded, already very ancient and had a long pre-history. This is only natural: The origin of the tale always escapes the researching perspective and dates back to pre-historical times.”)

Only in the wake of Gunkel is William Foxwell Albright’s later statement understandable. He writes:

“[A]s a whole, the picture in Genesis is historical, and there is no reason to doubt the general accuracy of the biographical details.”<sup>3</sup>

Albright was lightyears away from Wellhausen, and the mediating figure between them was actually Gunkel. By the 1970s, this approach prevailed in biblical studies. Only in the mid-1970s with the groundbreaking work of Thomas Thompson and John Van Seters – who simply stated the obvious – was a return to safe, historical ground again possible, so that Wellhausen’s approach was again properly recognized.<sup>4</sup> There is no need here to repeat why Thompson and Van Seters felt the world of the patriarchal narratives differed from the world of its narrators. One can just recall the use of camels as transport animals,<sup>5</sup> along with references to the city of Gerar and the Philistines<sup>6</sup> – matters which were impossible in a 2nd millennium historical context, but which fit into a first-millennium context very well.<sup>7</sup>

Thompson and Van Seters provided an apt and successful critique of a biblicist approach to the historical background of the Jacob cycle, but it is also necessary to mention the upheavals in Pentateuchal criticism at the same time, with Van Seters playing a crucial role here too. In order to understand current historical approaches to the Jacob cycle, it is helpful to keep these developments in mind.

In German-speaking scholarship, the questioning of fundamental assumptions behind the Documentary Hypothesis by Van Seters, Hans Heinrich Schmid, and Rolf Rendtorff is often referred to as the “crisis of pentateuchal criticism.”<sup>8</sup>

In my view, this is a misleading label. It would be more adequate to speak of the “*chance* of pentateuchal criticism.” If seen from a rational point of view, during the 1970s, what happened to the Pentateuch was simply that some traditional assumptions about its composition turned out to be unwarranted and without a secure foundation.

<sup>2</sup> Gunkel, *Genesis*; idem, *Genesis: Translated and Interpreted*, XL.

<sup>3</sup> Albright, *Biblical Period*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 133; Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*.

<sup>5</sup> Walz, “Neuere Untersuchungen,” 45–87; Fritz, *Die Entstehung Israels*, 114.

<sup>6</sup> Ehrlich, *The Philistines in Transition*.

<sup>7</sup> See also the discussion of Finkelstein and Römer in “Comments on the Historical Background of the Jacob Narrative, 317–338.

<sup>8</sup> Van Seters, *Abraham in History*; Schmid, *Der sogenannte Jahwist*; Rendtorff, *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*. For a discussion of the notion of “crisis,” see Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, 1.

For the literary analysis of the Jacob cycle in the wake of Rendtorff, Erhard Blum's groundbreaking book from 1984 about the composition of the patriarchal narratives is still the best argued and most sophisticated approach to Gen 12–50, even though some of his historical evaluations demand refinement and correction, as he himself has subsequently stated.<sup>9</sup>

It is crucial to identify the main difference between Blum's view of the Jacob cycle in comparison with the traditional assumptions of the Documentary Hypothesis. The Jacob cycle is no longer just an episode in a much longer work like the Yahwist or the Elohist, but, according to Rendtorff and Blum, it is better interpreted as an originally independent literary unit that had its own historical setting and tradition history. Only later was it then incorporated into larger narrative threads like P – which is a successful survivor in today's pentateuchal theory.<sup>10</sup>

According to Blum and others, the composition of the Pentateuch is not *the* exception within the formation of biblical literature. Also in the book of Psalms or in the book of Isaiah, smaller units stand at the beginning of the formation process, and the larger connections emerge at the end of that process. But according to the increasingly doubtful argument of the Documentary Hypothesis, the overarching narrative lines of the Pentateuch were there from the very beginning.<sup>11</sup>

The relative literary independence of the Jacob cycle is one of the most important insights of recent research on the Pentateuch, but there is another, often neglected element that is nearly as important: The Jacob cycle is not just one story among others, but a legend of Israel's origins. Especially Albert de Pury has described this function of the Jacob cycle in various publications.<sup>12</sup> A key text for his approach is Hos 12, where the Jacob and the Moses traditions seem to be presupposed as two competing myths of origin for Israel. At that point they may not yet have been arranged in their now familiar order, where Moses is subsequent to Jacob.<sup>13</sup> However, this interpretation of Hos 12 has also been contested from various sides.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*; idem, "The Jacob Tradition," 181–211.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g., de Pury, "P<sup>8</sup> as the Absolute Beginning," 99–128, here 123–28. An overall assessment of P in recent discussion is provided by F. Hartenstein and K. Schmid in *Abschied von der Priesterschrift?*

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch*; Dozeman/Schmid/Schwartz (ed.), *The Pentateuch*; Römer, "Urkunden," 2–24; idem, "Der Pentateuch," 53–166; Schmid, "Der Pentateuch und seine Theologiegeschichte," 239–271; Kratz, "The Analysis of the Pentateuch," 529–561; Gertz et al. (ed.), *The Formation of the Pentateuch*; Dozeman, *The Pentateuch: Introducing the Torah*.

<sup>12</sup> de Pury, "Le cycle de Jacob," 78–96; idem, "Situer le cycle de Jacob," 213–241; idem, "The Jacob Story," 51–72.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g., de Pury, "Erwägungen," 413–439.

<sup>14</sup> Schott, "Die Jakobspassagen in Hos 12," 1–26; Blum, "Hosea 12," 291–321. Vielhauer, *Das Werden des Buches Hosea* opts for a late date of Hosea 12 (here 178–180).

Hos 12:13–14 [ET: 12–13]

וּבִרַח יַעֲקֹב שָׂדֵה אֲרָם	And Jacob fled into the field of Aram,
וַיַּעֲבֹד יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאִשָּׁה	Israel served for a wife,
וּבְאִשָּׁה שָׁמַר	And for a wife he kept watch.
וּבְנָבִיא	But by a prophet
הֵעֵלָה יְהוָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם	YHWH brought Israel out of Egypt
וּבְנָבִיא נִשְׁמַר:	And by a prophet, it (Israel) was kept.

To evaluate the Jacob cycle historically, the following three starting points can be maintained.

1. The Jacob cycle is not a historical witness for the period presented in the narrative, but rather, when critically evaluated, it is a historical source for the periods of its literary development.
2. The Documentary Hypothesis no longer represents a safe starting point for the exegesis of the book of Genesis (at best, it might be a possible albeit improbable result).
3. P is a comparably well founded assumption in pentateuchal theory and usually provides a reasonable starting point.<sup>15</sup>

## *2. The Priestly Passages in the Jacob Cycle: A Political Appropriation of the Pax Persica in the Levant*

In order to proceed from more secure to less secure assumptions, one may start with the Priestly version of the Jacob cycle, which is usually located in Gen 25:19–20, 26b; 26:34–35; 27:46–28:9; 31:17–18; 33:18\*; 35:(6?) 9–15, 22b–29. There is a certain, even if not unanimous, scholarly agreement that P originates from the early Persian period.<sup>16</sup> This dating is discernible in P's positive adaptation of Persian imperial ideology:<sup>17</sup> For P and the Persians alike, every nation shall live in its own land, with their own language, culture and religion, as the Priestly refrain to the Table of Nations in Gen 10 points out.

בְּנֵי יֶפֶת ... בְּאַרְצֵתָם אִישׁ לְלִשְׁנוֹ לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם בְּגוֹיָהֶם

Gen 10:2, 5 The sons of Japheth ... in their lands, with their own language, by their families, by their nations.

אֱלֹהֵי בְנֵי־חָם לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם לְלִשְׁנָתָם בְּאַרְצֵתָם בְּגוֹיָהֶם

Gen 10:20 These are the sons of Ham, by their families, by their languages, in their lands, and by their nations.

<sup>15</sup> See n. 10.

<sup>16</sup> See n. 10 and Kratz, *Historisches und biblisches Israel*, 162 n. 107, who differentiates between the date of the cultic laws and the narrative framework.

<sup>17</sup> Koch, "Weltordnung," 197–201; see also Schmitt, *Bisitun Inscriptions of Darius the Great*; idem, *Die altpersischen Inschriften der Achämeniden*.

אלה בני-שם למשפחתם ללשנתם בארצתם לגויהם

Gen 10:31 These are the sons of Shem, by their families, by their languages, in their lands, and by their nations.

In other words, in the wake of Persian ideology, P acknowledges a culturally diversified world as a theologically legitimate option.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, there are also dissenting voices in scholarship that prefer to place P in the exilic<sup>19</sup> or even monarchic period,<sup>20</sup> but the Priestly Jacob tradition in particular supports a post-monarchic historical context for P.<sup>21</sup> Such a context can be seen from the concerns that are highlighted in the Priestly Jacob texts,<sup>22</sup> where two elements receive considerable attention: the first is Bethel and the second is the question of intermarriage. Both show how P is mainly interested in cult and family issues, but no longer in national politics.

P's cultic interest is detectable in its version of the Bethel episode in Gen 35:9–15, which is a clear doublet *and* reception of the non-Priestly Bethel account in Gen 28:10–22.<sup>23</sup>

וירא אלהים אל-יעקב עוד	Gen 35:9 And God appeared to Jacob again
בבאו מפדן ארם	when he came from Paddan-aram,
ויברך אתו	and he blessed him. ...
ויאמר לו אלהים	35:11 And God said to him,
אני אל שדי	I am El Shaddai:
פרה ורבה	be fruitful and multiply;
גוי וקהל גוים	a nation and a company of nations
יהיה ממך	shall come from you,
ומלכים	and kings
מחלצוך יצאו	shall spring from you.
ואתהארץ	35:12 The land
אשר נתתי לאברהם וליצחק	that I gave to Abraham and Isaac
לך אתננה	I will give to you,
ולזרעך אחרוך	And to your offspring after you
אתן אתהארץ	I will give the land.
ועל מעליו אלהים	35:13 And God went up from him
במקום אשר-דבר אתו :	at the place where he had spoken with him. ...
ויקרא יעקב את-שם המקום	35:15 And Jacob called the place
אשר דבר אתו שם אלהים	where God had spoken with him
בית-אל	Bethel.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g., Wiesehöfer, "Achaemenid Rule and its Impact on Yehud," 172–185. The Assyrians pursued a different policy, discussed in Berlejung, "The Assyrians in the West," 21–60.

<sup>19</sup> Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 730–732.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, 161–216; see also Hurvitz, "Dating the Priestly Source," 88–100; idem, "Once Again," 180–191.

<sup>21</sup> See in more detail Schmid, "Taming Egypt," 13–29.

<sup>22</sup> See de Pury, "Der priesterschriftliche Umgang," 33–60.

<sup>23</sup> See Rapp, *Jakob in Bethel*, 25–66.

The traditional association of Jacob with Bethel was apparently so strong that P could not neglect it, even though it does not fit P's own concept of a fully centralized cult. But P did what it could do with regard to the preceding tradition. According to P, Bethel is no longer a holy place *as such*, but a place where God *occasionally* appeared and spoke to Jacob, after which God *left the place* (ויעל "he went up"). Bethel is thus not a sanctuary, but the place of a specific revelation to Jacob in which nothing really new is communicated to him. Jacob basically receives a repetition of God's promises to Abraham from Gen 17.

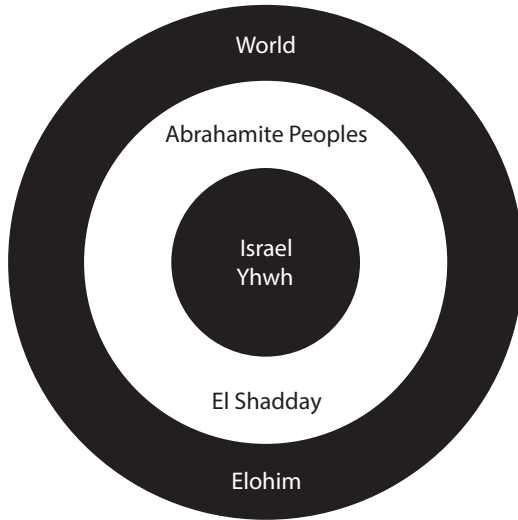
Regarding the topic of marriage, the sheer amount of text allotted to this issue shows its importance for P: Approximately one third of P's Jacob texts deal with Esau and Jacob's marriages. Here is a selection of them:

ויהי עשו בן־ארבעים שנה	Gen 26:34	When Esau was forty years old,
ויקח אשה את־יהודית		he married Judith
בת־בארי החתי		daughter of Beeri the Hittite,
ואת־בשמת בת־אילן החתי		and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite;
ותאמר רבקה אל־יצחק	Gen 27:46	Then Rebekah said to Isaac,
קצתי בחיי		I am weary of my life
מפני בנות חת		because of the Hittite women.
אם־לקח יעקב אשה		If Jacob marries one of the
מבנות־חת		Hittite women
כאלה		such as these,
מבנות הארץ		one of the women of the land,
למה לי חיים		what good will my life be to me?
ויקרא יצחק אל־יעקב	28:1	Then Isaac called Jacob
ויברך אתו		and blessed him,
ויצוהו ויאמר לו		and charged him and said to him,
לא־תקח אשה		You shall not marry
מבנות כנען		one of the Canaanite women ...
וילך עשו אל־ישמעאל	28:9	Esau went to Ishmael
ויקח את־מחלת		and took Mahalath
ויקח את־מחלת		daughter of Ishmael,
בן־אברהם		the son of Abraham,
אחות נבאיוח		and sister of Nebaioth,
על־נשיו לו לאשה		to be his wife in addition to the wives he had.

P's position with regard to these marriages is clear: Judeans and Israelites are *not allowed* to intermarry with Hittites and Canaanites, but intermarriage with Edomites and Ishmaelites is possible.

This policy accords with P's worldview of three concentric circles. According to P, the world is organized in three different realms with different political and theological qualifications.<sup>24</sup> The most general realm is the whole world.

<sup>24</sup> See in more detail Schmid, "Judean Identity and Ecumenicity," 3–26. This conception might be inspired by the Persians' own view of center and periphery within their empire; cf.



All nations, to which God is known as Elohim, are included in that sphere. The middle circle includes the Abrahamite people, i. e., Israel, but also Edom and the Ishmaelites, because they are all Abraham's offspring. God is known to them as El Shaddai and intermarriage is apparently possible within that middle circle. The inner circle is Israel itself: Only Israel knows God by the cultic name YHWH.<sup>25</sup>

It is remarkable historically that P still presupposes a strong sense of cohesion between Edom and Israel that allows for intermarriage between descendants of these peoples. It seems that the traditions about the relationship between Israel and Edom were still normative for P.<sup>26</sup>

To summarize briefly the place of Jacob in P:

1. The Priestly Jacob passages presuppose a Jacob cycle.
2. They both acknowledge and struggle with the Bethel-orientation of the material.
3. The Priestly Bethel episode in Gen 35 desacralizes the pre-Priestly Bethel tradition in Gen 28.
4. The Priestly Jacob passages downplay the political dimension of Israel's links to Esau, transferring it to the realm of intermarriage.

Herodotus, *Hist.*, 1.134: "After their own nation they hold their nearest neighbors most in honour, then the nearest but one – and so on, their respect decreasing as the distance grows, and the most remote being the most despised. Themselves, they consider in every way superior to everyone else in the world, and allow other nations a share of good qualities decreasing according to distance, the furthest off being in their view the worst." See Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 181.

<sup>25</sup> See de Pury, "Gottesname," 25–47; for a critical take on this argument, see Blum, "Der vermeintliche Gottesname 'Elohim,'" 97–119.

<sup>26</sup> See on this in more detail below in section III.

5. Nevertheless, P witnesses to a historical consciousness of a strong link between Edom and Israel.

I will now shift from this comparatively fixed point in the development of the Jacob tradition in the early Persian period and turn to earlier texts in the Jacob cycle – namely, the non-Priestly promises and then the non-Priestly narrative substance of the cycle.

### 3. *The Promise in Gen 28:13–15: An Exilic Appraisal of the Diaspora*

Not only in the Jacob cycle, but also throughout Gen 12–50, a characteristic textual element can be found: the promise to the patriarchs. Traditional scholarship deemed these promise texts to be a genuine part of Israel's nomadic past:

„Nomadenreligion ist Religion der Verheissung. Der Nomade lebt ja nicht im Zyklus von Saat und Ernte, sondern in der Welt der Migration. Das ist die Welt des Heute-hier, Morgen-dort, wo man weiss, dass die Kinder an einem anderen Orte sterben werden, als wo die Eltern begraben sind.“<sup>27</sup> (“Nomad religion is religion of the promise. The nomad lives not in the cycle of sowing and harvesting, but rather in the world of migration. It is a world of here today and there tomorrow, a world where one knows that the children will die at locations different from where the parents are buried.”)

Current scholarship has abandoned this romantic picture of nomadism, and rightly so. Nomads lived in a close relationship with Levantine cities, and it is mistaken to assume that they constantly dreamed of becoming a great people and taking up a sedentary lifestyle.<sup>28</sup> Much more adequate and important for a historical evaluation of the promise texts in the book of Genesis was Gerhard von Rad's fundamental observation that the promises provide a thematic link for the patriarchal narratives:

„So bunt das Überlieferungsmaterial ist, das in der großen Erzählkomposition von Abrahams Berufung bis zum Tod Josephs zusammengekommen ist, so hat das Ganze doch ein tragendes, verbindendes Gerüst, nämlich die sogenannte Erzväterverheißung. Mindestens kann man sagen, daß dem bunten Erzählungs mosaik durch die immer wieder auftretende Verheißung ... eine thematische Verbindung gegeben wurde.“<sup>29</sup> (“Although the great narrative complexes covering the call of Abraham down to the death of Joseph consist in the coalescence of a great variety of traditional material, the whole has nevertheless a scaffolding supporting and connecting it, the so-called promise to the patriarchs. At least it

<sup>27</sup> Maag, “Malkut JHWH,” 156.

<sup>28</sup> Cf., e.g., Weippert, “Semitische Nomaden des zweiten Jahrtausends,” 265–280.472–483; Fritz, *Die Entstehung Israels*, 113–118.

<sup>29</sup> Von Rad, *Die geschichtlichen Überlieferungen*, 171; trans. as *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, 167.



can be said that this whole variegated mosaic of stories is given cohesion of subject-matter ... by means of the constantly recurring divine promise.”)

In addition, apart from Gen 18 (and Gen 15 and 17, which provide narratives construed around their promises), not a single story in the patriarchal narratives includes a promise element that is essential to the narrative.

Rendtorff and Blum drew the redaction-critical conclusion from these literary observations and argued that one should see the promises in Gen 12–50 as redactional links between the individual stories and cycles that build up the patriarchal narrative.<sup>30</sup> But the promise topic is not an invented element of the cycle. Besides the recurrent theme of blessing in the Jacob cycle, the promise topic has earlier, tradition-historical roots in the story of Abraham,<sup>31</sup> particularly in the narrative of Gen 18, which is the only pre-Priestly story in Gen 12–50 that includes an integral promise element – that is, the promise of a son for Abraham and Sara in v. 14b.<sup>32</sup>

The most prominent promise text in the Jacob cycle is Gen 28:13–15:

והנה יהוה נצב עליו	And YHWH stood beside him
ויאמר	and said,
אני יהוה אלהי אברהם אביך	I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father
ואלהי יצחק	and the God of Isaac;
הארץ אשר אתה שוכב עליה	the land on which you lie
לך אתננה ולזרעך	I will give to you and to your offspring;
והיה זרעך כעפר הארץ	and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth,
ופרצת ימה וקדמה	and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east
וצפנה ונגבה	and to the north and to the south;
ונברכו בך כל-משפחת האדמה	and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in
ובזרעך	you and in your offspring.
והנה אנכי עמך	Behold, I am with you
ושמרתֶיך בכל	and I will keep you in all respects
אשר-תלך והשבתיך	wherever you go, and will bring you back
אל-האדמה הזאת	to this land;
כי לא אעזבך	for I will not leave you
עד אשר אס-עשיתי	until I have done
את אשר-דברתי לך	what I have said to you.

Genesis 28:13–15 clearly does not represent an original part of the Bethel story in Gen 28:10–22.<sup>33</sup> After waking up from his dream, Jacob only refers to the image of the stairway to heaven (Gen 28:16–17) but not to God’s speech in Gen 28:13–15. Neither does Jacob’s vow (Gen 28:20–22) seem to know the promise of Gen 28:13–15. Rather, Gen 28:13–15 takes up the apodosis of Jacob’s vow and

<sup>30</sup> See n. 8 and 9, differently Baden, *The Promise to the Patriarchs*.

<sup>31</sup> See Köckert, “Die Geschichte der Abrahamüberlieferung,” 103–127; Finkelstein/Römer, “Comments on the Historical Background of the Abraham Narrative,” 3–23; Ska, “Essay,” 23–45.

<sup>32</sup> Köckert, “Abraham- und Jakobüberlieferung,” 43–66.

<sup>33</sup> See Rendtorff, “Jakob in Bethel,” 511–523, and his reception in Blum, *Vätergeschichte*, 7–35.

turns it into a promise (compare Gen 28:20–21 with Gen 28:15). In addition, Gen 28:13–15 is very similar to Gen 12:1–3,<sup>34</sup> which indicates that the literary horizon of Gen 28:13–15 transcends the Jacob cycle and also includes the stories of Abraham and Isaac.

The content of Gen 28:13–15 includes the promise of numerous offspring and the gift of the land. These topics would be especially relevant in an exilic situation, which could point either to Israel's situation after 720 BCE or after 587 BCE.<sup>35</sup> The specific contours of the diaspora theology of Gen 28:13–15 are remarkable: Unlike other texts of the Hebrew Bible interpreting Israel's fate of existing in the diaspora as sign of divine punishment (e.g., Jer 24:8–10), Gen 28:13–15 sees the diaspora as a means in God's plan to convey salvation to the nations (28:14; see also Gen 12:2–3 and Gen 39:2–6, 21–23):<sup>36</sup>

ונברכו בכ כל משפחת האדמה    And all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you  
וּבוֹרֵעַךְ    and in your offspring

Genesis 28:13–15 thus takes an explicit stance against some explicit voices in the prophetic corpus, as well as in the so-called Deuteronomistic History, both of which interpret Israel's dispersion into the diaspora as an expression of God's anger and God's punishment for Israel's sins (see, e.g., 2 Kgs 17:7–23). Genesis 28:13–15 instead suggests the following: Israel was meant to cover the globe from the very beginning, in order to allow the nations to participate in God's blessings.

#### 4. *The Pre-Priestly Jacob Cycle: A Political Theology of Israel and Edom*

The bulk of the non-Priestly material in Gen 25–35 is probably *pre-Priestly*.<sup>37</sup> The only material of probably post-Priestly origin is Gen 34 and Gen 35:1–5,<sup>38</sup> because, in brief, the former presupposes Gen 17, whereas the latter is probably an anti-Samaritan polemic against Shechem, interpreting the Samaritans' holy site as a favissa of the אֱלֹהֵי הַנֹּכַר that Jacob disposed there.<sup>39</sup> But most of the rest likely belong to an older cycle of Jacob material.

That it is correct to speak of a “cycle” becomes clear by looking at the arrangement of the texts within Gen 25–35. As early as 1975, Michael Fishbane pointed out that there is a concentric structure in the Jacob material in Gen

<sup>34</sup> See Kratz, *Komposition*, 263–279.

<sup>35</sup> See Köckert, *Vätergott und Väterverheißungen*; idem, “Verheißung I. Altes Testament,” 697–704; Carter, *Emergence of Yehud*, 235; Knoppers, “Revisiting the Samaritan Question,” 268.

<sup>36</sup> See e.g., Levin, “Righteousness in the Joseph Story,” 223–240.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g., n. 7.

<sup>38</sup> See e.g., Levin, “Dina,” 49–59.

<sup>39</sup> Na'aman, “The Law of the Altar in Deuteronomy,” 160–161 n. 54.

25–35,<sup>40</sup> once one brackets out the material that obviously does not belong to it (namely, Genesis 26 and 34).

A Gen 25: Birth of Jacob and Esau, selling of birthright

*Genesis 26: Isaac*

B Gen 27: Jacob stealing the blessing, escaping

C Gen 28: Encounter with God (Bethel)

D Gen 29–30: Jacob at Laban's, birth of sons

C' Gen 31: Leaving Laban

B' Gen 32: Encounter with God (Penuel)

A' Gen 33: Reconciliation between Jacob and Esau

*Genesis 34: Dina at Shechem*

Genesis 35: Bethel, birth of Benjamin, Rachel's death

The composition's center is the birth of Jacob's sons, playing out at Laban the Aramaean's. It is surrounded by two stories about Jacob's encounters with God, which give the cycle its basic structure.

The texts of the pre-Priestly Jacob cycle were most likely written at different times and at different places.<sup>41</sup> It has its own complicated literary history.<sup>42</sup> For example, the Jacob-Laban material seems to be older than the Jacob-Esau material. In addition, the two stories about Jacob's encounter with God in Gen 28 and 32 seem to be secondary insertions into a pre-existing literary context, which the verses immediately following the episodes suggest: They fit the *preceding* context of the two episodes at Bethel and Penuel far better than the episodes where they are now positioned.

וישא יעקב רגליו	Gen 29:1 Then Jacob took off,
וילך ארצה	and he went to the land
בניקדם	of the people of the east (cf. Gen 27:45)

וישא יעקב עיניו	Gen 33:1: And Jacob looked up
וירא והנה עשו בא	and saw Esau coming (cf. Gen 32:14a and 32:22)

However, that does not mean that the two episodes are *necessarily* from a late date. This observation only suggests that their *literary insertion* into their current context is the result of a redactional act.

Another piece of evidence is the passage about the selling of the firstborn's birthright in Gen 25:19–34, which functionally doubles the stealing of the firstborn's blessing in Gen 27 and which is probably a secondary legitimization of what Gen 27 addresses: Jacob's dominion over Esau.

But there is no need to go into great detail here. My purpose with these remarks is just to highlight the clear structure of the Jacob cycle and that this

<sup>40</sup> Fishbane, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle," 15–38.

<sup>41</sup> Against Na'aman, "The Jacob Story," 95–125, who argues for a largely unified Jacob cycle and dates it to the 6th century BCE.

<sup>42</sup> See n. 9.

structure probably results from a complex compositional history rather than from a single author.

In what follows, I do not focus on the pre-history of the Jacob cycle (including its oral pre-stages) because it is extremely difficult to obtain plausible results to such investigations. I will instead point out three specific elements of the cycle that are important for its political theology.

1. The pre-Priestly Jacob cycle is chiefly (this is, except for minor, later additions) of a northern origin.
2. It dates back to the Northern Kingdom's monarchic period.
3. It had a *political* function from the outset, especially regarding relations with the Southern Kingdom.

I begin with the northern origin of the Jacob cycle. In terms of the history of scholarship, this insight was especially developed by Albrecht Alt in his seminal essay on the "God of the Fathers" from 1929.<sup>43</sup> His basic observations were striking and remain valid today: The locations in the Jacob story, Bethel, Penuel, Shechem, Machanaim, and others all point to the North. In addition, the clearest and most explicit allusion to the Jacob texts outside of the Pentateuch is in the book of Hosea, a prophet from the *Northern* Kingdom.<sup>44</sup>

As it stands, Gen 25–35 of course seems to play out in a conceptual framework that includes *both* Israel and Judah, also including Simeon, Levi, Judah and Benjamin among Jacob's sons. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the original geographical anchors of the Jacob material belong to the North.<sup>45</sup>

This can be corroborated by a second point: The Jacob material seems to have a clear orientation towards *Bethel*.<sup>46</sup> This can be illustrated by Gen 28:20–22, which depicts Jacob as making a vow in order to tithe, that is, to give the tenth to God – a vow that he makes at Bethel and that seems to legitimize the sanctuary there. The narrative is at odds with the later centralization of the cult in Jerusalem,<sup>47</sup> and for this reason probably predates it.

וישכם יעקב בבקר	28:18 And Jacob rose early in the morning,
ויקח את־האבן	and he took the stone
אשר־שם מראשתיו	that he had put under his head
וישם אתה מצבה	and set it up as a <i>mazzebah</i> ,
ויצק שמן על־ראשה	and poured oil on its top.
ויקרא את־שם המקום ההוא	28:19 He called that place
בית אל	Bethel ...

<sup>43</sup> Alt, "Der Gott der Väter," 1–78. For the English translation, see "The God of the Fathers," 1–66.

<sup>44</sup> See n. 14.

<sup>45</sup> See Sweeney, "The Jacob Narratives," 236–255.

<sup>46</sup> See Köhlmoos, *Bethel*; Knauf, "Bethel," 291–349.

<sup>47</sup> See Pietsch, *Die Kultreform Josias*.

וידר יעקב נדר לאמר	28:20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying,
אם יהיה אלהים עמדי	If God will be with me,
ושמרני בדרך הזה	and will keep me in this way
... אשר אנכי הולך	that I go, ...
והיה יהוה לי לאלהים	then YHWH shall be my God,
והאבן הזאת	28:22 and this stone,
אשר שמתי מצבה	which I have set up as a <i>mazzebah</i> ,
יהיה בית אלהים	shall be a house of God;
וכל אשר תתן לי	and of all that you give me
עשר אעשרנו לך	<b>I will surely give one tenth to you.</b>

Some scribes who transmitted Gen 28 apparently recognized this awkwardness, and they seem to have added a *second* apodosis to the vow formulation in Gen 28:21b (והיה יהוה לי לאלהים “then YHWH shall be my God”), which in the present context precedes Gen 28:22 but is probably secondary because it is a functional doublet and downplays the significance of paying the tenth in the second apodosis.

The emphasis on Bethel in the Jacob cycle allows for an *even more precise date* when taking into account the archaeological findings at Bethel. Bethel as a working sanctuary clearly points to a period before the downfall of the Northern Kingdom.<sup>48</sup> Since Bethel is central to the overall structure of the Jacob cycle, it is quite plausible to assume that the Jacob cycle can be dated before 720 BCE.

The interpretation of the figures of Jacob and Esau prove relevant to a third point that ties in with the political substance of this material. There is a traditional and well-known approach to this problem dating back to Hermann Gunkel and reiterated by Eckart Otto that the conflict between Jacob and Esau reflects the old conflict between farmers and hunters in basic cultural-historical terms.<sup>49</sup>

But to my mind, this approach is untenable. By contrast, Wellhausen and Blum are on the right track. Wellhausen notes in his *Prolegomena*:

„Der Stoff ist hier [in der Patriarchengeschichte] nicht mythisch, sondern national.“<sup>50</sup>  
 (“The narrative material is here [in the Patriarchal stories] not of mythical, but of national quality.”)

Wellhausen does not support his statement with much argumentation, but Blum fills this omission in his seminal study on Gen 12–50. He demonstrates that crucial elements in the Jacob cycle presuppose the story’s political dimension, for example, the birth oracle in 25:23, the birth account in Gen 25:25 that associates Esau with Edom and Seir, and the blessing in Gen 27:29. All of these elements are essential for the narrative, and they all witness to the political dimension of the cycle: Jacob is Israel and Esau is Edom.

<sup>48</sup> Finkelstein/Singer-Avitz, “Reevaluating Bethel,” 33–48.

<sup>49</sup> Gunkel, *Genesis*; for the English translation, see idem, *Genesis: Translated and Interpreted*; see also Otto, “Jakob,” 352–353.

<sup>50</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 336.

Gen 25:23–25

ויאמר יהוה לה	And YHWH said to her,
שני גיים בבטנך	Two nations are in your womb,
ושני לאמים	and two peoples
ממעריך יפרדו	born of you shall be divided;
ולאם מלאם יאמץ	the one shall be stronger than the other,
ורב יעבד צעיר	the elder shall serve the younger.
וימלאו ימיה ללדת	When her time to give birth was at hand,
והנה תומם בבטנה	there were twins in her womb.
ויצא הראשון אדמוני	The first came out red,
כלו כאדרת שער	all his body like a hairy mantle;
ויקראו שמו עשו	so they named him Esau.

Gen 27:29

יעבדוך עמים	Peoples will serve you,
וישתחו לך לאמים	and nations will bow down to you.
הוה גביר לאחייך	Be lord over your brothers,
וישתחו לך בני אמך	and may your mother's sons bow down to you.

Gen 27:39–40

ויען יצחק אביו	And his father Isaac answered him
ויאמר אליו	and said to him:
הנה משמני הארץ	See, away from the fatness of the earth
יהיה מושבך	shall your home be,
ומטל השמים מעל	and away from the dew of heaven on high.
ועל חרבך תחיה	By your sword you shall live,
ו ואת אחיך תעבד	and you shall serve your brother;
והיה כאשר תריד	but when you break loose,
ופרכת עלו מעל צוארך	you shall break his yoke from your neck.

However, it is also important to see that the stories about Jacob and Esau cannot simply be read as political *allegories* that can be translated on a 1:1 basis into historical events. This becomes especially evident when looking at the end of the cycle, in Gen 33:1–4.<sup>51</sup>

וישא יעקב עיניו	Gen 33:1 And Jacob looked up
וירא והנה עשו בא	and saw Esau coming,
ועמו ארבע מאות איש	and four hundred men with him.

...

והוא עבר לפניהם וישתחו ארצה שבע פעמים	33:3 And he [i. e., Jacob] himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times,
עד־גשתו עד־אחיו	until he came near his brother.
וירץ עשו לקראתו	33:4 But Esau ran to meet him,
ויחבקו	and embraced him,
ויפל על־צוארו	and fell on his neck
וישקהו ויבכו:	and kissed him, and they wept.

<sup>51</sup> For more detail, see Schmid, “Versöhnung,” 211–226.

This text reports that Jacob bows down seven times to Esau, which seems to constitute a complete inversion of the blessing that Jacob stole from Esau in Gen 27:29. There is apparently a political dimension to the Jacob story, though its narrative flow is not a linear representation of corresponding political events. The cycle develops its own narrative world. In this case, Gen 33 seems to imply a critique of a magical understanding of the firstborn's blessing: Jacob may have stolen it, but in effect, other factors are decisive with regard to its actual corollaries.

Yet the Jacob cycle is not only about Jacob and Esau, but also Jacob and Laban, who is called an Aramean. It is noteworthy that when Esau is in the picture, Laban is not, and *vice versa*. This supports the common assumption that the Jacob cycle is built up out of two formerly independent traditions, the Jacob-Laban story on the one hand, and the Jacob-Esau story, on the other one.<sup>52</sup> Whereas the Jacob-Laban story is somewhat self-sufficient, the Jacob-Esau story is not: Without the Laban episode, it is not clear where Jacob flees to and where he comes from in order to reconcile with Esau. In addition, there is good reason to assume that the trickster motif so clearly present in the Jacob-Esau tradition is taken from the Jacob-Laban material, where Laban is the trickster.

How are we to evaluate the Laban tradition in historical terms?<sup>53</sup> At this point, it is again helpful to look at the geography. According to Gen 27:43; 28:10; and 29:4, Laban dwells in Haran.

ועתה בני	Gen 27:43	Now therefore, my son,
שמע בקלי וקום ברחלך		obey my voice and get up,
אל-לבן אחי חרנה:		flee at once to my brother Laban
		in Haran.
ויצא יעקב	Gen 28:10	Jacob left
מבאר שבע		from Beersheba
וילך חרנה:		and went toward Haran.
ויאמר להם יעקב	Gen 29:4	Jacob said to them,
אחי מאין אתם		My brothers, where do you come from?
ויאמרו		They said,
מחרן אנחנו:		We are from Haran.

This point is at odds with the narrative substance of the Jacob-Laban story, which seems to presuppose Laban not in the far north of Syria (where Haran is situated), but rather somewhere in the Damascus area.

In particular, three passages hint at this original location for Laban. First, in Gen 29:1 we are told that Jacob went on his journey to Laban and came to the land of the בני-קדם. While this is not very specific, we learn from texts like Judg

<sup>52</sup> See n. 9.

<sup>53</sup> See Blum, "The Relations between Aram and Israel," 37–56.

6:3, 33; 7:12; Jer 49:28; Ezek 25:4,10 that the בני־קדם are assumed to be farther south than Haran, somewhere in the Transjordan area around Gilead.

Another text compatible with this location is Gen 31:23, where we learn that Laban caught up with Jacob after three days in the hill country of Gilad, which would have been impossible had Jacob fled from Haran. In addition, this location of Gen 31:23 is the place of the frontier treaty in Gen 31:51–53, thus assuming that Laban's territory expands into the Gilead area.

If we account for how all three Haran mentions are only superficially linked to their contexts, it is plausible to follow the proposal of Gunkel, Eduard Meyer, John Skinner, Noth, Thompson, Otto, and Blum,<sup>54</sup> affirming that, in the process of reworking the Jacob cycle, Laban's location has secondarily been transferred from the Transjordan area to Haran in Northern Syria.

But why would this have happened, and when? Ernst Axel Knauf points convincingly to the particular religious and political significance of Haran in the Neo-Assyrian context.<sup>55</sup> Haran is the city of Sin, who is the Lord of the West. Having Jacob travel to Haran shows him to be a loyal servant of the Neo-Assyrian dominion.

One element of the Jacob cycle's Haran layer is especially interesting. The mention of Haran in Gen 28:10 is combined with Jacob's departure from Beersheba. What is Jacob doing in Beersheba? This verse apparently already presupposes the literary connection between the Isaac story from Gen 26 with the Jacob cycle because Beersheba is the location of Isaac according to Gen 26. This chapter is not an integral part of the Jacob cycle since Isaac and Rebecca remain childless in Gen 26, but they have children in Genesis 25 and 27 alike.<sup>56</sup>

The Haran interpretation therefore either presupposes or establishes the link between the Jacob cycle and the literary Isaac tradition, which, again, is a good argument that the core of the Jacob cycle predates the conquest of Israel by the Neo-Assyrians.

At the same time, this point does not necessarily imply that Jacob as the son of Isaac is a late construction. The figure of Isaac is well rooted in the accounts of Gen 25 and 27, and there is no reason to believe – as Reinhard Kratz does<sup>57</sup> – that Isaac had actually blessed Esau in the first literary edition of Gen 27, with Jacob intruding by means of a secondary insertion.

Rather, Gen 25 and 27 seem to reflect that Jacob, representing Israel, entertains a close relationship to Judah from the outset, which is symbolized by Isaac, a correspondence otherwise known from the book of Amos (Amos 7:9; 8:5).

<sup>54</sup> See the discussion in Blum, *Vätergeschichte*, 164–167.

<sup>55</sup> See Knauf, "Bethel," 320.

<sup>56</sup> On the juxtaposition and redactional connection of the Abraham and Jacob stories, see Köckert, "Abraham- und Jakobüberlieferung."

<sup>57</sup> Kratz, *Komposition*.



In the Jacob cycle, the prominence of Esau and Edom raises a series of serious historical questions. First and foremost, it is striking that a non-neighboring nation like Edom enjoys such a close relationship to Israel. Second, the close relationship of Esau *as the twin brother* of Jacob is astonishing in light of the hateful passages against Edom in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, especially in the Prophets (cf. Isa 34:5–6; Jer 49:17–22; Obad 1, 8, 9, 19, 21; Mal 1:2–3).<sup>58</sup>

The second point can be explained in part by the relatively early date of the Jacob cycle, which does not presuppose the possibly difficult history between Edom and Judah in the 6th century (a history only reconstructed by texts like Arad ostrakon no. 24;<sup>59</sup> see also 3 Ezra 4:45). Nevertheless, especially the first point requires an explanation.

On this matter, the findings of Kuntillet 'Ajrud provide some help.<sup>60</sup> They are quite well known, and they provide a good example of close *economic*, as well as *religious*, contact between the Northern Kingdom and Edom. The *pithoi* inscriptions mention YHWH of Samaria and YHWH of Teman. Teman is connected to Edom,<sup>61</sup> at least when accounting for biblical passages like Amos 1:11–12; Jer 49:7, 20; Obad 9; Ezek 25:13.

Kuntillet 'Ajrud provides extra-biblical evidence of how geographical neighborhood is apparently not the sole determining factor for expressing political or religious relationships within the Levant. Israel and Edom are not neighboring nations, but they entertained manifold exchanges in economic, cultural, and religious terms.

In view of the epigraphically documented relationship between Edom and Israel that illumines the figures of the Jacob cycle, other *biblical* texts likewise come into play.

Especially remarkable is the song of Deborah in Judg 5, which clearly reflects a Northern setting (Judah is missing among the tribes mentioned) and, for linguistic reasons, is probably an old text (Knauf dates it to the 10th century).<sup>62</sup> This text shows a similar connection between the North and the South: YHWH has his origins in Seir and Edom,<sup>63</sup> but he is active in the North.

<sup>58</sup> See Becking, "Betrayal of Edom"; Glazier-McDonald, "Edom in the Prophetic Corpus," 23–32; Assis, "Why Edom," 1–20; idem, *Identity in Conflict*; Bienkowski, "New Evidence on Edom in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods," 198–213.

<sup>59</sup> Renz/Röllig, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik*, 389–393; Donner, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* 405 and n. 23–24; 407 and n. 35.

<sup>60</sup> See Meshel (ed.), *Kuntillet 'Ajrud*.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. de Vaux, "Téman, ville ou région d'Edom?" 379–385; Knauf, "Teman," 799.

<sup>62</sup> Knauf, "Deborah's Language," 167–182; cf. Mayfield, "The Accounts of Deborah (Judges 4–5)," 306–335.

<sup>63</sup> See Leuenerger, "YHWH's Provenance from the South," 157–179.

Similar is 1 Kgs 19, which is probably not an old text.<sup>64</sup> It recounts Elijah's trip from the North to the South via Beersheba. It is not important here whether or not Elijah made this trip (since he seems to be a literary rather than a historical figure, he likely did not). Suffice it to say that a traditional travel route appears to be implied here, witnessing again to established connections between the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms.

Finally, in the book of Amos and ostensibly addressed to the Northern Kingdom, there are warnings against going on a pilgrimage to Beersheba. Some scholars think that the mention of Beersheba in Amos 5:5 is a later addition because the name Beersheba is missing in the second part of the verse, but this assumption is not compelling for a couple reasons. First, the verse as it stands exhibits a clear structure, highlighting Beersheba in the center; and secondly, one can imagine that, in the alleged political situation of the 8th century, Beersheba would be considered safe. It is thus not farfetched to adduce Amos 5:5 and 8:14 in order to show that there were significant cultic bonds to the South in the 8th century.

But *why* do these connections from Israel to the South exist? Two things need to be highlighted here. On the one hand, these connections seem to reflect memories or at least repercussions of the religious-historical origin of the YHWH religion in the South, and the same seems present in Judg 5 and plays some role in 1 Kgs 19 and Amos 5 and 8.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, economic reasons are also likely to stand behind such memories or repercussions. Edom was on an important trade route, and Beersheba seems to have been its gateway to the North.<sup>66</sup> Beersheba is the place associated with Isaac in the Bible (esp. Gen 26; see also Gen 28:10): As Jacob and Esau's father, Isaac lives in a place that apparently bore significance for Israel's trade with Edom and the South.

These factors of religion and economy were apparently so strong that Israel could be closely connected to Edom, even bypassing what, at the time, was a less significant Judah that only gained importance after 720 BCE.<sup>67</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

This article addresses some basic, preliminary aspects of the political implications of the Jacob cycle: its northern origin, and its links to the South, and its affiliation with Haran. One can summarize these findings in the following seven points.

<sup>64</sup> See Köckert, "Elia," 111–144; see also Blum, "Der Prophet und das Verderben Israels," 277–292.

<sup>65</sup> See n. 45.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Singer-Avitz, "Beersheba," 3–74.

<sup>67</sup> On the sociological backgrounds of this development see the discussion between Na'aman, "Dismissing the Myth of a Flood of Israelite Refugees," 1–14; and Finkelstein, "Migration of Israelites into Judah after 720 BCE," 188–206.

1. The Jacob cycle belongs to the North, is to be dated pre-720 BCE, and was a political narrative from the outset in its literary form.
2. Although the *dramatis personae* symbolize political entities, the events in the narrative cannot always be “translated” into political history. To a certain extent, the narrative pursues its own logic.
3. The connections between Jacob/Israel and Esau/Edom are understandable in a 9th or 8th century BCE context, as the inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud suggest. Such connections reflect religious and economic bonds between Israel and the South.
4. Although we hardly know anything about Edomite history in the relevant period, the Jacob cycle seems to take a pro-Edom stance and to foster the contacts between Israel and Edom.
5. These contacts were so significant that, in the late 6th century BCE, the Priestly code could still allow and even encourage marriages between Israel, Edom, and Arabs, the old trade route participants.
6. In terms of the Jacob cycle’s literary history, the fact that Jacob is presented as the son of Isaac, located in Beersheba, need not be seen as an element foreign to the Northern origin of the cycle. Beersheba was a gateway for the contacts between Israel and Edom.
7. The literary growth of the Jacob texts in Gen 25–35 provides a mirror for the political history of Israel and Judah from the 9th to the 4th centuries BCE. The cycle originally served as a legend of the Northern Kingdom’s origin. After 720 BCE, the links to Judah became more important (Jacob as the son of Isaac and the father of Israel’s twelve tribes). Either after 720 BCE or 587 BCE, the topic of the promises gained significance not only in the Jacob cycle, but also in the patriarchal narrative as a whole. Rather than seeing Israel’s diaspora existence as a divine punishment, the promises instead interpret it as an element of God’s plan in history. In the early postexilic period, the P portions in Gen 25–35 transformed the political substance of the earlier Jacob cycle into social regulations regarding intermarriage among the Israelites, Edomites, and Ishmaelites (i. e. Arabs).

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