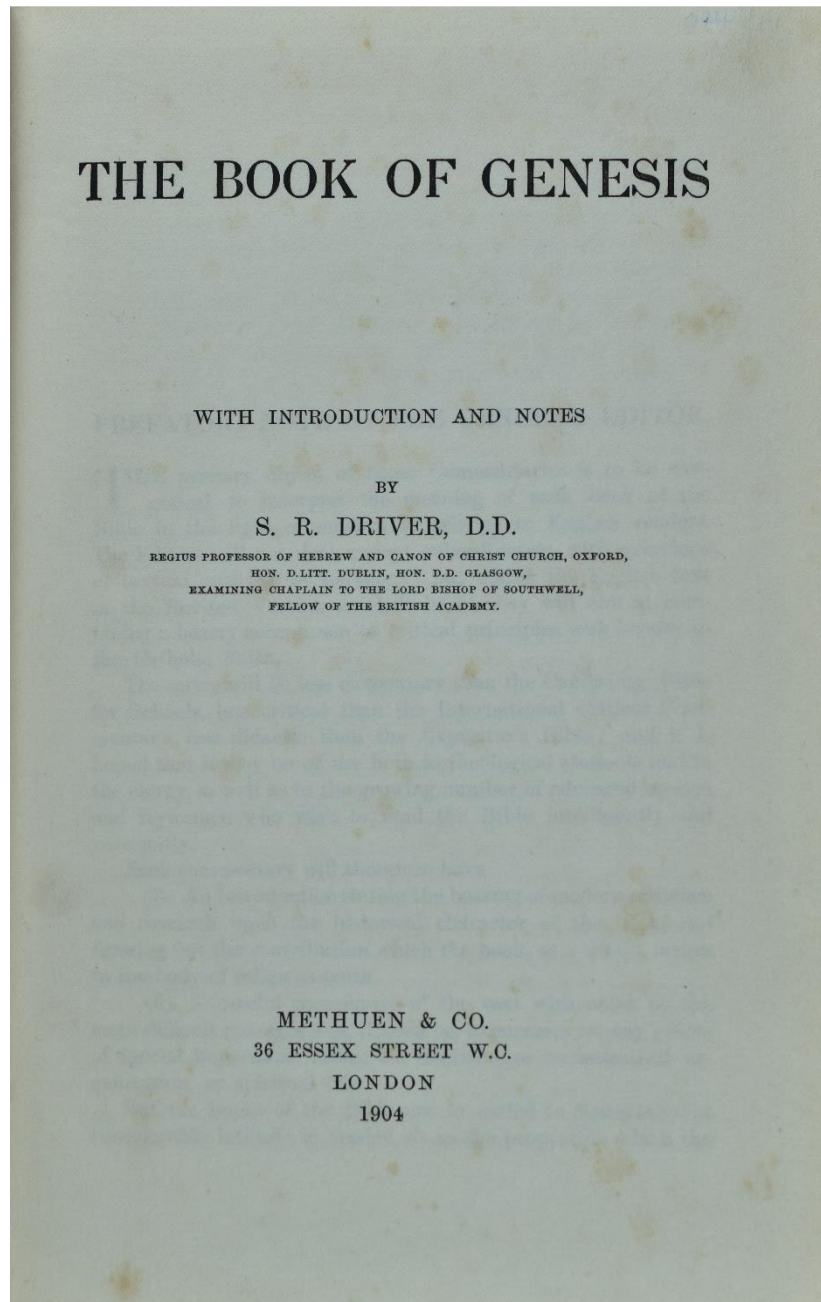


**Samuel Rolles Driver:
His Impact on the Reformed View of the Patriarch Jacob and the Meaning of his Name**

Modern theologians agree that over the centuries various religious groups have had different attitudes to the personal name of the Patriarch Jacob and his character. This note is intended to briefly depict how, over the centuries, different groups of people have looked at the biblical Jacob. In addition, the note aims to show that the academic, Samuel Rolles Driver (1846–1914), a Church of England clergyman and biblical scholar at New College, Oxford, was a man whose substantial writings contributed to cementing the Reformed interpretation of the derivation and meaning of Jacob's name.



New College Library, Oxford, NC/DRI, title page

Samuel Rolles Driver received his early education at Shirley House School in Southampton. Thereafter his life and education were shaped first at Winchester College, and then at New College, Oxford. From 1870 onwards and for the rest of his distinguished career, Samuel Rolles Driver was a fellow and tutor at New College, before becoming Regius Professor of Hebrew and Canon of Christ Church. Throughout his career, Driver was commended as an outstanding biblical scholar, who knew Syrian, Arabic, and Hebrew well, along with a good knowledge of other Semitic languages.¹ As a result, he was appointed a member of the Old Testament Revision Committee of the English Revised Version of the Bible (1876–1884). Driver was a brilliant philologist, skilled in interpreting ancient texts. In his writings, Driver often demonstrated how Christian faith could be reconciled with the rise of a harsh biblical criticism and scientific outlook engendered by the work of Charles Darwin. Together with W. Robertson Smith and T. K. Cheyne, Driver has been one of the foremost champions of biblical criticism, from an evangelical perspective.² Summing up all of Driver’s abilities as a scholar, Francis Brown, President of the Union Theological Seminary in New York, stated that “[t]here was no better one in his time”.³

THE ANCIENT INTERPRETATION

It is important to remember that the ancient biblical commentators considered Jacob and his colorful life, described in the Holy Bible, as furnishing a significant example of true piety and faithfulness.⁴ Hebrew exegetes have continuously held the view that the Holy Torah depicted their forefather Jacob as a perfect man, because the Hebrew adjective [תָּמִי / *tam*] that describes Jacob in Genesis 25:27 means perfect, complete, or morally innocent.⁵ In addition, Hebrew exegetes strongly believe that each step of Jacob’s life was permanently guided by Hashem (a title used in Judaism to refer to Yahweh [*jab'web*])—the Lord God of the Israelites—and that ‘the name Jacob derives from the Hebrew word יַעֲקֹב עֵינַי [Ya’aqov - ei] ‘y-`-k-b-`-l,’” which literally means ‘may God protect [you]’.⁶ Since its founding in the 7th century, Islam, too, has always had a highly respectful view of Jacob, whose name and exemplary actions are mentioned in the Qur’an 16 times.⁷

The early Christian community saw that the Old and New Testament writings depicted Jacob exceedingly positively (Genesis 28; John 1:50-51; Hebrew 11:20-21).⁸ Saint Augustine reflected the ancient apostolic view of this matter, stating that Jacob was ‘a simple man living at the tabernacles. Some translators have “guileless” in place of “simple”. But, whether we say “guileless” or “simple” or “without pretense” for the Greek *áplastos* . . . the man [Jacob] himself is guileless’.⁹ Likewise, Saint

¹ *Studies on the Language and Literature of the Bible: Selected Works of J. A. Emerton*, edited by Graham Davies and Robert Gordon (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 688.

² Isidore Singer and Cyrus Adler, eds., *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1903), vol. 5, p. 2.

³ Francis Brown, ‘Samuel Rolles Driver’, *The Biblical World* 43 (5) (1914), 291–4.

⁴ John L. Thompson, ‘The Immoralities of the Patriarchs in the History of Exegesis: A Reappraisal of Calvin’s Position’, *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 (1) (1991), 9–46 (p. 9).

⁵ George V. Wigram, *The Englishman’s Hebrew Concordance of the Old Testament: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001).

⁶ *The Jewish Study Bible*, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 49.

⁷ H. A. R. Gibb and P. J. Bearman, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 11 (Leiden: Brill, 1954), p. 254.

⁸ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 152. See also Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 219, and Nicholas Perrin, *Jesus the Priest* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2018), pp. 215–6.

⁹ *Saint Augustine: The City of God: Books VIII–XVI*, trans. by Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), XVI:37.

Ambrose found in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ‘a [right] pattern of how to live’ that all believers should ‘follow in their shining footsteps along a kind of path of blamelessness opened up to us by their virtue’.¹⁰ Proceeding from the ancient apostolic view, Ambrose persistently taught his spiritual flock that: ‘He [Jacob] was a great man and truly happy who could lose nothing of his and possess nothing of another’s . . . the man who has nothing to excess is just—this is to observe the proper mean of justice . . . the wise man is never empty but always has the garment of prudence on himself’. Then, in conclusion, Ambrosius called on all believers to: ‘Follow the example of [the] holy [Patriarch] Jacob’.¹¹

It is also significant to stress that throughout the post-Patristic period, the most influential Christian leaders persistently held an exclusively positive view of Jacob and completely justified all aspects of his colourful behavior. William Tyndale, in his translation of *The Five Books of Moses*, indicated that Jacob is a man without craftiness and deception, and a man who continually believes and fulfils the will of God in his life. In the same way, Martin Luther entirely supported this ancient Patristic exegesis, saying: ‘Jacob had an upright and unspoiled will, was saintly and very zealously devoted to godliness, and was fervent in his desire for the [upcoming] kingdom of God’.¹² Similarly, John Wesley correspondingly believed that ‘[the Patriarch] Jacob was a plain man—an honest man that dealt fairly . . . As a student, he frequented the tents of Melchizedek or Heber, as some understand it, to be taught by them divine things’.¹³

THE REFORMED INTERPRETATION

During the Protestant Reformation, the idea arose and was enthusiastically cultivated—especially among Reformed theologians—that the Patriarch Jacob as a human being had nothing worthy of praise. The first to sharply question the character of Jacob, and thereby cast a shadow on his life, was John Calvin. In his commentary on the book of Genesis, Calvin asserted that Jacob as a man did not have anything worthy of admiration. Thus, the fact that Jacob became ‘the father of the church was not given as a reward, but only as a pure result of God’s grace’.¹⁴ Calvin added: ‘Jacob should have willingly satisfied his brother’s hunger. But when being asked, he refuses to do so: *who would not condemn him for his inhumanity?*’ Calvin also reasoned that ‘in compelling Esau to surrender his right of primogeniture, he seems to make an illicit and frivolous compact’.¹⁵ As a result, Calvin considered Jacob ‘a deceiver,’ which seemingly contradicted all the ancients and his contemporaries. A Reformed theologian, John L. Thompson, pointed out that, initially many Reformed theologians, including Huldrych Zwingli and Wolfgang Musculus, had a predominantly favourable view of all biblical patriarchs, but only Calvin stood apart among his contemporaries for his singular rejection of the traditional positive explanation for patriarchal behaviours.¹⁶

Over time, Calvin’s profound influence made him celebrated and helped him gain more followers among ordinary people, biblical commentators, and national Bible translators, especially among the British. Thus, according to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the ‘Geneva Bible, also called *Breeches Bible*,

¹⁰ *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works*, translated by Michael P McHugh (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1972), p. 189.

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 158-9.

¹² *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 4: *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 21-25*, ed. by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan and Walter A Hansen; trans. by George Victor Schick (Saint-Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 1964), p. 387.

¹³ *Wesley’s Notes on the Bible* (Christian Classical Ethereal Library), p. 928 <<https://ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes/notes>> (Accessed: 24 September 2019).

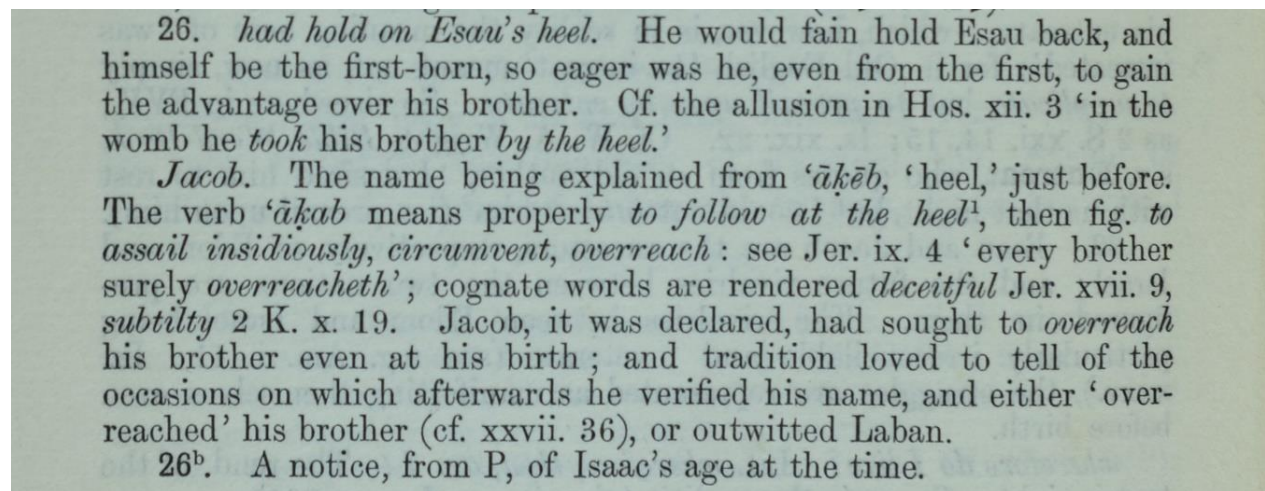
¹⁴ John Calvin, *Genesis* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001), p. 224.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. by John King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847–50), vol. 2, p. 51.

¹⁶ Thompson, ‘The Immoralities of the Patriarchs’, pp. 14, 20, 37, 43.

[was a] a new translation of the Bible published in Geneva . . . by a colony of Protestant scholars in exile from England who worked under the general direction of Miles Coverdale and John Knox and under the influence of John Calvin'.¹⁷ Therefore, significantly influenced by Calvin and his innovative theology, the *Geneva Bible* was the very first known English translation of the Bible which claimed that the name Jacob means 'a deceiver'. The rationale of this interpretation was established on Esau's statement: 'Was he not iuftly called Iaakob, for he hath deceiued me thefe two times' (Genesis 27:36).¹⁸ But impartial readers will immediately notice a side-note next to the verse 36 that interprets the biblical text: 'In Gen.25, he was so-called [*Jacob*] because he held his brother by the heel, as though he would overthrow him: and therefore he is here called an over thrower, or deceiver'.

During the seventeenth century, the Reformed exegesis gained more followers and had much influence on the clergy and parishioners of local congregations, who remained under the sway of Calvin's interpretation. As a result, in a relatively short period of time, the negative opinion of the Patriarch Jacob was cultivated by another Reformed theologian, Matthew Henry (1662–1714), whose commentaries had considerable impact on the Christian community. For instance, in his interpretation of Genesis 27, Henry stated that 'Rebekah is here plotting to procure for Jacob the blessing which was designed for Esau. The means were bad, and in no way justifiable. If it was not wrong to Esau to deprive him of the blessing (he himself having forfeited it by selling the birthright), yet it was a wrong to Isaac. It was a wrong to Jacob too, whom she taught to deceive, by putting a lie into his mouth'.¹⁹



The Book of Genesis with Introduction and Notes by S. R. Driver (London: Methuen, 1904)
New College Library, Oxford, NC/DRI, p. 264 [detail]

THE IMPACT OF SAMUEL ROLLES DRIVER

However, perhaps the most devastating blow to Jacob's reputation was dealt by Samuel Rolles Driver. In his monumental publication, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes*, Driver sophisticatedly discredited the reputation of the Patriarch Jacob. In light of this discussion, it can be noted that Driver was the first to attempt to present Calvin's ideas on the subject in an attractive scholastic form. For

¹⁷ <www.britannica.com/topic/Geneva-Bible>

¹⁸ *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

¹⁹ *Matthew Henry's Commentary for the NIV: based on the Broad Oak Edition edited by Leslie F. Church*, ed. Gerald W. Peterman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), p. 131

that reason, Driver claimed that Jacob's name means a deceiver: 'being explained from 'ûkeḇ, 'heel,' just before. The verb 'ûkeḇ means properly *to follow at the heel*.

Moreover, Driver also suggested that the Hebrew adjective [טָמִי / *tam*] that describes the Patriarch Jacob as a 'perfect' man should not be interpreted literally but allegorically (Genesis 25:27). 'Heb. *perfect*,—usually (e.g. Job i. 1; Ps. xxxvii. 37) in a moral sense (= *blameless*), such as would hardly be applicable to the crafty Jacob'.²⁰ The scholar also specified why it was the case: 'Instigated by his ambitious and designing mother, Jacob deceives his aged father [Isaac], and wrests from his brother [Esau] his father's blessing'. Driver goes further and elegantly states that the Patriarch Jacob acted this way because 'truthfulness was not observed by the normal Israelite with the strictness demanded by a Christian standard'.²¹

Significantly, Driver was a member of the Old Testament Revision Committee of the English Revised Version of the Bible (1876–84). As an influential member of this working group, Driver was able to fully impart his ideas into the newest, most prominent edition of the Holy Bible, the *English Revised Version of the Bible* (1885). It can be said, therefore, that the ERV was the Bible which thereby removed the favourable image of the Patriarch Jacob, and overshadowed the meaning of his name.

The ERV was published at a time when Britain was the world's dominant colonial power, and English the predominant language. Publication of the ERV had a significant influence on further dissemination of Calvin's innovative ideas, and his negative view of the Patriarch Jacob, and Driver's writings lent these notable support. In addition, it can also be said that the ERV's emphasis was then adopted by the American Standard Version (1901), and from then onwards all other biblical translations into other native languages, at the beginning of the 20th century.²²

Thus, by way of John Calvin, Matthew Henry, Samuel Rolles Driver, and the popularity of the latest English Bible translations (*Geneva Bible* and ERV), Jacob's negative hermeneutics were effectively cemented into public consciousness. By the end of the nineteenth century, a global Christian clergy had, apparently forever, overshadowed the life of the once much-respected Patriarch Jacob, and led to the assertion that the name of Jacob means—'deceiver'.

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²⁰ *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes* by S. R. Driver (London: Methuen, 1904), p. 247.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 255.

²² Watson E. Mills and Roger Aubrey Bullard, eds., *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1990), p. 110.