

Narrative Artistry in Genesis 12-50: A Conceptual Approach

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Abstract:

This paper examines the literary artistry of Genesis' Patriarchal Narratives from a conceptual framework. First, a primary conceptual strand, the polarity of blessing-conflict, is explored. Second, the literary (namely, structural) impact of this strand is studied. The study concludes that the blessing-conflict thematic strand provides Genesis 12-50 with both conceptual and literary cohesiveness and that narrative artistry in these stories is best viewed through a conceptual lense.

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Introduction

In speaking about narrative artistry, we recognise the book of Genesis as a literary whole and posit that a holistic approach yields delightfully surprising results. As such we can study, utilising morphological and syntactical approaches, the details that comprise the whole.¹ It is also possible to view Genesis as great literature, as a work of art which can be studied for its literary qualities.² This calls for an investigation of literary techniques such as plot development, characterisation, and so on.³ Furthermore, Genesis, as canonical literature, has a decidedly didactic purpose. Its concepts and themes can be explored so as to discover the primary ideas

that govern the text. On the one hand, this approach allows us to discover the conceptual elements that bind the text together and provide it cohesiveness. On the other hand, it enables us to highlight elements that arrange or structure the text.

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between these diverse elements in as much as they impact upon the text. With a more decided focus on the conceptual elements, I will survey the primary conceptual strand(s) of Genesis' Patriarchal Narratives. I will also attempt to ascertain the structural impact of these strands. Morphological and literary elements are employed where necessary and where they have a direct bearing upon the stories.

The Patriarchal Narratives, *Gen 12-50*, are clearly divided into three cycles of stories, the so-called Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph Cycles. However, the rather contiguous nature of the narratives demand a rethink of such labels. While the commonly recognised labels make for easier retelling of the stories, they do ignore the presence of other players, particularly Isaac and Judah. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to label the narratives as the Abraham-Isaac, Isaac-Jacob, and Jacob-Joseph-Judah Cycles as this allows the narratives to link up better with each other while demonstrating the narrative movement wherein one cycle of stories leads to and merges with the next.

This entire segment of Genesis opens with the Abraham genealogy of *Gen 11:27-32* which serves as the prologue to the Patriarchal Narratives and closes with the account of the deaths of Jacob and Joseph in *Gen 49:29-50:26* which then serves as the epilogue to the stories. Within this larger envelope is a secondary one (*Gen 12:1-9* and *49:1-27*) which dwells upon the idea of "blessing," one that serves as the cover conceptual strand of *Gen 12-50*. This double envelope points to the literary and conceptual cohesiveness of the Patriarchal stories.

The Abraham-Isaac Cycle (*Gen 11:27-25:11*)

The story of Abraham really commences with the brief family genealogy recorded in *Gen 11:27-32*. While the genealogy itself

contributes little to the actual account of Abraham's life, it does set the backdrop to it by providing essential family and clan information. The cycle terminates with the genealogy of Ishmael in *Gen 25:12-18*.

A simple morphological search reveals that the Hebrew verbal root *brk* (to bless) appears some 19 times in this narrative cycle. However, *brk* is not employed evenly, but rather in concentrated doses, namely, 5 times in *Gen 12*, 3 times in *Gen 17*, 3 times in *Gen 22*, and 4 times in *Gen 24*. These chapters are pivotal to the episodes within this Cycle. In *Gen 12*, God enters into a special covenantal relationship with Abraham whose terms are guaranteed by divine promises (*Gen 12:1-3*). It is in connection with such promises that *brk* appears. Likewise, in *Gen 17* we encounter the reiteration of this covenant with the accompanying blessings (see vss 16 and 20). Conversely, in *Gen 22* and 24 we are confronted with events that are potentially detrimental to the covenant. The divine order for Abraham to offer Isaac as sacrifice (*Gen 22:1-19*), the so-called *aqedah*, and the need to locate a spouse for Isaac (*Gen 24:1-67*) are events that threaten the very existence of the covenant. In these two chapters, *brk* serves as a reminder that the covenant is secure, even if it is under some pressure.

Nevertheless, the appearance of one word, albeit an important one, does not, in and of itself, provide a defensible conceptual strand. However, it does point to the possibility that the 'blessing' motif is a principal conceptual strand that may be explored. The use of the word *brk* is augmented by the various images or intimations of blessing that permeate the Abraham-Isaac Cycle. It is in the combination of the two elements, morphological and imagery, that the conceptual strand begins to take shape.⁴

The episodic nature of the stories in this Cycle⁵ suggests that each individual episode is designed to highlight the blessings that accompany the lives of these two patriarchs, especially Abraham, despite their apparent failures. Consequently, in each episode, the failure of the patriarch is supplemented with some image or intimation of blessing. In *Gen 12:10-20*, Abraham's less than forthright dealings with the Pharaoh of Egypt results in his profiting

from the situation. The same can be said about his dealings with the Canaanite king, Abimelech (*Gen 20*). In *chapters 13 and 14* Abraham's separation from and rescue of Lot likewise makes Abraham a potentially richer person despite his intentional deference to accepting any direct reward for his efforts. Even the contentious issues that accompany the birth of (*Gen 16:1-16*) and final separation from Ishmael (*Gen 21:8-21*), did not result in total disaster, with a measure of blessing assured even to Ishmael (*Gen 21:13*).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, we encounter an unexpected antithesis to *brk*. What should have been 'curse' as the polar opposite of 'blessing', is replaced with something else. Every time that blessing is pronounced or experienced in this Cycle, conflict rears its ugly head. The magnificent promises made in *Gen 12:1-3* are almost immediately undermined by Abraham's half-truths to Pharaoh (*Gen 12:10-20*). The presence of Lot as a potential heir to the promises ends up in recrimination and worse (*Gen 13:1-18*). The birth of Ishmael, which promises so much, becomes a source of family conflict and results in the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from the family (*Gen 21:8-21*). Even the eventual birth of Isaac, the heir to the covenant, is fraught with difficulty as a consequence of both expected human envy (*Gen 21:8-10*) and unexpected divine demands (*Gen 22:1-2*).

It appears that the primary conceptual strand in the Abraham-Isaac Cycle is the idea of blessing and its opposite concept, conflict. The blessing-conflict continuum serves as the paradigm for the remaining cycles in Genesis as will be shortly observed.

The Isaac-Jacob Cycle (*Gen 25:19-35:29*)

As earlier noted, this Cycle is separated from the first with a short genealogy of Ishmael (*Gen 25:12-18*). In this Cycle, the word *brk* is utilised in even greater intensity than in the previous Cycle. The word appears some 37 times in the stories recorded here. In a manner resonant to that of the Abraham-Isaac Cycle, *brk* appears in concentrated doses in chapters 26 (4 times), 27 (19 times), 28 (5

times), and 30 (3 times). The uses in chapters 27-28 reveal that the principal debates arising in the Isaac-Jacob stories concern themselves with blessing: its presence, its potentials, and its ownership. Moreover, the individual episodes here also resonate with the previous Cycle in that they too carry intimations of blessing even in the absence of the word *brk*. Such intimations take on the form of treaties made (see *Gen 26*), subterfuges employed to gain a blessing advantage (see *Gen 25:27-33, 27:1-28:9*), dreams that underpin the blessing motif (see *Gen 28:10-22*), subtle attempts to undermine another's blessings (as in *Gen 30:25-31:21*), and physical altercations that result in further pronouncements of blessings (see *Gen 32-33*).

However, we can also observe a major departure in this Cycle when compared with the previous one. Whereas in the Abraham-Isaac Cycle, conflict presents itself as a potentially destructive force against blessing, in the Isaac-Jacob Cycle, conflict is intentionally employed as a means to undermine and remove blessing in order to gain personal advantage over the same blessing. The twins, Esau and Jacob, are in a state of altercation that commences at the moment of their birth (*Gen 25:19-26*) and continues largely unabated into their adult life. Throughout their lives, Jacob, the one who ultimately inherits the covenantal promises (*Gen 25:23*), is also depicted as the one responsible for attempting to defraud his brother of those very blessings (see *Gen 27-28*). The same dissonance can be detected in the stories concerning Laban (*Gen 29:13-30; 30:25-43*), Jacob's wives (*Gen 29:31-30:24*), and the angel at the River Jabbok (*Gen 32:24-32*).⁶ Jacob, the central character of the Cycle is depicted as an enigmatic figure, one who is rather complex and elusive.⁷ Nevertheless, despite the immense destructiveness of these conflicts and the enigma of the central character, the blessing, the promised *brk*, inevitably triumphs.

The Jacob-Joseph-Judah Cycle (*Gen 37-50*)

Like the previous two Cycles, this one also finds its setting in a genealogy, that of Esau (*Gen 36:1-43*). Clearly, genealogical data

are utilised both as introduction as well as interlude material. It has been argued that this final Cycle of Genesis is the most seamless of the narrative cycles in the book.⁸ It is also believed that the principal character of the Cycle is Joseph.⁹ However, it is evident that the whole Cycle is far more complex and that the subtle reversal of the blessing concept reveals that this Cycle revolves largely around two characters (Joseph and Judah) with differing fortunes for both. Jacob plays more of a cameo role in the stories here but his part is still significant.

As expected, *brk* is still employed fairly freely (some 20 times) in this Cycle and yet its occurrence tapers off sharply when compared with the Isaac-Jacob Cycle. If we take into account the length of this particular Cycle, it can be surmised that, in terms of ratio, *brk* is less conspicuous here than in the preceding Cycles. This does not detract from the importance of the concept *per se* but it does clue us to the subtlety of the whole idea in these stories.

Here we discover that *brk* is employed largely in three chapters, 47-49 (about 15 times). The significance of this highlights the fact that these chapters represent not only the culmination of the Patriarchal stories but the climax of the Book of Genesis itself. The centrepiece of this Cycle is chapter 49 which contains the final ‘blessings’ of a dying father (Jacob). The concept is further augmented in the Cycle by the presence of blessing intimations such as the elevation of Joseph into vizier of Egypt (*Gen 41-42*), the rescue act that saved Jacob’s family from being decimated by a famine (*Gen 42-46*), and the eventual prominence of Judah over his brothers (*Gen 49:8-12*).

While the concept of blessing runs true in this Cycle of stories, so does its antithesis. Conflict within the family takes some unexpected and rather murderous turns in the Jacob-Joseph-Judah Cycle. In a manner almost reminiscent of a thriller “who-dun-it” novel, the story of Joseph and Judah takes the reader through many twists and turns and leaves him/her breathless by its sheer intricacy,¹⁰ the multiplicity of its reversals,¹¹ and a completely unexpected conclusion.¹² The blessing-conflict polarity constantly threatens to unravel the very fabric of the covenant. Conceptually

speaking, however, the triumph of blessing over conflict again plays its hand and demonstrates the potency of *brk* in the face of every attempt to undermine or destroy it.

The Structural Impact of the Blessing-Conflict Conceptual Strand

Having unveiled the principal conceptual strand (blessing-conflict) of the Patriarchal Narratives of Genesis, we can now ascertain the structural impact of the concept and learn of the manner by which the concept underpins the arrangement of stories in these narrative cycles.

The Abraham-Isaac Cycle

Gen 12:1-25:11 is arranged in two discrete sections. The first section, comprising of chapters 12-22, begins and ends with stories that focus sharply on blessing: the call of Abraham (*Gen 12:1-9*) and the *Aqedah* episode (*Gen 22:1-19*). Encapsulated within this envelope are two panels of out-of-sequence stories, forming a chain of narrative pairings whose correspondences are conceptually-driven. There are five such narrative pairings in this section of the Cycle. In each pair of stories, the spectre of conflict is presented which then leads to further pronouncement or intimation of blessings.

Pairing One: The story of Abraham and the Pharaoh (*Gen 12:10-20*) is paired with the story of Abraham and Abimelech (*Gen 20:1-18*). In both stories a king is unwittingly involved, Abraham conducts himself in a less-than honourable manner, and the largely innocent king is cursed while Abraham is blessed further.

Pairing Two: This pairing consists of separation stories. In *Gen 13:1-18*, Abraham and Lot separate, whereas in *Gen 21:8-21*, Abraham separates from Ishmael. Both separations are acrimonious in nature and leave the promised blessing in a delicate state of balance with the departure of someone (Lot and Ishmael) who could have been

the heir to the promise.

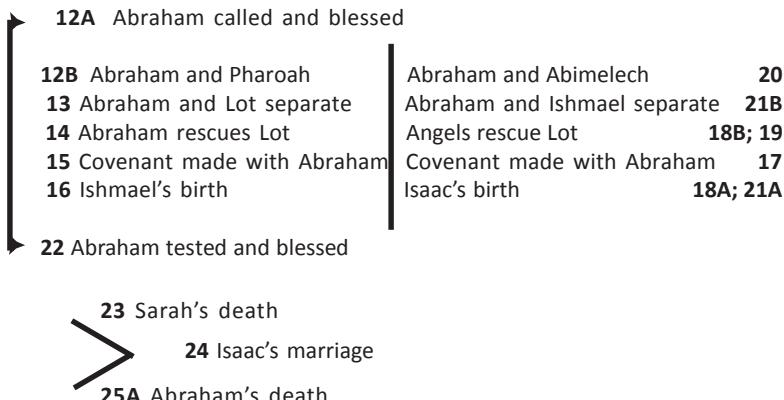
Pairing Three: In *Gen 14:1-24*, Abraham goes to war with the five kings in order to rescue Lot who had been taken captive along with most of the people from Sodom and Gomorrah. This rescue act is paired with another rescue act where angels pull Lot and his family out of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Gen 18:16-19:29*). This pairing is uncannily reflective of the structural pattern and involves three common elements: Abraham, Lot, and Sodom and Gomorrah. Again, the preservation of the promised blessing is maintained despite potential threats.

Pairing Four: In *Gen 15:1-21*, God once again appears to Abraham with news regarding the fulfilment of the promise to the extent that his descendants will be as innumerable as the stars of the cosmos (*Gen 15:5*). In conjunction with this renewed promise, God then “cuts” the covenant with Abraham. The same motif is also repeated in *Gen 17:1-27* where God reiterates the terms of the covenant, and here too another “cutting” is involved.¹³

Pairing Five: The final pairing narrates the births of Ishmael (*Gen 16:1-16*) and Isaac (*Gen 18:1-15; 21:1-7*). This pairing unveils the final piece of the puzzle and presents the birth of Isaac as the ultimate fulfilment of the promise encountered in *Gen 12:1-3*. All potential and real conflicts cannot halt this realisation.

There is a mini-genealogy (*Gen 22:20-24*) before the second section is presented. Section two employs a concentric pattern with the deaths of Sarah (*Gen 23:1-20*) and Abraham (*Gen 25:7-11*) enveloping the marriage of Isaac (*Gen 24*). The high occurrence of *brk* in *Gen 24* hints at the possible threat to the covenant precipitated by Isaac’s bachelorhood which is then resolved by his marriage to Rebeccah.

Asymmetrically arranged, the Abraham-Isaac Cycle of narratives appears as follows:



The Isaac-Jacob Cycle

The structure of this Cycle utilises a threefold or triadic (a-b-a') structural pattern. There are three such triads in the Cycle.¹⁴ Each triad opens with a story of conflict and closes with a similar story. Sandwiched between the two is a story about conflict resolution. Furthermore, at the end of the first and the second triadic patterns Jacob flees the scene of the story (see *Gen 27:1-28:9* and *30:25-31:35*). This positioning is reversed in the third triadic pattern which commences with a conflict story in which Jacob does not flee the scene (*Gen 32*). It then closes with a similar story of conflict (*Gen 34*) and a conflict resolution story is sandwiched between the two (*Gen 33*). Moreover, at the end of the first triadic pattern, there is a story involving Bethel which is then repeated at the end of the third triadic pattern.

It should be noted that in all these stories, Jacob is both the precipitator of conflict and the recipient of blessing. Of further interest is the contrast between this Cycle and the previous one. Whereas the strong, personal presence of God is pivotal to the stories about Abraham, the presence of God is more discreet in the stories of Isaac and Jacob. With a greater role assigned to the human protagonists, God slowly fades into the backdrop. The God who speaks so often to Abraham is now gradually replaced by more

human deliberations about him. This appears to be an intentional narrative technique which has a direct bearing upon the flow of the stories.

Triadic Pattern One: This pattern commences by relating the story of the birth of Esau and Jacob (*Gen 25:19-34*). Their birth is accompanied by a prophecy about their impending conflict (*25:23*), a revelation of Jacob's "grabbing" nature even at birth (*25:26*), and Jacob's first attempt to defraud his brother of the birthright (*25:29-34*). The pattern closes with the story of the stolen blessing and Jacob's subsequent flight (*Gen 27:1-28:9*). Located between the two is the story about Isaac's conflict with his neighbours over the digging of wells which is amicably resolved with a treaty (*Gen 26:1-33*).

Triadic Pattern Two: In *Gen 29:1-30*, Jacob arrives in Padan Aram, the home of his kin, Laban. Here, the great deceiver becomes the victim of deception and Jacob and Laban are instantly engulfed in a conflict over the issue of wives for Jacob. *Gen 30:25-31:55* record the ongoing saga of conflict between the two men over the nature of divine blessings that results in the second flight of Jacob. Sandwiched between the two narratives is a tale of conflict between Jacob's wives. This conflict is concerned with and resolved by the birth of sons (*Gen 29:31-30:24*).

Triadic Pattern Three: The final triadic pattern opens with a picture of Jacob's fear of retaliation from the oncoming Esau (*Gen 32: 1-23*). While meditating at the River Jabbok, he is accosted by a person who he believes capable of blessing him (*Gen 32:24-32*). This time Jacob does not flee the scene of conflict. Contrary to his nature, he stands his ground and demands greater blessing, which he duly receives and acknowledges (*32:26, 30*). *Gen 34:1-31* paints the picture of Jacob's sons in conflict with a Hivite prince, Shechem, which culminates in the massacre of the citizens of Shechem's city. The conflict-causing paradigm of Jacob's life is depicted here as the life paradigm of his sons as well. In between these two conflict

narratives is the story of the reconciliation between Esau and Jacob (*Gen 33:1-20*).

The structure of this Cycle appears as follows:

→ **25B** Jacob and Esau: initial conflicts over birth and birthright

→ **26** Isaac's wells' conflicts: resolved with a treaty

27-28A Jacob and Esau: conflict over blessings and Jacob flees

→ **28B** Jacob's dream at Bethel

→ **29A-B** Jacob and Laban: initial conflicts over wives for Jacob

→ **29C-30A** Jacob's wives' conflicts resolved with children

30B-31 Jacob and Laban: conflict over blessing and Jacob flees

→ **32** Jacob and the angel: conflict over blessing but Jacob does not flee

→ **33** Jacob and Esau: conflict resolved

34 Jacob's sons in conflict

→ **35A** Jacob returns to Bethel

The triple repetition of this pattern clues the reader to the distinct possibility of emphasis. The story of Isaac and Jacob is told through the lense of blessing and conflict.

The Jacob-Joseph-Judah Cycle

This narrative Cycle is, arguably, the most complex of the narrative cycles of Genesis. This complexity can be accounted for in two ways: (1) The Cycle comprises the stories of two major protagonists, Joseph and Judah. The two stories run along rather different tracks and suggest the presence of two intertwining narrative strands, one belonging to Joseph, the other to Judah. The two strands tell two

rather different stories with sharply distinct consequences. (2) The Cycle employs different structural patterns for the two narrative strands, one structural pattern for the Joseph strand and another for the Judah strand.

The Joseph strand utilises a pendulum pattern (see diagram on the next page). Each time that Joseph is elevated by someone (e.g. by Jacob as in *Gen 37:3-4*)¹⁵ he is subsequently de-elevated by someone else (e.g. by his brothers as in *Gen 37:26-28*). This pattern continues throughout Joseph's story until his ultimate elevation by the Pharaoh (*Gen 41-42*). However, his story ends in his final de-elevation by none other than Jacob when his princely place in the clan is designated to Judah instead (*Gen 49:8-12*; see also *Exod 1:8* and *Ps 78:67*).

The Judah strand begins in a rather dubious manner in *Gen 38*, but the story progresses almost unobtrusively through the Cycle until Judah is elevated over all his brothers (*Gen 49:8-12*). This unexpected reversal of fortunes of the two brothers goes virtually undetected by most readers.¹⁶ At stake in all of this are the blessings that would eventually be given and the conflicts that are precipitated by them. Perhaps it is not surprising to discover that God is virtually absent in these stories while human conceptions of God thrive.

The two narrative strands of this Cycle can be depicted as follows:

The Joseph Strand

37A Joseph is elevated by Jacob over his brothers

►**37B** Joseph is de-elevated by his brothers and becomes a slave

39A Joseph is elevated by Potiphar over his household

►**39B** Joseph is de-elevated by Mrs Potiphar and becomes a prisoner

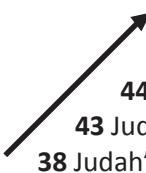
39C Joseph is elevated by the jailer

►**40** Joseph is de-elevated by the forgetful butler

41-42 Joseph is elevated by Pharaoh over Egypt and the family

►49:20-26 Joseph' is finnally de-elevated by Jacob¹⁷

The Judah Strand (in reverse order)



- 49:8-12 Judah elevated by Jacob over the family
- 46B Judah's further elevation
- 44 Judah's mediatorial work
- 43 Judah's rise to prominence
- 38 Judah's humiliation by Tamar

A word about this unexpected reversal is appropriate at this juncture. Joseph clearly served a useful purpose in the short term. Jacob's initial treatment and Joseph's own dreams seem to point the path to eventual greatness. This is evident in the short term, but the scope of his greatness is short-lived. Judah on the other hand gradually rises on the ascendancy until he becomes the acknowledged leader with a far more universal scope than that of Joseph.

It appears that Judah's salvific instinct, displayed in nearly every episode of his life, should be viewed as a major reason for this reversal. We find Judah attempting to prevent the murder of Joseph (*Gen 37:26-27*),¹⁸ ensuring that Tamar can continue to live (*Gen 38:26*), persuading Jacob to release Benjamin as part of a family saving enterprise (*Gen 43:3ff.*), and interceding for the life of Benjamin with none other than Joseph himself (*Gen 44:18ff.*). In contrast, it may be observed that Joseph displays a degree of indifference to his brothers and even a mild penchant for revenge in his baseless accusations against them (*Gen 42:8-17*), imprisoning of Simeon (**Gen 42:18-19, 23-24**), demanding that Benjamin be brought to him upon pain of death (*Gen 42:20, 34*), and baiting Benjamin (*Gen 44:1-17*). While it is possible to excuse his behaviour as merely an attempt to test his brothers, it may be equally argued that these actions demonstrate his less graceful side. Whatever the real reasons, Judah's star is the one that ultimately shines brightest. Most significantly, the sometimes murderous conflicts of Jacob's family do little to destroy the blessing of God. Nevertheless, the

stories in this Cycle model best the polarity of blessing and conflict and the total triumph of the former over the latter.

Final Thoughts

Clearly, the Patriarchal narratives of Genesis have much to warrant our undivided attention. The pervasiveness of the blessing concept and its antithesis of conflict leave the reader breathless with the constant possibility that the latter would cause the former to self-destruct. However, the use of *brk* and intimations/images of blessing throughout the narratives guarantee that good succeeds over evil. Even when the conflicts are self-inflicted and potentially catastrophic, blessing, the promise of God, triumphs. The blessing-conflict conceptual strand of the stories underpins the possibility that God's promises are durable and indefatigable. While it is possible to suggest that there are other thematic strands in the stories, yet it may be argued that this blessing-conflict strand is pivotal to the Patriarchal stories.

The blessing-conflict concept serves more than just a didactic role in the book of Genesis. As also observed in this study, the concept plays a dominant structural role. The blessing-conflict concept arranges the various stories about the different Patriarchs in a specific manner. Each arrangement highlights different aspects of the stories. The panelled pairing of the Abraham-Isaac Cycle captures the mild threats to covenant that conflict presents. The triadic pattern of the Isaac-Jacob Cycle encapsulates the more destructive nature of conflict in its relationship to blessing. The twin strand of the Jacob-Joseph-Judah Cycle portrays, on the one hand, the murderous intents of the internecine conflicts and, on the other hand, the almost unnoticed work of God in raising up agents for salvation, both short term (Joseph) and long term (Judah).

In this way the blessing-conflict theme provides both conceptual and literary cohesiveness to the Patriarchal stories. Narrative artistry in *Genesis 12-50* is most surprisingly seen in the literary nature of an idea and best viewed through a conceptual lense.

Endnotes:

¹ See Robert L. Cohn, "Narrative Structuring and Canonical Perspective in Genesis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983): 3-16. Cohn suggests that literary shaping conditions the theology of the text. Of course, this study contends that perhaps the opposite may be equally true, that the concepts impact the literary shaping of the book.

² The works of Michael Fishbane are informative. See "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25:19-35:22)," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 26 (1975): 15-38 and *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979).

³ Particularly germane to this discussion is the groundbreaking work of Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: George and Unwin, 1981). He points out the crucial role of literary art in shaping biblical narrative (3) and draws attention to "the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting plays of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else . . ." (12). Alter's basic paradigm is also employed in his commentary on Genesis (*Genesis* [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996]). Laurence A. Turner is another author whose research has contributed immensely to the literary study of Genesis. His works, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, JSOT Supplement Series 96 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990) and *Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), have much to offer any literary study of Genesis. Turner's basic conclusion is that "Genesis is a sophisticated piece of literature" (*Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, 182).

⁴ I consider this dual combination of morphological and imagery elements as the principal base for any attempt to decipher conceptual elements in the biblical text.

⁵ Cohn suggests that the Abraham Cycle is highly episodic in nature but that the episodes are governed by a dominant

theme, God's covenantal promise to Abraham (6). Turner proposes that the Cycle is more cohesive with a discernible overarching plot (*Genesis*, 17). While the Cycle portrays the life of one dominant human character, Abraham, it does not do so in a seamless manner.

⁶ In each instance there is a direct threat to Jacob, the one chosen to be the inheritor of the covenantal blessing, the promise of God.

⁷ Turner, *Genesis*, 17.

⁸ Cohn contends that this Cycle is "the most tightly woven part of *Genesis*" and that it is not a "cycle of stories but one continuous tale" (11). However, such an assertion ignores the presence of a second narrative character, Judah, whose role is subtle and often inconspicuous. The presence of Judah as a major player in the Cycle points the Cycle in a rather unexpected direction.

⁹ This may appear to be the case, but only at a cursory glance at the text. A more thorough examination reveals a more fascinating picture.

¹⁰ As demonstrated in this study, this Cycle comprises of two narrative strands that intertwine rather tightly as is suggestive by the introduction of two different characters in Gen 37 and 38 and yet both chapters end in the use of identical verbs (Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10).

¹¹ For example, Jacob the deceiver of the previous Cycle is deceived by his sons in this Cycle. Judah the leader of the deception against Jacob in Gen 37 becomes the victim of deception in Gen 38 (Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10).

¹² Turner correctly points out that the monologue of Gen 44:18-26, the longest in *Genesis*, provides the turning point in the narrative (*Genesis*, 188). Eventually even Jacob acknowledges Judah as his successor (Gen 49:8-12).

¹³ In Gen 15, animal parts are "cut" as sign of the covenant whereas in Gen 17 a human part is "cut" also to signify the covenant

¹⁴ Cohn concurs that this Cycle "consists of three large blocs of narrative" (8).

¹⁵The *kathoneth passim* that Jacob gave Joseph appears only here and in 2 Chron 13:18-19. The precise meaning of the term is unclear. Perhaps it refers to some “unisex garment” which is “a product of ancient *haute couture*” as suggested by Alter or a kind of robe worn by the nobility (Alter, *Genesis*, 209) or some sort of “ceremonial robe with gold ornamentation” (Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 [Dallas: Word Books, 1994], 351). However, the intent of Jacob, the preferential treatment of Joseph, is quite clear.

¹⁶The ‘reversal of brothers’ motif, the elevation of a younger brother, is a major literary pattern of Genesis (Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6, 10). In the case of Judah, it is more about the elevation of a lower ranked brother with the most likely scenario being that Joseph, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi all outranking Judah. Joseph clearly outranks Judah by virtue of being the son of a favoured wife. Reuben, Simeon, and Levi outrank Judah chronologically.

¹⁷Gen 45-48 deal with miscellaneous family matters.

¹⁸It may be argued that Judah’s role in the enslavement of Joseph is motivated by a desire for profit (Alter, *Genesis*, 213) or perhaps an attempt to avoid the danger of “blood guilt” (Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 355). It is equally tenable that Judah was simply trying to save Joseph, as slavery would provide the young boy with some chance of life, something the brothers were not prepared to grant Joseph.

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