THE RIGHTEOUSNESS AND SURVIVAL OF THE SEED: THE ROLE OF PLOT IN THE EXEGESIS AND THEOLOGY OF GENESIS

by

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to contribute to the recent trend of understanding plot as the organizing principle of biblical theology. As such, it engages in two levels of inquiry.

First, this study explores plot and its role in shaping historical narratives. Because plot is necessarily mimetic, it has long been perceived as problematic for historical narrative because of mimesis’ alleged tendency to distort reality. Here an argument is presented that sees mimesis, and thus plot, as an isomorphism of reality. Plot is the transferal of reality into the domain of narrative through literary convention in such a way that truth is recoverable. In addition, because plot is the arrangement of events into an Aristotelian “single act” it is the organizing principle of the narrative and thematic progression from tension to resolution.

Second, this study looks at the plot of Genesis as setting the plot of Scripture in motion. Genesis has its own complete movement from tension to resolution that contributes to the plot of Scripture as a whole. The plot of Scripture is tentatively identified as the quest to return to God’s creation-sanctuary of rest and the narrative indicates that this will take place through the promised seed of the woman. The plot of Genesis is identified as the need for the seed of the woman to be righteous and survive. This is emphasized throughout the narrative while the seed’s actual righteousness and survival are increasingly brought into doubt, eventually reaching climax in the Joseph narrative. The tension is resolved when it is shown that YHWH himself will ultimately ensure the righteousness and survival of the promised seed.
The argument for the plot of Genesis bolsters our initial reading of the plot of Scripture and the view of plot presented in the first level of inquiry, thus providing support for plot as the organizing principle of biblical theology.
This is my theologico-liturgical offering dedicated to those to whom we are indebted because we are not indebted.

Thank you for your faith in our calling to serve the church in Slovakia.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

For some time now, and despite a recent resurgence,¹ most theologians consider the struggle to find the "Mitte" of biblical theology a sciamachy.² Instead a multifaceted approach is necessary in order to do justice to the multifaceted nature of Scripture. At the same time some theologians, especially those of more conservative bent, have begun to explore narrative as an organizing principle for biblical theology whether as a major part of their approach,³ or as central to biblical theology.⁴ This is an interesting phenomenon considering the kinship to narrative theology and the conservative rejection of


³See especially the first volume in Goldingay’s trilogy Israel’s Gospel (Vol. 1 of Old Testament Theology; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), but also.

⁴Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); Craig Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, “Story and Biblical Theology,” in Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation (ed. Craig Bartholomew et al.; Scripture and Hermeneutic Series 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 144–71; also consider Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine 18; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Also note that for Waltke, Kaiser, and Hamilton the narrative nature of the text is central to their approach—there is a theme because there is a narrative.
narrative theology when it first emerged. Quite a shift has taken place since the exchange between Henry and Frei.\(^5\)

Much of the reason for the shift can be traced to works such as Fokkelman or Alter and many others that have demonstrated the literary nature of the biblical text.\(^6\) These works have helped develop a much greater appreciation for plot and this, in turn, has led some to argue for plot as the organizing principle of biblical theology. But to make the jump from plot as an important feature that we need to identify in order to better understand the text, to plot as the organizing principle of biblical theology, poses a potential problem that may not be adequately recognized. According to conventional wisdom, plot involves mimesis and mimesis in turn necessarily implies the distortion of reality. This makes it difficult for narrative to be the basis of theological reality, especially if that theological reality is embedded in a text that presents itself as a historical narrative.

My goal in this study is to address these challenges and bolster the emerging position that plot is the organizing principle of biblical theology. To do this it will be necessary to engage two levels of inquiry. First, we need a better understanding of the nature of plot and its ability to convey truth about reality. The issue is not just that plot conveys truth about reality but how it conveys truth. This is the goal of chapter two where I will argue that plot is an isomorphism of reality. It is a truth preserving transform which uses literary conventions to transfer the events of history from the domain of reality to the domain of the


literary work in such a way that truth about reality is recoverable. The key to understanding plot’s role as a reality transform is a better understanding of mimesis. Once we have gained a better understanding of mimesis and how it represents reality in the narrative work, then we can also understand the importance of plot to the construction of the narrative. I will follow Aristotle in suggesting that plot is the arrangement of events into a “single act.” In that case, “seeing together” the narrative as a movement from tension to resolution is essential to understanding the text.

On the second level of inquiry we will take this enhanced understanding of plot and apply it to the biblical text in an attempt to bolster the view that the Bible as a whole is a narrative organized by plot. It would be impossible to deal with the biblical plot as a whole in a single work of this nature and so we will deal only with the beginning, the book of Genesis. I will suggest that Genesis sets the biblical plot in motion while it also has its own plot with a beginning, middle, and end that tie in to the biblical plot and moves it forward. In Gen 1-3 we can identify the tension that sets the biblical plot in motion as our quest to return to God’s creation-sanctuary of rest. The narrative also hints that our return will come through the promised seed of the woman. This turns our attention to the seed of the woman in Gen 4 where a new tension is introduced. The promised seed of the woman is not just any seed of the woman, it must be righteous and it must survive. In fact, the lack of righteousness threatens the survival of the seed. Thus the tension that drives the plot of Genesis is introduced: Will the seed of the woman be righteous and survive?

Chapter three is important because it attempts to initiate our study of Genesis by setting the ground rules for the study. Linguistics is a necessarily circular endeavor and so we need to very carefully define our approach to the text. I will suggest that functional sentence perspective at the level of pericopae will help us understand how lower level narratives work together to develop into higher level narratives like sentences work together to develop into paragraphs. I will also lay out my understanding of the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure of
the book and use this as a framework for the whole approach. The most important control in this study is that plot must both cooperate with and explain widely recognized features of the text. To the extent that it does (or does not) this approach to plot is bolstered (or undermined).

In chapters four through eight I will move through the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure of the plot from the beginning (chapter four), where the tensions of Scripture and Genesis are identified; to the middle of the Genesis plot (chapters five to seven), where one action leads naturally to another and builds the tension; to the end of the Genesis plot (chapter eight), where the tension is finally resolved.

The study of Genesis is key to the argument. On the first level of inquiry I will argue for a particular view of plot (plot as an isomorphism of reality) based on philosophy of history and philosophy of mimesis. On the second level of inquiry I will apply this understanding of plot as a sort of case study in Genesis in order to show that my understanding of plot does not do violence to the Genesis text but actually helps us better understand the book as a whole by better understanding the interconnectedness of well-known features of the text. In the first half of chapter nine I will evaluate the application of plot according to three criteria of fittedness that will be defined there. At this point, we should begin to see implications of plot for exegesis and theology. I will close this study by pointing out some of these implications. Plot is not just an interesting literary feature of the text; it is the principle according to which the text is organized. As such it plays a crucial role in exegesis and theology and perhaps even as the organizing principle of biblical theology.
CHAPTER 2
FROM HISTORY TO STORY—AND BACK:
MIMESIS IN HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION

Against the backdrop of the Biblical Theological Movement that took place especially in the post-war United States in response to liberal theology, James Barr argued that history “as we understand the term”\(^1\) should not be regarded as the center of the tradition out of which the Old Testament text arose.\(^2\) Barr acknowledged that there are aspects of the Bible that bear semblance to history, especially “in that it reads in a temporal progression and tells a story\(^3\) which is cumulative from the beginning along a temporal scale.”\(^4\) However, he


\(^2\) James Barr, Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments (The Currie Lectures 1964; New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 15. Wharton expresses a similar concern in his article, “The Occasion of the Word of God: An Unguarded Essay on the Character of the Old Testament as the Memory of God’s Story with Israel,” ASBFE 84 (1968): 3–54. Sometimes Wharton is cited as first introducing the shift from history to story but this overlooks Barr’s discussion in Old and New in Interpretation, e.g., Hasel, Old Testament Theology, 133. H. Richard Niebuhr should also be noted as wrestling with the issue of history and suggesting the importance of story, but his concerns are different (he is trying to relate history, revelation, and ethics with a deep appreciation for historical relativism) and he does not quite address story as a literary phenomenon. See H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Macmillan, 1941).

\(^3\) In this study I have elected not to differentiate between narrative and story or even to provide precise definitions for them. I have two reasons for this. First, the words are so commonly used, and in common use are so defiant of precise definition, that it seemed an artificial imposition on natural usage to provide precise definitions that end up counter to common usage. The futility of this approach is confirmed by the observation that some authors differentiate between story and narrative in such a way that they provide the exact opposite delineation as other authors. So the English translation of Ricœur uses “narrative” to refer to those texts that are emplotted (mimetic) while story is mere one thing after another. Barr, on the other hand, uses story to describe the category of mimetic texts. The second reason follows from the first. If I were to ascribe precise definitions to both story and narrative and if I were to be consistent in my usage, then when describing Barr’s view I would end up using the word “story” when he uses “narrative,” which would only introduce further confusion into the
believes that the failure of the Biblical Theology Movement demonstrates the inadequacy of the rubric of history.\(^5\) History, according to Barr, is not well equipped to handle the various types of relationships that exist between the text and the reality behind the text. As a result, “[i]t invites the production of artificial senses of ‘history’, or precarious divisions of history into different kinds or levels, or artificial overemphasis of those features in the texts which seem to fit with an emphasis on history.”\(^6\) Barr believes the Biblical Theology Movement, in a reaction against liberalism, swung the pendulum too far in trying to make history the central organizing principle of biblical theology and forced on the text a category foreign to its nature. In his most poignant statement he declares that “[t]here is no intellectually serious conception of history … that would allow us to classify all the narrative material of the Old Testament, or even most of it, as ‘history.’”\(^7\)

\(^4\)Barr, *Old and New*, 81. Elsewhere Barr lists four characteristics of the text that resemble history as he understands it. Those include, as already mentioned, that the “story is unitary and cumulative,” but also that “[t]he story is provided with a chronological framework which sets it against a time scale. … Certain segments of the story constitute a fairly reliable source of historical evidence for the period in which the narrative is set. … Certain segments of the story can be counted as coming close in certain respects to actual history writing.” Barr, “Story and History,” 5.

\(^5\)Barr, “Story and History,” 2.

\(^6\)Barr, *Old and New*, 20. In the same article where he lists the features of the text that seem to resemble history, he lists four features that appear to be a departure from history. Those characteristics are that “[t]he story contains within itself large elements which no one seriously considers as history and which belong rather to the area of myth and legend,” that there is a mingling of styles (e.g. in some places human causation and in some places divine), other forms of motivation besides historical (e.g. Smend’s “aetiological” and “paradigmatic”), and finally the biblical text lacks the critical evaluation of sources, Barr, “Story and History,” 7.

\(^7\)Barr, “Story and History,” 8.
My purpose in what follows is to show that narrative theology, the Biblical Theology movement, Barr, and the conservative scholars who responded negatively to narrative theology all shared a particular understanding of mimesis that makes it incompatible with historiography. However, conservative scholars have more recently adjusted their view of mimesis, allowing them to embrace story or narrative. This shift in their understanding of mimesis creates a new understanding of how mimesis in history writing conveys historical truth and, especially important for this study, a better understanding of the role plot plays in that shaping.\(^8\)

In what follows we will trace the shift from *diegetic* history to story to mimetic history.\(^9\) I begin with a perusal of each of the above mentioned schools of thought or individuals in order to examine their understanding of the relationship between the historical events behind the text and the text itself. Their understanding of this relationship gets us to their understanding of mimesis. The goal here is to lay out my own understanding of mimesis, which in turn will help us to develop an understanding of plot and its role in

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\(^8\) Two notable works from evangelical scholars that argue specifically that biblical narrative is both history and story (or that it has literary shaping) are: Robert B. Chisholm, “History or Story? The Literary Dimension in Narrative Texts,” in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (ed. David M. Howard and Michael A. Grisanti; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 54–73; V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

\(^9\) “Diegetic” and “mimetic” refer to the distinction made by Plato in the famous section of *The Republic* (Plato, *Republic* III 392d). Plato refers to a story being told “ἁπλῇ διηγήσει” (by simple recounting) as narrative where the author indirectly relates what was said or what happened, whereas a story is told “διὰ μιμήσεως” (through mimesis or “affected through imitation”) when the author stands in for the characters and tells what happened as if he were not the author but the character himself or actually participating in the event. Socrates is using as an example the first lines of the Iliad when the priest Chryses is pleading with Agamemnon to release his daughter. First Homer relates what is about to happen diegetically, then he takes up the speech of Chryses mimetically, by masking the fact that he is the author of the account and relating the plea of Chryses as if he himself were the priest pleading with Agamemnon. In western history, mimesis came to be associated with fiction and so history writing could not be mimetic, it must be diegetic. It is important to note, as I will do in more detail later, that this reception of Plato should be distinguished from Plato’s actual meaning. Halliwell has shown Plato’s conception of mimesis to be more complex than generally acknowledged.
shaping the text, especially its role in mediating historical reality in linguistic form. On the basis of this understanding of plot we can then evaluate the attempts that have been made so far to look at plot in Genesis and biblical theology.

Genesis as History—An Aside

Though seemingly out of place, now is a good time to address the issue of why I insist on treating Genesis within the history debate. After all, not only Barr but likely even most narrativists would disagree with my position that Genesis is history. Not only does Genesis contain material that most would consider outside the realm of history writing (the creation account, for example); it also uses literary features such as chiasms that impose a structure on the account and open further potential for distortion.

At the same time, however, we must also recognize that the book of Genesis is constructed around a genealogical structure that traces the lineage of Israel back to Abraham, with whom God entered into a covenant relation. Israel is to see itself as continuing in this covenant relationship. What is more, the genealogies trace the lineage of Israel back to creation, which also has repercussions on how Israel is to perceive its identity.\(^\text{10}\) Genesis, along with the rest of the Pentateuch, serves as an identity narrative designed to teach Israel about its past in order to shape its present and future.\(^\text{11}\) These assertions about who Israel is rest on the veracity of the historical account. If there is no creation rest to which they are

\(^{10}\) Cf. David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (2d ed.; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series; Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1997), 104. He says that “wherever exilic Jewry opens the Pentateuch it finds itself. Genesis 1-11 is not for them, as it is for us, universal history; it is their own history.”

meant to return or if God did not enter into covenant with Abraham, then the identity being presented to Israel is a false identity with no grounding in historical fact.

From this standpoint we could argue that Genesis presents itself to us as history. This may be problematic for modern historians but I share Huizinga’s concern that moderns may be artificially limiting the term “history” to include what we consider appropriate to the historical discipline while excluding what has been considered history in other ages. From this standpoint we could argue that Genesis presents itself to us as history. This may be problematic for modern historians but I share Huizinga’s concern that moderns may be artificially limiting the term “history” to include what we consider appropriate to the historical discipline while excluding what has been considered history in other ages. After all, as Sternberg famously notes, “bad historiography is bad historiography: no more, no less.” But Sternberg also argues that whether the failure to achieve veracity is intentional or not, “[w]hat opposes fiction to historiography is not the writer’s breach or avoidance but his independence of factuality.” And this independence he defines as “the built-in license to create a world as one thinks fit.” In other words, it is the nature of the work which the author is attempting that defines his relationship to reality, not

12 “Would it not be worthwhile to seek for a delimitation of the concept of history which does without the distinction between historical science and historiography, and is able to comprehend also the earlier phases of history and recognize them in their full value?” Johan Huizinga, “A Definition of the Concept of History,” in Philosophy & History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer (ed. Raymond Klibansky and H. J. Paton; trans. D. R. Cousin; New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 4. Shryock confirms this viewpoint, that is, that a modern view of the recording of history wrongly discriminates against alternate modes of historical explanation. In his studies of modern day Bedouin of central Jordan he finds that the tribes he studies adamantly rejected the notion that their genealogical narratives are ahistorical. The claims of preeminence inherent in the genealogies were competing claims that depended upon historical veracity (even while paradoxically acknowledging embellishment or exaggeration). “‘Abbadis and ‘Adwanis argued convincingly that their genealogical knowledge was not simply a model of social topography; it was a way of articulating past and present, a way of transmitting and talking about history.” Andrew Shryock, Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan (Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 23; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 22.

13 Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 25. But this does not mean, and I am certainly not arguing, that truth is not important for history writing. I agree completely with Norman, who argues that historical narratives “consist of assertions about the past, and they attempt to tell us what actually occurred. This means precisely that narrative histories purport to refer—that they claim truth.” This is indisputable. However, the point is that whether a historical narrative is good or bad is an entirely different question than whether or not it is a historical narrative.

14 Ibid., 26.
the author’s relationship to reality that defines the nature of his work. Sternberg says “it all boils down to the rules of the writing game, namely, to the premises, conventions, and undertakings that attach to the discourse as an affair between writer and audience.” Instead of arguing that a narrative can be classified as a work of history based on the relationship between the author and the evidence, a locus which lies behind the text, Sternberg places the determining factor between the author and the reader, in the language game, in the conventions.16

Tracing the Shift from History to Story

The history of the rise of the historical critical approach and the resulting separation of biblical theology from dogmatic theology in Gabler’s inaugural address of 1787 is quite well known.17 Equally as well known is the subsequent, and fairly recently acknowledged crisis in biblical theology or collapse of history described by Childs18 and Perdue.19 As already noted via Barr, it is partly out of an increasing dissatisfaction with the

15 Ibid.

16 I am speaking here of the determination of the genre. If we were to speak of the validity of the account, then we turn to the relationship of the author’s account to the historical data that stands behind the text.


18 In Childs’ analysis of the crisis, it was Barr’s inaugural lecture and his books which dealt the death blow. Brevard S. Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 65, 72.

19 When Perdue talks about the collapse of history he says he means that “for at least a generation now active revolt against the domination of history and historical method for Old Testament study in general and Old Testament theology in particular has been under way and in large measure has seceded from the epistemological rule of this once unchallenged strategy of interpretation.” Leo G. Perdue, The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 4. In his second book on the subject, Perdue leaves history behind. He points out that “[f]or proponents of some of the newer approaches, history as the theme, center of interpretation, and framework for theological
historical approach that narrative theology and a focus on the literary aspects of the text began to emerge. While these approaches shifted the focus from the historical to the literary in the text, they did not change the underlying view of mimesis until this was facilitated by the parallel debate on narrative and history in the field of philosophy of history. A brief overview of the emergence of narrative theology and literary approaches will help us track the underlying shift from diegetic to mimetic representation of history in biblical studies, which will in turn help me to articulate the view of mimesis that I adopt in my approach. We can start with a brief review of G. Ernest Wright.

G. Ernest Wright and the Biblical Theology Movement

G. Ernest Wright is one of Barr’s more important conversation partners from the Biblical Theology Movement. Barr’s shift from history to story can be seen as a reaction to the views of scholars such as Wright, who was very much concerned with the historical event. He says “the facts of tradition and history … are the facts of God.” But that does not mean he thinks there is no difference between the way we think of objective history and the way the Hebrews thought about history. For this reason, “Biblical theology is first and foremost a theology of recital, in which Biblical man confesses his faith by reciting the discourse has lost its unchallenged position of dominance.” And so he advocates taking a multivocal approach where different approaches to theology get us closer to a multiform theology. Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 9, 340. At the same time that we acknowledge the contribution of these authors to pointing out the problems of the “historical” approach, we should balance this by pointing out that often, because the historical-critical approach was unable to handle the literary aspects of the text, it misinterpreted the historical reference and this eventually led to an unnecessarily skeptical opinion of the text’s historical accuracy. A number of authors, such as Younger (already cited here), Kofoed, and many others are beginning to bring balance back to the discussion. Jens Bruun Kofoed, *Text and History: Historiography and the Study of the Biblical Text* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005).

formative events of his history as the redemptive handiwork of God.”  

But in Wright this move from history to story takes us right back again to history. Like Niebuhr, Wright does not want God’s revelation to become “frozen,” to become something that humanity can “possess.” Unlike Niebuhr, however, “[t]he Word leads us, not away from history, but to history and to responsible participating within history. … The Bible thus is not primarily the Word of God, but the record of the Acts of God” (Wright’s emphasis). In Wright’s view of theology there must be a close correspondence between what the author presents and what actually happened in history. To this we can contrast narrative theology and some strands of literary approach.

Narrative Theology

Even though narrative theology is far from monolithic, it does seem to have some core attributes, one of which would be the impetus to shift our interest from the world behind the text to the world of the text itself or even the world in front of the text.

Richard Niebuhr is generally thought to stand at the beginning of narrative theology while being a part of the biblical theology movement. He was concerned with the problem of historical relativism and found a solution to this in suggesting that revelation is not something that comes from outside of us but it “begins with the historic faith of the Christian community.”

We are historically situated and so the history that we produce is

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 107.
24 Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis, 43.
affected by our situatedness. For him theology begins in the historic faith and with God’s acts in history but not because these acts of God were then faithfully recorded and deposited to us as revelation that the church now “possesses.” This construction of revelation (he calls this self-defensive uses of revelation) makes God a God of the past and revelation—perhaps it even turns him into a deistic God no longer involved in the world.\textsuperscript{26} Instead he asseverates that “[a]s we begin with revelation only because we are forced to do so by our limited standpoint in history and faith so we can proceed only by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community.”\textsuperscript{27} This explains his distinction between internal and external history. Internal history is history experienced while external history is history observed and analyzed.\textsuperscript{28} He then compares internal history to the history of the poet rather than the history of the scientist: “we may call internal history dramatic truth and its truth dramatic truth, though drama in this case does not mean fiction.”\textsuperscript{29}

Through this brief perusal of Niebuhr we can hopefully discern that on the one hand he is trying to steer us off the trail of the historical project as defined by Gabler. He is veering us away from objective history but trying to hold on to history nonetheless. This blurring of the lines manifests itself later in a variety of stances toward the relationship between narrative and history by later narrative theologians.\textsuperscript{30} In essence then, narrative

\begin{footnotes}
\item \footnotetext[26]{Ibid., 41.}
\item \footnotetext[27]{Ibid., 40.}
\item \footnotetext[28]{Ibid., 70.}
\item \footnotetext[29]{Ibid., 71.}
\item \footnotetext[30]{See George W. Stroup, \textit{The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church} (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 71. He notes that, “numerous theological articles and books have appeared which make use of the category of story or narrative. In some of this material the category of ‘story’ bears little or no resemblance to Niebuhr’s use of the term. … Unfortunately there is nothing close to a consensus on precisely what the term [narrative] means. The proposals that have invoked the category are bewilderingly diverse and often there is little or no agreement among them.”} 
\end{footnotes}
theologians are attacking a problem described by Niebuhr’s Yale colleague, Hans Frei. According to Frei the interpreter prior to the narrative theologian “has no category for dealing with the meaning of biblical narratives other than the disjunctive device that assigned either ostensive or mythical status to them.”\textsuperscript{31} He believes that theologians “confused the claim to the close, intimate relationship between the sense of a story and its narrative shape with the claim to the identity between sense of story and reliability or unreliability of its reports.”\textsuperscript{32} In other words, Frei, like other narrative theologians and like Barr, is taking a step further from the “ostensive reality” behind the text so that the events behind the text are not as important as dealing with the sense being communicated by the narrative.\textsuperscript{33}

In narrative theology, then, we can see this same inclination to shift from history to story that we see in Barr and we make note of the fact that it involves leaving behind what Frei refers to as the ostensive reference. That is, the events behind the text are no longer crucial to the import of the story. This has become a hallmark of narrative theology.

**Literary Approaches**

We can go beyond narrative theology proper to find similar positions. Clines insists that while in “western philosophy, reality has tended either to be identified with appearance or to be contrasted with it,” story is able to present truth that is at home in both realms. His point is that “within the story there is no distinction between the real and the


\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., 279.

\textsuperscript{33}This is why he can make a statement such as that found in his response to Henry, “there really is an analogy between the Bible and a novel writer who says something like this: I mean what I say whether or not anything took place.” Frei, “Response to Carl F. H. Henry,” 22.
unreal. … We yield ourselves to the reality of the story: … a willing suspension of our everyday sets of operational beliefs for the sake of those of the story.”

Likewise Robert Alter addresses the relationship between reality and the world of the text with his well-known identification of Hebrew narrative as “historicized prose fiction” (Alter’s italics). Like Barr, Alter believes that there is “a whole spectrum of relations to history in the sundry biblical narratives … but none of these involves the sense of being bound to documentable facts that characterizes history in its modern acceptation.”

With his definition Alter is trying to mediate between two apparently opposing observations he makes of the biblical text. On the one hand he does not want to “discount the historical impulse that informs the Hebrew Bible. The God of Israel, as so often has been observed, is above all the God of history.” On the other hand he goes on to assert that “fiction was the principle means which the biblical authors had at their disposal for realizing history.”

We get an idea what he means by fiction when he says that

the writer could manipulate his inherited materials with sufficient freedom and sufficient firmness of authorial purpose to define motives, relations, and unfolding themes, even in a primeval history, with the kind of subtle cogency we associate with the conscious artistry of the narrative mode designated prose fiction.

In other words it is the shaping of the text, the author’s conscious freedom exercised to portray the characters and events that brings about this separation from “history in its modern

34 Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 110–111.
36 Ibid., 32.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
acceptation.” We note, however, that it is really a separation between the author’s account and the reality behind the text (and not just a modern conception of history) since, despite the fact that the narratives are presented as history, they are nonetheless fiction.

Resistance to the Shift

Thus far we have investigated representatives of the Biblical Theology Movement, narrative theology, and practitioners of literary approaches to Scripture. Various degrees of nuance and even outright disagreement can be found within these movements. Sternberg takes issue with Alter, for example, because of Alter’s classification of historicized prose fiction. Sternberg argues that it is the nature of the claims of the text that they make historical assertions and that therefore, on the basis of the nature of the claims, the Bible is a historical text. According to Sternberg, “bad historiography does not yet make fiction.” So Sternberg advocates a turn to the literary nature of the text and yet this need not be a move away from its historical nature. Still, it is the literary aspect in which the significance is found and while the claims are historical in nature, Sternberg does not seem to believe the veracity of the account to be of overly serious consequence. Similarly, Stendahl urges us to recognize that whether we take the Bible as Holy Scriptures or classic literature, “the normative dimension is an irreducible part of biblical literature” and he warns us that “the recent preoccupation with ‘story’ tends to obscure exactly the normative dimension.” But again, Stendahl’s concerns, though with the original intention of the author, do not put any special emphasis on the veracity of the original account.


41 Ibid., 8.
It is the evangelicals who offer the most resistance to the shift to story and if narrative theology helps us locate one end of the spectrum, the evangelicals locate the other. Carl Henry expressed the fear of evangelical scholars with regard to the shift to story when he complained that “if reading the biblical accounts narratively requires setting aside narrated occurrences as historical revelation the sense of the accounts is strikingly diluted, much as their ultimacy merely as historical revelation may be questioned. Evangelical theism insists that God reveals himself in external history.”\(^{42}\) Henry may not locate revelation in history in quite the same way as Wright, but God’s revelation in history is tightly linked to the account given in the text. If the link between the text and what God has done in history is broken, then the veracity of the text and thus its authority is compromised. For this reason evangelicals tended to oppose narrative theology and the whole idea of the shift to story over against history as the organizing principle for biblical theology.

Two Poles, One Axis

If we consider the two poles we find that at one we have those who say all of biblical narrative cannot seriously be taken as history and so it must be story that serves as the organizing principle of biblical theology. At the other pole are those who say the move to story compromises the authority of scripture inasmuch as revelation is dependent upon historical veracity. The account given must be true to the events they describe. Yet these two poles and the entire spectrum between, as just laid out, occupy space within a larger field of agreement that revolves around a single axis. That is, both poles base their justification for history over against story or story over against history on the idea that the two are mutually exclusive or at least that the presence of literary shaping, or emplotment, compromises the

historical veracity of the account. By both accounts, historical veracity and literature are only precariously compatible. In other words, what the two poles have in common is a particular view of history writing and how it relates truth about reality. For that reason it is helpful for us to turn to the parallel debate in the philosophy of history which will eventually lead us to the view of mimesis that has dominated Western culture.

_Narrative and History in the Philosophy of History_

The debate over the shift from history to story in biblical studies parallels a debate within the philosophy of history. Just as in the field of biblical studies—positivism heavily influenced the philosophy of history during the first half of the twentieth century. This can be seen in almost every movement or school of historical writing from Marxism to _la nouvelle histoire_. In fact, _la nouvelle histoire_ or the Annales School is a perfect example. The founders of the Annales School, Bloch and Febvre, “defended a conception of history consistent with the scientific imperatives of the social sciences.”

One of the characteristic tenets of the first generation was a tendency to eschew the history of events, and narrative, to a history of structures. The classic example of this is Fernand Braudel and his history of the Mediterranean. Braudel divides his work into three “planes” with the first focusing on “man in his relationship to the environment,” the second on “social history, the history of groups and groupings,” and then finally, “traditional history” or what he describes as history “not on the scale of man, but of individual men” or “_l’histoire évènementielle._”

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this last plane of history as the most dangerous, asserting that it captures short moments in time that are blown out of proportion because they are “surface disturbances” or “[a] history of brief, rapid, nervous fluctuations, by definition ultra-sensitive; the least tremor sets all its antennae quivering.”

Thus the first and second generations of the Annales School set off a debate between structural history and narrative history. Ricœur spoke into this debate by doing an analysis of Braudel’s work on the Mediterranean in which he showed that despite Braudel’s aversion to narrative, nonetheless his work has characteristics of a narrative and perhaps even a plot. Since then historians (the fourth generation of the Annales School) have begun to recognize that the debate between structures and narrative may be a false dichotomy. Burke suggests we may have two ends of a spectrum, that the middle should not be ignored, and that both are necessary in order to produce “thick descriptions” of history.

The Annales School is not the only school of historiography that experienced a shift first away and then toward narrative at about the same time. Among analytical philosophers of history, a movement developed that began to react against positivism in a way that parallels both the conversation taking place in the Annales School and in biblical studies. Due to the philosophical locus of the discussion, the debates in analytic philosophy and biblical studies have more in common. However, unlike the debate in biblical studies, the discussion among the analytic philosophers was not polarized into narrative or history. A majority of scholars defended both narrative as a means of representing history and its value

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46 Ibid., 21.

as a cognitive instrument. It is for this reason that the debate among analytic philosophers of history can inject a new dimension into the story-history debate in biblical theology.

A Taxonomy of Views

In the discussion which follows I will divide scholars and their views into a taxonomy of three camps based on how they view the relationship of narrative to the writing of history and to the historical events described in the account. In each case the relationship will be evaluated as either essential or nonessential. The first group of scholars encompasses those who view narrative as nonessential for both history writing and the historical events. Included in this camp are Maurice Mandelbaum, Carl Hempel, and Karl Popper who all made contributions to the philosophy of history through their promotion of a scientific approach to the discipline.48 As a part of the discussion that centered especially on Hempel’s view of historical explanation, new proposals on causation in history led to the conclusion that narrative is essential to the writing or representation of history or at least it is, as a matter of fact, the most persistent mode of historical discourse.49 As these narrativists began to develop their ideas through the fifties and sixties they eventually branched off into two camps in the sixties, based on variant views of the relationship of narrative to historical event. One group, including Hayden White and Louis Mink, held the position that narrative,

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while unavoidable in the writing of history, is not inherent in historical events. This second group of my taxonomy is characterized by the linguistic turn. These scholars are sometimes referred to as anti-realists. While this group began to construe narrative as an artificial imposition on historical event in such a way that it raised issues of relativity and the truth telling ability of historical narrative, a third group of philosophers came to the defense of historical veracity by arguing that narrative is not only essential for the communication of the historian’s findings but is also inherent in life itself. Scholars who fall into this camp or tend toward this camp include the likes of David Carr,50 M. C. Lemon,51 or W. B. Gallie.52 Most of these scholars are associated with the phenomenological turn. Some even take an ontological stance toward the relationship between narrative and historical event.

The Positivists

Louis Mink more than once declared, “[I]t could be said without exaggeration that until about 1965 the critical philosophy of history was the controversy over the covering-law model’” (Mink’s emphasis).53 “Covering-law model” is the term William Dray assigned


52Given the two variables used in this taxonomy (the relationship of narrative to historical account and the relationship of narrative to historical event), one could hypothetically posit a fourth group which would argue that narrative is essential to historical event but not to the writing of history. This would round out the four possible permutations. However, I know of no philosophers of history who hold to this view for the obvious reason that if history is essential to life then it would naturally follow, even if not necessarily, that it would be essential for the writing of history as well.

to Hempel’s theory of causation as it was applied to history. Dray was also among the first to offer an extended critique on Hempel’s view. However, Gallie, who had previously proposed an alternate view of historical explanation, quickly turned the discussion of causality and explanation on to the topic of narrative, arguing that “the question of historical narrative is prior to all other questions with which critical philosophers of history have struggled.” He suggests that historical understanding is the equivalent of the ability to follow a story.

The Linguistic Turn

Mink was the first to take the linguistic turn. He argues against Gallie and his view of experiencing history in story form. For Mink, there are no beginnings, middles, and ends in history but rather “experiences come to us seriatim in a stream of transience.” Prerequisite for historical understanding is a comprehension that he defines as “thinking together in a single act, or in a cumulative series of acts, the complicated relationship of parts.” And so according to Mink the process of seeing together the events of history into a single narrative whole is a process of bringing form to what would otherwise remain chaotic.

54 Dray coins the commonly used nomenclature in William H. Dray, Laws and Explanation in History (London: Oxford University Press, 1957). Hayden White uses the term nomological-deductive argument or model, which is the term more commonly used outside the philosophy of history.


56 Gallie, “The Historical Understanding,” 149.


58 Mink, “History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension,” 548.
In one of his more well-known quotes Mink declared that, “stories are not lived but told … narrative qualities are transferred from art to life.”

Hayden White picked up on the thoughts of Louis Mink and developed them in his analysis of 19th century historical discourse. White is adamant that historical discourse must be recognized for what it is—a linguistic phenomenon. He marvels that “philosophers of history should have taken so long to recognize the importance of language for the understanding of historical discourse.” As a phenomenon of language, historical discourse uses the normal linguistic modes or tropes for conveying its content. In the case of historical discourse, chronicle is transformed into story when selected events are arranged into “a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end.” Following this reasoning, in his analysis of historians and philosophers of history of the 19th century, White applies the four modes of plot suggested by Northrop Frye. Each of these modes is a different way of construing the congeries of historical events that lie behind the text. Romance, for example, views humans as masters of the world; in satire they are its captive.

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59 Ibid., 557. Similarly, Hayden White stated that “no given set of causally recorded historical events in themselves constitute a story; the most that they offer to the historian are story elements.” Hayden V. White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding (ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicky; Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1978), 47.


Thus, because of the form of the discourse, these plots are a way of “seeing together,” in Mink’s terms, and they impose a particular interpretation upon the historical events. In this sense all historical narrative is figural and what separates history from fiction, according to White, is not the form of the discourse, which is precisely the same as fiction, but the content, since the content of historical discourse is real events, whereas the content of fictional stories does not exist outside the imagination of the author.

White’s arguments are rather unsettling for many historians since his work inevitably raises questions regarding the truth value of historical writing. Well before White, Mandelbaum was writing to defend against relativism in historiography. Has White now argued that we have no choice but to accept the relativity of any historical account? He seems to say as much, both by the nature of his argument and by indirect assertion.

When White separates the content from the form where the content adheres by convention to the factuality of historical events but the form blurs the lines between fact and fiction, he intentionally breaks down traditional distinctions between fact and fiction and between art and science that have been with us since Plato and Aristotle. In doing so, he opens the door to the idea that authors, by the very act of narrating, construe the events in such a way as to give them a significance of the author’s own making. The nature of his argument with respect to relativity is most clear in his article Historical Text as Literary

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64 This is in stark contrast to Mandelbaum who thought that history is either nothing more than a neutral medium used to convey the findings of the historian, or if narrative structures do have any significance, it is because the “basic intent of historical works [is] … to discover, depict and explain what has occurred in the past.” A few lines down he contends that “narratives do represent past structures and processes, and serve as icons which represent relationships that actually obtained.” Maurice Mandelbaum, “The Presuppositions of Metahistory,” H&T 19 (1980): 44–45. See also his argument against historical relativism in Mandelbaum, “Causal Analysis in History,” 34–36.

65 Hayden V. White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 27.
Artifact. In this article White describes, as I have already mentioned, how the events are construed into a whole by the emplotment of events. The mode of emplotment is entirely a choice of the author and determines the nature of the relationship between the events recounted. As a result “these sets of relationships are not, however, immanent in the events themselves; they exist only in the mind of the historian reflecting on them.” Here is the scandalon of White’s argument. In White, emplotment is an alternative to causal explanation and not an alternative that reflects any structure inherent in reality. It is an invention of the author, thus introducing the relative perspective of the author relating the narrative account.

Besides being congruous with the nature of historical narrative as he describes it, White outright pronounces his position that relativity is inescapable in historical discourse. White will not allow that his view of historical narrative degrades to inescapable ideology or propaganda but Mandelbaum would not be encouraged to hear the reasoning why he holds this to be so. It is not because narrative discourse escapes relativity, on the contrary, historical discourse does not degrade into ideology precisely because no representation of history can possibly avoid relativity. To think that by some scientific mode of discourse we

66 White, “History and Literature,” 55.

67 Ibid., 57. “[T]he conviction of the historian that he has ‘found’ the form of his narrative in the events themselves, rather than imposed it upon them, in the way the poet does, is a result of a certain lack of linguistic self-consciousness which obscures the extent to which descriptions of events already constitute interpretations of their nature.”

68 “I do hold that there is an inexpungeable relativity in every representation of historical phenomenon. The relativity of the representation is a function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding.” White, Figural Realism, 27. Note, however, that White at one point clearly backs away from absolute relativity. “Historical relativism, as I understand it, has to do only with the idea that, in historical research at least, the truth-value and authoritativeness of a given representation of a given domain of the past must be in terms of its relation to the cultural production and with respect to the perspective from which the inquiry launched.” Hayden V. White, “Response to Arthur Marwick,” Journal of Contemporary History 30 (1995): 239. Though White does at times refer to himself as a postmodernist, it would seem his classification would require a great deal of qualification, qualification that he himself frequently provides. White, “Response to Arthur Marwick,” 244.
can escape relativity is to fall into the trap of canonizing a particular historical account that is, in fact, only one possible interpretation of reality, and not an objectively true presentation of it. And so by canonizing any particular historical discourse we shut off discussion and fall prey to ideology or propaganda; by recognizing the fictitious nature of the form, on the other hand, we leave discussion open and introduce the best chance of avoiding ideological impositions.\(^{69}\)

The Phenomenological Turn

It goes without saying that White and Mink have collected their share of detractors, especially among those who want to maintain a more direct connection between the historical text and reality. Of those that belong to the camp of traditional historians who view narrative as superfluous to both historical discourse and events, the responses are mired in misunderstandings and misreadings that shed little light on the discussion.\(^{70}\) The most formidable arguments are launched by fellow narrativists who argue that narrative structure, instead of being an imposition on the historical events, actually inheres in life. There are a number of scholars who hold this position but one of the more developed and emphatic arguments comes from David Carr. Carr’s first ideas on the subject appeared in a review of

\(^{69}\)White, “History and Literature,” 61.

\(^{70}\)Arthur Marwick, “Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (Including ‘Postmodernism’) and the Historical,” Journal of Contemporary History 30 (1995): 5–35; C. B. McCullagh, “Narrative and Explanation in History,” Mind 78, no. 310 (April 1969): 256–61; Willie Thompson, Postmodernism and History (Theory and History; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Marwick’s response to White is guilty of making postmodern views monolithic and thus accusing White of holding views he does not subscribe to. As both White and Lloyd point out in their responses, he is both guilty of his own accusations and falls short of his own ideals. See White, “Response to Arthur Marwick”; Christopher Lloyd, “For Realism and Against the Inadequacies of Common Sense: A Response to Arthur Marwick,” Journal of Contemporary History 31, no. 1 (January 1996): 191–207. Thompson misrepresents White in many places including, for example, asserting that White argues for four and only four possible modes of emplotment according to Northrop Frye’s taxonomy. However, White clearly states this is not the case. White, Metahistory, 7.
Ricœur’s *Time and Narrative* in which he asserts that “the raw material with which the historian works is an already narrativized world.” Narrative must be selective in its inclusion of events and in the way these events are construed into a whole. Contrary to what Ricœur, White, and Mink assume, life too is selective. In life we are forced to prioritize, placing some of what we face in the foreground while other aspects of life are relegated to the background, at least for a time. Of course life and narrative are not the same, we are in the middle of life and cannot control our lives like the narrator controls the story, but nonetheless, even if there is some difference between narrative and life, it is not a sharp division. “[Stories] are lived in the telling and told as they are lived.”

Carr advances this argument further in an article written two years later and even further in his 1986 book. In these works he argues especially against White’s division of narrative into content and form where the form of the narrative is foreign to the historical event. Carr argues it is not. He says that life displays beginnings, middles, and ends just as literature does. Carr is aware that there is more to beginnings and ends than just the benign sense of starting and ending a sequence. Beginnings, middles, and ends imply events coordinated into a structured whole and it is these kinds of beginnings, middles, and ends that we find in life itself. His argument is based on a Husserlian perspective of time whereby we understand the present by selective retention of the past and “protention” of the future. This results in our actions being teleological in the sense that we desire and will certain outcomes and act in order to direct ourselves toward those goals. And so Carr’s point is that in life “we

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72 Ibid., 368. Contra Mink.

are constantly striving, with more or less success, to occupy the story-teller's position with respect to our own lives.”

Next Carr acknowledges the need to show that the narrative form of life is not present only at the individual level but at the level of the community as well. He argues that when people identify themselves with a group, the “I” rightly becomes a “we” and that even history which is concerned with societies and groups is a matter of that group’s teleological direction of its future. These groups become, in that way, like individuals because of their common experience and “what is grasped as common experience can be met by common action.”

Carr’s goal is to defend the epistemological status of historical narrative by showing that the structures given to historical events when they are presented as historical narratives are not imposed but are present in the historical events themselves. Dray shows that Carr does indeed succeed at showing that life exhibits narrative-like form (contra the anti-realists) and that the relationships between events are not created ex nihilo by the historian, but his argument still falls short because ultimately, according to Dray’s argument, Carr cannot escape the fact that the narrative structures in historical discourse must depict the historical structures lived in life. If the narrative structures are not the same, even

74 Carr, “Narrative and the Real World,” 125.
75 Ibid., 128.
77 Ibid., 145–151. See especially section IV in Dray’s analysis of Carr. Carr’s argument is not always clear on this point. In some places he seems to require that the narrative structures of life are the ones depicted in the narrative. “[T]hese structures are to be found here, where we have located them, namely in the midst of experience and action, not in some higher-level linguistic construction or reconstruction of the experiences and actions involved.” Carr, Time, Narrative, and History, 50. In other places he seems to acknowledge that they are different. Carr, “Narrative and the Real World,” 131. The best summary statement of his position is that historical and fictional narratives are "extensions and configurations of its [reality’s] primary
if life has narrative form, then we are right back with White and Mink, where the narrative structure is imposed on the historical events.\footnote{Dray asserts that even “if the historian makes some use of it [the narrative structure of the historical event] in the way envisaged, [it] has no authority for him. The question whether the past reality studied really assumed the narrative form ascribed is one which he is obliged ultimately to answer without reference to it.” Dray, \textit{On History and Philosophers of History}, 153.}

Dray suggests, in the end, that instead of trying to counter the anti-realists by showing that narrative structures inhere in reality, why not “instead question the assumption on which it rests: that an intellectual form—a “cognitive instrument”—needs to be “natural,” something found ready-made in experience, in order to be capable of conveying the true nature of reality?”\footnote{Ibid., 152.} In the section of the essay that follows he takes on the anti-realists by arguing that there is no reason to believe that narrative structures, even if they are impositions on historical events, lack objective criteria for selectivity, categorization, or configuration any more than any other genre.\footnote{Ibid., 160.} Dray also takes issue with the anti-realist notion that narrative closure is imposed on history and that as a result it necessarily imposes moral significance.\footnote{Ibid., 156.} At this point I think Dray exposes himself to the criticism that he does not fully appreciate the notion of the beginning, middle, and end of plots.\footnote{“The plot-reifiers [e.g. Carr] account does not do justice to the creative, actively configuring character of narrative construction.” Andrew P. Norman, “Telling it Like it Was: Historical Narratives on their Own Terms,” in \textit{The History and Narrative Reader} (ed. Geoffrey Roberts; London: Routledge, 2001), 188.} Norman is correct

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features.” Carr, \textit{Time, Narrative, and History}, 16. I believe the best way to understand Carr then is to acknowledge first that he is primarily concerned with showing that the form of our experience of reality is narrative in structure and so there is continuity with the narrative form itself. Second we can acknowledge that the narrative structure imposed by the author differs from the narrative structures that are lived because of the hindsight of the story-teller. Carr, \textit{Time, Narrative, and History}, 58.
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to point out that the idea of plot implies an author and so it is foreign to the concept of past to think of it having a plot.\textsuperscript{83} One could argue that since plots move from beginning to end along an axis of tension to resolution or toward a goal, that this goal orientation of narrative involves a value laden imposition in the very nature of the structure. But this is a point that can only be developed later, once we have looked more closely at mimesis.

Stalemate: Looking Toward Mimesis to Understand the Representation of History in Narrative

For now we can take stock of where we have arrived with respect to the relationship between history and narrative and see if we can make any progress in the history-story debate within biblical studies. In the first place we have decisively moved away from the position that held to a scientific explanation of history. Historical explanation involves a too complicated system of cause-effect relationships, not to mention the goals of human actors given imperfect knowledge and limited ability to influence their environment and effect their plans. The human element alone makes narrative a suitable, even if not an inevitable medium for historical discourse.

If the recognition of story (narrative) as the primary mode of communication in Scripture resulted in the polarization of opinion regarding the status of Scripture as history (Scripture is either history or story), the recognition in philosophy of history that historical discourse is both narrative (story) and history opens the door for reconsideration of the relationship between literary shaping and historical representation. In other words, the philosophy of history debate has shown that the central issue comes down to our

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 187.
understanding of mimesis or the representation of reality in historical discourse. Does mimesis necessarily distort and thus compromise the truth status of historical discourse?

So far I have outlined three responses to this question. First we have the anti-realists who, though they do not deny our ability to know something from historical discourse, introduce a definite break between historical reality and the texts that represent it. As a result there is an unavoidable relativity in historical discourse that encumbers the communication of historical truth. Carr has shown at minimum that this position is too skeptical. Life does exhibit narrative characteristics that can be discovered and communicated through narrative structure. But his ontological view of narrative tries to do too much, as Dray has pointed out. However, Dray’s own position is untenable since I believe he underestimates the effect of narrative structure as an interpretive imposition on historical events. A more viable solution, therefore, is a kind of mediation between these three positions where narrative structure does inhere in life (with Carr, contra White), even if not in the same way as it appears in life (with Dray, contra Carr). The key is to understand mimesis—that is, the nature of the representation of reality in historical narrative. The narrative structure itself does influence the portrayal of relationships between historical events (White, contra Dray).

*Mimesis in Western Culture: The Ugly Ditch between History and Mimesis*

The Greek word μίμησις (and other derivatives of μίμος) is commonly translated as either representation or imitation. There is some debate on the appropriateness of either translation accompanied by much discussion on what Plato, Aristotle and others have meant in their use of the various terms. Nonetheless we can give as our preliminary understanding of mimesis the representation of nature (or reality, or truth) through various artistic media whether painting, dance, theater, music, or narrative. Debates about mimesis go beyond what the word itself means to its role in conveying truth. In what sense can we say
that music is able to truly communicate reality? What about painting or narrative? Can mimesis play any role at all in teaching us about reality and if so, just how does that play itself out? Stephen Halliwell has suggested that in Western culture views of mimesis have oscillated between two poles. At the first pole we have the “idea of mimesis as committed to depicting and illuminating a world that is (partly) accessible and knowable outside art.” At the other pole we find “the idea of mimesis as the creator of an independent artistic heterocosm, a world of its own.” These two poles are readily recognizable in biblical studies’ story-history debate and the philosophy of history’s debate on history and narrative.

Narrative is the medium that most interests us in this discussion and narrative, because it is also the medium for historical discourse, raises the thorny issue of the degree (if any) to which it is appropriate (or unavoidable) to employ mimesis in the writing of history. Like Halliwell’s two poles above, we find a variety of opinions on this topic in Western culture. The majority opinion over time, and the one increasing in momentum during the rise of modernism, has been not only that it can be avoided, but that true history must avoid mimesis in order to avoid deception or distortion and achieve an objective portrayal. Modernism only increased the chasm between history and mimesis or between history and philosophy. We can trace this chasm to interpretations of both Plato and Aristotle.

### Traditional Interpretations of Plato and Aristotle on Mimesis

Plato makes two moves that have been interpreted in ways that separate mimesis from history. First, in book three of *The Republic* he distinguishes between

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85 It is important to keep in mind that in this section I am relating views commonly held, not any supposed proper interpretation of Plato or Aristotle. Halliwell has argued that the views expressed here are common, though merely a caricature of Plato’s and Aristotle’s. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*. 
narrating “by pure narrative” (ἁπλῇ διηγήσει) and mimesis, which involves a figurative mode of expression. Mimesis is deceptive and therefore unfit for use in education in the republic.

Second, in book ten, Plato develops his famous mirror analogy in which a mirror is the painter that is able to represent reality merely by perfect replication of real objects. But, Plato is said to argue through Socrates, what the mirror, and thus the painter, produces is only a shadow twice removed from reality. It is only a depiction of the object, which is a depiction of the “form” or “idea” made by god. In this way, the more real the painter’s image, the more deceptive because it remains, in fact, only an image, while purporting to be real. Thus Socrates concludes that mimesis is deceptive and thus unfit for any role in the teaching of truth. It is a portrayal of reality that claims to be a realistic account.

Following the interpretation most common in modernism, Aristotle modifies Plato’s view by allowing that mimesis does have a useful role in depicting reality, one that can be used in the instruction of philosophy. Aristotle makes the distinction between fiction and history according to which mimesis conveys what usually happens in the world, or that which is likely or probable. As such, fiction depicts not the world as it is, but the world as it might be or ought to be. Because of this, fiction is able to convey truths about the way the world generally works, that is, universal or philosophical truth. But if Aristotle effects some redemption of mimesis for communicating truth, he still makes a sharp distinction with history, which is not mimetic. If fiction (mimetic narrative) conveys philosophical truth, it cannot convey historical truth or contingent truth. History is not just what can happen or usually happens it is that which has in fact happened. Mimesis has no place in the writing of history.
Western culture’s commitment to realism reveals itself in art which values ever improving technologies for more accurately representing reality. Yet, somewhat ironically, its equal infatuation with objectivity means that no matter what the degree of realism attained, art is still deceptive and not qualified for endeavors that seek to convey truth objectively or scientifically. Voltaire said of figurative language, “A figurative style is constituted by metaphorical expressions, figuring the things spoken of … Ardent imagination, passion, desire—frequently deceived—produce the figurative style … We do not admit it into history, for too many metaphors are hurtful, not only to perspicuity, but also to truth.” Canary and Kozicky observe the results of such an opinion of figurative language noting “[t]he modern separation of history and literature.”

Once we have seen the dichotomy between history and philosophy or history and literature that came into modernism through a negative view of mimesis we can see how it has influenced the views of the narrative theologians, literary critics, and conservative scholars mentioned above. The Biblical theology movement has roots in positivism which,
with its commitment to supposed objective, scientifically gained knowledge, was adverse to mimesis in historical writing. The text must be, above all, a direct connection to the acts of God. Naturally, as the literary nature of the text became clear, and as questions arose that challenged the historical veracity of literal readings of the text, an impetus developed to shift away from history. Without a change in our view of mimesis, however, there was nowhere to go except along a path toward story and away from history. Conservatives, likewise subscribing to the same view of mimesis, saw no way out but to reject the shift to story or narrative on the grounds that the claims of the text are rooted in the historical events. To detach the text from its historical moorings is to neuter its message. They defended their position by defending the historicity of the text.

Reinterpreting Plato and Aristotle

Since 1966, when Barr first suggested the shift to story, and certainly since Niebuhr began talking of narrative in 1941, we have seen several developments in our understanding of Plato and Aristotle that have shifted our perception of mimesis. In addition, Ricoeur has critiqued Aristotle, arguing that even the writing of history and all writing of history involves mimesis. Now conservative authors such as Long or Bartholomew have argued that the literary shaping of the text need not detract from its historical veracity. This move by conservative scholars necessarily implies a different understanding of mimesis than previously held. A new understanding of mimesis goes beyond simply opening the door to being able to engage with the literary features of the text, it also implies an emplotment of events in a way that makes a unity out of a series of events put together into a single work. This is why examining this understanding of mimesis is foundational to this study.

90 Even a narrative theologian such as Stroup acknowledges this to be the case, at least in some parts of Scripture, see Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 137.
The goal of what follows is to trace these new developments in mimesis beginning with Halliwell’s reinterpretation of Plato and Aristotle, continuing on to Ricœur, who modifies Aristotle’s theory of mimesis in the context of Augustine’s philosophy of time. Drawing on these thinkers, I will assimilate their views into a theory of mimesis which will serve as a foundation for understanding the role of plot in depicting reality and shaping the process of interpretation. This will allow us to reassess the history and narrative debate to gain a better understanding of how narrative represents historical reality before returning to an assessment of the more recent attempts at reading the Bible and Genesis for plot.

Halliwell takes umbrage against the traditional views of Plato and Aristotle that attribute to them a monolithic and negative view of mimesis. In the case of Plato, who is interpreted most negatively, he looks first to the larger Platonic corpus and points to the “dangerous temptation to which many writers on this subject have succumbed, namely the assumption that it is feasible to identify a unitary, monolithic conception of mimesis at work in the dialogues.” Halliwell then goes on to provide a reinterpretation of books 2-3 and 10 of the Republic, resulting in his view of Plato as a “romantic puritan” over against the usual view of him as puritanical with regards to the use of mimesis in education in the republic. Finally,

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91 Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 38. Key points in the argument come from *Cratylus*, where Halliwell suggests that through the picture-image theory for the relationship of language to reality (which involves the use of mimesis) Plato allowed for a looser relationship between language and reality so that “mimetic art does not purport to make determinate statements about the world and does not constitute a medium of truth (or falsehood) about the world, yet represents things that may be congruent with, and be recognizable on the basis of, experience in general.” Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 45.

92 Among other things contributing to this idea is the fact that Plato himself confesses to be a lover of Homer and poetry. In fact, it is often pointed out that Plato’s own works are mimetic due to his mode of representing his teaching through Socratic dialog. A purely puritanical reading of Plato, Halliwell thus asserts, “might well be suspicious of Plato’s own text.” Ibid., 55. See also note 46 on this page. For his description of what he means by a romantic puritan and the context for this description see Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 73. Halliwell also draws the conclusion from these apparent contradictions that we are to take into account the tone of the Socratic discussion and understand there to be subtexts due to the use of sarcasm or irony, Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 134.
Halliwell argues that we cannot stop at the *Republic* in analyzing Plato’s thoughts on mimesis for he takes up the topic in subsequent works such as the *Sophist* and the *Laws*. When we look at these subsequent works, Halliwell argues we should come to the conclusion that “the critique of painting in *Republic* 10, with the critique of the simulation of appearances more generally, is offered not as a definitive judgment on all forms of mimesis but rather as the criticism of one conception of mimetic representation, a conception that makes ostensible verisimilitude (the look of the real) a supreme artistic value.” Halliwell points out that it is only through a more complex interpretation of Plato’s view of mimesis that we can understand such late statements as “everything we say must surely be mimesis and image making.”

Halliwell’s main point is that we need to avoid the temptation to oversimplify Plato’s view into a monolithic and purely negative assessment of mimesis. Even in Plato, mimesis has some role in communicating truth about reality. There are different kinds of mimetic activity with varying degrees of relationship to reality, some more negative than others. In the end, however, “mimesis—representation—is all that we have, or all that we are capable of.”

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93 It is not that others are not aware of the fact that Plato speaks of mimesis in other places, certainly Woodruff is, see “Aristotle on Mimesis,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics* (ed. Amélie Rorty; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 77. And even Derrida, whom Halliwell criticizes, has more than a simple view of mimesis, see especially note 14 in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 186. But Halliwell’s point is not that they are unaware of the complexity, but that they succumb to the temptation to oversimplify their final analysis of Plato based too heavily on the *Republic* 3 and 10.


95 Ibid., 70. Quoting Halliwell’s translation of Plato’s *Critias* 107b, (μίμησιν μὲν γὰρ δῆ καὶ ἀπεικασίαν τὰ παρὰ πάντων ἠμῶν ῥηθέντα χρεών που γενέσθαι).

96 Ibid., 71.
of literal correspondence between depictions and objects in the world to be a necessary condition for visual mimesis per se. Halliwell derives this idea from the *Sophist* where Plato distinguishes between two kinds of image making. There is the “eicastic” or “likeness-making” (εἰκαστικός) which “produces the imitation by following the proportions of the original in length, breadth, and depth, and giving, besides, the appropriate colors to each part.” On the other hand there is the “fantastic art” which is, in dimensions, ontologically distorted in order to preserve what appears to be from the perspective of the observer the more true depiction of the object. It is Plato’s endorsement of fantastic art as a legitimate mode of representing reality that allows Halliwell to conclude that Plato did not unilaterally condemn the use of mimesis. Rather, this could be considered a key insight of Plato’s; that there is no communication without mimesis.

Since Halliwell interprets Plato as less antagonistic to mimesis than what he asserts to be the traditional tendency in interpretation, Aristotle will not be so much a correction to Plato’s supposedly negative stance. Instead, Halliwell sees him as formulating a subtle theory of mimesis with a “dual-faced” nature. This has to do with the two poles of mimesis between which Western philosophy has tended to oscillate. At one end of the spectrum we have the outward focus of mimesis, which is its tendency to reflect the world as it is. At the other end of the spectrum is mimesis as a heterocosm which exists at once separate from (Halliwell talks of an imaginary world) and parallel to reality. It is separate

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97 Ibid., 128.


99 Plato, *Sophist* 275c.

100 For his original definitions of these two poles, see Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 5.

101 Ibid., 166.
from reality in that it does not reflect events or objects that actually exist yet is parallel in the sense that the modes of existence or causation are the same. Two points of interpretation support this view. The first is the idea that, unlike Plato, Aristotle sees mimesis as being potentially more than just a replication of the appearance of reality. It produces not just a formal but potentially a functional equivalent of the reality it portrays. In other words it actually “opens up the possibility of equivalence of experience, on the part of the audience, in relation to such reality.”

In drawing the second distinctive aspect of Aristotle’s view of mimesis Halliwell looks to the way Aristotle distinguishes mimesis from other modes of writing with which it is often confused. The most famous of these is the distinction between history and poetry. This is an important discussion in Aristotle that we need to examine more closely here because of its intersection with our topic.

In this section Aristotle is discussing the nature of plots. He argues that plot, the arrangement of incidents, is the “first principle” of poetics before characterization. Plots have a proper arrangement with beginnings, middles, and ends. The beginning is that before which there is no required prior incident but it leads naturally to the string of incidents which make up the middle and continue on in a natural arrangement until the final incident, after which it is not necessary that anything follows. A natural arrangement means that one incident follows another in a plausible or necessary relationship that reflects what would happen in the real world. This string of incidents culminates in the end, that is, the final

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102 Ibid., 163. He draws this conclusion especially by looking to Aristotle’s discussion on musical aesthetic in Politics where Halliwell concludes by his interpretation that “Aristotle does not locate mimesis ‘in’ tones and rhythms in order set up an ‘objectivist’ interpretation of musical representation but precisely in order to correlate the musical work or performance with the experiences of the mind that ‘sympathetically’ receives it,” Halliwell, The Aesthetics of Mimesis, 161.

103 Aristotle, Poetics 1450a-1451b.
incident which, though it is the natural result of the previous incident does not require any following incident. Here we take note of the fact that plots are strings of incidents arranged in such a way that the beginning incident sets in motion a chain of cause and effect that, even though not describing an actual chain of events, it describes a chain of cause and effect that is plausible in the real world—there is a natural or probable relationship between incidents. As a result Aristotle notes that “a poet’s object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably.”\textsuperscript{104} In the arrangement of a plot the arrangement must be such that the result is a whole—a complete unit made up of parts that are each one necessary to the makeup of the whole. To remove one would be to make the whole incomplete. In this regard Aristotle says that, “the component incidents must be so arranged that if one of them be transposed or removed, the unity of the whole is dislocated and destroyed.”\textsuperscript{105} This is different than a historical account because a historical account merely relates what happened. Of course there is a natural relation between the successive events but they need not be each one necessary to the makeup of the unit. This becomes the grounds for his distinction between history and poetics. History describes contingent truth, what actually happened, whereas poetry, because it describes what could or must happen, deals with universal or philosophical truth. Thus Aristotle says that, “For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.”\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{104} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} 1451a.

\textsuperscript{105} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} 1451a.

\textsuperscript{106} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} 1451b.
The point Halliwell wants to make is that “mimesis entails an exemption from the norms of truth applicable to both historical and scientific discourse.” The exemption he refers to is the exemption from relating incidents that actually happened. It is not important that the described events actually happened, only that they fit with some probability to the real world. On the other hand, it is important in Aristotle that every incident is necessary for the makeup of the whole and in this sense the arrangement of incidents is contrived or artificial and thus, in Halliwell’s words, fictional.

This brief summary of Halliwell’s (re)interpretation of Plato and Aristotle has served more than one purpose. First, we have been introduced in some detail to the teachings of Plato and Aristotle on mimesis. This is relevant for our understanding of how narrative might possibly convey historical reality. Second, Halliwell has challenged the usual interpretations of Plato and Aristotle that read mimesis as having only a negative impact on the communication of truth. The result is that Halliwell is urging us in the direction of a “double-faced” (or janulreflective) view of mimesis whereby mimesis looks both outwardly and inwardly. It looks outwardly, offering a true reflection of reality and yet also looks inwardly, creating its own world that, though separate from, is still parallel to and bears resemblance to


108 Halliwell does make note of the important fact that Aristotle seems to avoid the use of “fictional” when speaking of mimetic texts and argues this is due to his attempt at avoiding having his understanding of fiction confused with Plato’s since Aristotle is attempting to credit mimesis with the ability to convey true knowledge of reality. Halliwell, The Aesthetics of Mimesis, 167.

109 One would probably look in vain for the scholar who has a purely negative view of mimesis. However, I would stress again that Halliwell’s argument is only that we have a tendency to underappreciate the complexity of Plato’s view of mimesis. If we fall into an oversimplified interpretation of Plato the result is an interpretation of Aristotle which reads him as reacting against and correcting Plato. Woodruff is an example of another who counters this tendency in Aristotle, Woodruff, “Aristotle on Mimesis,” 73. His interpretation of Plato, however, exhibits the negative tendency toward oversimplification. Like other interpreters, he explains Plato’s apparently contradictory uses of mimesis by suggesting that when using the term positively, he uses it as part of a metaphysical theory. Halliwell, The Aesthetics of Mimesis, 75.
reality. Nonetheless, after Plato and Aristotle we are still left with the dichotomy between philosophy and history whereby mimesis is understood to be mutually exclusive with history. In what follows I will look to Ricoeur to show that a januflective mimesis is potentially consistent with the use of mimesis, or plot, in the writing of history. This kind of understanding of mimesis helps us in turn understand how plot functions to shape historical narrative.

Recasting the Problem of Story in Scripture in the Light of Januflective Mimesis

Before moving on it would be helpful to take this discussion on mimesis and overlay it on the previous discussions in biblical studies and the philosophy of history. As I had noted, we have found a common view of mimesis in biblical studies by which there is a definite sense of uneasiness when mimesis (or poetics, or literary shaping) is introduced into historical writing. According to theologians, if mimesis is introduced, it means a separation between the text and reality. Once we turn to the philosophy of history discussion we can no longer abandon history and so while the opinions of these scholars bifurcate, they do so along different lines. The narrativists recognize that we cannot escape the fact that narrative (and mimesis) is, for better or worse, a part of historical discourse. Mimesis has snuck in the door and the question now is how to cope with it. Carr and those who adhere to the phenomenological turn believe that narrative inheres in history. In other words, they are minimizing the distance between the text and reality. In their case they see mimesis, at least mimesis as it is used in historical narrative, along the lines of Halliwell’s first pole, that is, we can know and understand the world around us in terms of narrative and we can accurately
communicate that narrative world in historical discourse (the world is accessible and knowable outside art).  

Those like White and Mink who take the literary turn see mimesis along the lines of Halliwell’s other pole. Mimesis for them is a heterocosm. By creating a new, artificial world, the use of narrative creates a discontinuity between historical discourse and reality that results in relativity, compromising the ability of the narrative to communicate truth about the real, historical world. In other words, the discussion in the philosophy of history shows that the dichotomy between story and history that existed at the beginning of the discussion on narrative within biblical studies, has not quite dealt with the primary issue of mimesis. The question is not “mimesis or not mimesis, narrative or not narrative;” the question gets rather to the issue of what kind of mimesis—the mimesis of the first pole or the second pole. Carr has shown that reality is structured teleologically in a way that is conducive to narrative discourse thus moving us away from a purely heterocosmic view of mimesis described by White and Mink. But he did not succeed in showing that the structure of the narrative is the same as the structure of life. The narrative structure must ultimately be the historian’s construction, which has been interpreted from reality. Thus in the history and narrative debate we are stuck uncomfortably in between the two poles.

As a first step toward resolution I propose a discussion on the topic of Aristotle’s dichotomy between history and philosophy. With regard to this issue he distinguishes between the historian and the poet because the “poet’s object is not to tell what

\[\text{\footnotesize{\cite{Carr, Time, Narrative, and History, 16.}}}\]
actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably.\textsuperscript{111} In this regard it is also important to remember that for Aristotle a poet is not defined as such because of writing in verse, rather “he is a poet in virtue of his ‘representation,’ and what he represents is action” (δόσῳ ποιητής κατὰ τὴν μίμησίν ἐστιν, μιμεῖται δὲ τὰς πράξεις).\textsuperscript{112} In other words, it is the plot which makes a work a work of fiction.\textsuperscript{113}

There are two things that need to be said in this regard. The first is that there is still truth to be had in fiction. In fact, Aristotle considers it to be “more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.”\textsuperscript{114} The problem with mimesis then, is not that it is not “scientific” (φιλόσοφος) but that it introduces the element of fiction to historical narrative. Fictional narrative can still offer us truth, but now the truth that comes to us through plot is a general truth (scientific, philosophical) rather than a truth about the particulars of history. If we notice that history writing in fact is not only about what happened but about the significance or meaning of what happened, then it seems clear that it can also offer us truth on the “philosophical” level rather than just on the level of reporting historical facts. However, the significance of the historical events must necessarily be an author’s interpretation and cannot arise merely from the cause-effect chain of nature. Since it is an author’s interpretation, it is necessarily subjective or relative and must be judged on the basis of philosophical, or better yet, sapiential criteria,  

\textsuperscript{111} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} 1451a.  
\textsuperscript{112} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} 1451b.  
\textsuperscript{113} Heath agrees in his introduction to the Poetics that this distinction leads us to the conclusion that “Aristotle’s concept of poetry as imitation is therefore consistent with (although not identical to) that of fiction.” Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} (trans. Malcolm Heath; Penguin Classics; London: Penguin Books, 1996), xiv.  
\textsuperscript{114} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} 1451b.
rather than scientific. Yet at the same time, the author’s interpretation of significance depends upon the veracity of the report of historical events presented in the work and the cause-effect relations that explain the chain of events. In this way these two levels of truth correspond to Hayden White’s artificial yet still useful separation between content and form, where the historical events themselves are the content that are given form through emplotment.

Coming to the second point to be made with regard to Aristotle’s diegesis and mimesis distinction, the question then becomes: is it true that when we impose form on the content we necessarily distort historical events and the cause-effect relations between them in such a way that they lose their historical veracity? This is what Aristotle seems to be implying by making the distinction between history and poetics and it is certainly what was assumed early on in the debate over the shift from history to story in biblical studies. This assumption also shaped the debate in the philosophy of history even if differently than in biblical studies. But we should look to Aristotle’s criterion for what makes a well-formed plot. One of the criteria is that even though the poet need not report about actual historical occurrences or people, he must cause the plot (and thus its characters) to adhere to “general truths” by which he means, “the sort of thing that a certain type of man [the character] will do or say either probably or necessarily.”\textsuperscript{115} (Aristotle, \textit{Poet.}, 1451b, Fyfe). However, what actually happens in history is certainly a subset of what happens probably or necessarily and so one wonders why plots could not also give account of actual historical events (history is a special case of fiction). In fact, Aristotle asserts as much himself when he says that, “Even supposing he [the poet] represents what has actually happened, he is none the less a poet, for there is nothing to prevent some actual occurrences being the sort of thing that would

\textsuperscript{115} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} 1451b.
probably or inevitably happen, and it is in virtue of that that he is their ‘maker.’”

In other words, there seems to be no necessary inconsistency between the work of the historian as recorder of historical events and as interpreter of those events. This assertion is all the more supported when we recognize with Carr that when humans act with goals and intentions we invest history with a story-like character that lends itself to plots. In fact, because humans have irrational goals, act irrationally to accomplish their goals, and act with imperfect information and with imperfect ability to accomplish their goals; story is an appropriate form of representing history. To apply a strictly scientific discourse to the writing of history is to leave out the human dimension of history. This is why I think the impulse to shape historical accounts according to plot is so powerful and ubiquitous.

History and Narrative in the Mimetic Mediation of Paul Ricœur

Carr argues against Ricœur’s take on the relation between narrative and history citing Ricœur’s reticence to see a one to one relationship between the structures of narrative and the structures of reality. I have already argued against Carr’s understanding of mimesis. But we can now return to Ricœur to see that though he thinks narrative structures are fabricated and do not inhere in reality (at least not in the same direct relationship that Carr sees), he still holds that there is an important connection between narrative and reality that plot, as the mimesis of action, mediates. The goal of this section is to explore the mediating function of plot.

116 Aristotle, Poetics 1451b. This offers the necessary support to Norman’s claim that, “[t]he fact that a discursive representation has a structure that that which it represents does not, does not itself entail that a falsifying imposition has taken place.” Norman, “Telling it Like it Was: Historical Narratives on their Own Terms,” 190.
Ricœur’s Mediation Between
Time and Narrative

Rather than seeing a one to one relationship between the structures of reality and the narrative structures of historical writing, Ricœur finds in Aristotle’s “mimesis of action” a relationship like that between the noema and noesis of phenomenology. Action, he suggests, is the noemic correlate of the noetic act of mimesis. That is to say that the action as perceived by the author is the noema that becomes, through mimetic activity, the noesis, which is the plot. Hence Ricœur’s threefold activity of mimesis becomes the mechanism through which the action is transposed into plot. Mimetic activity, by helping us to move from noema to noesis, makes of the plot a “seeing together” of the events.

The relation of reality to plot as mediated by mimesis is not one in which the structures of reality are simply mirrored or reproduced in plot. Instead, the nature of the mimetic activity is three tiered where mimesis$^1$ is a narrative prefiguration of reality, mimesis$^2$ is the configuration of reality into narrative form, and mimesis$^3$ is the hermeneutic refiguration of reality back into the time domain of action. Mimesis$^2$ in this scheme is the

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117 Ricœur is addressing the relationship between two of Aristotle’s statements about plot. In one statement he says that “plot is the mimesis of action” (ἐστιν δὲ τῆς μὲν πράξεως ὁ μῦθος ἢ μίμησις, Aristotle, Poetics 50a) and in another that “plot is the configuration of events” (λέγω γὰρ μῦθον τοῦτον τὴν σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων, Aristotle, Poetics 50a). He makes of these a “quasi-identification” and then takes up a discussion that expounds on their relationship that leads to the noema-noesis correlation discussed here.


119 In phenomenological vocabulary, the noema is not the object itself but the object as the content of intention—the object as believed, judged, perceived, etc. For example when we perceive a cube we do not perceive a cube all at once from every angle but from a particular vantage point. In our minds, nonetheless, we always give the meaning of cube in its fullness. This full understanding is the noesis, which correlates to the noema via the noetic activity of mimesis. With some extrapolation and borrowing from Mink we might say that the noesis is a “grasping together” or seeing together of the noemata of an object.

120 Ricœur sees mimesis$^3$ as the emplotment of reality “In this sense my argument here consists of constructing the mediation between time and narrative by demonstrating emplotment’s role in the mimetic process.” Ricœur, Time and Narrative I, 53–54.
emplotment of reality and it is anchored in mimesis, where he goes so far as to suggest a “prenarrative quality of experience.” He says that “the composition of the plot is grounded in a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character.”

First, a preunderstanding of the meaningful structures of the world of action requires mastery of the conceptual network that presupposes a shared practical understanding of goals, motives, agents, and the interaction of agents with each other. Next he looks to the insights of cultural anthropology, making note of the idea that “if, in fact, human action can be narrated, it is because it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms.” Symbols inherent in cultural systems provide the context in which people perform their actions. Actions themselves, then, are readable according to these systems of symbols and provide the means by which actions can be interpreted and thus also emplotted. Finally, the configuration of reality into a narrative form presupposes “temporal structures that call for narration.” Starting with his interpretation of Heidegger’s “being in time” or “within-time-ness” and Sorge (translated Care in Time and Narrative), Ricœur argues that if being-“within”-time, as invested with Care, which gives significance and meaning to time, breaks

\footnotesize{121 Ibid., 74.}
\footnotesize{122 Ibid., 54.}
\footnotesize{123 Ibid., 55.}
\footnotesize{124 Ibid., 57.}
\footnotesize{125 Ibid., 59.}
from the linear representation of time, then the temporality of experience is now vested with the potential for configuration in narrative form.\textsuperscript{126} In sum, Ricœur concludes that

To imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality. Upon this preunderstanding, common to both poets and their readers, emplotment is constructed and, with it, textual and literary mimetics.\textsuperscript{127}

If Ricœur’s position on the relationship between experience and narrative seems overly beholden to phenomenology and existentialism, then it may be worth noting that we could approach the issue in a similar fashion but now seeing mimesis, and thus historical narrative, as an isomorphism of reality. I do not mean to use the term “isomorphism” in its mathematical sense according to which two different systems produce the same resulting data sets, but in the more loose sense and yet more appropriate sense used by Douglas Hofstadter. In a book in which he explores how intelligence (which is flexible, makes decisions given ambiguous circumstances, recognizes the relative importance of various data points, etc.) can arise out of systems that are “the most inflexible, desireless, rule-following of beasts,”\textsuperscript{128} Hofstadter explores the role of isomorphism in bridging the world of reality with the almost mechanical operation of the brain. The concept of isomorphism plays a crucial role in his argument because it helps bridge the gap between the unconscious and the conscious, between the intelligent and unintelligent (in the sense of the contrast between machine and human). Isomorphisms are able to bridge this gap because

\textsuperscript{126}Ibid., 64. Ricœur says that “a bridge is constructed for the first time between the narrative order and Care. Narrative configurations and the most elaborated forms of temporality corresponding to them share the same foundation of within-time-ness.”

\textsuperscript{127}Ibid.

they are information preserving transforms that produce meaning from the mind’s perceptions of reality. In this way, Hofstadter’s concept of isomorphism is analogous to Ricœur’s mimesis (emploi) because it is the noesis that “grasps together” or gives meaning to the historical noemata.

An example of an isomorphism of this type is a musical composition. When a composer writes a musical score it is recorded in the form of musical notation. This musical notation contains all of the information necessary to convert the information on the page into a performance. Because it contains all the relevant information, yet this information has been transferred into another realm of communication (from sound to written notation), it is an isomorphism of the composition. In the same way, mimesis is an isomorphism of reality because it attempts to transfer our perception of reality to a realm of communication (painting, dance, music, story, etc.)—in other words, the musical composition itself is an isomorphism of reality. Historical narrative, because it is a representation of the events of history, is an isomorphism of reality or an alleged representation of reality in narrative form.

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129 Ibid., 337. In other words, since “thought must depend on representing reality in the hardware of the brain,” (Hofstadter’s emphasis) isomorphism is a way of bridging the gap between reality and the brain’s physical wiring. Vanhoozer’s explanation of Ricœur’s understanding of the relationship between the real and the imaginary runs parallel to what I am trying to communicate here. Using Gombrich’s assertions regarding the development of visual representation Vanhoozer says that, “It is only by certain inventions that painters came to discover the appearances. In Gombrich’s terms, there is no ‘matching’ before ‘making.’ … Ricœur and Gombrich are thus saying that visual and verbal representation alike both invent and discover” (Vanhoozer’s emphasis). Isomorphisms, likewise, represent reality in a new medium in a process that involves both inventing and discovering, or, we might say with Halliwell, with a mimesis that both refers to reality and creates its own heterocosm. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricœur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 10. At the same time, it should be pointed out that I also concur with Vanhoozer when he suggests that Ricœur, by creating so close a connection between reality and imagination, leans too far toward the “manifestation model,” or, toward the imaginative aspect of the representation. In my presentation of narrative as an isomorphism of reality, I intend to avoid that bias by asserting that historical narrative, here biblical historical narrative, demonstrates a commitment to presenting reality, even while it presents that reality using imaginative poetics. The key to understanding the poetics and when they depart from reality is in understanding the literary conventions associated with genre and the way in which the text refers. See Vanhoozer, Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricœur, 169–178.
When the conventions of the genre are well understood, we find that it preserves its reference to reality.

We have felt uncomfortable with this idea of mimesis because of the distortion of reality that we have believed was unavoidable as a result of the transform that results from mimesis. In response to this I would produce the example of the representation of a cube in two dimensional space. A cube can be represented “scientifically” in two dimensional space using orthographic projection (which offers two dimensional representations from various angles of perception). This offers all the views and dimensions necessary for a carpenter to reproduce the cube and so is an adequate isomorphism for those purposes. However, there are occasions when a cube needs to be perceived “all together” in its context, for example in its location in a room or in order to represent its movement through space relative to other objects. In order to achieve this “seeing together” one must produce a drawing that affords the perception of three dimensions. In doing so, however, the actual dimensions or angles of the cube must be distorted in the two dimensional medium for the sake of producing a figure that looks like a cube in relation to the surrounding space and/or over time.

It is important to note that both the orthographic projection and the 3D perspective drawings are isomorphisms of the cube. The distortion of the 3D perspective drawing does not mean that truth is distorted; it means that due to the limitations inherent in the chosen convention, certain aspects of reality are not as readily accessible. In fact, the

130 The example given here is analogous to Husserl’s example of a box given in Edmund Husserl, Logical Investigations (trans. J. N. Findlay; International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method; London: Routledge, 1970), 1:565. In Husserl’s example he talks about the fact that our experience of a box from different perspectives changes our experience of the box while our perception of the box remains the same. An isomorphism, whether an orthographic projection, or an isometric drawing, or a plot; in every case is an attempt at reproducing not the experience but the perception of the object (from a phenomenological standpoint).
“distorted” information may still be accurately accessible given the proper key for decoding, which is available by proper identification of the convention. The same limitation applies to the orthographic projection, except that it applies to different aspects of reality. Each convention has its own methods of encoding and limitations that are capable of being understood by author and interpreter.

In essence, I am arguing that emplotment creates an isomorphism of historical reality that is uniquely suited for transferring information about the meaning of human action, in keeping with Aristotle’s view of plot. Therefore, though emplotment can convey hypothetical meaning, as in fiction, it can also communicate or suggest real meaning, as in the writing of history.

This view of mimesis reflects Halliwell’s contention that ancient mimesis is best understood as operating at both poles of how mimesis has generally been understood. Halliwell argues that mimesis was understood to be both world-reflecting and world-creating. Ricœur’s view of mimesis and my extension of his view do the same. Because of the nature of the task of writing history and because of the imposition of plot, historical narrative both points to the real world while also creating its own world. On the one hand, historical narrative commits itself to recording events that actually happened and, to the extent described or required by the narrative, the relationships between those events must adhere to actual cause and effect relationships. Falsification on either level threatens falsification of the historical narrative. On the other hand, in the process of creating a plot, which we have said is the grasping together of these events into a single action with a beginning, middle, and end, a new layer of interpretation has been placed on the events described which gives them
meaning. In other words, because plot removes a set of events from the infinite cause-effect chain of life and imposes upon them a unity of structure that is the author’s creation (albeit dependent upon reality), it creates a heterocosm—a new, “self-contained” world.

Reading for Plot

In the previous section I laid out my view of the concept of plot which sees plot as an isomorphism of reality. This abstract formulation is foundational for a more practical view of what plot is and how it functions in shaping the narrative text. By outlining my specific view of what plot is and how it functions in this section, I will have the criteria for assessing the most recent shift toward story. This assessment will, in turn, set the stage for defining my strategy of using plot in the exegesis and theology of Genesis.

With the advent of the novel there has arisen such a variety of thought regarding plot that some prefer to avoid use of the term altogether. With the novel, plot

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131 Ankersmit criticizes the vocabulary of “interpretation” and “meaning” because he believes it inappropriately implies that historical events are a “text” to be read and must therefore be about something other than the events themselves (he specifically criticizes Ricoeur and White in this regard). There are several reasons I have chosen to stick with interpretation and meaning. First, whether historical events themselves have meaning or not, the texts that authors produce do assert or give a meaning to the historical events. Since I want to emphasize the meaning laden nature of the narrative text I prefer “interpret” to Ankersmit’s “represent.” Furthermore, however, I do not think Ankersmit does justice to Ricoeur’s argument concerning how emplotment mediates time and narrative. Ankersmit too easily writes off the possibility that there is anything outside historical events that they can refer to or interpret. Specifically, Ankersmit says, “If texts are really meaningful texts … they are always about something outside the text itself. … We may wonder, then, what the text that the past is could possibly be about. And our inability to answer this question speaks strongly against White’s and Ricoeur’s proposal to see the past as text.” Ricoeur draws on cultural anthropology to argue that human action itself is meaning laden because every action is a symbol that functions within a cultural system. Human action then, does refer to something outside of itself and it is precisely for this reason that Ricoeur is arguing for part of the connection he finds between time and narrative. F. R. Ankersmit, History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 101.

132 To alleviate the confusion of conflicting definitions, Abbott, as an example, prefers to use synonyms for the various concepts sometimes assigned to the word plot. Thus he provides clear definitions of such terms as story, narrative, narrative discourse, type of story, etc. Some of these terms traditionally overlap with meanings sometimes assigned with plot. In general, however, he avoids the use of “plot” to avoid the confusion of its multiple meanings. H. Porter Abbott, The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative (2d ed.; Cambridge Introductions to Literature; London: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 18. See also David
tended to recede into the background while point of view or character became dominant, especially in so-called stream of consciousness narrative. Consequently, some theorists attempted to create a broader view of plot that could accommodate the modern novel. Attempts of this nature include Kermode, Frye, and Genette, for example. Others, such as Propp and Greimas, as well as Genette, have attempted to define a grammar of narrative. Each of these has made a contribution to narrative theory. However, as should be expected, none of them has achieved the goal of producing a formalized system of narrative. Rather than drinking deeply from the well of any of these theories, I would prefer to continue with the trajectory of Aristotle’s poetics and the foundation he laid for all subsequent discussion on plot. Ricœur has argued that Aristotle’s conception of plot, though confined in Aristotle

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133 In a discussion on narrative theory in the early twentieth century, Wallace Martin observes that “another noteworthy change in criticism was an increasing concentration on point of view as the primary technical device in narrative. Discussion of plot all but disappeared despite the efforts of R. S. Crane and others to preserve it. The very conception of plot was associated with traditional tales and the stock devices of popular fiction.” Wallace Martin, Recent Theories of Narrative (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 21.


136 Paul Ricœur, Time and Narrative (trans. David Pellauer and Kathleen McLaughlin; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 10. Ricœur makes expanding Aristotle beyond tragedy and comedy a major point in his argument. “It is a matter of some urgency therefore that we test the capacity of the plot to be transformed beyond its initial sphere of application in Aristotle’s Poetics,” Ricœur, Time and Narrative, 7. That entire discussion can be found on pages 8-14.
to the two major families of tragedy and comedy, is broad enough even for the modern novel. Even if this were not the case I would argue that it fits well with most, if not all, biblical narrative.

As I have already noted on several occasions, the basis of Aristotle’s view of plot is that it consists of a beginning, middle, and end. As trivial as this statement seems, on reflection it turns out to set the stage for some of the more important characteristics of plot. First of all, because plot has a beginning and end the events described in the narrative are separated from the infinite chain of cause and effect that is reality. This separation creates a space between the narrative and the real world that allows for the author to find in or impose on reality a unity that Aristotle calls a single action. The unity of the narrative arises out of an order that the author gives to the events described. This order, even if dependent upon the chronological and cause-effect order of reality, even still transcends this order by exploring the dimension of human action. I will describe two consequences of this concept of plot. The first addresses the paradigmatic shaping of the discourse with plot as the highest level of discourse and the second addresses the syntagmatic ordering of the text whereby the logic of plot is argued to be the logic of a movement from tension to resolution.

*Plot and the Paradigmatic Shape of Narrative Discourse*

The first consequence of this conception of plot is that the narrative text is a linguistic phenomenon that exhibits a unity based on the logic of the beginning-middle-end structure (emplotment) of the work. The plot is therefore the highest level discourse of the work and provides the context for all lower level linguistic phenomena. The question is: what does this first consequence imply?

If we think of plots being made up of episodes, then the episodes are shaped both externally and internally according to the logic of emplotment. Externally, in the sense that the episodes are ordered and placed in relationship one to another and subordinate to the
logic of emplotment, so that the first episode is suitable as a beginning (it does not require a prior cause) and leads to the middle episodes where each follows naturally from the previous (starting with the beginning episode) and leads naturally to the next, continuing on in succession until the final episode which serves as the end because it completes the action of the beginning and middle and as a result has no necessary consequence following from it. This means that episodes (and thus the events of history) are selected for inclusion according to their fittingness for the plot. They are arranged and placed in relationship one to another based on this same logic of emplotment. I believe Fokkelman is quite right when he describes plot in this way:

Beginning, middle, and end are more than linear entities. … They have been carefully attuned to each another, which is not surprising as they themselves are deliberate products of selection. Inspired and guided by a specific vision, the writer “sees” what would be a meaningful whole within the material he is working on, and how to delineate this whole.137

The plot also affects the internal shaping of the episodes. Everything within the episodes, from the phoneme to syntax to the episode at the discourse level is subordinate to the emplotment of the overall narrative. Not only are the episodes ordered so that one leads naturally to the other but the episodes themselves are internally shaped so as to promote this same order.

I do not mean to make any startling claim by this, my aim is only to emphasize that while emplotment operates at the discourse level, affecting the ordering of

137Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 77. Similarly, see Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 93. Yet part of the impetus of this study is my conviction that Fokkelman, Bar-Efrat and others have not completely appreciated the significance of plot for influencing the construction of the narrative text. This tendency, in my opinion, is quite visible in the history and philosophy debate especially, as I mentioned earlier, in the work of Dray, and it shows up in biblical studies when plot, though recognized as an ordering principle, is not often treated that way in the actual exegesis of the text—at least not to the degree that I will argue for in my exegesis of Genesis.
episodes, it also influences lower level discourse (discourse at the level of the episode, for example, which may have its own subplot) and even the linguistics proper of the text including everything from syntax down to phoneme. The claim may not be startling or even new but it is important to grasp the upshot of the influence of plot on the linguistics of the text. To identify the plot of a narrative is to identify more than just the basic run of events. To describe the plot is to do more than give a skeletal review of the action that takes place in the narrative. To understand the importance of plot is to understand that while it is true that the episodes following one after another make up the plot, it is also true, and in a more important and profound way, that it is the plot which makes the episodes.\textsuperscript{138} We cannot deal completely with a text unless we take plot into consideration. The linguistic axiom that we cannot work through a text in a linear fashion moving from phoneme up to lexeme and so on up to syntax to discourse, but that we must instead work at all levels at the same time, struggling to spiral in on the text as each linguistic level fashions and redirects our understanding of each other level, gives credence to this view of the importance of plot in a linguistic analysis of the text.

\textit{Plot and the Syntagmatic Order of Discourse}

Fokkelman speaks of a horizontal and vertical organization of emplotment where the horizontal axis is the succession of one event after another and the vertical organization is the organization imposed upon the work due to the author’s unifying vision. Fokkelman says that due to the vertical organization the author only includes “what

\textsuperscript{138}I have already taken note of Ricoeur’s use of noema and noesis with respect to action and plot respectively. It is therefore interesting to note, by way of analogy rather than logical argument, since I am not inclined to bind myself to a phenomenological view of plot, that phenomenologists view the noesis (the whole picture of the object that exists in the mind of the thinker) as giving meaning to the noema (the object as perceived in a particular instance) rather than the noema giving rise to the noesis. In the same way the plot gives meaning to the events described which is to say that it provides the logical ordering which allows us to understand the significance of the events.
contributes to his thematics and to the ideological unity of the story. The biblical narrator only uses details if they are functional to his plot. Fokkelman’s organizational categories approximate Ricœur’s syntagmatic (horizontal) and paradigmatic (vertical) orders of discourse.

If the first consequence of the emplotment of the narrative as I have described it above is associated with the vertical or paradigmatic ordering of the discourse, then the second falls within the realm of the syntagmatic. This second consequence of emplotment brings to the fore of the discussion an ambiguity that can be identified in the previous discussion when I used such expressions as the “logic of emplotment” or the idea of one episode following “naturally” from another. The ambiguity that we need to clarify has to do with just how we can identify or describe what it means for one episode or action to follow naturally from another within the logic of emplotment. At one level, this ambiguity is very easy to resolve. Most introductory texts on literary theory will describe the logic of emplotment as moving from an initial, peaceful situation that is disturbed and that subsequently leads to a resolution that somehow gives meaning or significance to the change that has occurred in the narrative. Thus the nature of the syntagmatic progression of narrative is the movement from tension to resolution (or expectation to fulfillment) as we progress through the story from beginning to middle to end.

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139 Fokkelman, Reading Biblical Narrative, 78.
140 Ricœur, Time and Narrative I, 56.
141 Jonathan D. Culler, Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 84. Or Fokkelman describes “the full-grown story” as that which “begins by establishing a problem or deficit; next, it can present an exposition before the action gets urgent; obstacles and conflicts may occur that attempt to frustrate the dénouement, and finally there is the winding up, which brings the solution of the problem or the cancellation of the deficit.” Fokkelman, Reading Biblical Narrative, 77.
As with the first consequence of emplotment, the significance of this second should not be underestimated. The creation of tension in a story is, like the creation of tension in a spring, the creation of potential energy that allows the author a certain control over the reading of the text. Almost unwittingly, with the creation of narrative tension readers become vested in a story in such a way that the tension motivates them to read, it directs their reading strategy, and it creates a rhetorical force that exerts persuasive pressure on the reader to accept the claims of the narrative—that is, the meaning and significance created by the paradigmatic ordering of the text.

Everyone is familiar with the experience of becoming so engaged in a story that we find it difficult to stop reading. We must admit that in a very real way the author is exerting a force on us, feeding our curiosity and driving us to read longer, sometimes faster through the text from beginning to end. And this is despite the fact that the author may be removed from us by centuries of time, by language and by culture. This is, I think, a convincing indication that there is potential energy stored in the plot that is converted to kinetic energy, exerting its force on us as we engage with the text.

If we can acknowledge the pertinence of the metaphor of a text’s potential energy and the force it exerts on us, motivating us to read, then it is only one step more, and a natural consequence, to recognize that the author also influences reading strategy through the syntagmatic order of emplotment. A critical reader who engages in a close reading of plot will scrutinize the plot in order to identify exactly the tension that arises in the beginning of a text and then will follow how the tension is transformed and developed throughout the text. But even a non-critical reader, who is not entirely conscious of the precise tension and is simply pushed along by the text, has a reading strategy that is influenced by the author’s design of tension moving toward resolution. In that sense we might say that all readers navigate the text or “read forward”—meaning they read with the intention of relating the current text to what they expect to happen. This is due to the fact that when readers recognize
a tension (to whatever degree of consciousness) their attention is directed especially to those elements of the narrative that offer the potential of better understanding the tension or bringing about its resolution. In this way the tension serves as a filter that makes certain details of the text more important to the reader than others. This is why, to use an example from fiction, plots can sometimes take surprising turns. Our expectations for resolution had been built up in one direction only to find that direction leading to a false resolution.

The third way in which emplotment creates potential energy in the text follows again from the first. In the process of reading, readers become engaged in the unfolding story such that they find themselves “siding with” the protagonist, and desiring a positive outcome in line with the interests of the protagonist. By siding with the protagonist, they also naturally side with his goals and motives. At this point we remember that the goals and motives of the protagonist are related to emplotment since I have argued, in line with Ricœur’s mimesis, that the logic of emplotment is anchored in the meaningful structures of human action. If we follow this string of connections we then find that by “taking sides” with the goals and motives of the protagonist we also are taking sides with the author’s interpretation of historical events. The readers’ interest in the outcome of the protagonist becomes one and the same as their interest in the meaning and significance given to the narrative by the author. The result is a rhetorical or persuasive force located in the tension to resolution shaping by emplotment.

Tracing the Shift to Mimetic History

My goal in the previous sections has been to establish a more complete view of my understanding of plot. Given this view of plot it is now possible to undertake a survey

\[142\] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative I*, 55.
of the more recent attempts to use story or plot as either the basis for an approach to biblical theology or for understanding the text of Genesis. Previously, I discussed the concerns of Barr, the narrative theologians, and literary approaches to the text especially with an interest in exposing their assumptions regarding mimesis in the biblical text. In this section I will trace increasing interest in plot and the growing willingness of conservative scholars to see narrative as an important organizing principle for biblical theology. This will help me to accomplish two things. First it will describe the context in which my own study of plot has arisen and second it will reveal a shift in conservative scholars’ understanding of the relationship between mimesis and history.

Whether intentional or not, Barr’s writing on “story” exhibits a gradually increasing awareness of plot and its function in biblical interpretation. In 1966 when Barr first suggested the shift from history to story he spoke of the ways that story is history-like, noting among its characteristics its “cumulative progression” or the fact that it has a “beginning with a progression” noting that “what is done and written is placed in relation to what has already been done and written.” Writing ten years later in 1976 and now ostentatiously in line with literary theory, he refers to the narrative’s beginning, middle, and end; terms that clearly associate his perception of story with plot. This adjustment in language is suggestive of a conscious relationship between Barr’s commitment to story and an increasing appropriation of literary theory in biblical studies and also a greater

143 Barr, Old and New, 21.
appreciation of the emplotted nature of Scripture. In what follows I will trace this increased awareness of the role of plot in interpretation and for biblical theology.

David J. A. Clines

If Barr’s discussion of story remained at a theoretical level, Clines began the process of actually using story as a way of looking at Scripture in his book *The Theme of the Pentateuch*. As he states in his preface, an underlying claim of his book is that the Pentateuch is a single, unified, narrative work. The unity of the work is based on the fact that it comprises a single story with a single plot. For Clines, “[s]tory creates order out of the flux of happenings by arranging them in … such a chain of connectedness that leads one to speak of the end as the goal and the middle as directed movement.” This of course reminds us of the idea of plot with its beginning, middle, and end. But the book is not directly about the plot of the Pentateuch—it is about its theme. Theme, of course, can have a variety of meanings. For example T. D. Alexander also deals with themes in the Pentateuch but Alexander deals with themes such as “seed” or “blessing,” and follows them throughout the books. He shows how each theme shows up in various ways in the Pentateuch and how they contribute to the work as a whole. For Alexander there are multiple “main themes” and he makes no claim about any single theme or even any group of themes together capturing the

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145 See Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*. These books are exemplary of efforts to bring literary theory (including plot) into biblical studies.

146 Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 6.

147 Ibid., 112.

essence of the work as a whole. Thus when Alexander uses the term “theme” we might suggest the gloss “motif” as being synonymous with his usage. Clines, on the other hand, relates theme to plot by saying that “[i]f plot can correctly be defined as ‘a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality’, theme may be regarded as plot with the emphasis on conceptualized meaning.” In other words we could think of Clines’ theme manifesting itself as a concise abstraction that expresses the thrust of the work, or a paradigmatic (or vertical, in Fokkelman’s nomenclature) distillation of plot. As such, there is only one theme for a literary work, for if there were two then a new statement of theme that synthesized the two would need to be proposed. “[U]nity of theme is a function of the unity of the literary work.”

At the time that Clines originally wrote, one of his main contributions was in demonstrating the importance of dealing with the text of the Pentateuch in its final form. For the purposes of this project, however, another important insight is how he depicts the role of story, and especially how plot plays a central role. Story takes the cause-effect ordering of reality and organizes it according to a plot with a beginning, middle, and end. This re-ordering of reality results in a depiction that is “always purposive and goal-oriented. … [It] leads one to speak of the end as the goal and the middle as directed movement.”

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149 T. Desmond Alexander, From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Pentateuch (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

150 Clines, The Theme of the Pentateuch, 20. This articulation of plot is derived from E. M. Forster, whom he cites in this passage.

151 Ibid., 21. He nuances this slightly by stating that there can be a variety of abstractions, each of which produces a different statement of theme. But these are really different perspectives on theme, rather than multiple themes. Also, I am aware that he now backs away from this idea that “theme” and especially “the theme” captures the main thrust of the Pentateuch since he has become more informed by postmodernism. Clines, The Theme of the Pentateuch, 132.

152 Ibid., 112.
this is all very much related to Aristotle’s definition of plot from his *Poetics*. Likewise, Clines’ theme is a short description of what that ordering has set out to accomplish.

Clines’ approach is an important application of plot to biblical interpretation. However, in the light of what we have put forward with respect to plot there are a few comments that can be made. First, Clines speaks of the “willing suspension of our everyday sets of operational beliefs for the sake of those of the story.”\(^{153}\) In other words, the text creates a heterocosm, another world that the text attempts to draw us into. Following Clines’ line of argument, even though the original readers may have accepted the text as a work of history, we need not.\(^{154}\) But as I argued earlier, the nature of the truth claims of the text are in part determined by the conventions of genre, or by the culturally situated understanding reached between authors and their intended audiences. To say that the original readers would have read the Pentateuch as history but that modern readers should not is to redefine its genre and tear it from its context. Such readings come precariously close to a violation of interpretive virtue.\(^{155}\)

Also, Clines speaks of a beginning without an ending. But I would argue that a plot with a beginning and no end is incompatible with the view of plot for which he argues elsewhere, where the text is purposive and goal oriented. While it may certainly be true that the Pentateuch leaves the plot of Scripture open, it may be that Clines has overlooked the fact that each of the books on its own, and the Pentateuch as a whole, may have their own sub-

\(^{153}\)Ibid., 111.

\(^{154}\)Ibid., 104. “Genesis 1-11 is not for them [Israel], as it is for us, universal history; it is their own history.” This could be read similarly to Aristotle’s distinction between history and philosophy.

\(^{155}\)Of course it is important to distinguish between following illocutions versus perlocutions but we are referring here to receiving a text on its own terms as opposed to using it. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 374.
plots that do indeed have their own endings. Of course, contra Clines, my goal here is to show that Genesis does have its own plot with a beginning, middle, and end and to show also how it fits into the overall biblical plot.

There is one other aspect of Clines’ study that needs mentioning. For Clines, the theme of the Pentateuch deals primarily with the promises given to the patriarchs and this leaves Gen 1-11 somewhat disjointed from the rest of the Pentateuch. He argues that the material in Gen 1-11 “concern[s] a world in which the divine promise to the patriarchs has not yet been spoken, and so their theme … can hardly be subsumed under that of the patriarchal promises and their (partial) fulfillments.”\(^{156}\) He therefore identifies a “prefatory theme” for Gen 1-11 and then modifies the theme of the Pentateuch to reflect this new material. The problem with this approach is that it assumes too great a disjunction between Gen 1-11 and the rest of the Pentateuch and especially it creates a too great disjunction between Gen 1-11 and the rest of Genesis. According to this approach, Gen 12-50 belongs to a single work with the rest of the Pentateuch before it belongs to Gen 1-11. This is a fairly strong indication that Clines, while accomplishing much in the way of reading the Pentateuch along the lines of plot, may not yet have arrived at the best approach.

John Sailhamer

Evangelical scholar John Sailhamer’s *Pentateuch as Narrative* also deals with the whole of the Pentateuch from a narrative perspective. Sailhamer argues for an approach that shifts revelation from the history behind the text to the text itself. This is a definite reaction to the biblical theology movement which located revelation in history and is a clear

\(^{156}\) Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 66.
indication of the move from history to story that is taking place in conservative scholarship.\footnote{157}{Few tenets lay closer to the heart of the Biblical Theology Movement than the conviction that revelation was mediated through history.” Childs, \textit{Biblical Theology in Crisis}, 39.}

When Sailhamer sets forth his methodology he applies a feature analysis of different methods of biblical theology.\footnote{158}{Feature, or componential, analysis is akin to the phonological analysis of the Prague Circle which brought attention to the marked and unmarked nature of certain sound groupings. For example, they grouped for comparison phonemes such as $s$ and $\check{s}$, $c$ and $\check{c}$, etc. These sounds are related with the distinguishing feature being that those phonemes written with the diacritical caron (ˇ) are palatalized. They are thus the marked phoneme because of the presence of the feature \textit{palatalization}. Feature analysis is applied to every linguistic layer. In semantics, the meaning of words is analyzed by the presence or absence of a semantic feature. In this case Sailhamer has set the semantic feature of “revelation located in the text” [+ ,or presence of the feature, thus marked], or “not in the text” [-, or absence of the feature, thus unmarked]. He then equates the presence of revelation in event with the absence of the feature so that revelation in the event becomes the opposite of revelation in the text. This dichotomy takes over Sailhamer’s whole methodology and contrasts with the approach I took earlier in my discussion of history and narrative in the philosophy of history. In that discussion I divided the views of the relationship between history and narrative into four groups depending on how they viewed the role of narrative in history. Unlike Sailhamer’s feature analysis, my taxonomy included a group where narrative was seen to be essential both for history and the communication of history. This would correspond to Sailhamer including the possibility of revelation being located in both history and the narrative. John Sailhamer, \textit{Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 30.} In effect he classifies biblical theological methodologies as those which locate revelation in the text and those that locate revelation in the event. Sailhamer does not deal directly with G. E. Wright but it is clear that he would classify him as one who places revelation in the event. Even with Wright’s nuances, the text remains primarily a witness to the revelation found in God’s acts. Sailhamer is adamant that the text itself, and not the event, is the locus of God’s revelation. When we look for meaning and sense, that is, when we look for the theological import of the revelation, this is to be identified with the author’s intention and interpretation. It is not an historical endeavor but a linguistic one. This is actually quite a strong claim, for he is in essence arguing that there is no need to look beyond the text since “the author will represent the text as the central focus
of the reader—that is, the author will not assume that the reader will be looking elsewhere for the information it intends to transmit.”

This is the methodology that he carries out in his narrative analysis of the Pentateuch. His approach to the Pentateuch is decidedly synchronic—he takes the five books of the Pentateuch as comprising a single whole and he applies linguistic and literary methods. This can be seen in the way he treats the structure of the narrative and especially in the way he considers individual narrative sections as they are placed in relationship to surrounding texts. This juxtaposition has implications for interpretation that go beyond cause and effect. If the material is organized in a way that moves beyond cause and effect then the events that are related are given a literary relationship. The best example is his view that the Sinai covenant is to be seen as the center of the whole Pentateuch. Like a controlling theme, even the creation account of Gen 1:1–2:4 serves the overall purposes of furthering the Sinai covenant by focusing creation on the three primary subjects of God, human beings, and land.

Sailhamer stresses the mimetic nature of narrative and thus a very close relationship between the text and the events. In a way, the text replaces the events, becoming in the mind of the reader almost the event itself. He calls this “one of the most characteristic


160 He states as much when he says that, “[a] close reading of Genesis 1:1–2:4a shows that the author made a careful and purposeful selection in composing the Creation account and that the features he selected do, in fact, provide an introduction to the Sinai covenant—that is, the Creation account tells the reader information that makes the author’s view of the Sinai covenant understandable.” Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 28. This is an example of selectivity that serves the author’s mimetic purposes but he also uses and describes other linguistic and literary methods.
features of narrative,” namely, “its attempt to mimic the real world, that is, to reproduce the real world in linguistic terms.”\textsuperscript{161} He goes on to say that “[t]he biblical writers did not necessarily want their narrative depictions of reality to be noticed as such. They were aiming at our reading their narratives as versions of the event themselves.”\textsuperscript{162} Here we see that Sailhamer definitely takes the view of mimesis that the text creates a heterocosm. Strangely, however, he takes the precarious position that even though the text is connected to reality by accurately reflecting the reality behind the text, the text is disconnected from reality because it creates its own complete and self-sufficient world that communicates itself to us with no need of any contextual understanding of the reality behind the text. Sailhamer’s view of the text moves toward a janusreflective mimesis even if the connection between the text and the reality behind the text is severely weakened. This leads him to focus on the internal (literary) relationships in the text and is also the reason that he locates revelation exclusively in the text and not in the historical events. However, the disjunction between the text and reality leads him to a less then fully linguistic approach as will be seen when I compare his approach to N. T. Wright’s.

\textbf{N. T. Wright}

Though a NT scholar, N. T. Wright’s approach is relevant both because of his narrative approach and because he offers a position that mediates between G. E. Wright (revelation in history) and Sailhamer (revelation in the text) in ways that help to advance the discussion here. In N. T. Wright, as in both G. E. Wright and Sailhamer, the text is witness to

\textsuperscript{161}Sailhamer, \textit{Introduction to Old Testament Theology}, 49.

\textsuperscript{162}Ibid., 50. Similarly, in The Pentateuch as Narrative he states that, “[a] biblical narrative text takes the raw material of language and shapes it into a version of the world of empirical reality. Its essentially linguistic structures are adapted to conform to events in real life.” Sailhamer, \textit{The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary}, 50.
actual historical events and the veracity of the witness is crucial to upholding the truth claims 
of the text. When he talks about his position he uses the example of a telescope, or more 
generically speaking, an arrangement of lenses. In the view of some narrative theologians the 
lenses are arranged in such a way as to become an angled mirror. Despite our attempts to get 
back to the events behind the text, the angle of the mirror keeps us from ever getting to the 
history behind the text and instead deflects our attention back upon the author. Thus 
revelation and with it the theological weight of the text is contained within the confession of 
the author and his community. However, like Sailhamer and unlike G. E. Wright, N. T. 
Wright insists that the lenses of the text are not arranged as a mere window to the event. No historical account can be “bare chronicle,” every account is an interpretation of the events 
and we get at this interpretation through linguistic and literary means. And this is where 
Wright departs from Sailhamer. Since he sees the text as a linguistic phenomenon he 
understands that phonemes are to be interpreted in the context of lexemes, lexemes in the 
context of sentences, sentences in the context of stories, and stories in the context of 
worldviews. Sailhamer’s is also a distinctly linguistic approach to the text and so this 
difference between them is not a difference in kind but it is a significant difference because 
of Sailhamer’s linguistic lacuna. Sailhamer underappreciates the role of pragmatics (itself a 
division of linguistic study) and thus in turn the role of context in interpretation. He wants to

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Question of God; London: SPCK, 1992), 95.

164 Ibid., 50–51.

165 Ibid., 70. For example he uses Greimas and Propp as a way of understanding the narrative 
structure of stories in Scripture, whether they be fictional (as in parables) or historical (the Gospels as literary 
units).

166 Ibid., 115.
create too sharp a cutoff of the text from the history behind the text. Wright, on the other hand, because he takes his linguistic methodology up to the level of worldview, situates the text in a cultural setting that must be understood in order to properly interpret the text. Thus he sees the text as a historical text and he applies historical methods to understanding it.

Narrative Theory and Plot in Biblical Studies

Prior to Clines’ synchronic study of the Pentateuch from the perspective of its theme or plot, J. P. Fokkelman pioneered the literary/synchronic approach to the biblical text. The first of his works to be published in English was *Narrative Art in Genesis* in 1975, though the original work came about as a result of his research in the sixties. The techniques that Fokkelman applied in this first work are explicated in *Reading Biblical Narrative* where he devotes a chapter to plot. Fokkelman supports many of the features of plot that I am advocating here. At first he talks about plot in terms of action; it is the action that serves as the backbone or core of the narrative moving it along in sequence. But for Fokkelman there is more than just mere reporting of action because of the process of selection. When we begin to understand the author’s reason for inclusion or exclusion then we begin to understand how the narrative is put together because, after all, “[t]he plot is the main organizing principle of the story.” He relates his views to those of Aristotle, speaking of a beginning, middle, and end that provide the narrative with coherence. This idea of a coherent whole has been mentioned before and it is crucial to the argument I am presenting. In an Aristotelian sense, beginning, middle, and end refers to much more than a sequence of events reported in

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167 Prior to Fokkelman’s introductory guide to biblical narrative Bar-Efrat published his work which is in many ways similar to Fokkelman’s especially with regard to his views on plot. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*.

168 Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 76.
chronological order. Actions arranged into a narrative structure with beginning, middle, and end have been given an organization that is infused with meaning. Fokkelman says, “[i]nspired and guided by a specific vision, the writer “sees” what would be a meaningful whole within the material.” \(^{169}\) Likewise, Bar-Efrat says that plot “serves to organize events in such a way as to arouse the reader’s interest and emotional involvement, while at the same time imbuing the events with meaning.” \(^{170}\)

Very much a part of this coherent structure is the trajectory along which the narrative develops. We might think of this trajectory as a movement from tension to resolution or expectation to fulfillment. It is this movement from the introduction of the tension to the release of the tension through successful or unsuccessful conclusion that produces a resolution that creates the unity and coherence of the story. Fokkelman says the story “begins by establishing a problem or deficit; next, it can present an exposition before the action gets urgent; obstacles and conflicts may occur that attempt to frustrate the dénouement, and finally there is the winding up, which brings the solution of the problem or the cancellation of the deficit.” \(^{171}\) The trajectory is what creates of the story one single action and it is what relates each action to the other. What is more, as I have argued earlier, because the trajectory from tension to resolution engages the reader and actually influences the reading process, it is the trajectory, in part, that serves to fuse the horizons of the reader and the text.

\(^{169}\) Ibid., 77.


\(^{171}\) Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 77. Bar-Efrat has a similar scheme and he also notes the fact that there may be other ways to organize the narrative other than along a trajectory of tension to resolution including sudden turns in expectations. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 94. Sternberg also sees a movement from a sort of tension to resolution but due to his “epistemological revolution” he finds it moving instead along a trajectory from the reader’s lack of knowledge to full knowledge controlled by the author. He calls this “the interplay of truth and the whole truth.” Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 88.
In a later chapter Fokkelman notes that individual stories can themselves become the building blocks for larger narratives. They can be organized into acts, cycles, or books. Each story may or may not have its own plot but together the stories work together to create a larger whole so that each story is to the larger act, cycle, or book, what the individual actions were to the story. In this way Fokkelman comes around to describing the text as a hierarchy. At the lowest levels are all the linguistic layers from phoneme to syntax—everything up to the level of the sentence which Fokkelman attributes to the field of traditional grammar. Next in his scheme come the levels that transcend the sentence and become the field of inquiry for discourse or textual analysis. These levels include sequences, speeches, scenes, etc. and include everything from the sentence to the story. Finally, we move on to next layer which comprises everything from the story to the book.

All of these levels from the phoneme to the text are interdependent. No one level alone can produce a complete and satisfactory interpretation of a text and no one level can be left out. For that reason, and since plot is the organizing principle of the text, plot cannot be left out of any interpretive strategy. That is why it is somewhat puzzling to find that while Fokkelman has worked with the plot of stories within Genesis and he has even worked with plots of larger narrative acts or cycles within Genesis, he did not address the issue of the plot of Genesis as a whole. Even more interesting is that so few people have done it since.

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172 Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 156.

173 Ibid., 161.
Laurence Turner and David Clines

David Clines supervised a dissertation by Laurence Turner that picked up on his work in the Pentateuch. This time, however, Turner focused in on the plot, or plots, of Genesis. In fact, Turner comes closer than anyone to working on the plot of Genesis as a whole in the sense that Fokkelman’s or Bar-Efrat’s definitions of plot invite us to do so. However, as I will show below, it falls short in one important way that turns out to be characteristic of all dealings with plot in Genesis.

Turner takes there to be four major narrative blocks in Genesis including the primaeval narrative and the subsequent narratives of Abraham, Jacob and Jacob’s family. He sets out to analyze the plot of these four narrative blocks and in doing so he finds it interesting that each begins with an announcement of plot. Turner defines announcements of plot as “statements which either explicitly state what will happen, or which suggest to the reader what the major elements of the plot are likely to be.” In the primeval narrative the announcement of plot is the statement “be fruitful and multiply” from Gen 1:22 and 28. The reader will expect that by the end of this narrative block or at least by the end of the book of Genesis this command will be fulfilled. In the Abraham narrative block it is God’s promises given to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3. In the Jacob story the announcement of plot appears first in Rebekah’s vision of Gen 25:23. In the case of the final announcement of plot which is

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174 Due to the remarkable similarity between the argument in Turner’s dissertation and Clines’ published article I have elected to deal only with Turner’s more extensive work: Laurence A. Turner, Announcements of Plot in Genesis (vol. 96; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990). As a general rule, the description and analysis of Turner’s work is valid for Clines’ work which is published as: David J. A. Clines, “What Happens in Genesis,” in What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 49–84.

175 Turner, Announcements of Plot in Genesis, 13.
associated with the narratives that Turner refers to as the narratives of Jacob’s family, it is
Joseph’s dreams that set up reader expectations for how the story is to proceed.

Having identified these announcements of plot Turner goes on to argue that
though they seem to promise some fulfillment they come up short in every case (even if some
have elements that are satisfactorily fulfilled).\textsuperscript{176} From this Turner draws the conclusion that
“the Announcements are misleading indicators of how the plot of Genesis will develop.”\textsuperscript{177}
Though Turner does not explicitly make the claim, his final interpretation of the whole of
Genesis warrants the assessment that he sees the overall coherence of the narrative as
existing in this lack of fulfillment. It is worthy of note that though Turner does point out how
each narrative continues on into the narratives that follow, through the entire book of
Genesis, he does not look at the plot of Genesis as a single plot and so does not relate the
individual narrative sections to the overall plot of Genesis (if there is one). However, based
on the coherence he does identify, the book is a playful representation of divine and human
interaction where the reader is led to expect that the divine intentions described by the
announcements of plot will be fulfilled but are thwarted by human action or circumstances
that result in God’s altering his plans or perhaps even being unable to fulfill them.\textsuperscript{178} This
results in a theological conclusion counter to that of most commentators. According to
Turner, “[t]here is here, therefore, no high view of divine providence.”\textsuperscript{179}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[176] Ibid., 177.
\item[177] Ibid., 181.
\item[178] Perhaps it could be argued that Turner sees this as the organizing principle of Genesis—that is, that expectations are set up and thwarted. That would be possible but I did not find strong enough evidence in the work to conclude that he argues in this way. To do so, he would have to demonstrate how the book reaches some kind of ending so that Genesis can be seen as presenting a single action and that the various sub-plots of Genesis work together not just logically but also by literary connection. Turner does not argue explicitly in either of these senses and this is likely due to his conception of plot.
\item[179] Turner, \emph{Announcements of Plot in Genesis}, 182.
\end{footnotes}
When Turner defines what he means by plot he draws on Forster’s distinction between a story and a plot. Turner says the key to a plot is the causal connection between narrated events. He also talks about reading “as a first-time reader, unaware at any point of what the next development in the plot may be and ignorant of the way in which subsequent narratives both inside and outside the book may utilize material from Genesis.” These two taken together expose the flaw in Turner’s approach. Turner wants to read as a first-time reader because this emphasizes the fact that we must pay attention to the expectations developed by the author without imposing our own knowledge on the events as they are developed. In doing so, Turner is moving towards the idea that the events reported in the text are put together in such a way as to impose order on the text. However, he falls short of this. For him, plot is merely the causal connection of the events moving forward in relation one to another. The middle and end are to be read in relation to the beginning because they flow out of the beginning. This is extremely important because the reading strategy that Turner employs as a first-time reader implicitly argues that the only connection between the beginning and the end can be found in this causal chain linking them along the unidirectional flow of reading time (which is why we can only read from beginning to end as a naïve first-time reader). Turner’s perception of plot is syntagmatic but not paradigmatic and is therefore not a “seeing together” of the text which understands plot to be the representation of a single action.

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180 For Forster story is only a chronologically arranged sequence of events whereas plot is concerned with the “why?” or causal relationship between events. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 86. It is also here where we find Forster’s example of a story “The king died and the queen died.” A plot relates these two events causally so that “The king died and then the queen died of grief” is a plot.

This is a fundamental misunderstanding of plot and what it means to talk about a beginning, middle, and end. To have a beginning, middle, and end implies the imposition of structure on the text and it is this structure, which transcends even the causal relationships of the events, that produces the relationship between the end and the beginning and gives meaning to the text. It is due to this transcending structure that a text which moves from expectation to lack of fulfillment can still provide the sense of completion. The sense of completion is important because it is only if the narrative is complete that we can find lack of fulfillment. After all, if the narrative is not complete, we could simply continue along the cause and effect chain until fulfillment is achieved. Furthermore, if “beginning, middle, and end” is the imposition of structure on the narrated events and if it is this structure that provides the meaning, then lack of fulfillment of its own does not provide the foundation for the meaning that Turner abstracts from the text. It is merely the happenstance result of natural events devoid of significance. In other words, if Turner wants to show that the lack of fulfillment for each of the narrative units has the theological meaning that he asserts, he must show how the work as a whole comes to an end (the opportunity for fulfillment has ceased), how the subnarratives relate to that end, and how that relationship supports his conclusion.

182 Admittedly, I am measuring Turner against an Aristotelian view of plot which he may argue against. However, based on the sources he draws from, this seems not to be the case. Another instance where he separates himself from an Aristotelian view, possibly revealing a full understanding of Aristotle’s concept of plot is in the statement “It is not to be expected that everything following the initial Announcement of plot will be, or can be, directly related to it,” Turner, Announcements of Plot in Genesis, 14. In a trivial sense this is true, but from the standpoint of the construction of the plot, or the organization of the text according to the plot, it runs counter to Aristotle’s view of plot as a “single action.”

183 It is precisely for this reason that Clines is compelled to address the issue as to whether or not the narrative should be extended to the end of Kings. But he still does not recognize the need to relate the announcements to the plot. Both of these authors are taking these statements as expectations that need to be fulfilled and are not fulfilled by the end of the narrative but by not relating them to the plot their analysis becomes arbitrary. See Clines, “What Happens in Genesis,” 64.
It seems to me that Turner and Clines have failed to see the significance of “beginning, middle, and end,” that it is more than just a cause-effect report of events that arise out of the beginning. Instead, it is a series of events temporally and causally arranged, yes, but infused with meaning because of the plot which imposes an order on the events with the goal that they may be seen as one action. It is this point that I think is undervalued throughout biblical studies especially when dealing with the book of Genesis and the biblical plot overall.

John Goldingay

If plot is the organizing principle of a narrative, and if the Bible as a whole can be seen as a single narrative, albeit with non-narrative portions that contribute to the development of the narrative, then it makes sense to treat plot as an organizing principle of biblical theology. In what follows I would like to point out two works that begin to look at biblical theology from the perspective of plot. In both cases I think they fall into the same truncated view of plot that Turner and Clines follow when they look at plot as a series of actions that arise out of the beginning.

Goldingay has only recently completed his three volume work on biblical theology, the first volume of which professes to take a narrative approach. He explicitly claims that his first volume “is a work of narrative theology.”184 And he claims that even if not all of Scripture is narrative, “[t]he nature of the Old Testament's faith is to be a statement about God’s involvement in a particular sequence of events in the world. It is for this reason that Old Testament theology has to be shaped by narrative.”185 The narrative then, is witness

184 Goldingay, Israel’s Gospel, 28.
185 Ibid., 32.
to God’s activity in the world, so the event that the text describes is important. It is a historical narrative. When Goldingay describes the significance of the narrative form we see also why the correspondence to reality is important. First of all we see in the narrative that the story, though having a beginning and a middle, does not come to an end. For Goldingay this deferment of the ending is an important characteristic of Israel’s faith and one of the reasons for the pertinence of narrative.

My assertion that Goldingay, like Turner and Clines, fails to see the organizing nature of the plot finds support in the way that he interacts with and draws conclusions from the narrative flow. Rather than looking for the overall narrative structure in the book of Genesis, for example, and noting how the events relate to this structure, he looks to the way Scripture gives testimony to the unfolding narrative. It is a relationship where one event arises from another rather than all events being related according to the one organizing principle of its plot. In other words, it lacks the paradigmatic dimension of plot.

Goldingay also suggests that while the narrative view of theology has its advantages, the Bible offers another view of theology apart from the narrative view, that is, the metaphysical view, which offers descriptions of God’s traits, qualities, etc. Together the narrative and metaphysical accounts offer a binocular vision of theology. I would suggest that this also is evidence of a malformed view of plot. If plot involves one event rising out of another then, yes, the poetic interruptions of the wisdom literature and even the prophets create a break in the action that has no obvious connection to the beginning. But if plot

\[186\] Ibid., 34.

\[187\] Ibid., 35.

creates a unity out of a text that is moved along by the events but held together by the larger organizing principle then there is no reason that large swaths of poetic material cannot also be a part of that organizing scheme. In the book of Samuel, for example, two poems help to define and shape the plot.

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen

Goldingay takes a substantially narrative approach to biblical theology even if it is not an all-inclusive approach sustained throughout the Bible. Bartholomew and Goheen expand on this by suggesting that all of Scripture comprises a single “grand narrative.”

They justify this approach in two ways. The first is typical of narrative theology which emphasizes the advantages of narrative for giving a picture of the world. Each of us, they say, is living out our own personal story and we do this according to our worldview, or according the grand narrative that we have subscribed to. The Bible offers us an alternate grand narrative that we can use as the foundation or context of our own individual narrative. The second justification for this approach is simply that the Bible is a single unfolding story and should be read in that way.

Following the example of N. T. Wright, they find in the biblical story a pattern of development analogous to traditional five act dramas. This is important because it reveals their understanding of plot as following a trajectory from conflict to resolution, essentially similar to the idea of a beginning, middle, and end. Based on this Bartholomew

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189 They go on to say, “Not only do we think this possible—and thus wish to commend it as a major way of doing biblical theology—but also think it important if Scripture is to function as God’s word in the life of his people.” Bartholomew and Goheen, “Story and Biblical Theology,” 144.

190 Bartholomew and Goheen, The Drama of Scripture, 21.

191 Ibid., 27. Their scheme is similar to N. T. Wright’s five act scheme. Wright, The New Testament and the People of God, 140.
and Goheen proceed to relate the unfolding narrative of Scripture in a way that corresponds more closely to the concept of plot that I am advocating than most of the works discussed so far. In fact they argue that “[w]e cannot grasp the meaning of the story of Jesus until we begin to see that it is in fact the climactic episode of the great story of the Bible.”¹⁹² In other words, this corresponds to what I am arguing. The organization of the story provided by the plot imbues the narrative with meaning.

On the other hand, they also seem to revert to a thematic approach to biblical theology whereby they find the two themes of “covenant and kingdom to be the double door of the same main entrance to the scriptural cathedral.”¹⁹³ When they speak of this dual theme as the entrance to the cathedral they refer to a previous analogy they made between the biblical story and a cathedral. The themes of covenant and kingdom are the doors through which we approach the story. They talk about other possible entrances into the kingdom but they argue that while those other entrances (such as promise or presence) offer a view of the cathedral they do not offer the same overview of the whole that covenant and kingdom do. This seems in conflict with their approach to Scripture as a story if they have in fact understood plot as the organizing principle of the narrative. Is this both a story approach and thematic approach? How can it be both? What is the relationship between the two? The book is not meant to be a scholarly work and so it would not be appropriate to press them on this too much. Nonetheless I would simply offer the observation that if plot is the organizing principle of the narrative then the theme should be an expression of the plot that summarizes somehow the meaning implicit in the move from tension to resolution and one should be able to demonstrate how the theme arises from one’s identification of the plot.

¹⁹² Bartholomew and Goheen, The Drama of Scripture, 129.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 24.
Summary

We began this chapter by noting the divergence between history and story brought about by James Barr. The ensuing debate occurred parallel to (and slightly offset from) the debate about history and narrative in the twentieth century in America and England. But the history and narrative debate taught us that it is not a question of whether history or story (narrative) but a question of how history and narrative relate to each other. As we traversed the discussion we discovered that our understanding of mimesis shapes our understanding of how narrative relates history. We came to the conclusion that mimesis offers a double-faced or janureflective relationship between narrative and history whereby history both creates a world of its own while also truly representing reality. This helped us to recast the problem and with the help of Ricœur we began to see mimesis as transference of historical reality into the realm of narrative. Mimesis, and thus narrative, is therefore an isomorphism of historical reality. Again from Ricœur, we then said that plot has both paradigmatic and syntagmatic properties. On the one hand it is a seeing together of the action into a single whole that transcends the individual actions. On the other hand it is a consecutive cause-effect or tension-resolution sequential relationship that moves linearly through the narrative from beginning to end.

With this understanding of plot in mind we can better understand the justification for the relatively recent movement of conservative scholars toward narrative. And yet our understanding of plot exposes some weaknesses in the attempts at identifying plot (whether in Genesis, the Pentateuch, or all of Scripture) or in its application to biblical theology. Before I can actually embark on my application of plot to the exegesis of Scripture and Genesis, I now need only to further identify the specific methodology, or reading strategy, that I intend to use.
CHAPTER 3
A READING STRATEGY FOR GENESIS

In the previous chapter I attempted to establish plot as a linguistic phenomenon of the text. In fact I suggested that plot is the highest level discourse which creates textual cohesion through the imposition of a narrative structure that moves from tension to resolution. In the present chapter it is my aim to use this as a foundation for establishing a strategy for reading Genesis according to its plot. To develop this strategy I will draw on the Prague Linguistic Circle’s Functional Sentence Perspective in combination with a generally recognized feature of the text, namely, the תּוֹלְדוֹת headings.

Functional Sentence Perspective, Thematic Progression, and Plot

One of the first and most lasting contributions introduced by Roman Jakobson and developed further by others in the Prague Linguistic Circle was the concept of markedness. Jakobson first applied markedness to phonology, but the idea was subsequently developed in the areas of morphology, syntax, and semantics so that markedness is now a generally recognized feature of linguistic analysis.

Early on in the Prague Circle’s development of the idea of markedness, Mathesius, one of its founders, applied the concept to the arrangement of words in sentences

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relative to their context. This kind of sentence analysis has come to be known as “Functional Sentence Perspective,” as coined by Firbas.

Functional Sentence Perspective may be thought of as a grammar based not on the function of sentence parts in the sentence, but the function of sentence parts based on the surrounding context. Mathesius contrasts functional perspective with the formal or grammatical perspective. According to the formal, or grammatical perspective we would classify sentence parts as subject and predicate, and the position that these parts take in the sentence is determined by grammatical rules. In the functional perspective, rather than subject and predicate we have “point of departure” and “core.” The terms that we have become accustomed to in English are theme (for point of departure) and rheme (for core). In functional sentence perspective the order of the parts of the sentence is determined not by grammatical rules but by communicative or functional rules.

The concept of Functional Sentence Perspective has been significantly advanced since Mathesius so that today similar concepts are applied not only at the level of the sentence but at the level of paragraphs or episodes. For example Firbas introduced the concept of communicative dynamism. He noted that some functional elements in a sentence


3 Čermák, “Ferdinand de Saussure and the Prague Linguistic Structuralism,” 18.

4 From the Czech, “východiště” a “ jádro.” Mathesius, *Jazyk, Kultura a Slovesnost*, 174. Some schools of Functional Sentence Perspective identify these terms with theme and rhyme (most notably Sgall and Firbas), while others prefer to distinguish between theme and point of departure (Mathesius himself along with Daneš and Halliday, among others). This particular issue of distinguishing between theme and point of departure points to the fact that once one gets past the general insights of functional sentence perspective there is rather a bit of disagreement as to the details. In this analysis my hope is to stick with those aspects of functional sentence perspective that are generally agreed upon.
exhibit more potential for moving the discourse along toward its communicative goal. Firbas says that,

it is an inherent quality of communication and manifests itself in constant
development towards the attainment of a communicative goal; in other words,
towards the fulfillment of a communicative purpose. Participating in this
development, a linguistic element assumes some position in it and in
accordance with this position displays a degree of communicative dynamism.\(^5\)

To follow the communicative dynamism of a text is to follow the text as it transforms rheme
to theme and moves towards its communicative goal. The movement of plot from tension to
resolution parallels the theme-rheme relationship and so the use of the insights of functional
sentence perspective and the analysis of the communicative dynamism of a text can be used
to follow the plot of a story.\(^6\)

Daneš takes this thinking to the next step. He suggests that “even a superficial
observation of texts shows that the choice and distribution of themes in the text reveal a
certain patterning … the progression of the presentation of subject-matter must necessarily be
governed by some regularities, must be patterned.”\(^7\) In Daneš’s conception of thematic
progression, if theme is the primary functional sentence perspective unit around which the
text is organized, thus giving the text cohesion, it is the rheme, which carries a higher degree
of communicative dynamism, that moves the text on progressively toward its goal by
providing the new information, or by modifying and altering the theme, or by itself becoming

\(^5\) Jan Firbas, *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication* (Studies
in English Language; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7.

\(^6\) Ricœur refers to the movement from tension to resolution by the way of one event or episode
leading to another as the “constitutive dynamism of the narrative configuration.” Ricœur, *Time and Narrative I*,
66.

\(^7\) František Daneš, ed., “Functional Sentence Perspective and the Organization of the Text,” in
the new theme in the next textual segment. The roles played by theme and rheme in the organization and development of the text cause Daneš to observe that “[t]hematic progression might be viewed as the skeleton of the plot.”

Finally we arrive at Van Dijk who applies these concepts to discourse and especially in reference to units of text segmentation such as paragraphs or episodes of a narrative. Van Dijk asserts that instead of following a text from sentence to sentence, texts are divided into episodes that we can relate to one another in a way analogous to theme-rheme. This is what he means when he claims that “[e]pisodes may be the ‘locus’ for local coherence strategies.”

We can now apply this thinking to arrive at a foundation for our approach to narrative. Within a narrative such as Genesis we can think of a hierarchy of episodes where episodes combine into macro episodes that combine to make up the text as a whole. Each episode may have its own beginning, middle, and end even while each also contributes to moving the macro-episode along from beginning, to middle, to end in a pattern of thematic progression that follows the development of the story from tension to resolution. The key is to understand not only each episode as an independent unit, but also how each contributes to the movement of the macro-episode from tension to resolution. In doing so we do justice to both the syntagmatic nature of plot which moves from tension to resolution but also to the

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8 Ibid., 113.
9 Ibid., 114.
10 I am thinking in general of episodes as stories, each with a beginning, middle, and end. However, for the purpose of developing this idea I am ignoring the fact that text units at the level of episode need not all be stories. In Genesis we have genealogies at the macro-episode level that also contribute to the development of the plot. Nonetheless, stories tend to do the heavy lifting when it comes to moving the plot from tension to resolution.
paradigmatic nature of plot which arranges the parts into a coherent whole based on a seeing together of events.

This brings us finally to the application of functional sentence perspective to our strategy for reading the plot of Genesis. One of the major challenges of this analysis is that while working on the plot of Genesis as a whole, the space limitations make it impossible to deal exhaustively or even thoroughly with the entire book. It will be necessary to make a compromise that mediates between the necessity to deal with the details of the text on the one hand and, on the other hand, identifying and describing the emplotment of the text at the highest level of discourse.

The first step in the strategy is therefore to develop a method for dividing the text and dealing with it according to its hierarchical divisions. In terms of the chapters that follow I have divided the text according to Aristotle’s concept of plot, that is into beginning (chapter 4), middle (chapters 5-7), and end (chapter 8). The major textual divisions, however, are taken to be the divisions that arise as a result of the תּוֹלְדוֹת arrangement of the text. Since not every תּוֹלְדוֹת section is a properly formed narrative division, these sections do not all function at the same level of the discourse. In the second section of this chapter I will go into more detail on the specific strategy for analyzing the תּוֹלְדוֹת sections. Once the narrative divisions at the תּוֹלְדוֹת level are identified, the primary goal of this study will be to work at this level to identify and describe the thematic progression of the text from tension to resolution.

This is the reason that the chapter division which follows is arranged according to beginning, middle, and end. The primary goal of chapter 4 will be to identify the tension of the narrative. We must first recognize, as I will argue in chapter 4, that the book of Genesis contains a narrative which functions as a sub-plot of the larger biblical narrative. Therefore the early chapters of Genesis contain first of all the tension which will serve as the guiding trajectory for the Biblical plot as a whole and only then will it develop the tension
that serves as the trajectory for the plot of Genesis. To identify the tension of the biblical plot is the start of identifying the theme for the biblical text. The theme is only completely identified when coupled with the resolution—further emphasizing the fact that we must work at all textual levels at once. Similarly, to identify the tension of the Genesis plot is the beginning of identifying the theme of the book of Genesis. However, these two themes operate in a hierarchical relationship so that the theme of Genesis might be said to serve as the rheme to the biblical theme. In other words, we should expect that Genesis is a macro-episode within the biblical text that moves the story along in thematic progression from tension to resolution. Likewise we should expect that each well-formed תּוֹלְדֹת narrative also has a theme which serves as a rheme within the thematic progression of Genesis. This continues on down the textual hierarchy.

In summary, the goal of an analysis of the plot of Genesis is to understand in what way the text represents an Aristotelian single action. In order to best accomplish this feat I will undertake to describe as thoroughly as possible, given the limitations of this project, the thematic progression of the book of Genesis at the level of the תּוֹלְדֹת. In order to do this I will need to first of all place the Genesis plot within the larger plot of Scripture by identifying as nearly as possible the tension of Scripture as indicated in the early chapters of Genesis. Then it will be necessary to do as much detail work as possible within each of the תּוֹלְדֹת strands in order to establish the theme (which is to say the plot or other narrative structure) of each of the תּוֹלְדֹת strands so that the skeleton of the plot of Genesis can be described as nearly as possible as the thematic progression at the level of the תּוֹלְדֹת.

*The תּוֹלְדֹת Headings and the Beginning, Middle, and End of Genesis*

In this section I will argue that the תּוֹלְדֹת structure of Genesis creates six main narrative groupings within the book. The first narrative section (Gen 1:1-2:3) precedes any תּוֹלְדֹת heading and so we can think of it as a prologue to the book. The five remaining
In terms of plot, I will be arguing that the prologue and the first plexus establish the beginning of the Genesis plot, the next three make up the middle, and the last plexus brings the plot to its climactic conclusion.

The תּוֹלְדוֹת formulae in Genesis became a heated topic of discussion with the documentary hypothesis. Wellhausen ascribed the תּוֹלְדוֹת headings to the P redaction of the book, asserting that they serve as the scaffolding which ties the whole together. However, his presuppositions regarding the nature of the P redaction led him, and those who followed him, to argue that the heading in 2:4 had been misplaced from its original location—that it should really occur at the beginning of the book. If the headings are truly the organizing structure, one would expect the author to be consistent in their use. Thus since Wellhausen there has been general agreement that the תּוֹלְדוֹת phrases provide structure for the book of Genesis but the quest to find the logic of their arrangement has found no consensus.

There are a number of challenges that make it difficult to find the principle of composition that explains the structure. First, some of the phrases seem to serve as headers

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11 I have elected to use the braid metaphor in the naming of תּוֹלְדוֹת divisions, inasmuch as the combination of the תּוֹלְדוֹת divisions creates a weaving or braiding of plot. The book of Genesis is usually thought of being made up of twelve divisions created by the eleven תּוֹלְדוֹת headings (there are an additional two instances of תּוֹלְדוֹת that do not occur in headings). Each section with a תּוֹלְדוֹת heading will be referred to as a תּוֹלְדוֹת strand, whether each strand is a narrative or a genealogy. Three strands, a linear genealogy, a narrative, and a segmented genealogy are usually combined to create a single תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus. For example, the Shem, Terah, and Ishmael תּוֹלְדוֹת strands make up the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus. Plexus is derived from the past participle of the Latin plectere, which means to braid. When a narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת division has a chiastic structure the subdivisions are often referred to as layers and, where appropriate, may also be referred to as episodes or even narrative sections.

12 Julius Wellhausen, Prolegomena to the History of Israel. With a Reprint of the Article “Israel” from the Encyclopaedia Brittanica (trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies; Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885), 296. Eiβfeldt was especially important in promoting the idea that the תּוֹלְדוֹת formulae are part of what arises from a “conscious literary design” (von bewußter schriftstellerischer Planung.”) Otto Eiβfeldt, “Biblos geneseōs,” in Gott Und Die Götter; Festgabe Für Erich Fascher Zum 60. Geburtstag (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1958), 34.
but others seem awkward in this position (Gen 2:4, as noted). Sometimes what follows is a genealogy (sometimes linear, sometimes segmented), while other times we find a narrative. With the תּוֹלְדוֹת heading introducing both genealogical and narrative sections, how should the term be understood? Some of the headings trace the line of promise; some trace the line not of promise. If the תּוֹלְדוֹת phrases are to be seen as headings for divisions of the book, how do we explain the double entry for Esau (Gen 36:1 and 9)? And finally, we have the fact that there is no major section for Abraham and the related fact that Terah, Isaac, and Jacob are the תּוֹלְדוֹת headings for the narratives of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, respectively. Sometimes attempts at explaining these conundra create new problems, but every attempt needs to address at least these issues. Despite a lack of consensus, when we examine various attempts at understanding the תּוֹלְדוֹת arrangement we find certain points of convergence of opinion. These points of convergence suffice to provide the basic form and function of the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure.

The first point of convergence, which goes back at least to Wellhausen, is the overriding consensus that the תּוֹלְדוֹת phrases serve to structure the book. This was noted by Wellhausen, but Eißfeldt brought this to bear as a principle of composition for the book, meaning Genesis is not joined in a haphazard way but in a way that produces a unified structure and meaning.\(^{13}\) Since Eißfeldt, a number of authors have continued along this track, including Scharbert, Külling, Koch, Tengström and others. Though each of these has their own take on the nature or function of the תּוֹלְדוֹת arrangement, each argues with some force that the תּוֹלְדוֹת phrases are the primary element of textual coordination. Perhaps most detailed and most convincing is Tengström’s argument that we have a variety of genealogical

\(^{13}\)“Es dürfte deutlich geworden sein, daß die elf Toledot-Formeln in der Tat ein von bewußter schriftstellerischer Planung zeugendes sinnvolles Ganzes bilden.” Eißfeldt, “Biblos geneseōs,” 34.
forms throughout the book of Genesis yet the headings and conclusions of these genealogies are uniform. This consistency indicates that a variety of genealogical material has been conformed to the overall narrative pattern of the book.\textsuperscript{14} He even argues that the narrative portions themselves have undergone a literary shaping in order to match the format of the genealogies of Gen 5 and 10.\textsuperscript{15} For these reasons it seems that this consensus is reflected in the data of the text.

The second point of convergence is that the תּוֹלְדוֹת phrases are not colophons that end a section, but headings that begin a section. Wiseman argued for the alternate viewpoint partly in an attempt to counter the documentary theory’s tendency to fragment the book of Genesis.\textsuperscript{16} However, his theory created as many new problems as it seemed to solve.\textsuperscript{17} Külling, drawing on Holwerda, pointed out that the phrases point both backward and forward. Since the word itself arises from the Hebrew verbוֹלַל it naturally points forward to the generations to come; while the genitive associated with it (e.g. “of Adam”) looks back to a starting point.\textsuperscript{18} So we rightly view the תּוֹלְדוֹת phrases as junctions between two sections. Yet at the same time, אֵלֶּה must refer either backward to what has been recounted, or forward to what is yet to be recounted. In this case the most natural reading is that it looks forward.

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\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 32–33. He specifically identifies this pattern, which he refers to as the “Toledotschema.”
\textsuperscript{17} Wiseman, \textit{New Discoveries in Babylonia About Genesis}, 48.
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This is true based on its use outside Genesis (cf. Ruth 4:18 and its numerous uses in 1 Chronicles 1-9), and also from the perspective of the Genesis narrative itself, since in every other instance the phrase is best read as a heading. This includes the narratives about Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph that begin with תּוֹלְדוֹת headings for Terah, Isaac, and Jacob respectively. However, when we take into consideration not only the redactional history of the book, or supposed ANE parallels, but also the literary purpose of the headings, which is to connect one line or narrative to the next in a continuous genealogical line, then these תּוֹלְדוֹת phrases make sense as headings rather than as colophons.

The third point of convergence is the idea that the arrangement of the תּוֹלְדוֹת effects the narrowing of the genealogy down to the seed of promise, leaving aside the line that falls outside the line of promise. This is especially clear in the use of the genealogies in the book. Linear genealogies, which usually function to follow a particular line of descent, for example as in king lists, are used in conjunction with the major narrative strands (also marked by תּוֹלְדוֹת headings) to trace the line of the seed of promise from the beginning of the book to the end. The segmented genealogies with תּוֹלְדוֹת headings, on the other hand, serve to define the alternate line (the line not of promise) in relation to the line of promise

and, in effect, cauterize it within the narrative. While concern with the alternate line does not continue after the segmented genealogy, the line of promise is immediately taken up and continued in the narrative.

Now we can take these observations together and begin to see how the headings function within the book of Genesis. First of all, the use of the headings and the genealogies associated with them allow us to trace a single line from the beginning of the book, starting with the heavens and the earth, through to the end, concluding with the twelve sons of Israel. From this observation, and the fact that the headings are used to somehow structure the book, we notice that the book as a whole functions as a genealogy that traces the line of promise. In fact, we note from other ANE genealogies, including linear genealogies, that it is not uncommon for a genealogy to include narrative expansions at certain points. In that sense we can think of Genesis as a dramatic extension of the genealogy genre.

However, Genesis is more than just a genealogy with extensive narrative addenda; we see here a genealogy that has been shaped to fit the narrative goals of the author. This is apparent in the use of Gen 2:4 within the structure. In this case the phrase heads a narrative strand which I am suggesting belongs in the linear chain for the line of promise. In that case this must be a metaphorical application of genealogy, clearly transcending standard expectations of genealogical genre, hinting at a larger narrative

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21 It is, of course, anachronistic to speak of “twelve tribes of Israel” at the end of Genesis, when it is only the house of Jacob, a mere group of 70, that went down to Egypt. Yet the book clearly has left off at a point that lays a foundation for understanding Israel in its tribal sense due in part to the narrative of the blessing of Joseph’s sons. This, I think, is a significant observation that, among other factors, leads me to conclude that the book should be seen as an identity narrative that defines Israel vis-à-vis the nations.
purpose. It is also important to note the unique combination of both linear and segmented genealogies within the same document. Not only have the two types of genealogy been intermingled within the same document, they have been arranged in such a way as to complement each other. This again is outside the normal genealogical form, suggesting an overriding literary purpose.

This raises the inevitable question as to how the תּוֹלְדוֹת have been arranged and what purpose they serve. Even on this issue there is a certain degree of convergence, even if dissenting opinions remain and despite the fact that not all questions are solved. I will begin this discussion by turning to Steinberg’s analysis, not because hers is the best solution, but because, more than others, she takes into consideration how the תּוֹלְדוֹת strands function together, especially with a view as to how they advance the plot of the book. I will look at her conclusions, modify them in the light of studies of Koch and Tengström, and then offer a suggestion as to how they fit within the beginning, middle, and end of Genesis.

Steinberg argues that family stability is “the ideal narrative state” in the book of Genesis. The literary representation of the ideal state is a genealogy since it peacefully progresses from one generation to the next without interruption. The family stories in Genesis, however, are fraught with tension, usually centering on the identification of the heir that is to follow. Therefore while genealogical portions of the text correspond to states of equilibrium, the narrative portions of the text reveal states of narrative disequilibrium.

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22 Averbeck, “Factors in Reading the Patriarchal Narratives: Literary, Historical, and Theological Dimensions,” 127. Averbeck notes significantly that, “it is not beyond the reach of our evidence to propose that genealogy could serve as the framework or skeleton within which stories could be remembered and sometimes recorded.” Averbeck, “Factors in Reading the Patriarchal Narratives,” 133.

23 Ibid., 12.

Steinberg then couples this analysis of the narrative with Todorov’s theory of plot which moves from equilibrium to disequilibrium back to equilibrium (through the agency of narrative forces that cause the shift from one state to another) to argue that the patriarchal portion of the book follows a literary pattern of three structurally similar cycles, each of which moves from equilibrium to disequilibrium, then back to equilibrium. In each case the genealogies serve to restore the state of equilibrium. Within this literary structure, Steinberg identifies the genealogies of Shem (Gen 11:10-16), Ishmael (Gen 25:12-18), and Esau (Gen 36:1-37:1) as the superscriptions for the three narrative cycles. She believes that each of these genealogies provides the initial stable situation which then becomes the unstable situation when the family narrative begins.

There are a few problems with Steinberg’s analysis. In part she relies upon a comparison of the genealogy of Shem to the genealogy of Ishmael, which, she asserts, demonstrates structural equivalency. However, the equivalency that she finds is vague and unconvincing. It seems to boil down to neither genealogy having narrative components or to the steady flow from one generation to the next. In fact, these genealogies are quite different. The Shem genealogy is linear while Ishmael’s is segmented. The Shem genealogy uses verbal sentences while the Ishmael genealogy non-verbal. Finally, the Ishmael genealogy does in fact include a narrative portion in vv. 17-18. Significantly, this is the account of Ishmael’s settling outside of the land of Canaan, a feature which is more similar to the Shem, Ham and Japheth genealogy of Gen 10:1-32. In fact, it is quite surprising that she would

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25 Ibid., 42.
26 Ibid., 43.
27 Ibid., 46. In fact she says, “[i]n every respect, the generations of Ishmael recorded in Gen 25:12-18 are the structural equivalent of the generations of Shem in Genesis 11:10-26.”
compare the Shem genealogy to the Ishmael genealogy, given the unique similarities between the Adam and Shem genealogies. But this final observation gives rise to the major objection to her scheme, which is that it deals only with the patriarchal history in Gen 12-50 and does not take into consideration how the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure of Gen 12-50 relates to that of Gen 1-11, something that seems quite necessary if one wants to suggest that there is some kind of literary shaping taking place in the book as a whole.

Nonetheless, Steinberg has some important insights. First of all, she has begun to consider that the תּוֹלְדוֹת headings, even those that head different types of genealogies, work together to advance the narrative. Secondly, she has taken an approach that attempts to take the plot of the book into consideration. In this regard, I think she has rightly identified the major issue in the three narrative cycles as being the identification of the seed that will continue the line of promise. However, she has looked at sub-plots within the book of Genesis or at most a cycle of sub-plots, without considering how they fit into the larger plot of the book. This would be impossible to do without looking at the book as a whole and considering the arrangement all together. I want to do just that by first of all modifying her proposal based on the work of Tengström and Koch.

Steinberg believes the genealogies of Shem, Ishmael, and Esau serve as superscriptions for the narrative cycles in the patriarchal history. Yet I have already mentioned that these are genealogies of two different types and I have also previously asserted that the linear genealogies of Genesis can be seen to trace the line of promise from the beginning to the end of the book. This assertion relies on understanding the narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת strands as being continuous with the linear genealogies of Gen 5 and 11:10-26. Tengström’s study bolsters this argument since he has observed that the genealogies of Gen 5
and 11:10-26 are both in narrative form by virtue of the fact that they are based on verbal sentences.\textsuperscript{28} Also, he has shown that both the genealogies of Gen 5 and 11:10-26 are organized according to a similar structure that follows the pattern set by Gen 5.\textsuperscript{29} If that is the case, then the Shem תּוֹלְדוֹת should not be considered together with the Ishmael and Esau תּוֹלְדוֹת. We should be seeking another narrative arrangement.

Koch’s arrangement of the narrative is useful for this purpose. Like Tengström, he observes that we have genealogies characterized by nominal sentences and others characterized by verbal sentences and so produces a similar division of the תּוֹלְדוֹת headings. In his scheme we have תּוֹלְדוֹת strands that are epochal, and תּוֹלְדוֹת strands that are enumerative. Drawing on his observation he suggests that these two strands work together to organize the text. He notes in particular that, “Die Epochen-Toledot stehen durchweg der Schilderung eines in sich geschlossenen Zeitraums voran, während die Geschlechter-Toledot an deren Ende stehen.”\textsuperscript{30} This is opposite to Steinberg’s suggestion,

\textsuperscript{28}Koch, “Die Toledot-Formeln als Strukturprinzip des Buches Genesis,” 184.

\textsuperscript{29}Tengström, Die Toledotformel und die literarische Struktur der priesterlichen Erweiterungsschicht im Pentateuch, 21. He identifies the elements present in chapter 5 as follows: a) the personal name of the father of the next generation, b) his age at birth, c) the son mentioned by name is in the genealogical main line, d) the life of the father after giving birth to that son, e) other sons and daughters that are not mentioned by name are the genealogical sideline, f) the total age of the father, and g) his death. The Shem genealogy differs from this slightly (he notes it is missing the f and g elements but he has argued cogently that this is due to the immediate narrative purpose of each genealogy). He has also argued that the narrative sections follow this same pattern with more variation. With regard to the variation of the narrative portions from the pattern he also has plausible arguments, though not always quite as convincing. Nonetheless, he shows some affinity between the narrative portions and the Adam and Shem genealogies that supports the view to the degree necessary for this study. Either way, the simple fact that a single line can be traced is sufficient evidence for taking the narrative portions together with the תּוֹלְדוֹת of linear genealogical format.

\textsuperscript{30}Koch, “Die Toledot-Formeln als Strukturprinzip des Buches Genesis,” 187. “The epoch תּוֹלְדוֹת sections consistently come before the narrative of a self-contained period, while the enumerative תּוֹלְדוֹת sections stand at the end.”
which would have placed the enumerative genealogies at the beginning as superscript. Koch arranges the book as follows:

1. From Adam to Noah (2:4-6:8)
2. The flood narrative—recreation of humanity and the earth (6:9-11:26)
3. The Abraham narrative (11:27-25:18)
4. The Jacob narrative (25:19-37:1)
5. The Joseph narrative (37:2-50:26)

Koch’s scheme, however, is not without its problems. The major problem is the fact that we have a תּוֹלְדוֹת strand subsumed within his second section, without adequate explanation.

For one further tweaking of the structure we can return to Steinberg’s insight that certain genealogies do serve as a transition from one section to the next. She placed these genealogies as superscripts; I suggest they be taken as closing out the narrative sections. My schema is laid out in the outline given below. I have used the narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת headings (The heavens and the earth, Adam, etc.) in the English descriptions below, even though the narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת strands do not always appear first in their particular plexus. The next level in the outline gives the specific תּוֹלְדוֹת headings, marking the beginning of the תּוֹלְדוֹת strands that make up the plexus (where there is more than one).

1. Creation Prologue Plexus (Gen 1:1-2:3, no תּוֹלְדוֹת heading)
2. The Heavens and the Earth Plexus (Gen 2:4-4:26, a single narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת strand)

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Ibid., 187–189. I have used more generic titles for the narrative sections than those used by Koch.
In the outline I have divided the תּוֹלְדוֹת headings and their corresponding strands according to the genre of the text which follows the heading. The narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת headings are found in Gen 2:4, 6:9, 11:27, 25:19, and 37:2. The linear genealogy תּוֹלְדוֹת headings occur in 5:1 and 11:10, and the segmented genealogy תּוֹלְדוֹת headings are in 10:1, 25:12, and 36:1 and 9. Each of the six plexus sections of the outline consists primarily of narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת strands that are attached to linear and segmented genealogy strands. It might be said that the default arrangement is linear genealogy strand followed by narrative strand followed by segmented genealogy strand.

Because the linear genealogy תּוֹלְדוֹת strands and the narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת strands work together to trace the line of promise from beginning to end, the linear genealogies serve to fill the genealogical gap between narratives thus creating one continuous linear genealogical line from the beginning to the end of the book. Though this is certainly not their
only purpose, it explains their placement as introductions to the תּוֹלְדוֹת narrative strands. Since Isaac follows immediately after Abraham and Jacob after Isaac, it makes sense that there is no linear genealogy introducing the last two major narrative sections. The segmented genealogies, inasmuch as they trace the line not of promise, close out the narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus. Generally, the narratives themselves distinguish between two lines and the segmented genealogies serve to pick up the line not of promise, trace it outside God’s promise and cut it off never to be taken up in the narrative again. If that is the purpose of the segmented genealogies then it is clear that the first (Prologue) and sixth (Jacob) plexuses do not require this תּוֹלְדוֹת strand—the first because there is no line to trace and the sixth because all the sons of Jacob are considered to be in the line of promise. This leaves still two irregularities, however, the second plexus (Heaven and Earth) which seems to be missing the segmented genealogy, and the fifth (Isaac) which ends with two segmented genealogical strands.

An examination of the Heaven and Earth תּוֹלְדוֹת will help to solidify the idea that the segmented genealogies serve the purpose I am suggesting. In Gen 4 we find that a major motif is Cain’s curse and the fact that he has been driven from the land and expelled from before the face of God (Gen 4:12-14). He is then said to settle in the land of Nod, East of Eden (Gen 4:16), in other words he is expelled further away from the presence of God than were Adam and Eve as a result of the fall. This fits with our expectations and leads us to observe that even though the geographical separation of the line that is outside the promise does not occur in its own separate segmented genealogy section, it still appears. The same is true of the genealogy of Cain which appears in a different form than the other segmented

32 This helps define that line vis-à-vis Israel or place Israel in its ANE context especially by demarcating it from its neighbors (in both a wider, Gen 11:10-26, and narrower sense, Gen 25:12-18 and 36:1-43). Averbeck, “Factors in Reading the Patriarchal Narratives: Literary, Historical, and Theological Dimensions,” 2–3.
genealogies (it is more narrative in its form) and without a תּוֹלְדוֹת heading. The fact that the geographical note and the segmented genealogy of Cain appear under the same תּוֹלְדוֹת heading as the heavens and the earth narrative strand suggests that the author had a reason for more closely associating them with the narrative. In the next chapter I will argue that Gen 4 is the matrix of interpretation for the book of Genesis. This would suggest that Cain’s banishment and genealogy are kept in with the narrative because they set the paradigm for the rest of the book.

My suggested תּוֹלְדוֹת schema leaves two additional problems to address. I have said that we should expect each plexus to end with a segmented genealogy and have given reasons why this is not so in two instances. However, my division of the narrative sections places the tower of Babel narrative at the end of the Noah strand, after the segmented genealogy of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. In this case, while the narrative itself serves its own purpose as a bridge between Gen 1-11 and Gen 12-50, it should also be noted that this is a narrative expansion of the theme of geographic separation. In other words, it should not be seen as disturbing the pattern which I have described above. In the section on the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus I will argue for a special purpose for this segmented genealogy which leaves hope open for the nations that fall outside the line of promise.

Finally, we have the problem of the double Esau תּוֹלְדוֹת at the end of the Isaac narrative. In this case, there is no clear solution. It may be that one of these headings is superfluous and a result of the updating of the text. Most subscribe to the idea that it is some kind of authorial error or later redactional addition.33 Due to a lack of textual evidence,  

33Tengström argues that the very fact that there are two תּוֹלְדוֹת formulas for Esau speaks to the fact that one of them is secondary. Tengström, Die Toledoiformel und die literarische Struktur der priesterlichen Erweiterungsschicht im Pentateuch, 32. Averbeck, in a personal interview, suggested that due to the similarities between the Esau and I Chronicles it appears that the second Esau genealogy could be the result of an updating of the text for readers of a later time. If this is the case, it seems to me most likely that Gen 36:1-
however, any suggestion that the double genealogy is a product of later addition is speculative and, therefore, it remains an option that the two תּוֹלְדוֹת strands are original.

K. Lawson Younger (in personal interview) has pointed out that the Esau pattern is not dissimilar to the other segmented genealogies. Interestingly, though they do not appear in תּוֹלְדוֹת headings, the two additional instances of the lemma תּוֹלְדוֹת occur in Gen 10:32, (אֵלֶּהְמִשְחֹתְיֵנֶֽוּ־נֹחְַלְתוֹלְדֹת ומִשְעֹתֶֽוּ־נֹחְַלְתוֹלְדֹת) and in 25:13 (וְאֵלֶּהְשְׁמֹתְיֵנֶֽוּ־יִשְמ עֵאלְבִשְמֹת ומִשְעֹתֶֽוּ־נֹחְַלְתוֹלְדֹת). These clauses bear remarkable similarity to the תּוֹלְדוֹת headings except with תּוֹלְדוֹת used in an alternate position. It may be possible that the double Esau תּוֹלְדוֹת is actually a variation on this pattern where תּוֹלְדוֹת now occupies the position expected in a header. If that is the case, then all three segmented genealogies follow a similar pattern and Genesis can be seen as having just ten תּוֹלְדוֹת headings or eleven major divisions and three additional occurrences of the תּוֹלְדוֹת lemma are subordinate to the segmented genealogies. This is an attractive suggestion, though further study would be needed in this regard. Therefore I have elected to leave the issue open and continue to refer to eleven תּוֹלְדוֹת headings.

It only remains now to explain the relationship of the creation account to the rest of the book. Of course the relationship can only be fully understood through detailed exegesis but for now it will suffice to say that I understand this to be a prologue to the book of Genesis which, together with Gen 2:4-25 provides the initial state of equilibrium for the plot. Whereas Gen 1:1-2:3 focuses on the original state of creation, Gen 2 prepares the scene for the introduction of the tension in chapter 3. Since we have argued that the תּוֹלְדָה 43 is a later addition to the Genesis text of a source that served as the material for the Chronicler’s text, who edited it. The source text may in turn be a conglomerate of multiple earlier texts.
headings function to link sections of the genealogy, it is natural that we have no אֲנָחָה heading in Gen 1:1.

A Summary of the Approach

Following this approach for dividing the text according to the אֲנָחָה headings we have defined six narrative plexuses in the book. Each of these plexuses is its own complete narrative while at the same time operating within the context of the book to contribute to its thematic progression. In the chapters that follow I will argue that in the book of Genesis we find a beginning for the overall plot of the Bible which does not find any resolution within the book of Genesis, but that we also find, nested within this larger plot, a beginning, middle, and end for the book of Genesis. We should expect to find a tension in the opening chapters of Genesis that does not find a resolution within the pages of this book but we will also discover a tension in the opening chapters that does find its resolution within the pages of Genesis. The plot of Genesis is nested within the larger plot of the Bible and makes its own contribution to the thematic progression of the overall plot of Scripture. I will primarily be attempting to demonstrate how the beginning, middle, and end of Genesis functions; however, its contribution to the overall plot of Scripture cannot be ignored because this too shapes our interpretation of the Genesis story.

If the book of Genesis is ultimately organized on the principle of plot, whereby there is thematic progression from tension to resolution, and if each of the sections that I have identified serves to advance the thematic progression of the book, then we should expect to find correspondence between the תּוֹלְדוֹת divisions that I have defined and the beginning, middle, and end sections of the book. The following three chapters deal with the interpretation of the beginning, middle, and end of Genesis, respectively, according to the following plan.
The beginning of the book, covered in chapter 4 here, corresponds to the first two narrative plexuses including the prologue (Gen 1:1-2:3) and the first narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus (Gen 2:4-4:26). Together they present the initial, stable situation of the plot and then introduce the tension of Scripture as a whole, which shapes our reading of the rest of Scripture, followed by the tension of the book of Genesis, which shapes our reading of the book while contributing to the thematic progression of the biblical plot.

In chapters five through seven I will interpret the middle of the book of Genesis, which I will argue is made up of the next nine תּוֹלְדוֹת strands, corresponding to the next three narrative plexuses. The first narrative plexus consists of Gen 5:1-11:9 and is made up of the תּוֹלְדוֹת strands of Adam; Noah; and Shem, Ham and Japheth. The second narrative plexus in the middle of the plot consists of Gen 11:10-25:18 and is made up of the תּוֹלְדוֹת strands of Shem, Terah, and Ishmael. The final narrative plexus in the middle of the plot consists of Gen 25:19-37:1 and is made up of the תּוֹלְדוֹת strand of Isaac along with the two Esau תּוֹלְדוֹת strands. The middle of the plot picks up the tension that is introduced in the beginning and develops it in a thematic progression that develops naturally with one leading to the next. In some cases this movement occurs because the tension becomes more clearly defined, in other cases it is modified, refocused, or heightened. In any case each section contributes to moving us toward the end.

Finally, the Jacob plexus is made up of the one remaining narrative plexus which corresponds to the final תּוֹלְדוֹת strand. This plexus resolves the tension that is introduced and developed in the beginning and middle even while it leaves unresolved the tension that governs the biblical plot. The analysis of this section will be important because it must demonstrate the single action of Genesis by showing how it brings the Genesis plot to a satisfactory resolution. Also, the implications of the Genesis plot will need to relate to the biblical plot in a way that contributes to its thematic progression.
CHAPTER 4
IN THE BEGINNING: THE RETURN TO GOD'S CREATION TEMPLE

In this chapter we look closely at the first two narrative plexuses of the book of Genesis, namely, what I have termed the prologue (Gen 1:1-2:3) and the first תּוֹלְדוֹת division (Gen 2:4-4:26). The end goal is to show that two tensions develop in these chapters that serve as the beginnings for the Bible in the first place and for Genesis in the second. I will attempt to argue that the first tension arises in the reading of Gen 1-3. Genesis 1-2 sets up the state of equilibrium which is disturbed by the fall narrative in Gen 3. The fall narrative introduces the tension of people being expelled from God’s creation-sanctuary. At the end of chapter three the reader wishes for the return to the state of creation rest and this is the tension for which resolution is sought as the reading continues. Furthermore, the author supports reading along these lines by offering the possibility of return through the agency of the seed and as a result of the struggle described in Gen 3:15. As the reader continues into chapter four it is with the expectation that the narrative will continue along these lines of movement toward resolution and the reader seeks a way forward through the seed. We should expect that chapter four interacts with and develops this original tension and through my exegesis of the Cain and Abel narrative I will attempt to show that it not only develops the narrative along these lines, but that in so doing develops a sub-tension which provides the major plot line for the book of Genesis. In this case, I will argue that the tension introduced is over the survival and the righteousness of the seed through which our return to creation rest must come. I will attempt to support this suggestion by showing that Gen 4 is the matrix for many of the important themes that are developed later in the book.
In previous chapters I have argued that reading for plot is a matter of finding the “one action” of the narrative, or that it is a matter of “seeing together.” The emphasis is on the interconnectivity of the pericopae, meaning that as we move from one to the next we do so along the lines of the movement from tension to resolution. This introduces a general challenge for this section of the project (chapters 4-6) and a particular challenge in Gen 1-4.

The general challenge is that we need to traverse a sufficient amount of ground to cover the material and show how connections develop. The result is that I will need to summarize a great deal of material that is not new in any discussion of Genesis. It may thus appear that we are making no headway. However, the nature of this project is not so much that there will be new interpretations for individual pericopae, but that the pericopae are seen together in a new light. In Gen 1-3 it will especially be the case that I will need to cover old ground in order to set up the introduction of the tensions in Gen 3 and 4. In chapter 4, the imposition of plot on my reading will introduce a significantly new perspective on the text that will set the stage for the rest of the book. I will suggest that the Cain and Abel narrative sets up the seed of promise (or the line of promise) as the protagonist of the book, and the seed not-of-promise as the foil. This will result first of all in an explanation for the relationship between plot and the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure of the book and it will also throw light on the plot and the themes introduced in Gen 4 that become paradigmatic for the book of Genesis. It is these two insights together that I think provide a nuance to our current reading of Genesis.

The particular problem that arises in reading for plot in Gen 1-4 is the connection that is to be made between Genesis chapters 1 and 2-4. It is true that in keeping with the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure Gen 1 serves as a prologue and is at least in some way separate from Gen 2-4. Source criticism however, generally makes this difference to be rather pronounced by suggesting that Gen 1 and 2 are in veritable conflict with one another. If, as I propose, Genesis is a single narrative artifact, then we would expect a greater deal of
continuity than source criticism alleges and the onus will be on this chapter to either
demonstrate such continuity or at least to defuse the arguments for such sharp discontinuity.

*Genesis 1: The Sanctuary as a Metaphor for Creation*

Two features of the Gen 1 account have received increasingly broad
recognition.¹ The first is the literary shaping of the text and the second is the presence of the
sanctuary motif throughout Gen 1-3.² I believe by focusing in on these two aspects of the text
we get to the main thrust of how the creation account in Gen 1 shapes the reader’s view of
the equilibrium or pre-tension state of the plot of the Bible and Genesis, which prepares for
and even anticipates the tensions that arise in Gen 3-4. In what follows I will engage in an
attentive reading and a close reading of Gen 1 in order to support my view that Gen 1-2
creates the equilibrium for the plot of scripture by applying the metaphor of the sanctuary to
God’s original creation.

By an attentive reading of the text I mean a “normal” reading, or what might
be thought of as a single pass reading with the goal of seeing the text as a whole. A close

¹I will at times be using Gen 1 as a shorthand reference to the creation account of Gen 1:1-
2:3.

²Of course, there are a variety of literary views. Irons and Kline, for example, have detailed
the “framework view,” Lee Irons and Meredith G. Kline, “The Framework View,” in The G3n3s1s Debae:
alternative to this view is what Collins refers to as the “analogical days position,” C. John Collins, Genesis 1–4:
A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishers, 2006), 124. There are
also still some theologians who resist a literary interpretation of the text, but even as conservative a scholar as
McCabe, who recently wrote a series of articles critiquing the framework view, sees the creation account as a
Account (Part 1 of 2),” *DBSJ* 10 (2005): 54. His other article in that series is, Robert V. McCabe, “A Critique of
the Framework Interpretation of the Creation Account (Part 2 of 2),” *DBSJ* 11 (2006): 63–133. Similarly, in the
case of the temple motif in Genesis 1-2, Walton’s book on the topic has received its share of criticism but the
criticism is not so much directed against the temple motif itself, but rather against his assertion that the text
should be read entirely on the basis of function and not at all in terms of ontology or material. Vern Poythress,
reading involves reading and re-reading with the intent of analyzing the text in order to define the patterns and structures in the text which create the effect the text has on the reader during an attentive reading. My definitions and the relationship between them are important because they influence how I weigh decisions regarding the likelihood of a supposed pattern being intentional or accidental. Genesis 1 has been heavily scrutinized and the result is a plethora of structural possibilities that have created an interpretive fog over the text. Some close readings seem to take the approach of trying to find the secret pattern according to which the whole text has been arranged as if the secret pattern can only be found when the text is broken up and analyzed. A close reading, in my opinion, should rather clarify the attentive reading by pointing to structures or patterns that show up in an attentive reading even if one is not fully conscious of them. In this way, the close reading supports or confirms the attentive reading. In some instances, I would agree that analysis might uncover patterns that would go unnoticed without a close reading. For example the sevenfold repetition of key words seems to defy coincidence because it occurs so frequently in the text and yet some of these details can be discovered only by a close reading. In this case, the pattern of sevens still shows up in an attentive reading and as we explore the text more closely additional patterns emerge.³

Literary Shaping in Genesis One

As we look to the literary shaping of Gen 1 the first thing to notice is that the text follows the grammatical pattern of typical Hebrew narrative. This is clearly indicated by the wayyiqtol verb chain stretching from 1:3-2:3. In fact, the pattern of the chapter as a

whole, which I take to be a title in 1:1, followed by a disjunctive \textit{waw} and a \textit{qatal} verb in Gen 1:2, fits easily within a typical pattern for Hebrew narrative where Gen 1:2 provides the background for the subsequent narrative chain.\footnote{Wenham has provided a fair presentation of the various views along with \textit{Gen 1-15}, 11.} Yet despite this clearly narrative character, it is equally as clear that the text has been shaped according to a literary pattern. It is widely recognized to be “highly stylized” and Collins, as a result, is led to classify its genre as “exalted prose narrative.”\footnote{Collins, \textit{Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary}, 44.} Beauchamp, in his extensive analysis of the literary structure of this text notes that the repetition “\textit{des tournures assez incolores ... constitue, semble-t-il, l’essence de la construction littéraire}.”\footnote{Paul Beuchamp, \textit{Création et séparation: étude exégétique du chapitre premier de la genèse} (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969), 20.} Indeed, the rote repetition of certain phrases (“and God said,” “and it was so,” “God saw that it was good,” “and it was evening...”) is quite noticeable during an attentive reading of the text and certainly warrants a closer look.

First, we note the clear stereotypical beginning and ending of each day as each day begins with \(וַיֹּאמֶרְאֱלֹהִים\) and ends with \(וַיְהִי־עֶּרֶּב\) and \(וַיְהִי־בֹקֶּרְיוֹם\)...\footnote{Ibid., 28.} In between these verbal elements, though we do not find a rigid sequence, we do find two additional \textit{wayyiqtol} clauses that appear with some, but not perfect, consistency throughout the six days, each occurring a total of seven times. These two phrases are \(וַיְהִי־כֵן\), and \(וַיַרְאָהוֹלָהִים\) (with...
some variation). Taking these four elements together each day then follows a pattern of God expressing his creative intention \( \text{וַיֹּאמֶרְאֱלֹהִים} \), fulfilling it \( \text{וַיְהִי־כֵן} \), assessing it \( \text{וַיַּרְאָּהֲהוֹ} \), and then concluding the day \( \text{וַיְהִי־עֶּרֶּב} \). In other words, in a close reading we uncover the nearly regular repetition of four phrases and this close reading corresponds to the general sense one gets as one reads the text, namely, that the text moves from expression of intention, to fulfillment, to assessment, to conclusion. Other activities that occur can be seen as supplementing these basic elements. The idea that these four phrases form the backbone of each day is supported by the fact that these are the only wayyiqtol phrases that are repeated six or more times and that these four elements always appear in order. Also, while the role of \( \text{וַיֹּאמֶרְאֱלֹהִים} \) and \( \text{וַיְהִי־עֶּרֶּב} \) is quite clear because of their appearance at the beginning and end of each day, the importance of the two inner phrases is supported by the fact that each appears seven times. With the importance of the number seven in this passage, this could point to their significance in structuring the narrative.

In order to further analyze the structure it will be helpful to construct a table that visually demonstrates the repetition of these four phrases. Each column in the table represents one creation day and reading from the top to the bottom of the column it contains all of the wayyiqtol verbs that appear during that day in order of appearance in the text. Those wayyiqtol clauses categorized here as making up the backbone of the creation day structure

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8 The variation I refer to is \( \text{וַיְהִי־א} \) on day one instead of \( \text{וַיְהִי־כֵן} \) and \( \text{וַיְהִי־א} \) on the sixth day instead of \( \text{וַיַּרְאָּהֲהוֹ} \). Beauchamp has a similar proposal. He identifies the following major component parts of the general structure: “God said,” “let there be…,” “and it was,” “God saw,” and finally, “it was evening…” He thinks of day one as a sort of “mother-cell,” (cellule-mère), or perhaps a “stem cell,” out of which the subsequent days arise. The pattern I am suggesting takes into account only those verbal elements that occur on the wayyiqtol level because, specifically, “let there be…” can be considered subordinate to and thus part of “God said.”
are elided in Hebrew while other *wayyiqtol* verbs are only represented by numbers where the number is the number of *wayyiqtol* verbs that appear in that portion of the Hebrew text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clause</th>
<th>Creation days</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>WAYIQTL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>WAYIQTL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>WAYIQTL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>WAYIQTL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The *wayyiqtol* pattern of the six days of creation.

By looking at the table we can begin to see greater nuance in the arrangement of the creation days. For example we see quite readily in the table that creation days 3 and 6 stand out from the others. As we’ve noted, every day goes through the four clauses in order, starting at clause 1 and proceeding to clause 4, but on days 3 and 6 we find clauses 1-2-3 and then, instead of finishing the day with clause 4 as we might expect, we begin again with
clause 1 and go through the entire sequence, this time ending properly with clause 4. Overall, this gives the impression of a double creative act on days 3 and 6. This aspect of the text has long been recognized. It is one of the main reasons that exegetes have found a two part symmetrical pattern in the text which places creation days 1-3 as a group in parallel with creation days 4-6. In fact, not only is the structure parallel, but once we see the parallel structure we can begin to think about its significance. This leads us to compare the content of the creation acts on days 1-3 to those on days 4-6. When we do that, we find that the text produces the effect of forming the environment during days 1-3 that is filled during days 4-6. Skinner describes the relationship as follows:

Thus the first day is marked by the creation of light, and the fourth by the creation of the heavenly bodies, which are expressly designated ‘light-bearers’; on the second day the waters which afterwards formed the seas are isolated and the space between heaven and earth is formed, and so the fifth day witnesses the peopling of these regions with their living denizens (fishes and fowls); on the third day the dry land emerges, and on the sixth terrestrial animals and man are created. And it is hardly accidental that the second work of the third day (trees and grasses) corresponds to the last appointment of the

9 Thus the idea of eight works in six days as has long been noted. John Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis (2nd ed.; The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1930), 8.

10 We need to note the fact that there are also two occurrences of וַיֹּאמֶּרַ אלֹהִים, which appear on day 6 within the blessing. Partly on the basis of this observation, Beauchamp, opts for a ten-fold structure within the text (due to ten repetitions of וַיֹּאמֶרַ אלֹהִים) that, in his opinion, actually takes precedence over the day structure. In my opinion, however, Beauchamp has over analyzed the text on this point, and has given precedence to verbal elements over content as if in an attentive reading of the text the two would have been separated. The rote repetition of “there was evening, there was morning” seems most clearly to structure the text as a whole and the fact that the Masoretic text is divided this way provides some support for this view. Finally, we can observe that even though the two extra וַיֹּאמֶּרַ אלֹהִים clauses, as wayyiqtol, are on the same grammatical level as the other wayyiqtol verbs, they are both logically subordinate to the וַיְבִרֶךְְאֹתֶם clause because they constitute the blessing. Once these have been excluded then the double repetition of וַיֹּאמֶּרַ אלֹהִים can be seen to serve within the six creation day structure as I have argued here. Beauchamp, Création et séparation, 28.
sixth day, by which these products are assigned as the food of men and animals."^{11}

Having established this pattern we can take a closer look at the inner clauses, which are the second and third clauses in the table. We notice that there are a few exceptions to the established pattern. For example, in the case of clause 2 we find the first occurrence to be anomalous since instead of וַיְהִיָּאָלֹּחֲךָ we have וַיְהִיָּאָרָבְּךָ. Yet if we look beyond the failure to repeat exactly the same clause we note that these two phrases are functionally equivalent in their respective contexts and that the repetition of the wayyiqtol, which seems to be the marker of repetition, is undisturbed.

Another anomaly seen clearly in the table is the failure to include the second and third phrases on the fifth and second days respectively. However, this may be due to competing motives for the literary use of this phrase. These phrases appear nearly each day in order to contribute to the overall structural shape of the six days of creation but they also contribute to the overall structural shape by appearing two times on days 3 and 6. Cassuto and Wenham have argued persuasively that repetition of key words in the text seven times is an important characteristic of the text.^{12} Wenham has argued that the repetition of the formulae (not just the four main clauses cited here) is such that they are grouped into patterns of seven. It therefore seems quite likely that the repetition of these two inner clauses, while contributing to the 1-1-2 structure of the six creation days, also conforms to the pattern of sevenfold repetition. In order to conform to the sevenfold pattern and shape the 1-1-2 textual

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^{11} Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 8. Driver describes this as, “the first three days, moreover, are days of preparation, the next three are days of accomplishment.” S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (9th ed.; London: Methuen, 1913), 2. It has also been pointed out that there is movement toward a climax as we move from day one to day 6. Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 8.

pattern, one occurrence of each clause must be left out. The author has selected to leave out the phrase in those instances that least affects the 1-1-2 pattern.\textsuperscript{13} It is interesting to note, that each of these two clauses are semantically related to the completion of God’s acts (“it was so,” and “God saw that it was good”). Thus the seven-fold repetition is especially relevant in the case of these clauses.

Once we have noted the anomalies and their explanations we can take another look at the structure of the text, this time focusing on the four clauses that form the backbone of the shaping. A table will help to visualize the result. This time we will use the shorthand of the numbers from the previous table to represent the four clauses. This will help to create a better visualization of the repetition. In this visualization we can see more clearly that the repetition is not precise from day to day. However, when we compare days one through three as a group to days four through six as a group, we see, as I have argued, that the imprecise repetition is precisely repeated.

\textsuperscript{13} Days 2 and 5 produce the least disturbance to the pattern because the double repetition on days 3 and 6 is necessary to establish the 1-1-2 pattern, while days 1 and 4, being the first (or fronted) days in the sequence, are more significant from a linguistic standpoint. With respect to the sevenfold repetition of these two phrases during the six days of creation it is interesting to note that of the four main phrases; only these two are repeated seven times in the six days. If seven is taken to communicate completion, then it is equally interesting to note that both of these phrases “and it was so” and “and God saw that it was good,” can be understood as related to the completion theme. This observation strengthens the idea that these phrases would be key both for the sevenfold repetition aspect of the text and for the structure of the six creation days.
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Table 2. A Visualization of the Literary Shaping of Gen 1:1-2:3.

There is much more to be said about the shaping of Gen 1 and its various nuances, but in the previous discussion the aim was to stay within the generally acknowledged features of the text. That will be enough to provide the basis of interpretation with regard to the development of the plot of Genesis. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, there is a second important feature of the text that has become increasingly important in the discussion of the creation account, that is, the application of temple symbolism to God’s creation. It will only be after looking at the allusions to the temple that we will discuss the implications of these two main features of the Gen 1 creation account.
According to Wellhausen, the idea that the temple is the exclusive location of worship for Israel is a concept that emerged gradually, over time, and in several stages of development. With this kind of assumption concerning the dating of the various layers of the text, it is no surprise that theologians began to think of the temple or sanctuary imagery as a pagan corruption (or potential corruption) of true Israelite religion. Thus Levenson has taken issue with the assumption that “anything Israel shares comfortably with its neighbors cannot be authentic to it, but is, instead, an impurity to be rejected.” Levenson then went on in his article to describe the convergence between the ANE and Israelite views of the role of the temple in ANE societies. Ahlström also argues that the most common views of ANE temple ideology were present in Israel (at least as early as Davidic or Solomonic times). Furthermore, Weinfeld argues for a very close relationship between the temple and creation, a notion that has become increasingly popular among exegetes and biblical theologians. In looking at Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts Walton concludes that

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“[d]espite significant differences from culture to culture, a number of ideas and characteristics are common in creation accounts from antiquity.” He cites among those, the idea that “[t]emple and cosmos are largely synonymous (homological), each representing an image of the other.”

The question becomes, to what degree are we able to find temple imagery in Gen 1? Actually, in Gen 1:1-31 we find very little that would direct our attention to the temple. It is true that the text is highly stylized and the number seven plays a key role in the shaping of the text, but none of this would be sufficient on its own. This does not happen until 2:1-3 with the mention of God’s resting on the Sabbath. Some studies have suggested a correlation between God’s resting after creation activity in Gen 2:2-3 and texts that describe the gods coming to rest upon the temple once the building project is complete has been consecrated. This might seem too trivial a mention to induce the reader to think about


Walton, “Creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3 and the Ancient Near East,” 57. Walton’s assertion is not necessarily demonstrated in his article but it likely relies on Levenson and others who argue more explicitly along those lines. “The Temple and the world stand in an intimate and intrinsic connection. The two projects cannot ultimately be distinguished or disengaged.” “The Temple and the World,” 288. See also Leeuwen whose study on creation and creation-as-building lead him to conclude that “Mesopotamian and Levantine societies not only organized their material world as house(hold)s, but also developed cognitive environments in which this metaphoric domain expressed their particular understandings of the cosmo-social order comprising god( s) and humans.” Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel,” in From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible (ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie R. Novotny; Alter Orient und Altes Testament: Veröffentlichungen zur Kultur und Geschichte des Alten Orients und des Alten Testaments 366; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 400.

creation through the metaphor of the sanctuary but there is a cumulative effect produced by ANE background material, other temple texts in the Bible, and important structural features of the Gen 1 creation account that, I will argue, do encourage the reader to look at the creation account through temple imagery. Most of these arguments are well known but I will quickly review them in specific relation to Gen 1:1-2:3 in order to draw out the significance for this text.

Throughout the ancient Near East and for a long period of time, both before and after the writing of the Old Testament, ancient texts connect the temple and the cosmos—and often times the connection extends to creation of the cosmos. Certainly there are variations in the worldviews of the ancient Near East. There are differences between the Mesopotamian and Egyptian view of temple and cosmos, just as there are between Canaanite and Egyptian, and so on. Likewise there is development over time. Yet there is enough commonality that we can speak of an overarching ANE correlation with regard to the relationship between the temple and the cosmos.\(^{22}\)

The earliest writings that make this connection are Sumerian texts related to the temple. These texts include the Cylinders of Gudea, the Hymn to Kesh, and other temple hymns. The Cylinders of Gudea and the Hymn to Kesh both come from the first half of the second millennium and refer to the temple metaphorically as a mountain.\(^{23}\) In the cylinders of

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\(^{22}\) Ahlström, “Heaven on Earth - At Hazor and Arad,” 70. This is the conclusion that Ahlström arrives at in an introduction to an article in which he uses these “most common ideas” as a means of approaching archaeological findings at Hazor and then Arad.

\(^{23}\) “The Cylinders of Gudea,” translated by Richard E. Averbeck (COS 2.155:429), see William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (vol. 2; Context of Scripture; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003). “The temple, mooring pole of the land, which grows (high) between heaven and earth; the Eninnu, the true brickwork, (for) which Enil decreed a good destiny; the beautiful mountain range, which stands out as a marvel, (i.5) (and) which towers above the mountains; the
Gudea, “The true shepherd Gudea made it [the temple] grow so high as to fill the space between heaven and earth” (ETCSL t.2.1.7, 655-664, cf. 471-481, 578-590, 815-823, 925-928, 1355-1361), its construction will bring abundance to the land (ETCSL t.2.1.7, 286-293, “Laying the foundations of my temple will bring immediate abundance,” cf. 277-285, 759-769, 1254-1257), and there are multiple patterns of seven associated with the temple (ETCSL 562-577, 602-616, 781-798, with other likely more minor occurrences). The overall impression the text paints of the role of the temple in Sumer is as a bridge between heaven and earth, bringing the presence of the god to Gudea’s kingdom and thus assurance of abundance in his land and, in turn, “rest” to the god who is provided for in the temple.\(^{24}\) These basic concepts of the role of the temple in Sumerian society are carried through time and geography to the rest of the ANE often times with only slight variation.

The most prominent text of later Mesopotamian literature is the *Enūma Elish*. In this text we find an explicit connection between the temple and creation. In this case Marduk builds a house for himself after effectively establishing his rule over the cosmos—the establishment of order out of chaos resulting from his defeat of Tiamat. The building of his house is seen as the capstone of this achievement “I shall appoint my (holy) chambers, I temple, being a big mountain, reached up to heaven; being Utu, it filled heaven’s midst;” (from the Cylinder B prologue, Cyl. B i.1-11). Cf. The Hymn to Kesh: “Good house, built in a good place, House Kesh, built in a good place, like a princely boat floating in the sky, like a holy barge set with seat and ‘horns,’ like the boat of heaven, the lordly crown of the mountains…” Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once ... Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 379. The temple E-ninnu, built by Gudea, is also compared to a boat.

shall establish my kingship.” 25 The next tablet describes first his creation of people which is couched as his plan for giving the gods rest from their burdens. 26 As a result the gods then express their desire to return the favor and will do this by building Marduk a shrine. 27 And so this shrine, which is the same “(holy) chambers” that Marduk set out to “appoint” and thus establish his kingdom, is connected with the cosmos, creation, the establishment of Marduk’s rule, and rest. There is not the emphasis on abundance for humanity that is seen in the Cylinders of Gudea but there is also no mention of any earthly king. The text is about the order of the gods, not about humanity except as an object of creation and as having a role in the created order and the maintenance of the gods’ rest. Thus accounting for the differences, there is, as others have acknowledged, similarity in view with respect to the role of the temple in ANE society. The temple is the nexus of deity and humanity and the realms of heaven and earth (also note that the name of the temple “Esagila,” which means “house whose top is lofty” and its association with a ziggurat in lines 60-65 of tablet VI, maintain the idea of the mountain establishing the connection between heaven and earth). 28 It is the crowning moment when order is established out of chaos, which can also be seen as the necessary condition for abundance in the human order as well. 29 Since the Enûma Elish dates


26 Ibid., 111:401 tablet VI:34.

27 Ibid., 111 tablet VI:50–54.


29 Hurowitz, I Have Built You an Exalted House, 94.
at least a millennium after the Cylinders of Gudea, we already have a hint at the persistence of these basic views of the temple in the ANE.\(^{30}\)

Walton makes this same assertion by comparing the Cylinders of Gudea to Neo-Assyrian texts, specifically Esarhaddon’s description of Ešarra. He asserts that the “concepts [especially the concept of the temple as the center of the cosmos] are present with little change in the mid-first millennium.”\(^{31}\) Several other authors have drawn parallels to Egyptian temple hymns. Ahlström’s argument for the temple ideology, in which he basically argues as I have reproduced here, that the temple is the connection to the divine realm for the purpose of bringing order and abundance, is based heavily on studies from Egyptian literature such as H. H. Nelson’s which draws the conclusion from Egyptian inscriptions that the temple is “a microcosm of the world, the realm of the god.”\(^{32}\) Janowski argues similarly from New Kingdom temples that “Die Welt ist ‘gotterfüllt’, weil ihr Zentrum, der Tempel, als Wohnstatt der Gottheit ein ‘Himmel auf Erden’ ist.”\(^{33}\) The temple then is a sort of gateway through which the god’s power and influence extend to the ends of the earth.

In addition to the Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts we have, in Ugaritic, the Ba’lu Myth, which tells of the battle between Ba’lu and Yammu, which, after Yammu is defeated, results in the establishment of Ba’lu’s rule and the subsequent building of his

\(^{30}\) It may be important that the Enûma Elish was written on seven tablets, corresponding to the use of symbolic numbers in temple texts. Though the temple is established on the sixth tablet, the whole work is about the exaltation or establishment of Marduk’s rule and so the seventh tablet is full of his praises.


\(^{33}\) Janowski, “Der Himmel auf Erden,” 246.
temple. A direct consequence of Ba‘lu being provided a house is that the normal agrarian cycle will be maintained.\(^{34}\) It is also worth noting that the construction of Ba‘lu’s temple takes place over a span of seven time periods.\(^ {35}\)

All these texts together suggest temple and creation ideologies that remain relatively constant, despite variation, from the third to the first millennium and from Mesopotamia to Egypt. This is despite the fact that there is no clear pattern or fixed relationship between temple and creation. That is, there is no conventional literary pattern that dictates the relationship between creation and temple. There is simply too much variety in the way the two motifs are combined. Instead it seems better to say that there is an affinity between temple and creation ideology that makes them a natural fit one for the other. The temple is meant to communicate the presence of the god to bring blessing and protection and this seems a natural culmination to creation accounts. Not only does this affinity make sense to us, but there is witness to such an affinity in ancient thinking based on the frequency of the collocation of creation and temple motifs in ANE texts.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{34}\) After Ba‘lu has received permission to build his house, it is stated that this will allow him to send rain in due season, thus creating a connection between the temple and the abundance of the land. “The Ba‘lu Myth,” translated by Dennis Pardee (COS 1.86:260).

\(^{35}\) The first six days are recorded in pairs according to the pattern, “for a day, two (days).” Hallo and Younger, Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World, 1.86 vi:16–40.

\(^{36}\) Walton, “Creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3 and the Ancient Near East,” 61. Walton says Gen 1 is a creation dedication ceremony. I do not agree with Walton on the specifics of this point. To show that Gen 1 is a temple dedication ceremony would require a more careful comparison and an analysis that shows a closer relationship in structure and content. See especially Hurowitz, I Have Built You an Exalted House. Instead, the text seems to use allusions to the temple or to temple dedicatory texts. Also, Levenson is cited as saying that creation and temple are homologous, that the imagery of creation and temple go freely back and forth, one to another. However, if we remove Scripture from our corpus of sources then it is not clear to me that we have texts where the imagery goes so easily in the direction of temple to creation. Certainly, temple texts use creation imagery and creation texts are often associated with temples, but where is creation described in terms of a temple outside Scripture? It seems to me unique that Gen 1 describes creation using imagery that might suggest temple related imagery.
We must be careful with our interpretation of the data when applying these observations to Gen 1. There is a marked tendency among some to assert that Gen 1 is a temple dedication text. And yet according to Hurowitz this is a specific genre with specific conventions that Gen 1 does not fulfill. This kind of conclusion seems to stretch the evidence. On the other hand, Gen 1 seems to include features that suggest temple or sanctuary imagery is being introduced into the creation account. In my judgment to understand the role of sanctuary imagery in the Gen 1 creation account we need to pay attention to the inclusio created by Gen 1:1 and 2:1-3.

On the level of an attentive reading of the text we can note two important observations that occur to the reader with regard to the seventh day. First, it is quite obvious that the seventh day falls outside the pattern established by the six creation days. It does not recount any creative activity but rather states the completion of God’s creative acts along with the fact that God rests on this day. A close reading of the text clearly supports this view since we can observe that it does not follow the pattern previously identified for the six days of creative activity (it does not contain any of the four key phrases). Second, Gen 2:1-3 brings to a close that which is started in Gen 1:1; in the beginning God created, and now God has completed.37 The relationship between the beginning of Gen 1:1-2:3 is made even more intimate by the repetition of key words from Gen 1:1 in Gen 2:1-3. Wenham observes that Genesis “2:1-3 echoes 1:1 by introducing the same phrases but in reverse order: ‘he created,’ ‘God,’ ‘heavens and earth’ reappear as ‘heavens and earth’ (2:1) ‘God’ (2:2), ‘created’ (2:3).”38 The reverse order repetition of Gen 1:1 in Gen 2:1-3 creates an inclusio around the

37 Fishbane, Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts, 9.

38 Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 5.
whole text. Usually, the use of an *inclusio* is regarded as a means for delimiting the text.\(^39\) Certainly this would be an important argument for taking Gen 1:1-2:3 as a single pericope with Gen 2:4 starting the next.\(^40\) However, it is also possible that the *inclusio* serves as an interpretive framework. Something similar happens in the book of Judges where some have argued that the *inclusio* provided by the double introduction and double conclusion delimits the text but also serves as the interpretive framework for the intervening judge cycles and for the book as a whole.\(^41\) I would argue that this is the case in the Gen 1 creation account as well.

The pattern of sevens at work in the text, though not a clear indication of being a temple construction text, suggests that we should read this creation account in light of the temple metaphor or in line with temple ideology. The *inclusio* framework further reinforces this interpretation by suggesting that the seventh day, which is both climax of the creation account and parallel to the initial state of Gen 1:1-2, is the key to interpretation of the text as a whole. In parallel, Gen 1:1 and 2:1-3 create a summary of the entire account and a filter through which the whole account should be read.

As earlier noted, both Levenson and Walton speak of the cosmos and the temple as being innate one in the other. And yet in ANE inscriptions we find it is generally the cosmos that serves as the vehicle and temple as the tenor in the metaphorical relationship so that the direction of the symbolism is from creation to temple, the temple *is* a


\(^40\) Compare Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary*, 41.

microcosmos (a small creation). I would argue that Genesis is unique in reversing this relationship. The author of Genesis induces us to see creation as a sanctuary. Not the temple but creation itself is the sacred space, or sanctuary, where the realms of the divine and human meet. Without any conflict or victory over any enemy, but by simple virtue of his creative acts, God comes to rest in his creation-sanctuary where he is present to bring abundance and blessing to all his good creation. The creation account of Gen 1, as the prologue to the structure, creates the initial state of blessing and abundance in God’s presence which will be disturbed in chapter 3, thus creating the tension of the plot.

The case for seeing creation through the lens of sanctuary imagery is bolstered when we further take into consideration the Eden narratives in Gen 2-3 and also texts related to the temple throughout the rest of Scripture. Biblical theologians have been paying increasing attention to this topic, but the first to give the motif its proper due were Wenham, Fishbane, and Weinfeld. At this point in the argument I will quickly address the temple found in Gen 2-3. The connection between creation and the tabernacle/temple will be discussed at the end of this chapter when I look at the beginning of the plot of the Bible (Gen 1-4) in relation to the plot of Scripture as a whole.

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42 Mark S. Smith, The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 107. Smith says of the temple correlations in Gen 1 that “the priestly author thought of God’s creation as similar to the Tabernacle, that both are structures sanctioned by God for the divine presence. In this similarity of phrases, as we have previously noted, we glimpse the most fundamental aspect of priestly thinking in this entire account, namely that the world is like a temple.” See also Fishbane, Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts, 12.

43 We must be careful to point out that the argument for reading Gen 1 in light of sanctuary imagery is not bolstered because we read Gen 2-3 back in to Gen 1 but simply because we observe that there is consistency in Gen 2-3 picking up and developing sanctuary ideology.

Using observations from previous studies and adding his own exegetical arguments, Wenham has identified sanctuary imagery in Gen 2-3, arguing that the Garden of Eden should be viewed “as an archetypal sanctuary, that is, a place where God dwells and where man should worship him.”45 Drawing from Chilton, for example, he notes based on the expulsion of Adam and Eve and the cherubim guarding the way to the tree of life that the garden was probably entered from the east just as the temple was.46 This observation can be expanded upon by noting that the punishment of Cain seems to send him further to the east, the implication being further from the presence of God. Wenham points out that the geography of Eden is also relevant. Gold, onyx, and bdellium all have potential sanctuary connotations.47 In fact, the abundance or “goodness” of the garden and the land of Eden described in Gen 2:8-14, along with the means of watering the garden in Gen 2:6, as well as the rivers flowing out of Eden, are all reminiscent of the abundance of life that comes from the ANE sanctuary ideology and the gardens that are often associated with them.48 The tree of life may also be associated with this motif.49 The cherubim who guard the way back to the tree of life in Gen 3:24 are also significant. It is the cherubim (Akkadian kuribu), as Wenham points out, who “were the traditional guardians of holy places in the ancient Near East.”50


47 Ibid., 33.


Wallace argues similar points as Wenham, though from the starting point of the garden of God rather than the sanctuary, Wallace says,

The motif which is of central importance in the biblical and extra-biblical passages in which the garden of God is depicted, is the presence of the deity or unmediated access to the deity. It is this motif alone which accounts for the life-giving or divine aspects of some of the other motifs, especially those of the streams and the trees.\textsuperscript{51}

When considering the prologue to Genesis in light of the beginning of the plot, we see that the Bible paints a picture of the initial state of creation as being one where God is present to bring abundance of life to his creation. In the next section of this chapter I will offer a reading of the plot of Scripture according to which Gen 2:3-4:26 will complete the “beginning” of the biblical plot and the plot of Genesis. In the remainder of this chapter I will present exegetical evidence that Gen 2-3 introduces a tension into the narrative which sets up the plot of the entire Bible, and that Gen 4, especially in connection to Gen 3, introduces a tension into the narrative that sets up the plot of Genesis. Both of these narrative tensions build on the view of the creation account that I have just presented.

\textit{Genesis 2-3: The Narrative Tension of the Bible}

One of the main tenets of reading for plot is that various episodes of a story must be read in relation to each other. The first \textit{תּוֹלְדוֹת}, for example, is to be read as continuing the prologue of Genesis (1:1-2:3). Therefore, the first \textit{תּוֹלְדוֹת} should be read as a unit with each episode building on the previous. This is a part both of the “seeing together” of reading for plot and the progression from tension to resolution. However, this is not how this first \textit{תּוֹלְדוֹת} is generally read. Often times the “Paradise” or “Eden” episode of 2:4b-3:24

\textsuperscript{51}Wallace, \textit{The Eden Narrative}, 78.
(or possibly 2:4-3:24) is read as a unit, but even then it is usually read independently of the prologue (1:1-2:3/4a) and the subsequent Cain and Abel episode (4:1-26). According to Gunkel, the narrative is an “etiological” myth which explains “the weal and woe of humanity: its particular distinction, judgment, and its sorrowful fate, the toil of farming and the pains of birth.” This may very well have been the thrust of the passage in its hypothetically original, separate state, but such an interpretation does not go far enough since it does not take into consideration the literary context of Genesis. The structuring of Genesis seems quite deliberate. If that structure is deliberate and if the so-called Eden narrative has been placed within this structure, then it must be interpreted in that context. Simply by virtue of placing the text in a wider context of Genesis it can take on a new function in contributing to the plot of Genesis (and Scripture). Subsequent studies of the pericope have modified Gunkel’s conclusion but have not altered his basic approach. In this section, by reading the episodes of the first together, with each related to the other, and by reading the strand in conjunction with the prologue of the creation account, a slightly different interpretation results. This becomes especially evident once we arrive at the Cain and Abel episode in Gen 4. The result of this reading will be the introduction of narrative tensions that set a trajectory for reading the rest of the Bible and Genesis.

52 Starting with Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 4–40; Tryggve N. D Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 2-3* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007). McKenzie’s study of the unity and diversity of Gen 2-3 leads him to the cogent conclusion that Gen 2-3 should be taken as a single literary unit, despite the variety of sources from which the passage may allegedly arise. “If we grant, as it seems we must, that he [the author] has used material from diverse sources, we must also grant that he has assimilated this material and fused it into one account which is his own.” John L. McKenzie, “The Literary Characteristics of Genesis 2-3,” *TS* 15 (1954): 557.

In what follows I will be dealing with Genesis chapters two, three, and four in separate sections as three narrative units that make up a larger whole. Despite dealing with them separately, in each section I will take care to show close connections with the surrounding material. Genesis 2, for example, will be connected to Gen 1 and 3. This may appear to counter the more common approach, which is to take Gen 2:4(b)-3:24 as a single narrative unit. I certainly do not deny the close connection between Gen 2 and Gen 3, and in a certain sense the two chapters may be considered a single narrative unit, but Gen 3 and 4 are also closely connected, perhaps more than usually recognized. I will be attempting to show that Gen 3 sets up the tension for the plot of Scripture—even that it gives us an initial indication of how the plot will find its resolution. By identifying the tension of the Bible and by identifying the expected means through which resolution is to come, we establish a strategy for reading the plot of Scripture. With this strategy in hand, we use it to interpret Gen 4, which I will try to show sets up the plot of Genesis and offers us a strategy for reading the book of Genesis as its own narrative unit within the larger plot of Scripture.

Genesis 2: Focusing in on Humanity in YHWH God’s Creation-Sanctuary

There is straightforward evidence that demonstrates a link between Gen 1 and Gen 2. Most importantly we have Gen 2:4, the header of the תּוֹלְדוֹת strand, which is clearly linked to Gen 1 by the repetition of the Hebrew words for “heaven,” “earth,” and “create,” all of which were key in both the initial and final sections of the inclusio surrounding Gen 1:1-2:3. The chiastic structure of 2:4 means it must be taken as a single unit.54 As with all the

54 The unity of the verse based on the chiastic structure was pointed out at least as early as 1944 by Umberto Cassuto and he applied other cogent grammatical arguments to strengthen the argument for this being the beginning of the Gen 2 section rather than the end of Gen 1. Collins provides a useful bibliography for others who have argued along the same lines since then. Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book
headings in Genesis, it connects a progenitor arising from the previous narrative (in this case heaven and earth) to the lineage that follows. Second, as previously discussed, both Wenham and Walton have pointed out the temple imagery in this chapter, especially in the description of the garden in Gen 2:9-14, which Walton compares to ANE temple imagery according to which the “cosmic mountain (temple) stood upon the symbolic primeval waters (spring).” In effect, Gen 1 applies the metaphor of the temple to creation and Gen 2 provides continuity by offering its own imagery suggestive of temple in the description of Eden and the garden. The link provides all the justification we need, and even compels us to read the first תּוֹלְדוֹת strand of Gen 2-4 in light of Gen 1.

**Genesis 2:5-17: The Creation of Man Narrative**

Having established the connection we then continue reading into Gen 2 and find two sub-narratives in a single longer narrative (Gen 2:5-17 and 18-25). Each of the sub-narratives starts with a narrative tension and moves to a resolution. In both cases

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55 Walton, *Genesis*, 182. Here Walton surmises that the Garden of Eden should be considered the antechamber to the Most Holy Place and the garden itself is the Most Holy Place. Sailhamer argued that the collocation of עֵבֶד and שָׁמֵר in Gen 2:15 indicates a priestly rather than agricultural function in the garden. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 101.

56 Other than some debate over the exact starting point of the pericope, this is not a controversial textual division. Walsh has one of the more helpful discussions on the topic. Jerome T. Walsh, “Genesis 2:4b-3:24: A Synchronic Approach,” *JBL* 96 (1977): 161.

57 Stordalen makes similar observations concerning the narrative suspense in Gen 2, though my interpretation is different because of the connection I make to Gen 1. He refers to these as “Announced Plot Segments.” Terje Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2-3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 25; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 221, 476. See also, Terje Stordalen, “Man, Soil, Garden: Basic Plot in Genesis 2-3 Reconsidered,” *JSOT* 53 (1992): 8. Van Wolde approaches the text from a similar angle as well, though she takes the אֵד of 2:6 to be the resolution for the lack of water expressed in 2:5. Ellen J. van Wolde, *A Semiotic Analysis of Genesis 2–3* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica; Assen Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1989), 83. This is unlikely since it is a part of the waw disjunctive background for the subsequent narrative. In addition, she may be misinterpreting the significance of the אֵד in
tension results due to cognitive dissonance between the state of affairs at the beginning of the narrative and the state of affairs as Gen 1 has made us familiar with them. In the case of the first narrative, Gen 2:5-6 opens with background statements (a series of four disjunctive waw clauses) describing deficiencies in creation. In Walsh’s analysis, he identifies a triad of motifs: vegetation, water, and man. These are deficiencies of creation which the narrative then seeks to provide for. All three of these deficiencies are in conflict with the finished creation described in Gen 1. This is especially true since they counter the abundance we would expect from a creation-sanctuary and because they hinder the fulfillment of the blessing.\(^{58}\)

Studies by van Wolde and Stordalen offer alternative viewpoints to Walsh’s view of the text. They see the deficiency of the text as being no man to till the soil and even though a man is created in the Gen 2:5-17 narrative, he is not provided for the soil until Gen 3:23. Thus the narrative tension that arises in Gen 2:5-6 is not resolved until Gen 3:23. Since I am dealing with the text in ways very similar to van Wolde and Stordalen, since they interpret the text differently, and since their readings influence my own, I will discuss their views in more detail. The question that confronts us is the identification of the tension or tensions that guide the narrative or narratives in Gen 2.

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\(^{58}\)Taking the blessing to include Gen 1:28-30, with God’s giving of vegetation in Gen 1:29. Even if one does not take this to be a part of the blessing, the state of affairs in Gen 2:5-6 is in conflict with the statement of Gen 1:29. Cf. Andrew J. Schmutzer, Be Fruitful and Multiply: A Crux of Thematic Repetition in Genesis 1-11 (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 78.
For van Wolde, the plot of Gen 2:5-17 is based on two lacking elements, the lack of water (2:5c) and the lack of man to till the ground (Gen 2:5d אֲדֹمֶה).\textsuperscript{59} She argues that the lack of water is provided for in Gen 2:6 but the lack of a man to till the soil, though addressed in 2:7 is not really fulfilled in the 2:5-17 narrative because here man is tilling the גַּן, not the אֲדֹמֶה, which van Wolde holds to be outside the garden. Instead she suggests that the end of this plot does not come until 3:23 when the man is finally said to be tilling the אֲדֹמֶה from which he was taken. Thus, “[t]he relation between man and the earth forms the beginning and the end of the story, and the garden was only an intermediate stage.”\textsuperscript{60}

I find van Wolde’s interpretation inadequate for a couple of reasons, both of which revolve around the grammatical structure of Gen 2:5-6 and how it relates to the subsequent narrative. First of all, she identifies lack of rain as the first deficiency when in fact lack of rain appears in a subordinate clause that modifies the previous waw disjunctive clause describing the lack of vegetation. Therefore it is not clear why in her interpretation lack of rain takes precedence over the lack of vegetation. In other words, why is not lack of vegetation the main tension of the narrative? The main problem with van Wolde’s interpretation, however, is that she takes Gen 2:6 as a resolution to the lack of water in 2:5c. This surely cannot be the case. Gen 2:5-6 constitutes the beginning of the narrative as seen by the fact that it consists of four disjunctive waw clauses that set up the background for the narrative that is to follow. If these are read together, it is most likely that together each phrase contributes to the introductory picture of deficiency. Due to this fact, no matter how one understands the אֵד of 2:6, it is highly unlikely that it constitutes a resolution to the first deficiency of the narrative.

\textsuperscript{59}Wolde, \textit{A Semiotic Analysis of Genesis 2–3}, 83.

\textsuperscript{60}Ibid., 84.
Stordalen’s analysis is more nuanced. He says that at the end of the Gen 2:5-17 narrative “the qualitative lack experienced by the land is overwhelmingly fulfilled in the garden.” Yet Stordalen also points out that the tension introduced by Gen 2:5 is not “explicitly and verbatim resolved” until 3:23. Somewhat in line with van Wolde, he believes the solution to the narrative is “suspended through a spatial tension between אֹרְץ and אַדְמָה on the one hand and גַּן on the other.” This ties in to Stordalen’s larger argument, that the גַּן is located in the “cosmic border regions;” somewhere in the divine realm. Because Eden (and the garden) is outside the realm of the everyday world, it follows that when God creates the man and places him in the garden he cannot till the ground (אֲדָם) because the ground is outside Eden. Therefore the tension of Gen 2:5-6 is not finally relieved until Gen 3:23 when the man is expelled from Eden לַעֲבֹדְאֶּת. Stordalen picks up Greimassian actantial analysis of the text from van Wolde but he arrives at a nuanced result according to which the two plot lines work together. In the end he believes he shows that the “human to till the garden” plot is the primary plot of the Gen 2:5-3:25 narrative. If his analysis is correct, then Gen 2-3 “is the account of how (wild and cultivated) vegetation appeared in the land, by provision of irrigation and a tilling man.”

Stordalen’s nuance to van Wolde’s reading requires careful consideration. It is probably significant that גַּן and לַעֲבֹדְאֶּת are repeated at the end of the Gen 2-3 narrative (Gen 3:18 and 23, respectively), especially when we consider the fact that עד שָׁוֵא (Gen 3:19) also brings to mind the early portions of Gen 2. However,

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61 Stordalen, “Man, Soil, Garden,” 16.
62 Stordalen, Echoes of Eden, 223.
63 Ibid., 222.
64 Stordalen, “Man, Soil, Garden,” 25.
Stordalen’s conclusion that Gen 2-3, when read according to its primary plot, is about the provision of irrigation and a tilling man, leaves us somewhat flat, perhaps because the analysis of Gen 2-3 is done in isolation from the surrounding narratives. How do we connect the provision of a man to till the ground, the alleged primary plot of Gen 2-3, with the creation account of Gen 1 or the Cain and Abel story in Gen 4? In Stordalen’s analysis, Gen 2 has its own plot scheme, as does Gen 3. It is only when taking Gen 2 and 3 together that we end up with the plot of “a man to till the ground.” In other words, according to Stordalen’s own analysis, taking the narratives together alters the final reading of the text and the determination of the primary plot. Yet by the same logic I would expect that Gen 2-3 must be read in the context of Gen 2-4 and 1-50 but Stordalen fails to carry the interpretation that far. If read in the context of Gen 1-4, we can more or less keep Stordalen’s narrative analysis but modify his conclusions. The text is not merely about the provision of a man to till the ground, but about the ejection of man from the creation-sanctuary and the unexpected, perhaps ironic results this has for God’s creation plans for man.65 In this reading, YHWH is not necessarily the unwitting supporter of a plot that diverges from his own goals.66 Instead, Gen 2:5-6 forebodes the outcome from the beginning, offering plausibility to the interpretation that the potential for the eventual outcome was foreseen by both the narrator and YHWH God.

Clearly, the grammar of the text affects our identification of the narrative tension and we need to deal with it more adequately. In my opinion, Tsumura provides the most persuasive argument for understanding the grammatical structure of Gen 2:5-6. He

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66 Stordalen, “Man, Soil, Garden,” 25. This is Stordalen’s conclusion based on Greimasian actant schemes in which YHWH plays multiple, sometimes conflicting roles. He thus becomes an ambiguous character acting almost unwittingly in opposition to his own goals. Stordalen, “Man, Soil, Garden,” 22.
interprets as follows (indentations of the Hebrew show his understanding of the parallel structure while the clause letter indentations designate grammatical hierarchy so that clauses a and b function at the same level while the c clauses modify them): 67

(5)a

ולל שית השדה טרמ יהוה בארא

b

וכלしてしまう השדה טרמ ימק

c

כי לא מתים יוהו אלהים עלדהאר

a

אעד ימלל מייתאר

וה➝שכוה אתיוכלפריריאפכמוה

(6)b

Rather than taking the first two waw disjunctive clauses at one level with a subordinate כי clause on one level with the two waw disjunctive clauses that follow it, Tsumura takes all four waw disjunctive clauses to be at the same clause level (the a and b clauses are all at the same level). This makes sense grammatically and when we consider the Genesis author’s tendency to begin narrative sections with disjunctive waw clauses and the triple chain that begins the creation account in Gen 1:2, there is already some advantage to Tsumura’s suggestion. But Tsumura also points out that there is clear literary shaping that divides the four waw disjunctive clauses into two groups (hence my labeling a-b-c, a-b-c across versification above). The first two waw disjunctive clauses both start with the same word (לול). Similarly, the second two start with similar sounding words (אוד and אוד). Clause “a” of the first group ends with בארא, and the group as a whole ends with עלדהאר. Clause “a” of the second group ends with אתיוכלפריריאפכמוה, while the whole group ends with אתיוכלפריריאפכמוה.

67 Tsumura, The Earth and the Waters, 87.
Now we have two parallel groups of clauses that are clearly meant to work together to create an overall picture of creation deficiency. There is no vegetation, no water for irrigation, and no man to cultivate the ground. Overall it is a lack of abundance and certainly not a creation-sanctuary environment conducive for the blessing of Gen 1:28-30. As the narrative develops, our primary concern will be for this overall deficiency to be remedied, and we will rightly expect the remedy to come in terms of vegetation, water, and man, as Walsh suggests, but to look for exact lexical matches “a man to till the ground,” is probably to over read the text.

The second narrative in Gen 2 adds confirmation to our reading since it follows a similar pattern moving from tension to successful resolution. Neither van Wolde nor Stordalen adequately account for the creation of the woman narrative in their narrative schemes. The creation of the woman narrative also contrasts with the Gen 1 account. The primary tension of this narrative arises with the statement that it is לֹאֵ֥וֹב for the man to be alone (Gen 2:18). We have established the fact that the repetition of טוֹב is an important and prominent structural element in Gen 1 and now the report in Gen 2:18 that it is לֹאֵ֥וֹב for the man to be alone directly counters the Gen 1 creation account. Just like in the first narrative, this tension-creating statement also offers a clue as to how the tension will be relieved. The text records YHWH God’s stated intention to make an וֹדּוֹֽזֶּֽ֑רֶּ֑כְנֶּגְּ. Again, here we find a relationship to the blessing. Without the woman, the blessing of Gen 1:28-30, and especially the blessing mandate of 1:28, cannot be fulfilled.

If these two narratives each create a situation in tension with our view of creation as established in Gen 1, then each also brings it to a successful resolution. In the

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Ibid., 94–116. Tsumura argues that the אֲדָמֵ֣ה are waters that come up from the ground to indiscriminately water the surface of the land.
creation of man narrative of Gen 2:5-17, each of the three lacking elements, vegetation, water, and man; is provided in the subsequent narrative development. After the background given in Gen 2:5-6, the narrative action picks up with a succession of six wayyiqtol clauses. The first three describe the creation of man (v. 7) and the next three the planting of the garden with the vegetation meant for his consumption (v. 8-9). Genesis 2:9b-14 contains an interlude to the narrative which describes the garden and the area around it in temple terms with the description of the four rivers which flow out from the garden and the tree of life in the center of the garden. The picture created is one of abundance with connections to creation-sanctuary imagery from Gen 1 and reference to each of the missing elements of Gen 2:5-6. The narrative ends with a succession of three wayyiqtol clauses which describe God “resting” the man in the garden לְעֶבֶד הָוָה שָׁמָּרַה. Genesis 2:16-17 continues with YHWH God’s foreboding command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. This last narrative string will be discussed in more detail later as it relates to the development of the narrative in Gen 3.

To summarize this first narrative in Gen 2:5-17, we have a movement from tension to resolution where the tension of the narrative is a lack of vegetation, water, and man to work the ground. Together these three deficiencies create a picture of lack of abundance in contrast with the creation-sanctuary imagery and with specific elements of creation in Gen 1. The end of the narrative provides a description of creation that fulfills the deficiencies recorded at the beginning of the narrative. This description, as previously noted, also relies on imagery reminiscent of the temple ideology and so resolves the narrative by bringing us to the Gen 1 state of creation-sanctuary and completely releasing the tension of Gen 2:5-17. By reasserting the creation-sanctuary imagery we have not merely arrived back where we started. The narrative explores man’s place in relation to God and to his creation. Genesis 2 thus picks up the creation-sanctuary theme of Gen 1 and modifies it with the rheme of man’s place in the creation-sanctuary.
The narrative of the creation of woman is, grammatically speaking, a continuation of that begun in Gen 2:5. However, Walsh points out that Gen 2:18 brings us a new “situation of imperfection whose rectification will be the theme of the entire section.”69 Just like the first narrative in Gen 2, the narrative of the creation of woman brings its narrative tension to a successful resolution. After identifying the tension, the narrative proceeds with an attempt at resolution when God brings the animals before the man to name them and, presumably, to see if he can find an אֱלֹהַ הָאָדָם among them. The presumption that the narrator expects the man to seek a matching helper among the animals is confirmed by his comment in Gen 2:20 “but for the man, no matching helper was found.” To conclude from this turn in the plot that “God considers it possible that one of them could be a ‘helper’ for him”70 is to confuse genres and treat the text as a mere record of events, that is, as a modern, objective record of events organized by chrono-logic, rather than a text organized according to story logic. The goal of the author here is more likely to be the introduction of a narrative foil that heightens the tension and creates a contrast between the animals and the woman.71 Creating such a contrast in turn brings greater meaning and significance to the woman being an אֱלֹהַ הָאָדָם.72 In fact, why did the narrator choose not to quote God as saying,

71 Stordalen expresses this same opinion of the function of this narrative segment. It is not irrelevant that my own observations came independently of reading Stordalen (including the identification of the animal segment as a foil), von Rad, and others, since it offers a measure of confirmation to this reading of plot. Stordalen, Echoes of Eden, 225.
“I will make a woman?” Likely, he uses an ambiguous term and allows the narrative to fill in our understanding in order to emphasize the woman being the only one capable of fulfilling the role of נְגֵד הָגֵרְנוֹ. This all then leads up to the climactic exclamation of the man that “this instance is bone of my bone” (Gen 2:24). In effect, she completes the creation of man and renews the possibility of fulfilling the blessing mandate of “be fruitful and multiply,” as only she can do.

Together, these two narratives create an important bridge between the prologue of Gen 1:1-2:3 and the first תּוֹלְדוֹת strand. The development of the narrative strongly suggests that it is the author’s purpose to create and then resolve cognitive dissonance. The cognitive dissonance created gets to the heart of the claims made about creation in Gen 1 because it brings into question the applicability of the temple metaphor and the blessing (Gen 1:28-30), which itself should be understood in the context of temple provision and abundance. By temporarily bringing into question these basic tenets of Gen 1 and by then reestablishing those same tenets, these narratives actually reaffirm the Gen 1 vision of creation as a temple and activate the metaphor for the first תּוֹלְדוֹת strand. The text is certainly more than mere repetition or emphasis. It takes a new look at creation by focusing in on the man and the woman and their relationship to creation, God, and each other. Each of the aspects of these relationships that is brought out in Gen 2 is then played on in Gen 3. I will next develop this idea by showing that just as Gen 2 connects back to Genesis 1 it also looks forward to Gen 3.

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73 In fact, I would argue that to interpret Gen 2 as a competing creation account, whatever its hypothetical origin or supposed original purpose may have been, is to impose a logic of the relationship of events on the text that is foreign to its genre.
In discussing the progression of the two narratives of Gen 2 I marked the movement from tension to resolution. This movement is readily apparent. Yet each narrative also introduces a latent tension that forebodes the ensuing narrative in Gen 3. In the case of the story of the creation of the man, the narrative ends with YHWH God’s command not to eat of the fruit on the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. If he does eat of it, God says he will surely die. This raises in the mind of the reader the question as to whether or not, or rather how long, the man will remain in a state of perpetual obedience to this command. Similarly, the narrative of the creation of the woman ends with the statement indicating that the man and woman were naked but not ashamed. Clearly this is an “other-worldly” statement that, as Stordalen indicates, “generates curiosity in the reader. Why is that so? How was this ancient state of affairs turned into the present day situation?”

To put it in mechanical terms, by moving from tension to resolution Gen 2 arrives at a state of equilibrium. However, the statements of Gen 2:16-17 and 24-25 introduce the notion that this is an unstable, and rather fragile, equilibrium.

Genesis 3: Expulsion from the Creation-Sanctuary and the Plot of Scripture

Though Gen 2 and 3 should be considered closely united by repeated motifs, literary plays that cross the boundaries of the texts, and common characters and setting; there is also ample reason to see Gen 3:1 as beginning a new episode in the narrative. The passage begins, as is common in Genesis, with a disjunctive waw clause that sets up a new scene (despite still being located in the garden) by abruptly introducing a completely new character, the serpent. Just like Gen 2 is dependent on Gen 1 for a full understanding of the tension introduced in Gen 2:5-6, so Gen 3 is dependent upon Gen 2 for a full understanding of the

tension that drives its narrative. Genesis 3 introduces a shift in the state of creation that brings it into line with our own perceptions of reality. In light of Gen 1-2 that shift is a tragic depiction of humanity’s fall that creates the tension that will determine development of the plot of all of Scripture.

Up until 1980 it seems the dominant interpretation of Gen 3 has been as the narrative of the fall of humanity into sin and the subsequent expulsion from paradise. But in 1978 Naidoff asked whether “this is the only possible level of meaning, or even the most basic.”75 His argument begins like van Wolde’s and Stordalen’s looking at Gen 2:5-6 as the beginning of the narrative. Like them, he identifies the meaning of the story as the search for a man to till the soil and thus the story serves to “illuminate the fundamental relationship of mankind to the earth as tillers of the soil.”76 I have already pointed out the flaw of this reading but in 1980 Beattie approached the text with similar questions, especially the nagging question of why the man did not die as God apparently stated he would. Beattie comes to the conclusion that the idea of this story depicting the fall of man is merely a Rabbinic derash.77 According to Beattie the text clearly shows that the serpent was correct in asserting that man would not die after eating the fruit and God was clearly wrong. Beattie even expresses sympathy with the serpent. “I cannot help but feel sorry for the poor old snake, condemned to crawl forever on his belly, he and his descendants, just for telling the truth and exposing God’s lie.”78 If we read with the grain of the story, Gen 3 is not so much a lament of man’s fall into sin as it is man’s celebration “in his own elevation above the animal world, in his

75 Naidoff, “A Man to Work the Soil,” 3.
76 Ibid., 4.
78 Ibid., 9.
ability to reason.”79 As provocative as Beattie’s article is, he raises some uncomfortable issues with the text. It does seem, when taken at face value, that God intended that the man would die upon eating the fruit, that this would occur shortly afterwards, if not on the spot (certainly not 900 years later), and that it would be a literal, physical death. How is it that this does not happen? James Barr followed up on Beattie in 1993 and added some weight to this view with persuasive arguments that drew on comparisons with ANE texts and explorations into the ancients’ true perceptions of death.80

These interpretations have invited a substantial response. The idea that God might have lied, or even that he might have gotten it wrong, certainly goes against orthodox Christian doctrine, but does it really reflect the text? In Boomershine’s narrative analysis he looks at the text in terms of narrative point of view, norms of judgment, distance in characterization, and plot. He points out that in Gen 2, due to the description of the garden and God’s actions in creating woman, the narrator portrays a sympathetic view of God so that we are invited to “approve of YHWH and his actions.”81 This is the image of God that we carry in to the Gen 3 story. As regards the serpent, on the other hand, the narrator paints a rather hostile picture.82 Right away the narrator “warns his audience to beware the serpent”

79 Ibid., 10.
and points out that this characterization of the serpent is the “first note of narrative disapproval in relation to any character.” If the narrator himself is painting such a picture of the characters, then Beattie’s sympathy with the serpent may not be so well founded.

If the narrative views God in a sympathetic light and the serpent negatively, the question of God’s threat of death and his apparent negligence to carry out the threat remains a conundrum in the narrative. This was one of Barr’s main lines of argument and Moberly fully recognizes the problem suggesting that “[t]he fact that apparently the serpent and not God spoke the truth is … the central issue that the story raises.” But he will not go the road taken later by Barr based on what he considers a “consistent Old Testament understanding of the ways in which God does and does not repent.” Whether or not one agrees with Moberly on this point, his claim is bolstered by Boomershine’s narrative observations and we have at least enough justification to look for a plausible explanation without first resorting to calling God a liar. On this count Moberly offers the valid observation that life is often linked with blessing and death with curse and that life and death can be taken in not only a literal physical sense but also in a metaphorical sense in such contexts. Thus the curses that follow “can be seen as complementary to the decay and death in the personal life of man.” Moberly’s argument is all the more persuasive if we remember

83 Boomershine, “The Structure of Narrative Rhetoric in Genesis 2-3,” 117.
85 Ibid., 12.
86 Ibid., 16. Here he cites Deut 30:15, 19. Walton, though addressing a different issue entirely, contributes to the discussion by citing Jer 26:8-11 as a text which emphasizes the connection between the threat and the consequence as an inevitable result. “In actual fact,” he says, “the language of the threatened penalty did not imply that physical death would immediately ensue.” Walton, Genesis, 175. Collins finds evidence for a meaning of death that refers to spiritual death, that is, “estrangement from a life-giving relationship with God.” Collins, “What Happened to Adam and Eve?” 23.
87 Moberly, “Did the Serpent Get It Right?” 17.
that the temple metaphor with its picture of abundance and thus fuller life is the background for the Eden narratives of Gen 2-3.

Kempf further adds weight to the traditional interpretation by looking at the text from the perspective of narrative climax. He says the climax of Gen 2-3 occurs in Gen 3:14-19 based on paragraph structure, prominence, grammatical peak, and resolution of the plot structure.88 He identifies Gen 3:8-21 as a complex dialogue section which he calls an “abeyance paragraph” based on the fact that when God begins dialog with the man, the completion of the dialog is deferred as man passes off the blame to the woman, and the woman to the serpent. Kempf does not speak directly to what exactly is deferred but that is an important point which needs to be expounded.

We enter chapter three off the fragile equilibrium of chapter two, which introduced two foreboding statements in Gen 2:17 and 25. These two statements provide two motifs—death and nakedness, both of which become important in chapter three. The threat of death becomes the central point of tension around which the narrative revolves from the very beginning when the serpent is introduced and he immediately challenges God’s command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad.89 In other words, from a narrative standpoint, the command itself is made implicitly central to the story. After the woman and man eat from the tree, however, and when YHWH God approaches the man, the command becomes central because the narrator, though he need not have, explicitly mentions the command: “from the tree which I commanded you not to eat from it, have you eaten?” (Gen

88 Von Rad also pointed out that “these [the penalties] are the real goal and climax toward which the narrative is directed.” Von Rad, Genesis, 92.

The consequences are not mentioned but rather, as Kempf notes, are held in abeyance. This increases the tension and makes the consequences and their manner of fulfillment the question which lurks over the development of the narrative. The narrator is developing the story in such a way as to confirm in the reader the expectation that the consequences of the command will be addressed. This is precisely what happens. The command and its consequences are not permanently deferred, since the narrator brings it explicitly into the dialog once more just before YHWH God pronounces judgment on the man in Gen 3:17: “because … you ate from the tree which I commanded you saying, ‘you shall not eat from it.’” Though Kempf does not mention this aspect of the narrative, the fact that the command and consequences of Gen 2:17 are implicitly central to the narrative in Gen 3:1-10 and become explicit in Gen 3:11 is another sign that the narrative is approaching its climax. The fact that the command is mentioned and held in abeyance until 3:17 suggests that, from a narrative standpoint, the climax of the narrative occurs at the point when the man is judged. Kempf points out other reasons to take this section as the climax of the story. He notes the “crowded stage” effect which is the result of all the characters of the narrative being present at once for the only time in the story. He also mentions the grammatical features of the text. One important grammatical feature which points to 3:14-19 being important in the narrative is the string of six verses that fall under a single wayyiqtol. There are a total of 30 wayyiqtol verbs operating to move the narrative along in the 24 verses of Gen 3 and this is the only section more than two verses long ruled by a single wayyiqtol. This is all the more striking considering the fact that that narrator could easily have included a wayyiqtol at the beginning of the judgment on the woman in Gen 3:16 and likewise with the beginning of the judgment on the man in Gen 3:17. Instead, he has left these together in a single, highlighted action.

Thus the completion, and with it the climax of the dialog occurs when God judges first the serpent, then the woman, and finally the man in Gen 3:14-19. If the judgments are the climax of the dialog, then Kempf argues that the judgment on the man is the most important. He points to the fact that this judgment is the most highly stylized of them all. Furthermore, he points out that the end of the judgment on the man is an amplified repetition of what was stated earlier in the sentence. “In this way, the death sentence functions as a summary conclusion to the judgment of the man.”

It is worth looking closer at the structure of the judgment on the man. This portion of the text begins when YHWH God addresses the man and makes explicit reference to the command in Gen 2:17:

Following the explicit mention of the Gen 2:17 command we have the judgment itself:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic Script</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>אָרוּר הָאָדָם</td>
<td>cursed be man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>וּבִנְעָן הָאָדָם כָּל זְמֵהוּ הלָּא</td>
<td>and upon all mankind shall overcome</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the explicit mention of the Gen 2:17 command we have the judgment itself:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic Script</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>בָּרֵךְ הָאָדָם בֵּאָמֶר</td>
<td>blessed be man in saying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אֵל יִשָּׂרָאֵל</td>
<td>God Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אֲנָחָה תְּשִׁיעֵי לָהֶם</td>
<td>and they shall call her name</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the explicit mention of the Gen 2:17 command we have the judgment itself:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic Script</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>וְאֵלֶּה שֶׁבֶדֶרְהֶל הָאָדָם</td>
<td>and God saw that it was good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>כִּי מְמֹמַן בֵּלָקָה</td>
<td>for it was enlightened</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

91Ibid., 358. See also Collins, “What Happened to Adam and Eve?” 24.

As seen by the arrangement of the text above, this portion of the judgment follows a palistrophic pattern of A-B-C-C’-B’-A’ followed by two explanatory clauses. The B level clauses each begin with the ב preposition on nouns that are parallel in meaning (“toil” and “sweat of your brow”) followed by the verb אכל. The C clauses exhibit a similar degree of parallelism. Both deal with plants; the first clause with weeds and the second with the same edible plants that are mentioned back in 2:5. Parallelism is also found in the A level clauses due to the appearance of the lexeme אד מ ה. But the A’ clause in v. 19b introduces quite a different element of the curse compared to the rest of the 17d-19b. Up until 19b the judgment deals only with the trouble man faces in providing food for his existence but suddenly, in 19b the judgment turns to his death. The two explanatory clauses bring out the significance of this turn by reiterating and emphasizing this aspect of the judgment. Thus the judgment comes to its climax and culmination in the death of the man, which is also the climax of the narrative and the answer to the question—will the man die as a result of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad? As Kempf concludes, “prominence in the abeyance paragraph is given to the three announcements of judgment, and in particular to the announcement of the death sentence in Gen. 3:17-19.”

The dénouement of the story comes in the remaining verses of Gen 3 when the result of the judgment is played out. As set up by Gen 2 and as in the rest of the narrative, nakedness and death play a central role. In Gen 3:21 God provides clothes in place of the fig leaf coverings made by the man and woman. Then in Gen 3:22-24 YHWH God sends the

93Ibid., 368.
man out of the garden and restricts access to the tree of life in a concentric segment (following the pattern suggested by Auffret): 94

There does appear to be a movement toward the center and then back out. Genesis 3:22 begins an expression of YHWH God’s intention to prevent the humans from eating from the tree of life and thus living forever. This is parallel to 24b in which YHWH God sets up the cherubim and the flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life. This is the ‘A’ layer in Auffret’s arrangement. Next comes the B layer in which, in order to fulfill his intentions, YHWH God sends the man out (שׁלחו 23a) and drives the man out (גרש 24a) of the Garden of Eden. At the center we find that man is now to work the ground. This arrangement is similar to that of Gen 3:17-19, previously cited. In Gen 3:17-19 death is at the outermost layer of the concentric arrangement while the vegetation and the labor required to produce edible vegetation are in the central layers. Here, in Gen 3:22-24, death is in the outer layers (by virtue of YHWH God restricting access to the tree of life) and the working of the ground

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94 Pierre Auffret, La sagesse a bâti sa maison: Études de structures littéraires dans l’Ancien Testament et spécialement dans les Psautiers (Orbis biblicus et orientalis 49; Fribourg, Suisse: Éditions Universitaires, 1982), 42.
is in the center. This similarity in structure would seem to indicate that the dénouement in Gen 3:20-24 extends the implications of the judgment in Gen 3:14-19.

The question remains as to what kind of death is meant by Gen 2:17 and is then brought about by Gen 3:14–24. On the one hand, a straightforward interpretation of physical death seems warranted by statements such as אֶלֶנְט וּב (Gen 2:17)⁹⁵ and פֹּרְיַשְּלַח יִדְּרו (Gen 3:22). Certainly, physical death is in mind in these statements. On the other hand, the patterning of the text in Gen 3:17d-19 and 3:22b-24 suggests that the author intends to convey more than just the idea of physical death. Physical death, the toil to provide sustenance, and the banishing from the garden all seem to be wrapped into a single package.⁹⁶ This especially seems to be the case when we note, for example, the juxtaposition אֲרוּר הֲה אֲד מ הְשֵׂעֶב (Gen 3:17) and עַדְשָּׁבְךְָאֶּל־ה אֲד מ (Gen 3:19) in the same concentric level. In the concentric pattern of the text we begin with the announcement of the curse on the ground. The next layer in describes the toil that will result from the curse, and the next, center-most layer states that only through toil will the man provide sustenance for himself. This brings us to the final line which is the announcement of man’s death. Until now, this whole concentric structure has been about the ground and man’s toil to provide for himself. Now, suddenly, the text turns to man’s return to the ground, or his death. Placed within the concentric structure as it is would strongly suggest that the laboring itself is a part of the death sentence. Regarding this Wenham says, “for him [the narrator] only life in the garden counts as life in the fullest sense. Outside the garden,

⁹⁵ Compare Job 10:9, 34:15, Ps 104:29, and Eccl 3:20.

⁹⁶ "Because Gen 2:16-17 is to be understood as ‘you shall become mortal,’ the curse in Gen 3 regarding work and pregnancy is also to be understood within the framework of mortality/finitude.” LaCocque, *The Trial of Innocence*, 101.
man is distant from God and brought near to death." The idea that death and curse or life and blessing can be so juxtaposed is very much in keeping with the overall thrust of the Pentateuch, as witnessed in Deut 30:15-20.

Earlier in this chapter I argued that the image of the temple is an important metaphor for creation in Gen 1-3 and that it shapes a view of creation whereby people dwell in God’s creation as if they dwelt in the temple, in the presence of God. The temple, as a source of abundance and blessing for ANE societies, is likewise the picture of creation as a place where people are meant to experience abundance and blessing. The creation imagery brings out the full implications of man’s death in Gen 2-3. The death YHWH God spoke of in Gen 2:17 is physical death, but it is not only physical death, it is also the banishment from YHWH God’s presence in his creation-sanctuary, where due to YHWH God’s presence people were able to experience abundance of life. All of this has been taken away. Creation as described in Gen 1-2 no longer exists and the blessing on man pronounced by God in Gen 1:28-29 has been threatened and marred by the curse of Gen 3:14-19. Thus the tension of Scripture has become: Is there life after Eden? Is there any hope to return to the life experienced by dwelling in God’s presence in his creation-sanctuary? Is there any hope of seeing the fulfillment of the blessings pronounced in Gen 1? This is the question that extends throughout Scripture.

Not only does Gen 3 provide us with the tension that haunts all of Scripture, it also points us in the direction we need to look in order to seek its resolution. I argued earlier

\[97\] Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 83.

\[98\] “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.” (from Deut 30:15-20, ESV). Emmrich sometimes overstates the relationship between Gen 1-3 and the rest of the Pentateuch. However, his observation in this regard has some merit. Emmrich, “The Temptation Narrative,” 9.
that the climax of the discourse occurs in Gen 3:14-19 and that as an abeyance paragraph the most important part of the climax is the judgment of the man in 3:17-19. However, this text is part of the climactic scene in Gen 3:9-19 when God addresses the man, woman, and serpent. He begins by addressing the man, who passes blame to the woman. When he addresses the woman she likewise passes blame on to the serpent. Though the man and the woman are not to be commended for passing the blame, there was indeed blame to pass. From the time the serpent is introduced as נֵרֵם he is placed in a bad light and his questions or statements to the woman are thus depicted as nefarious attempts at inducing disobedience. The serpent is the ultimate instigator and this shows up in the structure of the dialog where the serpent is placed at the center of blame. Without inquiring of the serpent, YHWH God passes judgment, a judgment which also affects the woman. The judgment he then pronounces over the woman affects her relationship to her husband and then finally God returns to the point where he started by passing judgment over the man. This creates a chiastic structure with the serpent at the center.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{אִשָּׁה} \\
\text{נֹרֶשׁ} \\
\text{אִשָּׁה} \\
\end{array}
\begin{array}{c}
\rightarrow \\
\rightarrow \\
\end{array}
\begin{array}{c}
\text{אִשָּׁה} \\
\text{נֹרֶשׁ} \\
\text{אִשָּׁה} \\
\end{array}
\begin{array}{c}
9-12 \\
13 \\
14-15 \\
16 \\
17-19 \\
\end{array}
\]

The prominence of the position of the serpent in this structure is matched by the prominence of these two verses in the history of interpretation. There has been endless debate as to whether or not Gen 3:15 can be considered a “protoevangelium.” This seems to

\[99\text{Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 77.}\]
have been a very early understanding if we take the LXX as a messianic interpretation. Certainly it was fairly common throughout Christianity, yet it was by no means the only orthodox understanding of Gen 3:15. Interpreters such as Chrysostom, Ibn Ezra, and Calvin all shied away from reading Christ into the curse on the serpent. By the time the critical age of interpretation had taken hold protoevangelistic readings had become quite out of style and Gunkel marveled that such “allegorical interpretation continues to be influential even today.” Von Rad plainly stated that the “exegesis of the early church which found a messianic prophecy here, a reference to a final victory of the woman’s seed (Protoevangelium), does not agree with the sense of the passage.”

Nonetheless a few recent studies have begun to come to the defense of a messianic reading of the text. In terms of interpreting the text, the most helpful of these


102 Gunkel, Genesis, 21.


studies is one done by Averbeck in which he looks at the serpent in terms of the “cosmic battle” motif in ANE literature. Averbeck argues that there are two types of passages in the Old Testament that interact with the ANE cosmic battle motif when making mention of Leviathan. One type ignores any conflict that might have existed between YHWH and Leviathan (Ps 104, Job 41); while the other adopts the cosmic battle motif (Is 27:1 and Ps 74:12-17).\(^{105}\) Genesis 1, he argues, belongs to the first category and Gen 3 to the second.\(^{106}\) He says the usage of the motif provides ample evidence that ancient Israel was familiar with it. Averbeck concludes that

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the Israelites would have seen a great deal more in Genesis 3 than a simple tale about snakes and mankind. This was the great serpent, the archenemy of YHWH and the people of God. From their point of view, this would have been the very beginning of a cosmic battle that they were feeling the effects of in their own personal experience (see the curses that follow) and their national history.\(^{107}\)
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This argument may be strengthened even further if we take into account the fact that in Gen 1 Moses uses ideas or vocabulary that call to mind the initial conflict of other ANE creation accounts (Gen 1:2, 21) and yet at the same time it is clear in these very texts that no conflict exists. Of this turn in the text Smith declares that this “omission of conflict, just at the moment in the narrative when it might be expected, is so marked that its absence

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\(^{106}\) See also an article by Karen Joines in which she argues based on comparisons to ANE texts that the “underlying purpose of this serpent is to deceive and to destroy mankind; consequently, it basically symbolizes chaos.” Karen R. Joines, “Serpent in Gen 3,” ZAW 87 (1975): 9. A. H. Sayce argued that the serpent is a symbol for the Babylonian god Ea. “The Serpent in Genesis,” ExpTim 20 (1909): 562.

indicates a paradigm shift.\textsuperscript{108} If the markedness of the text is as strong as Smith indicates, and this does seem plausible, then the fact that a conflict arises in chapter three with a serpent at the center of it would be a pretty clear indication of the kind of paradigm shift the author is trying to bring about. It is not that there is no conflict in creation, but that it is not where people would have typically assigned it. Instead of a battle between YHWH and Tiamat during YHWH’s creative activity, the locus of the conflict is shifted to humanity and to humanity’s struggle with sin.

Reading Gen 3 against the background of a cosmic battle has profound implications for the interpretation of this text and especially for understanding the curse on the serpent as it is related to the seed of the woman. If here we have a cosmic battle then Gen 3:15 tells us who is gripped in the throes of the battle. If we can expect that YHWH will arise victorious, as his counterpart does in other ANE cosmic battles, then we should rightly expect that the struggle of Gen 3:15 will end in the victory of the woman’s seed and that this will correspond to YHWH’s cosmic victory over the serpent and the restoration of order to this newly introduced chaos.

I have argued that the tension of Scripture revolves around the question of whether or not humanity will be able to return to the creation-sanctuary of Gen 1-2. Genesis 3:15 suggests that the serpent has not yet won the battle; the struggle now is between the serpent and the seed. The seed, therefore, should be our focus as we read further. Our hope for a return to God’s creation-sanctuary, to the abundant life found in the garden of his presence, is to be traced through the woman’s seed. This point needs to be emphasized. If we are reading for the plot of Scripture as it advances from tension to resolution, and if the narrator has identified the seed of the woman as means for resolving the tension of Scripture,

\textsuperscript{108}Smith, The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1, 69.
then our focus on the seed of the woman should rightly shape our reading of the text as the plot unfolds. In the next section I will try to show how this one thought shapes our interpretation of the Cain and Abel narrative.

*Genesis 4: The Crux of Interpretation for the Book of Genesis*

From a source critical perspective, Gen 4 is usually treated in two or three parts with the narrative of Cain and Abel taken in one section and the genealogies of Cain and Seth in one or two additional sections.\(^{109}\) Genesis 4:1-16 is treated as an independent narrative, though connections are made to the preceding texts.\(^{110}\) More recently, and especially starting with Baker’s and Hauser’s 1981 articles, Gen 4:1-16 has been considered structurally, lexically, and thematically connected to Gen 2-3.\(^{111}\)

In this section I would like to start with these studies and then build on them by teasing out more of the details of the connection in terms of both similarities and differences. Noting the similarities and differences will help us to understand the nature of

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\(^{110}\) Van Seters points out that “Most scholars treating Genesis 4 regard it as a continuation, in some sense, of the same source as in Genesis 2-3, to which they give the name Yahwist.” John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (1st ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 135. He goes on to argue that even though this may be true, it does not necessarily follow that we have here a literary unity. For Van Seters, the question of literary unity is a question of genre and since we have multiple genres in this text, we are therefore presented with a challenge at being able to assert its literary unity. Van Seters, *Prologue to History*, 136. He notes that “[t]he parallelism of the texts is thoroughgoing: there is temptation, desire, conflict, crime, punishment, and exile east of Eden.”

the connection between Gen 4 and Gen 2-3. From there we can then look at how these connections fit into the development of the plot, the tension of which we identified in Gen 3. In the final analysis I will try to show that Gen 4 is the crux of interpretation for the book of Genesis.

Comparing and Contrasting Genesis 3-4:
Delineating Two Lines of Seed

Hauser begins his article by pointing to what he refers to as eight structural links between Gen 4:1-16 and Gen 2-3. These include such links as “a word of warning is issued before the sinful deed is committed,” “principal characters are confronted by God after the deed,” “God pronounces sentence on the offenders,” etc.\(^\text{112}\) If we look at each of the eight items in his list we get the general impression that what happened in Gen 2-3, especially with regard to the fall and its consequences, happens again in Gen 4. We can make a closer comparison by dividing up Gen 2-3 and Gen 4 according to their development (following loosely from Hauser’s observations) as in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>Genesis 2-3&lt;sup&gt;113&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Genesis 4&lt;sup&gt;114&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of characters</td>
<td>2:4-25</td>
<td>4:1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggle with sin</td>
<td>3:1-5</td>
<td>4:6-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act of sin</td>
<td>3:6-8</td>
<td>4:8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YHWH (God) confronts</td>
<td>3:9-13</td>
<td>4:9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YHWH (God) judges</td>
<td>3:14-19</td>
<td>4:10-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The effects</td>
<td>3:20-24</td>
<td>4:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cain’s line</td>
<td>(4:1)</td>
<td>4:17-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seth’s line</td>
<td></td>
<td>4:25-26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Similarities between the narrative structures of Gen 2-3 and Gen 4.

In the table we can see both texts follow a similar pattern of narrative progression. As I proceed through the comparison of these texts it is important to keep two things in mind. First, at one level each text has its own agenda and so the congruities between the texts are

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<sup>113</sup> These textual divisions follow the structure identified by Walsh except that the creation of man and woman are grouped together in one section as are the dialogue between the serpent and the woman and the eating from the tree in 3:1-5 and 6-8. Also, Walsh’s structure excludes 3:20-21. Walsh, “Genesis 2:4b-3:24: A Synchronic Approach,” 161–162.

matched by features that are equally incongruous.\textsuperscript{115} For example, in Gen 2 the man and the woman complement each other and are in a harmonious relationship to one another. In Gen 4:1-5 Cain and Abel are placed in contradistinction one to another. So the passages clearly have their own agendas and the similarities we are pointing out operate within these agendas. The second thing to keep in mind is that in following Walsh and Wenham we are dealing not with the grammatical structure of the text but the narrative structure. The divisions are not based on grammatical features but on change of scene, introduction of new actors, etc. This is less tangible than the grammatical structure but equally as important in the perception of the reader.

The next step in comparing Gen 4 to Gen 2-3 is to look more closely at the lexical similarities in the two texts as they correspond to the structural similarities identified above. These will be presented in another table so that the phrases or clauses are listed in the order they appear in their respective texts and within the narrative structural components as identified above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Structure</th>
<th>Genesis 2-3</th>
<th>Genesis 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characters</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggle</td>
<td></td>
<td>4:7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>3:9</td>
<td>4:9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Lexical similarities between Gen 2-3 and Gen 4.

The purpose of these two tables is to show that the link between Gen 4 and Gen 2-3 is even more pronounced than Hauser suggested, and even more importantly, that while the similarities create a connection between the two passages, there are differences between them that reveal a rhetorical strategy in the composition of the Cain and Abel narrative. As the first table showed, in general, each narrative follows a similar narrative pattern of introduction, struggle, sin, confrontation, judgment, effects. The second table shows that key phrases from the Gen 2-3 narrative show up with slightly different but similar

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wording in Gen 4 and in exactly the same order as they appear in Gen 2-3. There is only one exception. Genesis 4:7 contains the phrase אֲלֵיהֶנָּֽה תְּשֻׁוָּקֹתּו and of the phrases from Gen 3 which are repeated in Gen 4, this is the first one to appear, having been fronted from its original order in the Gen 3 narrative. The repetition of this phrase is remarkable for two reasons. First, it contains the lemma תְּשֻׁוָּק which occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible. Two of those occurrences are Gen 3:16 and Gen 4:7. On top of that the clauses are almost identical syntactically.\footnote{Wolde, “The Story of Cain and Abel,” 25; Auffret, La sagesse a bâti sa maison, 50.}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gen 3:16</th>
<th>2fs + מְשַׁלְּבָּה (3ms)</th>
<th>3ms + אִישׁךְ</th>
<th>2fs + תְּשֻׁוָּקֹת</th>
<th>אֲלֵיהֶנָּֽה</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen 4:7</td>
<td>3ms + מְשַׁלְּבָּה (2ms)</td>
<td>2ms + אִישׁךְ</td>
<td>3ms + תְּשֻׁוָּקֹת</td>
<td>אֲלֵיהֶנָּֽה</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I would suggest that this clause in Gen 4:7 alerts the reader to watch for similarities between the Eden narratives and the narrative of Cain and Abel.

By drawing our attention to the similarities, the differences become more pronounced and more telling of what the author desires to communicate. The clearest, most significant difference is found when we compare the curse on Adam to the curse on Cain.

אֲרוּר הַאָדָם בְּעַבְרֵךְ
3:17
עַתַּֽה אֲרוּר אֲתֵה מְדָאָמָה
4:11a

\footnote{Kessler and Deurloo argue that it is grammatically incorrect to take the antecedent of this pronoun to be “sin,” supposedly because the pronoun is masculine and sin is feminine. He therefore takes the antecedent to be Abel. However, the antecedent is probably the substantival participle רוּבָּֽךְ, which is masculine and the most immediately preceding is nominative. Martin Kessler and Karel Adriaan Deurloo, A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginnings (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 62.}
Again, there is remarkable similarity between the two clauses, but the difference is striking. Instead of the ground being cursed, it is now Cain himself who is cursed. Instead of being able to eat the fruit of the ground only by toil and trouble, now the ground will produce no fruit for Cain at all. The difference is made more stark because of the prevalence of the ground in relation to both the man and Cain. The man is made from the ground (Gen 2:7) and the result of the curse is that he will work it and return to it (Gen 3:23). Cain also worked the ground (Gen 4:2), he brought offerings from the ground (Gen 4:3), his brother’s blood cried out from the ground (which, by implication, had returned to it, Gen 4:10), now Cain is cursed from the ground (Gen 4:11) so that it will no longer yield its fruit for him (Gen 4:12), and he is even banished from it (Gen 4:14). Cain’s sin and his curse is clearly a progression of the man’s.¹¹⁹

These similarities and differences should invite us to further comparison of the effects of sin on the fate of Cain. We note that just like the man is banished from the garden and so, we have said, driven from God’s presence in the creation-sanctuary, so Cain is banished from the ground and hidden from the presence of YHWH. The punishment of Cain, that he is to be a wanderer and a vagabond, is a punishment of alienation from the rest of humanity.¹²⁰ If the man is banished to the east of Eden (by implication from the location of the cherubim and sword) then Cain’s banishment to the east is an even greater banishing (and thus further to the east) because he is alienated from human society.

The final similarity in the chart goes beyond finding similarities between Gen 2-3 and Gen 4. It points to an important feature of the Gen 4 narrative. Genesis 4 starts out with a disjunctive waw clause that gives us the background information to set up the

¹¹⁹ Auffret, La sagesse a bâti sa maison, 65.

¹²⁰ Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 108.
narrative as is so common in the book of Genesis. It states that “Adam knew his wife Eve…” followed by a record of the birth of Cain and Abel. This initial clause is echoed in Gen 4:17, where we find a wayyiqtol clause stating that “Cain knew his wife…” This introduces the Cain genealogy which is followed by another echo of Gen 4:1 which states this time that “Adam knew his wife again…” (also a wayyiqtol clause). When we read the Cain genealogy and the narrative of Lamech we find echoes of the Cain narrative except with increased violence (at least in attitude) and multiplied consequences.\(^{121}\) This supports the oft held view that the Cain and Abel narrative, like the fall narrative of Gen 3 should be read paradigmatically; it expresses what generally happens—sin has a tendency to go from bad to worse. Cain’s own sin and the consequences of it are worse than his parents, the sin of Lamech is worse than the sin of Cain. I will not argue with that interpretation but I would like to point out that there may be another important purpose to these concluding “knowing” narratives as well, namely that they juxtapose Cain and Abel just like they were juxtaposed by the original “knowing” of Gen 4:1-5. The juxtaposition of these first verses is quite stark. Genesis 4:1-2 records first the birth of Cain, then of Abel in a series of three wayyiqtols where Cain is given precedence as the main actor in the narrative. The next wayyiqtol with an accompanying disjunctive waw clause juxtaposes the occupation of Cain with the occupation of Abel (Gen 4:2).\(^{122}\) The next two wayyiqtols are very similar, they record Cain’s offering


\(^{122}\) It is important to distinguish between the disjunctive and the adversative. Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 129. That is, I am not claiming that the nature of the first two comparative statements is contrastive. I agree with Cassuto that there is no animosity between vocations expressed in the first, Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Adam to Noah, 203. The second especially is not contrastive as indicated by the inclusion of “he also” (וְהֶּבֶּלְהֵבִיאְגַם־הוּא). My claim, as I develop it, is that the cumulative effect of the grammatical
and are followed by a disjunctive waw clause that juxtaposes Abel’s offering with Cain’s (Gen 4:3-4a). The introduction of the two brothers is completed with one last wayyiqtol clause to record God’s favor on Abel and his offering in contrast to his lack of favor on Cain and his offering (recorded by a waw disjunctive clause, exactly as before). When we get to this last juxtaposition of Cain and Abel we find the prose is couched in a chiastic structure indicating that significance is being placed on this last comparison.

4:5

יתשייה יוהי

אליבאל יאלהנותהו

באלימק אילימנותהו

לשייה

structure and the emphasis on the last, which clearly is contrastive in sense, shapes our interpretation of the whole.

123 There is a great deal of speculation as to why Cain’s offering was rejected, e.g. Jon Douglas Levenson, The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 72; von Rad, Genesis, 104; Joel N. Lohr, “Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain: Genesis 4:1-16 in the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the New Testament,” CBQ 71 (2009): 485–96. One has even argued that the difference was nothing more than that Abel’s offering smelled better to YHWH Saul Levin, “The More Savory Offering: A Key to the Problem of Gen 4:3-5,” JBL 98 (1979): 85–318. That it was the shortcoming of Cain and not YHWH’s is clear by the character development we find in the text. Collins, Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary, 200, 212. This argument is parallel to the one used in the Gen 3 narrative with regard to the serpent. The narrator simply gives us no reason to doubt the character of YHWH, whereas Cain is developed in contrast to Abel. The fact that YHWH encourages Cain with לא תוטיב את השם is also telling. If he does right, his countenance will be lifted. The statement regards the future, but certainly it has implications for his current state of discouragement (ויתפלו יוהי). From the standpoint of the exegesis developed here very little beyond that needs to be said in order to understand the development of the narrative. Nonetheless, I find Waltke’s and Cassuto’s discussion most helpful and Levenson’s objections to it unfounded, Bruce K. Waltke, “Cain and His Offering,” WTJ 48 (1986): 363–72; Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Adam to Noah, 205. They argue that the designation of Abel’s gift as being מיתייתא טמא מתקיבלא is to distinguish them from Cain’s. Thus Abel brought a whole-hearted gift whereas Cain’s was merely a token offering to fulfill an obligation. Cf. Ibn Ezra, Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Beresheet), 81.
The grammatical structure of Gen 4:2-5 and the chiastic structure of Gen 4:5 make it clear
that the narrator intends to bring the two brothers into a contradistinctive relationship with
each other. In fact, Auffret seems to be correct in pointing out that Cain has here been
supplanted by his brother, or, I would rather say, the text foreshadows such a supplanting. At
this point in the narrative Abel rises almost to the status of main character in the story but
immediately afterwards he disappears into passive obscurity, becoming a mere object of
Cain’s wrath. Therefore when the phrase that started the narrative and set the contrast in
motion is repeated two more times, once in association with Cain (Gen 4:17-24) and once in
association with Abel (Gen 4:25-26), we should wonder whether or not there is something
more to the juxtaposition than is usually recognized.125

The Tension of Genesis: The Righteousness
and Survival of the Seed

This brings us to the second part of this section on Gen 4 in which we apply
our reading of the plot of Scripture to the Cain and Abel narrative. Hopefully by
understanding the role Gen 4 plays in the development of the plot of Scripture and the plot of
Genesis we can then better understand the role of the juxtaposition of Cain and Abel.

At the end of Gen 3 we had identified the tension of Scripture as being
focused on our return to the creation-sanctuary of Gen 2-3. In order for the story to end (and

124 “Cain, du fait de Yahvé, se trouve donc, dans le rapport à ce dernier, supplanté par son
frère Abel.” Though I am not sure I would agree that it is YHWH’s doing. Auffret, La sagesse a bâti sa maison, 50.

125 Levenson says that “though Seth is not Abel, he does, it seems to me, stand ‘in place of’
(tahat) the dead son in a more profound sense than is comprehended merely in his being the younger brother of
Cain in a family of two male offspring.” He argues that Seth is “Abel redivivus” based on the cultural ideals of
Hebrew culture. I am also saying that Seth replaces Abel in a more profound way than usually recognized but
only in the sense the narrative offers, that is, Seth is the continuation of the line of the promised seed of the
woman. Levenson, The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, 78.
end happily) we must somehow return to the creation-sanctuary. We also said that Gen 3:15 indicates our return to the creation-sanctuary will come somehow through the seed of the woman and his victory over the seed of the serpent. It is also my contention that if we are aware of the tension and the proposed path to solution, we are naturally inclined as readers (due to our desire to seek resolution) to follow this path and anticipate as we read on, how the narrative we are currently reading could possibly lead us to resolution. If that is the case then as we read Gen 4:1-2 we cannot help but expect that Cain and Abel are both candidates for the seed of the woman through whom our return to the creation-sanctuary will come. At the beginning of the narrative Cain, as firstborn and as the one given more prominence (Abel has no etymology and Cain is acquired or brought forth אֶת־יְהוּדָה) is the more likely candidate—though both may also fulfill the role of the seed of the woman. However, as I argued above, the nature of the juxtaposition of Cain and Abel foreshadows a supplanting and in the end Cain, because he does not overcome sin, proves not to be an eligible candidate for the promised seed of the woman. But if the narrator were only to record Cain’s unrighteousness this would not be quite enough to disqualify his line without doubt. What clearly disqualifies Cain is the fact that his narrative follows the same pattern as the narrative of his parents. Cain, like his parents, succumbed to temptation and sinned. Cain, like his parents, was confronted by YHWH and was judged. In the case of Cain, sin breeds sin, breeds sin. What is more, his judgment was even more severe. He is driven even further from

126 Of the three sons, Cain, Abel, and Seth, only Abel has no etymology. Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, 103.

127 Wénin, “Adam et Eve: la jalouse de Cain, ‘semente’ du serpent. Un aspect du récit mythique de Genèse 1-4,” 14. Wénin finds a psychological reason for Cain’s opportunity—he is not yet completely lost in his sin if he learns to become human and “à maîtriser son animalité intérieure” or the primordial chaos within. But I refer to the fact that though the man and woman sinned, yet it is through the seed of the woman that the return to the creation-sanctuary will come. Based on that precedent there may be some hope for Cain and his line, if the narrative structure did not dictate otherwise.
the creation-sanctuary and further alienated from humanity. At the beginning of the chapter, Cain and Abel are candidates to serve as the seed that will return us to the creation-sanctuary, but the narrative of Gen 4 repeats the narrative of Gen 3 so that instead of being drawn closer to God’s presence we are drawn further away from it. In fact, the unrighteousness of Cain has threatened the fulfillment of Gen 3:15. Cain himself cannot be the seed through which deliverance comes because he failed to heed God’s warning; he failed to overcome sin (Gen 4:7).

The tendency for sin to breed sin raises a question for the promised seed. If the sin of Adam and Eve breeds the sin of Cain, and the sin of Cain breeds the sin of Lamech, then how will, or rather how can the seed evade sin and thus provide for our return to the creation-sanctuary? This becomes an important question for the narrative that follows. As a result, Gen 4:7 becomes a challenge not just for Cain, but the line of seed that follows.

We return again to the juxtaposition of Cain and Abel. The contrast between the two seeds and the problem of the unrighteousness of the seed is confirmed by the genealogies that close the chapter. The genealogy of Cain with the narrative of Lamech produces the result of not only rejecting Cain due to his unrighteousness, but his whole line

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128 Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 117.
as well. The genealogy that replaces Abel, on the other hand, is confirmed in its being the promised seed of the woman by the phrase אֲנָהּ הַמְּדָיִם לְפִיוֹ אֹבֶרְבֶּשְּם יִהוּדָּה (4:26, cf. Gen 12:8, 13:4, 21:33, 26:25). The overall effect of the Gen 4 narrative then is to divide the seed of the woman into two contrasted lines. There is one line that is unrighteous and one that is righteous. As readers our attention is in this way trained to follow the righteous or chosen line, and eschew the other in our search for the promised seed of the woman.

The promised seed faces another challenge in Gen 4. In the Cain and Abel narrative the unrighteousness of the seed has threatened the survival of the promised line. If we follow the progression of the narrative while asking ourselves the question, “where is the promised seed?” then we start with both Cain and Abel as options. As Gen 4:1-5 develops the contrast between Cain and Abel the answer seems to be with Abel. But Cain removes Abel as a possibility and only Cain is left, at least from the standpoint of the narrative as developed so far. As I argued earlier, the repetition of the narrative structure of Gen 3 in Cain’s narrative as well as the Lamech narrative finally removes Cain as a possibility. At the end of Cain’s genealogy in Gen 4:24 the tension of Gen 4 remains unresolved.129 Where is the promised seed of the woman that will lead us back to the creation-sanctuary? Therefore, Gen 4:25-26 is the climactic conclusion to this narrative when read in the context of the plot of Scripture. God provides אֲנָהּ הַמְּדָיִם לְפִיוֹ אֹבֶרְבֶּשְּם יִהוּדָּה. In the face of the threat of the survival of the seed, God provides.

The effect of the Cain and Abel narrative is twofold. First it divides subsequent generations of humankind into two lines. There is the promised, righteous line

129 I would also argue, contra Peels, that Gen 4:1-16 does not constitute a single, complete plot either. The plot of 1-16 does not revolve around the rise and fall of Cain, but on the provision of the seed. The larger context has an impact on the identification of the plot. H. G. L. Peels, “The World’s First Murder: Violence and Justice in Genesis 4:1-16,” in Animosity, the Bible, and Us (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 23.
through whom the seed will come that will return us to the creation-sanctuary, and that tends to “call on the name of YHWH.” This line is to be distinguished from the unrighteous line that will tend to move away from the presence of God. The second effect of the Cain and Abel narrative is to introduce two new questions with regard to the seed. How will the seed overcome sin and remain righteous? Will the seed survive? Genesis 4 has taught us that in order for the seed to lead us back to the creation-sanctuary of Gen 1-2, these two conditions must be met. Even though both of these issues are resolved in the Cain and Abel narrative, subsequent narratives raise these same issues and so they become the prominent theme that shapes the development of the Genesis narrative. Thus there is a new tension introduced into the story of Scripture that is in fact a sub-tension to the plot of Scripture and, I will continue to argue, the tension of the plot of Genesis.

Both of these effects shape our subsequent reading of Genesis. First, we have been alerted to the fact that we must distinguish between two lines of seed. We will take that with us as we read, keeping our focus on the line of promise. Second, our focus on the plot of Scripture has been diverted to the plot of Genesis nested within the plot of Scripture, since the plot of Genesis must be fulfilled in order to fulfill the plot of Scripture. From now on, therefore, we will look for potential answers to the questions, “How will the seed avoid sin and remain righteous?” and “Will the seed survive?” Answering these two questions will resolve the tension of the plot of Genesis and take us one step further to resolving the plot of Scripture.

Looking Forward

There has been some discussion in modern literary circles as to whether plot is really the most important factor in a literary work. Character, especially, has been put forward as an aspect of a narrative that is more important than plot. It is argued that the characters shape the action and thus the development of the plot. I have followed Aristotle in
his insistence that plot is the most important feature of mimetic narrative and have focused almost exclusively on plot in my analysis of Genesis. When we look at the structure of the book of Genesis and see how the narratives are put together into a whole it seems apparent that, at least for the book of Genesis, plot is the more significant aspect of the narrative. Yet at the same time, plot and character may be in more of a relationship akin to figure and ground where the figure in a drawing shapes the ground just as the ground shapes the figure. At times, such as in M. C. Escher’s work “Sun and Moon,” it may be difficult to determine which is figure and which is ground because both appear as a complete picture. With that in mind it may be helpful to point out the importance of the seed as the main character in the Genesis narrative. The structure of the book follows the promised line of seed but also differentiates it from the line not of promise so that if the seed of promise is the protagonist of the narrative, we can think of the seed not of promise as the foil. The two work together in a way analogous to figure and ground where the foil is the background or contrast against which the seed of promise is to be seen. The purpose of the seed not of promise is to help define the nature of the seed of promise. Thus the two together work to create a single picture. We will see this at work throughout the book.

Our identification of the plot of Genesis influences our reading of the book going forward. Ultimately, we are looking for the return to the creation-sanctuary but since that return will come through the promised seed of the woman our attention as readers is fixed on her seed. Genesis 4 has keyed us in on not following just any seed of the woman; this is a single picture.

130 Making light of the once favored distinction between the novel of character and the novel of incidence Henry James says, “When one says picture one says of character, when one says novel one says of incident, and the terms may be transposed at will. What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” The Art of Fiction: And Other Essays (Oxford University Press, 1948), 13. See also the discussion on character versus action in Abbott, The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative, 130–133.
rather we are to key in on the righteous line, or the line that avoids sin. Sin, we have found, threatens the continuation of the righteous line of the seed. Knowing already that some of the motifs of Gen 4 arise repeatedly in the ensuing narratives, we will also keep our eyes open to see how the narrator uses these motifs to shape the progression of the plot. Just as the Cain and Abel narrative shaped our understanding of the seed, so each subsequent narrative is likely to shape our understanding and modify our expectations of how this seed will help us return to the creation-sanctuary of Gen 1-3.
CHAPTER 5
IN THE MIDDLE OF GENESIS I: THE NOAH תּוֹלְדוֹת
PLEXUS AND THE UNDOING OF THE
UNDOING OF CREATION

In the next three chapters we will cover the middle of the Genesis plot beginning with the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus in Gen 5:1-11:9. In chapter six we will cover the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus, or Gen 11:10-25:18, and in chapter seven the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus, or Gen 25:19-37:1. The goal of these three chapters, in accordance with Aristotle’s view of plot, is to show how each of these three middle תּוֹלְדוֹת plexuses picks up on the tension of Genesis and moves it forward toward resolution in such a way that each plexus follows from the previous and sets the stage for the next.

Interestingly, in the case of each narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת strand, multiple interpreters have suggested chiastic structures. In my analysis of these structures I have come to agree that a chiastic or concentric structure shapes the narrative and so with some nuance I will adopt these readings for each of the three major narrative strands. These structures, as I have argued, will serve as a control on my analysis of the text but more importantly they will help to elucidate the meaning of the text in relation to the development of the plot’s movement from tension to resolution.

The Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus consists of three תּוֹלְדוֹת strands: the headings of the first two are Adam and Noah, and Noah’s three sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth head the third. The תּוֹלְדוֹת of Adam consists of the linear genealogy of chapter five along with the short narrative at the beginning of Gen 6. As I have indicated, one of the main purposes of this text is to trace the line of the promised seed from Seth to Noah. However, despite the fact that it
is “merely” a linear genealogy it has some additional features that contribute to the narrative. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this dissertation, we will need to move quickly past this text to the beginning of the narrative. Before doing so there are two relevant aspects of this passage to consider. First is the short speech of Lamech in Gen 5:29. In the plot of Genesis we are looking for the seed that will lead us back to the creation-sanctuary rest. Lamech’s speech plays into this expectation by alluding to the curse on the ground and by suggesting that through Noah we will find some relief (זֶּהֲנַחֲמֵנוְּמִמַעֲשֵנוְּוּמֵעִצְבוֹןְי דֵינוְּמִן־ה אֲד מ הְאֲשֶּּרְאְֵ, cf. Gen 3:16-19, since Lamech’s speech is similar in content to the curse on the man and bears lexical similarity to the curse on the woman). Lamech’s speech, therefore, focuses our attention on Noah and builds the expectation that through Noah we might return to God’s creation-sanctuary.

The second note deals with the short narrative section at the beginning of chapter six. This text is, of course, one of the most difficult in Scripture and it raises a number of extremely difficult issues. Who are the sons of God in Gen 6:2? Are they angels, Sethites, Cainites, despotic rulers, or some mixture? Who are the Nephilim? Are they giants, Cainites, Sethites, or another variant? And who are the mighty men of old and the daughters of men? Exegetes have produced diametrically opposed viewpoints on these questions but in

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1 For example several have noted that the repetition of “and he died” gives the text a cadence that reflects the doom of the fall, e.g. Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch* (trans. James Martin; Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 124. Interesting work has also been done on the names and their relationships to surrounding texts. Hess, for example, suggests that there may be an intentional relationship suggested between the Lamech of chapter four and the Lamech of Gen 5:28. Hess, “Lamech in the Genealogies of Genesis,” 22–23; Richard S. Hess, “The Genealogies of Genesis 1–11 and Comparative Literature,” *Bib* 70, no. 2 (1989): 241–54. There is also the likely important observation of the parallel structure found between Gen 5 and 11. Hess, “The Genealogies of Genesis 1-11,” 244. Hartman also has interesting comments, for example the possible pattern of ten generations, the length of life, etc. Thomas C. Hartman, “Some Thoughts on the Sumerian King List and Genesis 5 and 11B,” *JBL* 91, no. 1 (1972): 25–32.

2 For a sampling of some of the opinions see David J. A. Clines, “The Significance of the ‘Sons of God’ Episode (Genesis 6:1–4) in the Context of the ‘Primeval History’ (Genesis 1–11),” *JSOT* 13
general there is agreement that the upshot of the text is to provide the background for the flood narrative that follows, namely the apparently uncontrolled spread of evil and the necessity to curb its proliferation. Even those interpreters who take a more benign approach to the text, for example in arguing that there is no condemnation on the actions of Gen 6:1-4, must still end up fitting that interpretation with Gen 6:5-8 where there is little room for doubt about the uncontrolled spread of sin.\(^3\) This much seems uncontroversial.

What is more, the fact that this short narrative appears in the same תּוֹלְדוֹת with the genealogy of Gen 5 is certainly significant since it invites us to read the narrative as an extension of the genealogy. This produces an interesting result. The previous תּוֹלְדוֹת ends on a positive note with Seth, who we are told is רֵעַ אֱלוֹהִים חַתְמָנֵו (4:26) and who begins a line of seed that is characterized by the closing statement אֵין חַתְמָנֵו אֵין יְהוָה (4:27). The linear genealogy picks up on this positive ending and follows this line. Genesis 6:1-8 introduces a dramatic tension into the plot, however, when it describes an almost chaotic spread of evil. But this introductory תּוֹלְדוֹת strand does not end on a negative note because it reminds us that here is Noah who from 5:29 is זֶרַעֲאַחֵרְתְַּּחַת בֶּל (4:26) and who begins a line of seed that is characterized by the closing statement אֵין חַתְמָנֵו אֵין יְהוָה (4:27). Genesis 6:1-8 therefore plays the important role in the development of the narrative. First it picks up on and fills in the picture of Gen 5. While Gen 5 follows the line of

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\(^{3}\) See for example, Helge S. Kvanvig, “Gen 6,1-4 as an Antediluvian Event,” *JSOT* 16 (2002): 111. He argues based on a comparison to Atra-hasis, that the report of Gen 6:1-4 is nothing more than mere report, however, the multiplication of eternal beings introduces complications that lead to the spread of evil as seen in Gen 6:5-8. For a similar conclusion see Ellen J. van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1-11* (Biblical Interpretation Series 6; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 74.
promise, Gen 6:1-8 lets us know that there is more going on than just the propagation of the line of promise because these two portions of the Adam תּוֹלְדוֹת are describing one and the same world. Just as Seth the righteous seed arises from the rubble of the narrative in Gen 4, so Noah rises from the rubble of Gen 6:1-7. By reading 6:1-7 back on to Gen 5 we can better understand the significance of Lamech’s comment in 5:29. Secondly, Gen 6:1-8 introduces both the tension of the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת and indicates where we should focus as we seek resolution. The result is an ideal setup for the narrative that follows.

The Structure of the Narrative

A few exegetes have identified a chiastic structure in the flood account, though there is not complete agreement over the specifics. Most notable are the suggestions of Cassuto, Wenham, and Anderson. In what follows I would like to draw on and slightly modify their findings in an attempt to produce a better understanding of the text’s structure.

In the case of Cassuto, he divides the text from Gen 6:9 to 9:17 into twelve paragraphs that are arranged in a concentric pattern. Anderson’s approach is a modification of Cassuto’s but he suggests the limits of the text go from Gen 6:9 to 9:19. He also modifies the divisions. Instead of taking 6:9-12 as one paragraph, for example, he maintains that 6:9-10 is a transitional introduction corresponding to the transitional conclusion in 9:18-19.

According to Anderson, “in between these boundaries the drama of the flood unfolds in a

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4 Coats does not offer a chiastic structure for the flood narrative but he does note that it “unfolds in four principal parts. The exposition (6:9-11) and the conclusion (9:18-19) frame an element of judgment and destruction contrasted with an element of re-creation and renewal of commitment.” Thus he provides general support for the idea of chiastic structure. George W. Coats, Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature (The Forms of the Old Testament Literature; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 76.

succession of episodic units, each of which has a definite function in relation to the whole.\textsuperscript{6} Like Cassuto, the second half of the chiasm begins with 8:1, but Anderson puts more emphasis on 8:1 as the turning point of the text. Wenham’s structure in turn builds off of Anderson’s but now instead of twelve layers there are thirty-one with God’s remembrance in Gen 8:1 serving as the clear pivot point around which the text turns. His delimitation of the text is the same as Anderson’s.\textsuperscript{7}

In my view, these three authors have presented enough data to show that the chiastic or concentric structure found in the text is indeed a matter of authorial shaping. Emerton criticizes each of these three authors in their turn but many of his observations lack force. For example he criticizes Wenham’s structure because of the varying lengths of texts in the various divisions.\textsuperscript{8} This exposes him to the criticism of being unfamiliar with the conventions of Hebrew narrative or poetry.\textsuperscript{9} That is not to say that all his criticisms are unfounded. Wenham especially, because he tries to take the text down to such a fine resolution of detail, leaves his structure open to some of Emerton’s attacks. Namely, why are there gaps left in his division of the text (e.g. Gen 8:14)?\textsuperscript{10}


\textsuperscript{7}Wenham, \textit{Genesis 1-15}, 156–158.


\textsuperscript{9}See also his first article on the subject in which he argues for the necessity of finding multiple sources in the text. John A. Emerton, “An Examination of Some Attempts to Defend the Unity of the Flood Narrative in Genesis, Pt 1,” \textit{VT} 37, no. 4 (October 1987): 401–20.

\textsuperscript{10}Emerton, “An Examination of Some Attempts to Defend the Unity of the Flood Narrative in Genesis, Pt 2,” 9.
Emerton does not make this point but a stronger criticism of these three exegetes is the fact that the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת stretches from 6:9 to 9:29. And yet none of these three exegetes includes the final narrative section of Gen 9:20-29. It seems a rather odd anomaly that the author has taken pains to develop a chiastic structure but has not brought it into agreement with the equally as carefully designed structure of the book as a whole. As a result of these observations, I would like to suggest yet another chiastic arrangement of the text that builds upon these authors.

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<td>Noah, his three sons, (corruption in the earth)</td>
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The text begins with the title of the תּוֹלְדֹת strand followed by background information which sets up the narrative. The narrative chain of wayyiqtol verbs begins in 6:10 with the birth of Noah’s three sons and God’s observation of the corruption of the earth. The second layer in the concentric structure begins with 6:13 and the first of God’s divine speeches to Noah. The beginning of the divine speech is a natural break in the narrative. The second layer ends with the report of Noah’s response to God, which is complete obedience, and the third begins with another natural break, the beginning of God’s second address to Noah. This third layer also ends with a report of Noah’s response to God’s command, which is, again, complete obedience.\(^\text{11}\) Genesis 7:10 also produces a natural break. The report of Noah’s obedient response provides a fitting conclusion to God’s command and leaves the next layer to start with a statement dating the beginning of the flood, which is the concern of the following layer.\(^\text{12}\)

The next four layers (in my scheme D, E, E, D) are not as clearly delimited but I have opted to maintain Anderson’s divisions. The text in these sections especially seems to be overly, and randomly, repetitive—at least in an English reading. However, if one keeps in mind that the wayyiqtol verbs carry the main line of action and the remaining

\(^{11}\)While I take this third layer to include both God’s instructions to Noah and Noah’s response, which includes a wayyiqtol (Gen 7:5) summarizing obedience and a wayyiqtol describing his obedience (Gen 7:7), Cassuto separates out the description of obedience. This seems to me to be a strange division of the text and accounts for the bulk of differences between my textual divisions and Cassuto’s. By keeping God’s commands and Noah’s corresponding responses together the structure divides along more natural lines and provides an overall structure with greater apparent unity. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Noah to Abraham*, 71, 77.

\(^{12}\)My divisions of the text follow Anderson most closely, but in this case he places 7:10 with the following section. In my opinion it makes more sense that the two divine speeches begin with God’s command and end with the response. Also verses 10 and 11 can be taken together. Genesis 7:10 reports first a timeframe then the waters of the flood on the earth. Similarly, Gen 7:11 reports a more detailed timeframe and then the opening of the heavens and the deep to release the waters. The parallel structure suggests they should remain together under the single יִהְּיָ֫הָ of Gen 7:10. Finally, the content of 7:10 corresponds closely to the content of the whole section from 7:10-16. Anderson, “From Analysis to Synthesis,” 35.
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clauses fill in the details then the purpose of the construction becomes more apparent. In the first of these sections from 7:10-16 there are only four wayyiqtol verbs and the first two are actually יִהְיָהִי, which means there is minimal action taking place. It merely reports the arrival of the flood waters and, in conjunction with that, the fact that Noah, his family, and the animals are all safe inside because God has shut the ark up after them. Hence this layer has a neat beginning and end.

In Gen 7:17-24 the action picks up considerably. We have a total of fourteen wayyiqtol verbs in eight verses. Half of these appear in the first two verses. Six of the fourteen verbs report the might or increase of the waters on the earth. Of the others, the first is the opening יִהְיָהִי, three report that they caused the ark to rise and float on the waters, one that Noah alone was saved and three that the waters destroyed all flesh. In other words, this text is clearly about the fury of the flood and the results that ensued. All flesh outside the ark is destroyed. Genesis 7:24 wraps up the section with a final statement about the might of the waters.

Genesis 8:1 is a dramatic change of events and is rightly considered the pivot point of the whole text. We return to God and his active dealings with Noah. If the previous

13 Robert E. Longacre, “The Discourse of the Flood Narrative,” JAAR 47, no. 1 (March 1979): 133. Longacre describes the verbal arrangement here as having the effect of “slowing down the camera at the high point of the movie.” I do not disagree with him but simply sense the action in a different way. To me it seems more like keeping the camera on the action of the rising flood longer than seems natural (relative to the rest of the story) in order to emphasize the fury of the flood and the tension produced by the havoc it wreaks.

14 Coats asserts that this act of remembering is not covenantal because he believes the covenant is not completed until the end of the flood narrative. However the covenant pericopae frame the whole narrative and 8:1 appears at the very center. Even if we take the disputable view that the covenant is not finally established until after the flood there is still no reason that God cannot remember that he wants to act in accordance with a covenant he is in the process of establishing and there is certainly no reason the narrator cannot use this phrase as a way of giving covenant significance to the events that follow 8:1, thus inviting us to read them in light of the covenants that provide the framework for the narrative. Coats, Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature, 78.
and corresponding layer of the concentric structure was about the waters increasing, this text is about the waters decreasing. In the first wayyiqtol God remembers Noah. After this, every single wayyiqtol is about God’s activity to cause the waters to decrease (8:1-2), the waters decreasing (8:1, 3) or the result of their decreasing, namely the resting of the ark on Ararat.

The final layer begins with another וַיְהַלֵּל and a statement indicating the time elapsed. The action of this narrative revolves entirely around the sending and receiving of birds to determine the status of the waters’ drying up from the ground. In the corresponding concentric layer God shut the ark behind Noah. Here, both at the beginning and end of the narrative, Noah opens up the ark. In the corresponding layer the flood is a reported fact, it simply appears on the earth. In this section, we have a long series of wayyiqtol verbs that report the long wait for the waters to dry up so that those preserved in the ark can exit.

Just as we found two layers that report divine speech in the first half of the text, so we find two more instances of divine speech in the second half. The first of these is similar to the two in the first half in that it records God’s command and Noah’s response. It also corresponds to the Gen 7:1-9 layer because it reverses the action presented there. In Gen 7:1-9 God commands Noah to enter the ark: in Gen 8:15-20 God commands Noah to exit the ark. Not only does the text then record Noah’s obedient response but also his response of gratitude as he prepares an altar and offers sacrifices. This sets the stage for the covenant which is presented in the next concentric layer of Gen 8:21-9:11.15

15 This is the second, final, and major discrepancy between my divisions and Anderson’s. The final three layers in Anderson’s divisions of the text are 8:20-22, 9:1-17, and 9:18-19 while my final two layers are B’ 8:20-9:17, and A’ 9:18-29. According to my divisions, Noah’s building of an altar and the covenant that follows are kept together in the same B’ layer. It makes sense that these related activities are kept together and it also makes for a tighter relationship between B layers, including the fact that reference to the covenant appears in corresponding B layers of the chiastic structure. Anderson, “From Analysis to Synthesis,” 37.
This next section and final report of divine speech breaks the pattern of command and response. It is not without commands, but it is primarily concerned with the covenant and so the commands occur in the context of the covenant. They are not commands to be obeyed immediately, but commands to be obeyed consistently over time. The main line of action here is limited. There are only seven wayyiqtol in a text stretching from 8:21 to 9:17. The first wayyiqtol initiates God’s response to Noah’s sacrifice. With the next wayyiqtol God expresses his determination to never again destroy all life. This is the opposite of his determination in the corresponding concentric layer. Thus we can see, with Cassuto, Anderson, and Wenham, that the second half of the narrative undoes the first half. Along with God’s resolve to not destroy all life any more, we find that the bulk of this section deals with the covenant itself. It appears that the covenant which is established here is the covenant that is anticipated in the corresponding concentric layer. It appears that the actual ratification of the covenant occurs in the highly stylized text of Gen 9:12-17. This text exhibits the following chiastic structure.

A 9:12 This is the covenant

B 9:13-14 I am placing my bow in the cloud

C 9:15 I will remember the covenant

B’ 9:16 There will be a bow in the cloud

A’ 9:17 This is the covenant

One of the major advantages of the concentric structure of the flood narrative as I have presented it is that, unlike either Cassuto or Anderson, the covenant appears in concentric layers of the text. This is important because the covenant is not just another element in the flood narrative; it is an important part of the structuring of the text. In fact, it is
an important thrust of the text as a whole. This is clearly the case because the covenant does not just appear in concentric layers of the text but it appears in the very center, or pivot point of the text. God’s remembering in Gen 8:1, in the midst of the destruction and chaos of the flood, is a remembering of his covenant with Noah and with all flesh. The whole flood narrative is about God’s enacting and establishing his covenant with Noah and all flesh.

Another advantage of the concentric structure as I have presented it is that the remaining portion of the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת, 9:18-29, is included in the chiastic structure. This text is left out in all of the others’. According to this structure, this portion of the flood narrative corresponds to Gen 6:9-12 in the first half of the chiasm. These two sections form the outer layer of the concentric patterning. The first section is quite short. It is about Noah and his three sons and the corruption of humanity. This text is also about Noah and his three sons and, it could be said, it is about the corruption of humanity. This appears to be a bit of an ironic twist on the flood narrative but there are several reasons for taking these two texts as parallel. The first, as I have already mentioned, is the fact that the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure has produced textual delimitations that we should take seriously in our analysis of the text. The second is the conclusion of the narrative in 9:28-29, which concludes the account of Noah’s life and puts the whole thing in the context of the flood (וַיְחִי נֹחְַאַחַר הַמַב וּל). This final narrative too, should be read in the context of the flood. Third, as I have also mentioned already, taking these two sections as parallel provides us with the opportunity of placing the covenant in parallel layers of the concentric patterning. Fourth, the idea that the theme of this text and its parallel text can be described as Noah, his three sons, and corruption in the earth is quite fitting and, as I hope to show at the end of this section on the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת, it not only makes sense of the vineyard narrative in the context of the flood, it provides interpretive cohesion for the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת within the plot of Genesis as a whole. The final reason for taking this text in conjunction with the rest of the flood narrative is the continuity of the creation imagery which pervades the whole flood narrative. The creation imagery is equally
as strong and it continues in a recognizable sequence so that this final narrative section has parallels with the fall of Gen 3.

The Creation Allusions in the Flood Narrative

Exegetes of Genesis frequently make reference to allusions to creation that occur in the flood narrative. There are a few parallels that are worth mentioning here for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of how the flood narrative draws on and advances the creation account. Gen 6:12, “God saw the earth and behold it is corrupt (וַיַרְאָם אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּלְשֵׁנַחְתָּהוּ) can be reminiscent of the sevenfold repetition of “God saw that it was good” in Gen 1. In this same vein, Mathews points out that the “language of destruction in the flood narrative, such as the eruption of the ‘great deep’ and the ‘floodgates of the heavens’ (7:11), shows a reversal of creation days one through three.” The stark result of these allusions is the impression that creation is being undone. Another allusion occurs in Gen 8:1. After God remembers Noah he passes a wind over the earth (וַיַעְבֹר אֱלֹהִים רְוחִֹעֲלַהְו). This reminds us of Gen 1:2 when God’s spirit, or wind, hovered over the surface of the waters (וְרוּחֲאֵלֹהִים מָרַחְַפַע עַל פְֶנֵי הַיָּם). This allusion, which occurs at the pivot point of the text, takes us back to the pre-created state of the world in Gen 1:2, right at the

16See, for example, Walton’s chart in Walton, Genesis, 344. See also David L. Petersen, “Yahwist on the Flood,” VT 26, no. 4 (October 1976): 441; Sailhamer, The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary, 129. Sailhamer emphasizes this aspect of the text throughout his discussion. See also Coats, who speaks of God re-creating life from Noah. Coats, Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature, 81.

17Westermann, Genesis 1–11, 393.


19Anderson, “From Analysis to Synthesis,” 36. Sargent sees in the רוּחַ not just a wind but “a divine agent used to accomplish a familiar calming of the waters (8:1), a stopping up of the flood’s sources, bring a cessation of rain (8:2), and a steady return of the waters to their proper place (8:3-14),” Andrew Dean Sargent, “Wind, Water, and Battle Imagery in Genesis 8:1-3”, 2010, 178.
point before God’s creation work begins. This allusion, it could be suggested, marks the point in the flood narrative when the undoing of creation begins to be undone. Another allusion can be found in the covenant portion of the text in Gen 8:21 where it records God as saying to himself that he will not again curse the ground on account of the man (לֹא אֹסִיף לְקַלֵלְע וֹדְאְֶּ). Despite clear differences, this is a very clear allusion to the curse assigned to the man in Gen 3:17 (אֲרוּר הְה אֲד מ הְבַעֲבוּרְֶּ). In this case, however, the text marks a new era in creation with regard to God’s carrying out the curse on the ground. Finally, Gen 9:18-29 has been compared to Gen 3 because of Noah becoming a man of the ground, the planting of a garden, nakedness, a subsequent sin, an invitation to share in the sin and, finally, the curse that results. In all of this we can see a definite arrangement of creation text allusions so that in the flood narrative we move from the undoing of creation to re-creation, only to finish once more with the fall. But in all of this there is still an advancement. As the allusion in 8:21 indicates, the final state of re-creation will not be the same as the initial state of creation, whether before or after the fall. But before we can see the text together as a whole we must first look at the text with respect to ANE parallels.

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20 Sargent argues that the proper understanding of שֶׁכֶם in Gen 8:1 is “calm” rather than “recede,” “Wind, Water, and Battle Imagery in Genesis 8,” 54. He argues that this contributes to a “mythopoetic mood” in the text that relates to both ANE flood and chaoskampf myths. Ibid., 67. Overall, Sargent is suggesting that the flood account fits the ANE paradigm which he describes by the title “Kingdom Establishment.” In such texts “The ‘king,’ or ‘victor,’ extends his control over his new territory, often that of his defeated and humiliated foe, brings that realm into his order, and secures that order and control through the establishment of regency, the making of treaties.” Sargent, “Wind, Water, and Battle Imagery in Genesis 8,” 188. There is such a broad range of texts included in his study that it seems to defy a genre classification as he suggests. Still, his study may show the potential for a variety of motifs coming together in a modified form for a purpose specific to Genesis.

Besides these allusions to the earlier chapters of Genesis, the flood narrative also has commonalities with extra-biblical ANE literature. The most obvious parallels are the three extant Babylonian flood accounts. Frymer-Kensky analyzes the flood narrative in relation to the Atra-hasis epic, which she considers to be similar to Genesis in terms of its context in primeval history. By comparing the differences between the two accounts she believes it is possible to gain insight into the meaning of the flood narrative. The main difference, according to her analysis, is to be found in the reason for the flood and the solutions to the problem offered in the narratives. In Atra-hasis the problem that provokes the flood is the overpopulation of man. She says the postdiluvian blessing to multiply and fill the earth (Gen 9:17) is likely a conscious rejection of this perspective and that in Genesis the problem is clearly the evil nature of humanity.\textsuperscript{22} In a related vein, while in Atra-hasis the resolution to the problem is found in new suggestions from Enki, in the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת, according to Frymer-Kensky, the structural equivalent of Enki’s suggestions are the new laws given by God in the covenant portion of the text. Since the problem was humanity’s evil nature then the solution is the Noachic laws designed to bring more order to creation and thus curb the violence.\textsuperscript{23}

Another form of allusion or parallel to ANE literature should be seen in the form of the watery chaos that envelopes the earth. On the one hand, there are clear parallels between Noah’s flood narrative and the Mesopotamian flood narratives. In the


\textsuperscript{23}Frymer-Kensky, “Atrahasis Epic and its Significance for our Understanding of Genesis 1-9,” 151. Contra Petersen who believes the Yahwistic account of the flood is a criticism of YHWH because it was “a divinely ineffectual ploy. The flood had solved nothing; it neither blotted out humanity nor washed them of persistent evil.” Petersen underestimates the role of the covenant and the recreation motif in the narrative, Petersen, “Yahwist on the Flood,” 446. Sargent, “Wind, Water, and Battle Imagery in Genesis 8,” 182.
Mesopotamian narratives, however, there is no connection between the flood waters and the watery chaos associated with Tiamat and creation. Yet in Genesis both of these allusions co-exist in the flood account. There are clear similarities to the associated flood stories, and yet, as we have seen, there are also clear allusions to the Biblical creation. These allusions to the biblical creation account, as we saw the waters covering the earth and then receding, open up the possibility that the waters of the flood can allude to the chaotic waters of ANE creation accounts. This, in turn, potentially injects the motif of the creation struggle. In Gen 3 we saw that the struggle over creation finds its locus in humanity and our struggle with sin. In the flood narrative the struggle with sin and humanity as the focus of the struggle is also the impetus for the narrative. In fact, we can begin to see that the waters that undo creation are really God’s response to the chaos of violence introduced into creation by the sin of humanity. Clearly, the author is making creative use of allusions to the biblical account and to related ANE literature in order to develop a unique account of God’s response to the sinfulness of humanity. We can now use all these observations in conjunction with a reading of the flood narrative along the lines of the Genesis plot as we have identified it thus far.

A Seeing Together of the Flood Narrative

The main tension of the Genesis plot deals with the righteousness and survival of the promised line of seed. The promised line must certainly survive to accomplish its stated goal and we know from the Cain and Abel narrative that it must be righteous to do so.

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24 Sargent argues that the רוּחְַ of Gen 8:1 (and also Gen 1:2) brings to mind the chaoskampf motif “where the wind is routinely wielded as a weapon against the forces of chaos in the establishment or preservation of cosmic order,” Sargent, “Wind, Water, and Battle Imagery in Genesis 8,” 139.

25 Cf. Ibid., 83. “YHWH plays a dual role as both initiator and conqueror of the flood, both destroyer of life and its savior. Just so, the waters are the tool of YHWH, working his purpose in the world, and, by its unruly nature, a force of chaos that needs to be re-contained.”
As we enter into the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת with the first section, Gen 6:9-12, we find the seed essentially divided into two separate lines. There is Noah who is righteous and upright in his generation and who walks with God (6:9). The rest of the seed, however, has become corrupt and has filled the earth with violence (6:11-12). This certainly plays into the plot of Genesis. The narrative is making a distinction between the two lines and we should begin to wonder about the fate of humanity even at this point. The corruption or sin of the seed is a direct assault on our two expectations from the seed, namely that it be righteous and that it survive. What will become of these two lines, will they experience a fate similar to that of Cain and Abel/Seth? In that story the unrighteousness of Cain threatened the survival of the promised seed when Cain murdered Abel, yet God preserved a righteous line through Seth.

Each half of the flood narrative contains two sections marked by divine speech that appear in parallel concentric layers. The second section of the flood narrative, Gen 6:13-22, is the first of these divine speech sections. This section clearly builds on the previous by picking up on the distinction between the two lines of seed and now by explaining the fate of each. For the corrupt and violent line God has determined the fate of extermination by flood, but for righteous Noah and his line he has determined to enter into a covenant relationship that will preserve them through the flood. This continued distinction between the two lines and the differing fates of each is the main thrust of this section.

The section divides into two halves with the first half being 6:13-17 and the second half 6:18-22. In the first half God expresses his resolve to destroy in two highly marked clauses (6:13 וְהִנְנִי and 6:17 וַאֲנִיְהִנְנִי). These two verses envelope YHWH’s instructions to Noah to build the ark. It is also important to note the development. In Gen

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6:13 God states his intention to destroy all flesh but it is not until 6:17 that he clearly states the destruction will take place by flood. Despite the instruction to build the ark, God’s resolve to destroy is the primary thrust of this first half.\textsuperscript{27}

In the second half of this first divine speech section (layer B) the topic turns to the covenant that God is making with Noah. The focus of this second half is not destruction but preservation. In fact, I would argue that in this section we do not find instructions that God is giving to Noah to gather his family and animals to himself. Note that there is no imperative here as we found in the first half. Instead of giving Noah instructions, the author is defining those that are to be preserved through the flood. In other words, the emphasis of this section is on contrasting the fates of the two lines of seed that were distinguished in 6:9-12.\textsuperscript{28}

This section in the concentric layers of the flood narrative, which began with God’s speech to Noah, now ends with a statement of Noah’s obedience.

The third section of the narrative (Gen 7:1-9) is the second of the two divine speech sections that appear in the first half of the flood narrative. In each section YHWH gives instructions to Noah and in each section it is clearly stated that Noah carried out those instructions. In this section the emphasis on Noah’s obedience is even greater as seen in two features of the text. First, the section begins with a statement of Noah’s righteousness. The

\textsuperscript{27}This is clear due to those reasons stated, this portion of the speech begins and ends with God’s determination to destroy, the enveloping statements contain two highly marked clauses in 6:13 (וְהִנְִ) and 17 (וַאֲנִיְהִנְִ), each of which prefaces YHWH’s stated intention to bring destruction and the text overall moves from ambiguity to clarity with regard to the destruction that God will bring. In the instructions to build the ark there is nothing said about Noah and his line being preserved.

\textsuperscript{28}This is further supported by the overall structure of this section. The text begins with the wayyiqtol recording God’s summary statement to Noah that the end of all flesh is near. The rest of this section unpacks this statement.
text is clearly indicating that Noah’s preservation, and even the preservation of creation (7:3 לְחַיוֹתְּזֶרַעְעַל־פְנֵי ה א ְ רֶּץ), is associated in some way with Noah’s righteousness.

Secondly, the text gives far more attention to Noah’s obedience than the previous concentric layer. In Gen 7:2-3 YHWH gives clear instructions to Noah regarding who and what is to accompany him in the ark. These instructions are followed not only by a statement confirming his obedience but by a section that begins and ends with a clause confirming his obedience and which also contains specific reference to his having completed the instructions given to him. It may even be possible to identify a third confirmation of Noah’s obedience. We could point out the shift from אלוהים, as used in the previous section, to a use of יהוה in this section. The previous section was about distinguishing between the righteous and unrighteous lines, this section focuses on the righteous lines and may be using the term יהוה to emphasize the special covenant relationship that is developing between Noah and God that is based, at least in part, and certainly by this text’s emphasis, on Noah’s righteousness.

The fourth section, Gen 7:10-16, marks a significant shift in the flood narrative because now the flood actually begins. The section begins with a time clause followed by the report of the beginning of the flood וּמֵיְהַמַבְוּלְה יְוַעְל־ה א ְ רֶּץ (Gen 7:10). But there is still not a great deal of action being recorded in the narrative. There are only four wayyiqtol verbs, two of which are וַיְהֲיֶה. The two וַיְהֲיֶה clauses focus on the beginning of the flood while the other two record Noah’s going into the ark and God’s shutting the ark after him. We also have a density of time statements. These may reinforce the idea that events happened just as God said they would. In other words, if the thrust of the previous section is

29“The is a picture of simple obedience to God’s commands and trust in his provision.” Sailhamer, The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary, 124.
that Noah did just as God commanded, now God is responding by doing just as he said he
would by shutting Noah, his family, and all creation in the ark.

The final section of the first half of the concentric patterning is inundated with
*wayyiqtol* verbs. The action recorded by these verbs is focused almost entirely on the flood
waters and their effect. The first *wayyiqtol*, a יָֽהְִי, records the fact of the flood. Nine of the
subsequent thirteen record the activity of the flood which begins with the waters becoming
mighty, then lifting the ark, and then wiping out all life on the face of the earth. Naturally, the
text continues the distinction between the line of Noah and the rest of humanity. The mighty
waters affect all of creation except for Noah, for only he and those with him remain after the
destruction of the flood.

Since the waters in this text cover all the earth, we have returned to the
precreation state of the world. Being as we are in the midst of the conflict described in Gen 3
it may seem that the serpent, the proverbial Tiamat, is gaining the upper hand. But that
cannot be the case. The waters here are not Tiamat; they are the waters that God himself has
sent on the earth. In fact, it is not so much the flood waters but the violence of humanity that
is responsible for the undoing of creation. The flood waters have actually undone the undoing
of creation. If there can be found in this text any allusion to the chaotic sea of Tiamat then it
can only be an ironic allusion in that the flood waters, instead of bringing chaos, eliminate it.
The result of the unrighteousness of the seed is that creation has been undone. Righteous
Noah and his line have been saved just as much from the unrighteousness of the seed as they
have been from the waters of the flood.\(^{30}\)

\(^{30}\)“[W]hat happens when the human creature falls and thus breaks the intimacy of the created
order? If God punishes, can humanity survive?” Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature*,
75.
This brings us to the end of the first half of concentric layers. Creation, at this point, is completely undone but the redoing of creation is about to begin. In the first section of the second half of the flood narrative Gen 8:1 (וַיִּכְזֹרְאָלֹהִיםְאֶת־נְֵֶקְחָּהָּהָּּוָּو
in the corresponding layer that he would destroy all life on the earth, in this layer he
determines not to curse the ground again on account of the man (לְאָסִף לְהַכָּל עָזַד אָנֵר). This allusion to Gen 3:17 is significant. At the record of Noah’s birth
in Gen 5:29 Lamech also alludes to the curse, indicating that Noah would bring us relief from
it (לֵאמֹר יְנַחֲמֵנוּ מִמַעֲשֵנוּ מִעֶבְרֵיהֶם יִנַעֲמֵי מִדִּין אֲדֹנֵי). Now, after the
flood has passed we have indication that indeed this is about to happen. But in what sense
will this be true? While the text develops in a way that alludes to the creation garden of Gen
3, it also seems to develop a connection to the Gen 3 fall. For that reason, and for the mere
everyday experience of the reader, it is not possible to see in this a return to the creation-
sanctuary rest. And yet the text must surely be indicating some sort of new era with regard to
the curse on the ground. The answer is to be searched for in the clause at the end of this same
verse. There God specifies more directly what he means in a clause parallel to the first,
וְלֹא אָסִי־אֲסִי לְהַכָּל עָזַד אָנֵר מִדִּין אֲדֹנֵי. In other words, the lessening of the curse on the
ground will come as a result of God’s not striking the earth with a flood. But is this an actual
alleviation of the curse on the ground? I would argue that we must keep in mind that
throughout the narrative the flood has been closely correlated to the violence of humanity in
the earth. It was not so much the flood that undid creation, as it was the violence of
humanity. It was the chaos of the unrighteousness of the seed that necessitated some action
from God that would restore his created order. The flood was that drastic action that
destroyed the chaos of human violence. But now, in the alleviation of the curse we may find
some new creation order that will keep humanity from entering into such a state once more.
This is where I find Frymer-Kensky’s comments helpful. By comparison to the Atra-hasis

remaining, three are "אמור", the fourth is the wayyiqtol "אמר" which leads directly into the second "אמר". In
each of the previous divine speech sections there is only one speech related wayyiqtol. The dominance of
covenant in both sections also creates a strong bond between them.
epic she believes that the so-called Noachic laws of 9:2-6 correspond to Enki’s ideas about how to keep the population of humanity in check. In the Noahic laws it is not the population of humanity that must be kept in check, but the corruption and violence of humanity. By curbing the violence of humanity, God makes it unnecessary to invoke such a catastrophe as the flood in order to control humanity. Hence the blessings and laws of Gen 9:1-7 along with the covenant of Gen 9:8-17 all work together to express this new era of creation in which the violence of humanity has been brought into check. Through righteous Noah and his line God has actually brought some alleviation from the curse. And yet the narrative has not yet concluded. There is one more section to this narrative.

The flood narrative began with a clear distinction between the two lines of seed. On the one hand we have the righteous line of Noah along with mention of his three sons, but on the other hand we have the unrighteous line that brought violence and corruption to the earth. The final section of the flood narrative begins with the sons of Noah who came out of the ark. After listing the three sons, as he does in the parallel layer as well, the author makes an ominous remark, וְחֵם הוּא אֵבַי נוֹחָי. This must be more than just mere fact about the genealogy of Ham. For any reader of this text, this information identifies the line of Ham with the Canaanite inhabitants of the promised land who are to be driven out (cf. Gen 10:15-19 and 15:15-21), placing them outside the line of promise. It appears then, that the text

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33 These apparent side notes or relatively unusually extensive details are significant because they function almost as diegetic inserts (they step out of the “story world”). These are moments when the narrator is engaging the current or recent experience of the original readers and so they make a connection between the text and the reader, inviting the readers to see the text in the context of their own experience.

34 In the use of the passive participle (אֶרֶב cf. Gen 4:11 and 9:25) and “slave” (עֶבֶד in Gen 4:12 and עֶבֶד in Gen 9:25) Coats finds a connection between the curse on Canaan and the curse on Cain. Coats, Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature, 88.
has set a trajectory for delineating Noah’s line into the seed of promise and the seed not of promise.

The narrative as a whole continues with the theme of creation. We have gone from the undoing of creation, to recreation, and now we are located in the garden. There is a great deal of debate about the nature of the sin committed by Ham, the justice of God’s actions in cursing his son Canaan, and so on. Despite the lack of evidence, there are plausible explanations and the questions themselves are peripheral to the text. It is most important to note that despite the alleviation of the curse we experience as a result of Noah, the creation and fall motifs that mark this passage clearly indicate that the effects of the fall continue and that the seed is once again being demarcated. Ham, the father of Canaan, has become the father of the line that falls outside the line of promise. The corruption of humanity may have been mitigated, but it has not been eradicated.

The Shem, Ham and Japheth הַגּוֹיִם

Previously I argued that the segmented genealogies, like the Shem, Ham, and Japheth section, tend to pick up the line not of promise and demarcate it from the line of promise by locating them outside the line of promise. The Shem, Ham, and Japheth הַגּוֹיִם, however, points out that the nations (הַגּוֹיִם) are spread out over the earth. Therefore, whether or not the Shem, Ham, and Japheth הַגּוֹיִם indicates the banishment of the seed needs further consideration.

The role of the Ishmael and Esau הַגּוֹיִם sections appears to be quite clear. In each of the narratives there are two main competing lines of seed. Throughout the narrative one of the lines is favored as the line of promise while the competing line, fairly from the

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beginning, is forecast to be excluded from the line of promise. However, in both cases it is the segmented genealogy at the end of the תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus that clearly defines the competing line and geographically places it outside the line of promise. This has the effect of leaving only the line of promise (Isaac and then Jacob) as the line that should be subsequently traced. Thus the stage is set for the beginning of the next תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus.

As a result of the very similar pattern and role followed by the Ishmael and Esau תּוֹלְדוֹת strands we might be led to believe that the Shem, Ham and Japheth תּוֹלְדוֹת would follow a similar pattern and purpose. At the very least, we might expect, with Driver, that this genealogy sets the stage for separating Israel from the nations. However, unlike the Ishmael and Esau תּוֹלְדוֹת genealogies, which clearly do demarcate the line of promise, the Shem, Ham, and Japheth תּוֹלְדוֹת takes up the lines of all three sons including the line of promise which comes down through Shem. Even if we could begin to discern from Gen 9:18-29 that Shem is the line of promise and Ham is not; including the fate of all three lines together in one segmented genealogy makes it difficult to assert that the role of this genealogy is to demarcate the line not of promise from the line of promise. There are additional factors that point in this direction. The other two segmented genealogies provide a sharp end to the lines of Ishmael and Esau within the narrative. Ishmael’s and Esau’s lines are developed in the genealogy only to disappear for the rest of the book whereas the Shem line is picked up again. It is also interesting that from a literary standpoint the Ishmael and Esau תּוֹלְדוֹת sections have little to do with the narrative that follows. The Shem, Ham, and Japheth תּוֹלְדוֹת, however, and specifically the tower of Babel narrative within it, has textual connections to the Shem and Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת sections which immediately follow. A final

36: “[A]fter this chapter, he [the compiler] is able to limit himself exclusively to the line of Shem (xi. 10ff.), and shortly afterwards to a particular branch of the family of Terah” Driver, The Book of Genesis, 113.
difference can be found in the geological comment that follows the genealogy. In the Shem, Ham, and Japheth תּוֹלְדוֹת the geographical comment scatters the seed around the earth but this is not a clear reference to its being outside the line or land of promise. The promise of the land has not yet been given and there is no reference to position relative to Eden. In addition, the scattering comment refers to the line of promise as much as it refers to the other lines.

Additionally, we can observe that unique to this תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus is the fact that each of the genealogical תּוֹלְדוֹת strands incorporates a narrative as a commentary on the genealogy. In each case the narrative describes the status of humankind, not just one line of seed. In the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus therefore, the promised line of seed, though differentiated from the line not of promise, is still a part of humanity. The unrighteousness of humanity continues to threaten the survival and the righteousness of the seed.

As a result of these textual observations, it is clear that even if the Shem, Ham, and Japheth תּוֹלְדוֹת does set the stage for the demarcation of the seed in the Shem תּוֹלְדוֹת of Gen 11, it is not plausible to point to this text as one that sets the line of promise apart from the line not of promise. In fact, the most widely recognized characteristic of this text is that it puts Israel in the context of the surrounding nations.37 The genealogy is full of names that represent geographic locations or peoples or cities. Clearly then, the primary purpose of this text is not to demarcate the line of promise from the rest of the seed, but to put it in the context of the seed. This interpretation is confirmed by the geographic comment at the end of the genealogy which merges all three lines under the line of Noah, and states that נֵפְרֵדִים הַמָּרָכִים אֲנָחַר הָמָּרָכִים. In this text we find a clear, even if implicit

37 Merrill, among others, has pointed out that though “the names of Noah's sons seem to have little relevance to race, anthropological, linguistic, and even biblical evidence points to a certain correlation between race and the Noachic descendants.” This characteristic of the genealogy, along with the fact that it includes the line of promise, creates an important link between the nations and the line of promise. Eugene H. Merrill, “The Peoples of the Old Testament According to Genesis 10,” BSac 154, no. 613 (1997): 5.
solidarity of all nations, including the line of promise. As a result, von Rad may not have been so accurate when he rejected the view that this text offers out a hope for all nations to return to the creation-sanctuary rest.\textsuperscript{38} We may instead have grounds for the view of Keil and Delitzsch, that this genealogy is inserted “with the prophetic intention of showing that the nations, although they were quickly suffered to walk in their own ways (Acts xiv. 16), were not intended to be forever excluded from the counsels of eternal love.”\textsuperscript{39} However, in order to confirm such a view we will need to read the genealogy together with the Babel narrative that occurs along with it in the same תּוֹלְדוֹת strand.

Beginning seminally in 1978, a number of authors have begun to question the traditional view of the tower of Babel narrative in Gen 11:1-9, arguing that instead of a story of God’s judgment on pride we have here an amoral human act that results in God’s bringing about the diversity of cultures.\textsuperscript{40} One of the most recent to defend this view is E. J. van Wolde. However, her interpretation relies to a large degree on her understanding of Genesis 1-11 as a narrative focused primarily on the earth as opposed to humans.\textsuperscript{41} I argued against

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\item \textsuperscript{38} Von Rad, \textit{Genesis}, 144.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Keil and Delitzsch, \textit{The Pentateuch}, 161.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Wolde, “The Earth Story,” 152. Also, her arguments regarding the temple are less than convincing. For example she says that the term “‘head in heaven’ [single quotes in the original as well] (ראש בשמים) in combination with towers or large edifices does occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as figurative language to describe edifices of impressive high proportions, impossible to attack.” She gives the example of Deut 1:28 and 9:1. However, this is not necessarily a convincing argument. As van Wolde indicates, we do not find the same term of Gen 11:4 in these passages, instead we find בצרת בשמים. It is therefore possible that a difference in the language could indicate a difference of intended meaning. Also, she argues that heaven does
her reading in chapter four. More commonly, Hiebert is cited as the main proponent of the amoral tower view. Hiebert believes that the motive of the builders is explicitly stated in Gen 10:4, “so that we will not be dispersed over the surface of the earth.” He uses grammar to argue that the goal is not to build a tower; that is only the means to their desired end—to not be scattered. Hiebert then follows with some arguments about why the height of the tower is not important, that the focus is on the city and so on. However, he concludes by saying that, “While much energy has been spent on this debate [the identity of the tower], the tower's precise character is not crucial for the argument here, since the narrator's primary interest is not in the tower but in the cultural homogeneity that was the purpose of humanity's building project as a whole.” It is in this final statement that Hiebert exposes the main weakness of his argument. Hiebert puts all the emphasis on the goal of the builders assuming, apparently, that as long as their goal is neutral then it makes no difference whatsoever what means they choose to accomplish it. This cannot be the case. The righteousness of the means of accomplishing the goal is as important as the righteousness of the goal itself. If that is true then we do by all means need to take seriously the nature of the tower as many interpreters have pointed out. In Hiebert’s analysis he put a great deal of emphasis on the height of the tower. He seems to think that most interpreters would say that the attempt that was being made was to build a tower that would physically reach the heavens as some sort of assault against divine authority. He notes that idioms very similar to the one used in Gen 11:4 are not refer to God’s place of abode in Gen 1-11 but to a part of the universe. But the sum of her support for this view comes from Gen 1 where the context is quite different. Van Wolde, “The Earth Story,” 150.

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43 Ibid., 39.

44 Ibid., 38. This does seem to resemble the interpretation of some exegetes, see Seybold, “Der Turmbau zu Babel,” 466.
“ubiquitous in descriptions of the height of ziggurats and temple complexes” and from this concludes that the statement in Gen 11:4 must be understood “simply as a feature of the magnificence of the city in which it stands.”

It may be true for us today that magnificent church buildings are little more than cultural landmarks, but that is certainly not the case for the ancient world and here we find Hiebert’s stumbling block. He has not understood the significance of these cultic centers. If he had, he would have recognized that the means of accomplishing their goal is material evidence against their intentions.

Walton’s analysis of the Tower of Babel narrative is at many points speculative in its attempt at putting together a full picture of the affair. However, his basic assertions are quite cogent. Namely, Walton suggests that Shinar should be associated with Sumer.

This claim finds corroboration in the building materials used. A setting in southern Mesopotamia makes the identification of the tower as a ziggurat quite likely. As Hiebert himself pointed out and Walton affirms, “almost every occurrence of the expression describing a building ‘with its head in the heavens’ refers to a temple with a ziggurat.”

Unlike Hiebert, however, Walton finds significance in this fact. Walton points out that the purpose of the ziggurat was to be a stairway joining heaven and earth. Walton then makes a connection between the ziggurat and the anthropomorphization of the gods.

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48 Walton, Genesis, 376. “The needs and nature of the deities who would make use of a ziggurat stairway and be served in such ways reflect the weakness and distortion of deity brought about by the Babylonian anthropomorphization of the gods.”
zigurat might be seen as a way that people are intending to manipulate the gods, even trying to “force” them to come down from heaven to be present to bless and protect them. This is a stark contrast to Gen 4:26 (cf. 12:8, 21:33, and 26:25, and possibly 16:13) where we find the beginning of the calling on the name of YHWH. This seems to indicate that they are worshipping YHWH, even expressing their dependence upon YHWH, whereas in Gen 11:1-9 we see that people want to set up an organizational structure whereby they secure the patronage of their god in order to make a name for themselves. Rather than worshipping or depending upon YHWH and thus calling on his name, they are manipulating him.49

The order of the two passages that make up the Shem, Ham, and Japheth תּוֹלְדוֹת is often noted. The genealogy, which comes first, documents the nations as scattered in the earth after the flood. The narrative, which follows the genealogy, documents the scattering of the nations. Thus the two texts do not appear to have a simple chronological arrangement as we might presume from the ordering of the text, but they may be reversed or even overlap. This suggests that the arrangement is not chronological but literary with connections between them that are likewise not cause and effect but literary as well.50 This

49 For additional criticisms of Hiebert’s arguments see especially LaCocque’s third category, or philological critique in which he points out textual connections that bring in a sense of condemnation to this narrative, for example the reference to their coming from the east. André LaCocque, “Whatever Happened in the Valley of Shinar? A Response to Theodore Hiebert,” JBL 128 (2009): 29–41. Strong has also responded to Hiebert but he argues that the tower should be equated with a victory stele. There does not seem to be enough in the text to successfully make this connection. John T. Strong, “Shattering the Image of God: A Response to Theodore Hiebert’s Interpretation of the Story of the Tower of Babel,” JBL 127 (2008): 625–34. See also Hom’s article in which he sees a connection between Nimrod and Gen 11:1-9 that creates in implicit condemnation of the tower builders, Mary Katherine Hom, “... A mighty hunter before YHWH’: Genesis 10:9 and the Moral-Theological Evaluation of Nimrod,” VT 60 (2010): 68. But also see Penley’s interesting article in which he makes a competent attempt at placing the tower of Babel in a specific historical setting of the Sumerian Ur III period. In his view, the sin is also the Sumerian relationship to the gods (or God) but he bolsters the view that they have become prideful by using the historical data to support such a reading Penley, “A Historical Reading of Genesis 11,” 711.

50 Merrill cites the usual view of their reversal and the assumption of a reversed cause and effect relationship (Gen 11:1-9 brought about the table of nations) Merrill, “The Peoples of the Old Testament
literary arrangement actually helps to confirm our reading of these two texts, the first as neutral to the nations (the line not of promise is not cut off from the line of promise) and the second as morally negative of the nations (we have here another “fall”). If the texts were chronologically arranged then the genealogy would inherit the negative judgment of the Tower of Babel narrative by chronological implication. By arranging the texts in this way, the author has avoided these negative connotations. The result is a situation in which the genealogy expresses the solidarity of nations and thus the hope of all nations to return to God’s creation-sanctuary rest. The tower narrative on the other hand, points to the persistent problem of the righteousness of the seed. This lack of righteousness continually threatens the prospect of returning to God’s creation-sanctuary rest. Awabdy is quite right in noting that “the Tower of Babel saga engenders suspense by leaving open and elusive the future of YHWH’s relationship with humankind, a suspense to which the Terah-Abram introduction offers an inchoate, yet observable conclusion.”

This makes this segmented genealogy and its placement with respect to the Tower of Babel narrative an important contribution to the Genesis story. Without the

According to Genesis 10,” 6. But Penley offers an interesting view, suggesting that the Peleg genealogy is cut short (Gen 10:25) in order to be taken up by the narrative of Gen 11:1-9. The Shem genealogy of Gen 11:10-26 then takes up the line of Shem from the beginning and follows it to Terah (and Abraham). Penley, “A Historical Reading of Genesis 11,” 703. This is an interesting suggestion because it coincides with what we have noticed about the book of Genesis. It is in its essence a genealogy that has been overrun with narratives that are designed to be commentaries on the genealogy. In other words, the narratives are interpreting the genealogy for us. In that sense we can think of Genesis as an identity narrative because it tells us who we are by telling us where we come from. Cf. Jack M. Sasson, “The ‘Tower of Babel’ as a Clue to the Redactional Structuring of the Primeval History (Genesis 1:1-11:9,” in “I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood”: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11 (ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura; Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 4; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 448–57.


nuances we see in the content and organization of the Shem, Ham, and Japheth תּוֹלְדוֹת section, the thrust of the organization of the book is to separate out the line of promise as the only line that is interesting for the work as a whole. This would remove any hope for the rest of the seed to return to God’s creation-sanctuary rest. That reading would be affirmed by the flood narrative in which all of humanity is destroyed except for the line of promise. Yet at the end of that very narrative, and as a part of the same Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus, this genealogy affirms God’s commitment to all of humanity. An exclusive reading that removes all hope for the seed not of promise would also be affirmed by the other segmented genealogies that separate out the other lines and mark them as falling outside the land of promise. But the Shem, Ham, and Japheth תּוֹלְדוֹת, precisely because it does not set apart the line of promise, works together with the other two segmented genealogies to create a balanced and nuanced understanding of the line of promise. On the one hand, the line of promise is set apart as we have seen thus far, by its righteousness. On the other hand, the line of promise belongs still to all of humanity. The table of nations thus underscores the importance of the line of promise. It is not just the line that will experience the return to the creation-sanctuary rest; it is the line through which all of humanity has its hope of returning to the creation-sanctuary rest. Genesis 10:1-11:9 thus sets the stage for Abraham as the father of the righteous line through whom all nations will find blessing. As we shall see, by separating Abraham from the nations, the text sharpens or focuses our expectations of righteousness with regard to the line of promise.

*The Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת Plexus Summary*

In the methodological chapters of this dissertation I developed the idea of the theme-rheme concept from the Prague Linguistics Circle, as a way of understanding the interrelationship of plot episodes. Since I have concentrated here on the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus
it will be helpful to relate this to the prologue of Genesis and the Heaven and Earth strand in Gen 2:4-4:26.

I have argued that the prologue to Genesis establishes the idea of creation as a creation-sanctuary of rest, that the fall disturbs this rest, and that we are promised a seed that will help us return to the creation-sanctuary rest. The Cain and Abel narrative then picks up this theme and develops it with the rheme of the seed. The promised seed of the woman, we find out, must be righteous and it must survive. This is precisely the theme that the Noah plexus takes up and develops. It does it by introducing the rheme of sin expanding in uncontrolled measure or the rheme of the chaos of evil. The chaos of evil, or the unrighteousness of the seed, threatens the survival of the seed. Yet at the same time the righteousness of the seed becomes the vehicle through which God preserves the seed. Through the righteous seed God established a covenant with all flesh that we might think of as overcoming the chaotic evil of fallen creation. Or we might say that it brought a degree of stability to the post-fall chaos of creation. This new degree of order provides the possibility of hope for the nations but it still leaves open the question of the seed. At the end of the narrative (both in Gen 9:18-29 and 11:1-9) we are introduced to a new fall and humanity ends in a new state that, it might be said, is not as unstable or chaotic as the original.

By ending in a new fallen state our attention turns to the continuation of the seed of promise which has not yet been explicitly delineated by the narrative. We are still looking for confirmation of where this righteous seed will come from. Noah, though righteous enough that through him God stabilized creation, was not righteous enough to ensure the continued righteousness of his line. We might then think of Noah as a type of the

promised seed that led us toward the creation-sanctuary rest. Yet we are still looking forward to a seed that will lead us back to the creation-sanctuary rest as envisioned in Gen 1-2. Our expectations for the seed, that it must be righteous and that it must survive, continue as they have only been confirmed by the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus.
CHAPTER 6

THE MIDDLE OF GENESIS II: THE TERAH תּוֹלְדוֹת strand

PLEXUS AND THE PARADIGMATIC RIGHTEOUSNESS OF ABRAHAM

Like the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus before it, the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus consists of three תּוֹלְדוֹת strands: the Shem תּוֹלְדוֹת strand, which is a linear genealogy, the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת strand, which is the Abraham narrative, and the Ishmael תּוֹלְדוֹת strand, which is a segmented genealogy. The structural purpose of the Shem תּוֹלְדוֹת strand is to pick up the line of promise and trace it from Shem to Terah and his three sons. I have argued previously that the purpose of the Ishmael תּוֹלְדוֹת strand is to bring final closure to the Abraham narrative by picking up the line not of promise, developing it, and then setting it aside while the narrative follows the line of promise. These comments will suffice for understanding the flow of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus so that we can focus on the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת strand, or the Abraham narrative, in order to understand how it develops the plot of Genesis.

The Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus served to confirm our identification of the tension of the narrative. The promised seed that will lead us back to the creation-sanctuary rest must be righteous and it must survive. In the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus we saw both syntagmatic and paradigmatic ordering of the narrative according to our understanding of plot. Paradigmatic ordering includes the concentric structure of the text but especially the ordering of the text toward the goal of conforming to the demands of the plot. The segmented genealogy and the Tower of Babel narrative, for example, were ordered toward the goal of supporting the author’s paradigmatic arrangement of the plot. But there is also the syntagmatic arrangement in the one thing from another as we saw in the movement from chaotic creation, to
destruction of chaos, to renewal of order in creation, to the repetition of the fall (the theme-rheme sequence). In the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת our examination of the text will identify similar orderings in the text and we will begin again with an analysis of the concentric or chiastic ordering of the text. Once again there is no shortage of suggestions as to how the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת strand’s chiastic organization should be understood.

The Structure of the Narrative

There have been at least five suggestions for the arrangement of the Abraham narrative, which begins in Gen 11:27 and stretches to Gen 25:11. Chiastic or parallel structures have been suggested by Westermann/Sutherland, Alexander/Wenham, Rendsburg, Yudkowsky, and Wheaton.¹ As early as 1964 Westermann suggested that the Abraham narrative is structured by the plot and possibly also by a parallel arrangement of texts. In 1983 Sutherland picked up on Westermann and expounded the relationship between the plot and the parallel arrangement. He argued that the Abraham cycle ends with the Nahor genealogy of Gen 22:20-24 and not with the death of Abraham in 25:11. According to Sutherland, “Abraham's role in the unit is not primarily one of faithfulness. Rather, it is one of disbelief and confrontation.”² The chiastic structure suggested by Westermann and Sutherland was at several points imperfect but it sufficiently demonstrated the presence of a structure imposed upon the text.³ One year before Sutherland built on Westermann’s work,

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²Sutherland, “The Organization of the Abraham Promise Narratives,” 343.

³Ibid., 340–341.
Alexander had already developed the relationship between the plot of the Abraham narrative and its parallel structure. At the same time, he improved on the chiastic structure and eliminated the inconsistencies. However, the structure suggested by his 1982 dissertation stretched only from 12:10-20:18. Contra Sutherland, Alexander referred to all of 22:20-25:11 as an extended conclusion.

Subsequent to Alexander, Rendsburg suggested a structure similar to Alexander’s except that in addition to the layers that Alexander identified, he found connections in two additional outer layers. According to Rendsburg, the genealogy of Terah (11:27-32) is parallel to the genealogy of Nahor (22:20-24) and the “start of Abraham’s spiritual odyssey” (12:1-9) is parallel to its climax (22:1-19). Rendsburg’s overall structure differs in some additional ways to Alexander’s but Wenham picked up on these two additional layers and incorporated them into Alexander’s scheme. Alexander later expressed agreement with these modifications. I find the Alexander-Wenham structure to be the best starting point for this study.

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6 Rendsburg, The Redaction of Genesis, 29–30. Also see Williamson and his first footnote which outlines the various authors who have argued for this idea, Paul R. Williamson, Abraham, Israel, and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and Its Covenantal Development in Genesis (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series 315; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2000), 217.
7 Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 263.
9 Yudkowsky’s structure differs significantly from the others and she seems quite unaware of them as well. Her suggestion, however, is deficient in that it randomly skips over whole sections of text. Wheaton actually starts with and then builds on the Alexander-Wenham structure by positing that in addition to the palistrophic structure there is an additional overlay of a parallel structure making up two panels in the text (A-B-C… A-B-C…). Since Wheaton’s study builds on the Alexander structure it will be sufficient to deal with the palistrophic aspects of the texts.
There is however, one modification that should be made. I would argue that 11:27-32, which the above authors refer to as the genealogy of Terah, can be seen as parallel not only to 22:20-24 (the genealogy of Nahor or Milcah) but to what Alexander correctly refers to as the extended conclusion to the whole Abraham narrative in 22:20-25:11. It is important to observe that the so-called Terah genealogy in 11:27-32 borders somewhere between genealogy and background information for the narrative that follows. It includes details about the extended family such as extended relations of the family left in Haran, the death of family members, the wives of Abram and Nahor, and the travel of Terah’s family to Haran. If we look at the extended conclusion of 22:20-25:11 we find similar information, even if given in more detail. We find genealogical information of the family back in Haran, but we also find genealogical information of family that is not of immediate interest to the narrative (Gen 25:1-11), the death of Sarah, and travel to Haran to find a wife for Isaac. In fact, I would suggest that the genealogy of Milcah in Gen 22:20-24 serves the very purpose of directing our attention back to the land of Haran, or more precisely the text of Gen 11:27-32. In doing so it is not by itself the parallel to the introduction to the Abraham narrative but it introduces the extended conclusion that is in its entirety parallel to Gen 11:27-32. Thus we should read all of 22:20-25:11 in relation to the introduction to Abraham’s family in Haran.

For example the burial of Sarah establishes Abraham’s living intention to remain in the land since it shows his desire to be buried in Canaan and not to have his body returned to Haran (as Jacob’s body is returned to Canaan). Genesis 24, the narrative of the finding of a wife for Isaac, works on the same motif but from the opposite standpoint and thus has the effect of further defining and clarifying the relationship between Abraham’s
family and the Canaanites (and Haran). Yes, they will stay in the land, but no, they will not intermarry with the Canaanites or take on their culture; it is the family in Haran that is suitable for intermarrying. These two texts, which both have the characteristic of appearing to be too long for the apparent importance of the content they contain, are actually quite important because they define the relationship of Abraham’s family to Haran and Canaan in a way that forces us to read the rest of Genesis through the relationship as defined in these chapters (thus setting the stages for narrative evaluations of Esau and Judah).

Also, in this case, the genealogy of Nahor, which seems quite out of place at first read, serves the important purpose of averting our eyes back to Haran in order to bring Haran and Canaan in juxtaposition and thus arrive at the conclusions stated here.

If we can establish this connection between Gen 11:27-32 and 22:20-25:11 then the structure we suggest for the Terah תולדה as a whole is as follows:


11 Perry claims that the “wooing of Rebekah is known as the most detailed story in the Bible.” Menakhem Perry, “Counter-Stories in the Bible: Rebekah and Her Bridegroom, Abraham’s Servant,” Proof 27 (2007): 291.

12 This is surely not their only purpose. In Gen 24, for example, we see an emphasis on the lovingkindness and faithfulness of YHWH not only due to the repetition of חֶּסֶד, but also because of the structure of the narrative which shows the servant first asking for (Gen 24:12, 14), then receiving (as his sign is fulfilled in 24:15-25), then giving thanks for (24:27) and then recounting God’s lovingkindness (24:34-48). This should surely be read in the context of the covenant and thus is an example of how God blesses the righteous seed.
Enigmatic Features of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת Strand

In Alexander’s analysis of the Abraham narrative he related what he refers to as the palistrophic structure of the text directly to the plot.\textsuperscript{13} In fact it has often been noted, at least since Westermann, that the text has a plot that moves from tension to resolution as we

\textsuperscript{13}Alexander, “A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis,” 22.
are introduced to Abram’s wife Sarai, who is barren, in 11:30 and then in the very next section discover that God promises to make Abram into a great nation (12:2). The two statements create a tension that the rest of the narrative takes up and moves toward resolution.\textsuperscript{14} But even after Isaac is born and the narrative arrives at its expected conclusion (21:1-21), the seed is threatened once more in the Akedah (Gen 22). But what is the purpose of this additional tension? Does it accomplish some goal of the author’s or is it there merely for dramatic effect? It is likely that there is more than just dramatic effect at work in this arrangement of the text.

Alexander points out another interesting characteristic of the text that also relates to the overall palistrophic structure. Alexander believes that the identity of the seed and the tension that arises over its identification is primarily concerned with the choice between Ishmael and Isaac. According to Alexander, the Lot narratives of 13:2-14:24 and 18:1-19:38 are not related to the plot of the identification of the promised seed. As a result, the question of the relationship between the Lot narratives and the overall structure is somewhat unclear even though it is obviously incorporated into the chiastic structure.

Perhaps the most enigmatic feature of the chiastic structure is the placement of the birth of Ishmael at its very center. If the whole narrative revolves primarily around the birth of the promised seed, and that promised seed is Isaac, then one would expect the birth of Isaac to serve as both the high point and the turning point of the narrative. But that is not the case. In fact the birth of Isaac is buried in another section of the text that deals primarily with Abraham and his relations with Abimelech. This may be related to the fact that the true

\textsuperscript{14}Deroche points out that the narrative places “Abram in a series of situations which make the realisation of the blessing increasingly difficult.” Michael Paul Deroche, “The Dynamics of Promise: Narrative Logic in the Abraham Story” (Ph.D. diss., Canada: McMaster University, 1986), 66.
resolution to the narrative’s tension occurs in Gen 22 but it does remain puzzling as to why Ishmael is placed at the center of the narrative and why the climax is in Gen 22.\textsuperscript{15}

The best understanding of the Abraham narrative will provide an explanation for these enigmatic features of the text. In what follows I would like to show that while the promise of a seed for Abraham is an important tension that helps drive the plot of the Abraham narrative, the structure of this narrative and even the plot itself cannot be fully understood without seeing it within the context of the plot of Genesis as a whole. Once we have done this, then the enigmatic features of the text described above are no longer so puzzling.

The remainder of this discussion on the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת strand will develop in four main sections followed by a summary. First, we will establish that from the beginning Abraham is described as the successor in the line of the seed promised in Gen 3:15. This should establish expectations for both the righteousness and survival of Abraham and his line. This, in turn, will give us the proper context of reading the plot of the Abraham narrative which revolves around the question, “Who is the heir?” I will try to show that with respect to this question, the high point of the tension occurs at the center of the palistrophic arrangement with the birth of Ishmael. Thus we will better understand one of the enigmas of the Abraham narrative and the development of its plot from tension to resolution. This will set the stage for a second look at the Abraham narrative, this time observing in detail its interaction with the Genesis themes of the righteousness and survival of the seed. Here I will argue that the seed’s (Abraham’s) lack of righteousness threatens the survival of the line of

\textsuperscript{15} Williamson suggests that to understand the purpose of Gen 22 we must be able to answer the question, “Why did God put Abraham through this particular test and what was achieved by it?” This is the key question in my mind and can only be answered by understanding the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת in the context of the book of Genesis. Williamson, Abraham, Israel, and the Nations, 236.
the promised seed (which is to say, God’s promise to make Abram into a great nation). The wife-sister stories are key to this development and Lot serves as a foil to Abraham to emphasize the importance of the righteousness of the seed. This will be an important step toward explaining the function of the wife-sister stories and the enigma of the Lot episodes.

By looking at the narrative in this way we will see that the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת strand operates both on the level of the plot of the Abraham narrative (the identity of the heir) and the level of the Genesis plot (the righteousness and survival of the promised seed). Therefore in the fourth and final development of this argument we will be prepared to understand the confluence of these two levels of plot in the climax of the Abraham narrative. The climax occurs when the righteousness of the seed receives its greatest threat in the second wife-sister story. The lack of righteousness of the seed creates the need for the test in Gen 22, which corresponds to the greatest threat to the survival of the promised heir. Thus we hope to explain the final enigmas described above.

Abraham as the Promised, Righteous Seed

The fact that God’s call of Abraham in Gen 12:1-9 has parallels to the Tower of Babel in 11:1-9 and even Gen 10 is well established. Among some of the connections may be the fact that YHWH promises to make Abraham into a great nation (Gen 12:2, as opposed

16Ska has said that unlike the Jacob and Joseph narratives, the Abraham narrative is not centered on a single conflict and its resolution. The narrative tends to jump from one episode to another, unrelated episode. “La trame du cycle d’Abraham n’est pas unifiée. Au contraire du cycle de Jacob et surtout de l’histoire de Joseph, Gn 12-25 n’est pas centré sur un seul épisode, un conflit et sa résolution, ou un problème et sa solution.” (Ska mitigates these statements in the following section by demonstrating that there are also elements that unify the text.) Here I want to acknowledge that the narrative of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת is complex and does in fact deal with more than just the plot of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת proper, but that it is a unified narrative. At first glance it may appear to lack unity but that is only due to the care that the author has taken to weave the plot of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת into the plot of the book of Genesis. For that reason, I will deal with the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת separately on these two levels in order to “untangle” the two strands in the hopes that this will help us to see how they have been woven together into a unified narrative. Ska, “La nature et la signification du cycle d’Abraham,” 159.
to a great people),\textsuperscript{17} thus reflecting a connection to Gen 10 (cf. Gen 10:5, 20, 31-32) and making Abraham one among the nations. This fits in with our observation of Gen 10 that the line of promise is not separated out of but is one among the nations. YHWH also promises to make Abraham’s name great (Gen 12:2, וַאֲגַדְּלֵהוּ שֵם). “Name” is an important feature of the text in Gen 11:1-9 where all the earth expresses their intention to build a city and a tower and thus they say, והנה נבש他们会 (Gen 11:4). The word “name” is repeated again at the end of the story in 11:9 where the text ironically demonstrates just what name it is they have acquired. In that same verse, שֵם is repeated twice and in 11:7-8 it is found an additional two times. Interestingly, the use of “there” in these verses oftentimes seems superfluous. As Fokkelman points out, there is likely an intentional play between שֵם and שֵם which heightens the importance of שֵם in the story.\textsuperscript{18} If this is the case, then the use of שֵם at the beginning of the Abraham narrative likely brings to mind the Tower of Babel narrative. Contrastingly, it is not Abraham’s intention to make a name or nation of himself, but God’s.

Another possible parallel between these two narratives, as Awabdy points out, are the migration and settlement parallels.\textsuperscript{19} In Gen 11:1-9 the use of קֶדֶם is likely important since it connects us to the theme of movement away from God as it developed in chapters 2-4 (cf. 3:24, 4:16). In this text, though it is not entirely clear, it seems best to understand the migration as being a movement toward the east, as opposed to from the east.\textsuperscript{20} In that case, 

\textsuperscript{17}Victor P. Hamilton, \textit{The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17} (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 371.

\textsuperscript{18}Fokkelman, \textit{Narrative Art in Genesis}, 14.


\textsuperscript{20}This is the opposite of Awabdy’s conclusion, who takes the preposition מִן as ablative. However, here we should compare this construction וַיְהִיְבְנֶה סְעַםֶּ to its close parallel in 13:11 וַיִּשָּׁ יָסַעְלוֹטְנָה שֵם.
the movement of the people in the Tower of Babel narrative is, from the beginning, an indication of their movement away from God. This movement lands them in Mesopotamia. In contrast, God calls Abraham and his family from Mesopotamia and out of the east (implicitly), to the land that he will show them (12:1). This conclusion may be further reinforced by Awabdy’s observation that in both texts YHWH’s intervention plays a central role in our interpretation of the migration of people.\(^\text{21}\) In Gen 11:1-9 the people take the initiative to migrate to the east but YHWH intervenes with and thwarts their plans. In that case his intervention suspends their movement and results in the fracturing of human relationships and thus their ability to carry out their intentions. In Gen 11:27-12:9 Terah initiates a migration from Ur to Canaan (from the east). Interestingly, this movement is not completed until YHWH intervenes and calls Abraham to leave behind his family and continue the migration to Canaan.\(^\text{22}\) If we read this in line with our motif, as developed since Gen 3-4, where movement toward the east is movement away from YHWH, this movement out of the east should indicate a movement toward YHWH that is in line with his intentions and plans for Abraham and even humanity. In such a case, Gen 12:1-9 reflects a significant new development in the text.\(^\text{23}\) Abraham is now clearly a representative of the promised seed who is called back toward the presence of YHWH.

\(\text{םִקְדֶם, where we have the same verb and the same directional indicator and the context most clearly indicates that Lot is setting out to the east. Penley, “A Historical Reading of Genesis 11,” 700. Though I take the opposite reading of the direction as Awabdy, in the end I think my reading actually supports his interpretation of the text. Awabdy, “Babel, Suspense, and the Introduction to the Terah-Abram Narrative,” 19.}\)

\(\text{21 Awabdy, “Babel, Suspense, and the Introduction to the Terah-Abram Narrative,” 20.}\)


\(\text{23 See also Deroche’s discussion regarding the introduction of the tension of the Abraham narrative Deroche, “The Dynamics of Promise,” 109–121.}\)
Who is the Heir? The High Point of Confusion is the Turning Point of the Narrative

We have already noted the tension created between the two statements in 11:30, regarding the barrenness of Sarai, and 12:2, where we find God’s promise to make Abram into a great nation. How will God fulfill his promise to make Abram a great nation if his wife Sarai is barren? This is the initial tension that drives the plot of the Abraham narrative. We can readily see how this tension relates to the Genesis plot. The barrenness of Sarai not only threatens God’s promises to Abram but it threatens the survival of the seed of promise in the Genesis plot. Thus the plot of the Abraham narrative and the plot of Genesis are intertwined and should be read as such. In that vein we note that here we have a new kind of threat to the survival of the seed. Up until now the seed has been delineated along two lines so that the survival of the seed of promise was threatened by the unrighteousness of the seed not of promise. Now, however, the question of the survival of the seed is related to the barrenness of Sarai and, at first glance, not to the righteousness of the seed. Later I will suggest that by relating the plot of the Abraham narrative to the Genesis plot we will end up with a different view, but for now let us follow only the more immediate tension of the Abraham narrative which revolves around the provision of an heir to a childless couple.²⁴

Where will this heir come from?²⁵

It is immediately obvious that at several points in the narrative the promise of an heir is placed in jeopardy. The so-called wife-sister stories of Gen 12 and 20, for example, should be read in the context of the plot so that when Pharaoh and Abimelech take Sarai into

²⁴Ska points out that of Abraham’s total 175 years, the Abraham narrative gives most of its focus to the twenty five years after he arrived in Canaan until Isaac was born. This “dry fact” helps us to see what is most important to the author. Ska, “La nature et la signification du cycle d’Abraham,” 157.

their houses it raises the question of Abram’s heir. Similarly, Gen 22 and the testing of Abraham is also an obvious interaction with the tension. Each of these episodes poses a threat to the survival of the seed. Other portions of the narrative interact with the tension by confirming our expectations. This is the role of the covenant narratives in Gen 15 and 17 where the promise of an heir is confirmed in each case.

We can see that the narrative interacts with a tension over the question as to whether or not there will be an heir, or how the heir will survive. But in order to understand development of the plot we need to look at the structure of the Abraham narrative in conjunction with the plot. What role does Gen 16 and the birth of Ishmael play in the development of the plot in moving from tension to resolution? If we see the main tension as being not just whether an heir will appear on the scene but where this heir will come from, then we can more easily see how Gen 16 serves as a turning point. To do this we can start with the beginning and pay attention to the information we are given and how this information develops as the narrative progresses.

We begin with the tension introduced in Gen 12:2. Here we find out that YHWH promises to make Abram into a great nation. YHWH does not give any details as to how this will come about but, again, Sarai’s barrenness certainly causes the reader to wonder. The very next narrative about Abram’s travel to Egypt increases this tension but quickly provides resolution. At the end of Gen 12:10-20 there seems to be no difference in the status of the narrative—having come through a threat to the seed we now seem to be no closer or

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27 Ibid., 22. Alexander lays out the episodes described above in a general pattern of problem-promise-complication-fulfillment-resolution (in a simplified representation).

28 Ska follows a similar logic in his article: Ska, “La nature et la signification du cycle d’Abraham,” 161.
further from resolution. This raises the question as to how the episode in Gen 12:10-20 moves the plot forward. In Gen 13:1-14:24 we encounter the Lot narratives. As Alexander has noted, though these are incorporated into the palistrophic structure, they do not seem at first to contribute to the tension regarding the promise of making Abram into a great nation. On the other hand, some have argued that Lot is here introduced as a candidate for inheriting Abram. Whether or not Lot is a potential heir, the beginning of Gen 15 introduces the idea that since Abram does not have an heir, someone like Lot, someone that is not his direct heir could become his legal heir (Gen 15:2, יֵאָמַר אַבְרָם אֶלֶּהָ יִהְוָה מַה־תִּתֶּן לִיְוְא נֹכִיְהוֹלֵךְ עֲרִירִיְוּבֶּן־מֶּשֶּקְבֵיתִיְהוּאְדֵַּםֶּשֶּקֶאַלֵֶּעְרְ, 29). Yet after this idea is introduced it is immediately put down as God makes it clear that the heir will come from Abram’s own body (Gen 15:4, וְהִנֵה דְבַר־יְהוֵה אֵלַי אֶלֶּה אֵלַי שְׁכָּזֶּה אִם־אִשֶּׁר יֵצֵא מִמִּכֶּם אִשֶׁר יִשֵּׁרֶשׁ הוָא יִשְׁרֵי. 30) This interaction therefore modifies our understanding of the tension. We now have new information about where this heir will come from, namely, YHWH has specifically indicated that it will be Abram’s own physical son that will be his heir. This statement, however, does not erase any tension; it only increases the specificity of our expectation and guides our reading of the text. We now want to know how it will happen that this heir will come from Abram’s body when Sarai is barren. It is also not without consequence that this new information comes in the context of YHWH’s covenant with Abram. God’s promise to

29 Helyer argues that Lot is meant to share in the promised land with Abraham (at least according to Abraham’s expectations) and therefore, when Abraham invites him to choose from the land and he chooses outside Canaan, then Lot has endangered the survival of the seed because there is no longer a descendant to inherit from Abraham. Such an idea would certainly be a support to the plot as we have identified it here, but the narrative offers only scant support for such a view since it seems to sooner contrast Abraham and Lot. Helyer, “The Separation of Abram and Lot,” 79.

Abram is not only confirmed, it takes on new significance. In a sense, the stakes are increased and with them, we might say, the tension as well.

This brings us to Gen 16 and the center of the chiastic structure of the text and the birth of Ishmael. According to the information that the text has revealed so far, there is nothing in this chapter that would indicate that Ishmael is not the heir that God has promised. So far, he meets the only specific requirement that was given, namely, he comes from Abram’s body. The text has not specified that the heir will come from Sarai. However, it is unlikely that any reader of Genesis in its final form was not aware that this is a text about the descendants of Israel and not about Ishmael. Therefore this text marks the height of the tension regarding the question of where the heir will come from. So we might say the tension of the narrative is not so much concerning who will be the heir but how the narrative will unknot itself so that the proper heir arises in the story.

If Gen 16 is the height of the tension (regarding the identity of the heir) and the height of confusion as to how the narrative will reach resolution, then it also marks the turning point after which the confusion will begin to unwind into clarity. The fact that the text is designed in order to unwind this unclarity and begin the path toward resolution from this point on is immediately confirmed in Gen 17. This is the beginning of a covenant making narrative that marks a major turning point in at least two ways. First, Abram’s and Sarai’s names are changed to Abraham and Sarah. The changing of their names indicates a new era in their relationship with God and the immanency of the fulfillment of God’s promise of an heir. Second, in Gen 17:15-21 we find the final bit of information about where the heir will come from that, up to this point, has not been explicitly confirmed by the

31 Alexander goes so far as to say that Gen 16 “conveys the impression that Ishmael is the promised seed.” Alexander, “A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis,” 48.
narrative, even if it has been implied. Until now it has only been revealed that the heir will come from Abraham’s body, but now it becomes clear in a significant section of the narrative that Sarah will be the mother. This does not resolve the plot’s tension, but it does begin to clear up the confusion introduced by the developments of the narrative thus far. Now we know to follow the narrative with an eye on the heir that will come from Sarah, as opposed to a non-physical heir or a physical heir of Abraham whose mother is not Sarah. Having this information now focuses the narrative.

In Gen 18:19 we once again encounter Lot narratives that seem to take us off the track of the plot’s primary tension. And yet the visitation of Abraham by the angels in Gen 18:1-16 clearly does interact with the primary tension, just as God’s promises to Abraham in Gen 13:14-18. What is more, this is not a mere repetition of God’s promise to provide an heir. As in every previous occurrence of the promise of an heir, so also in this one we find yet more specific information about how and when the heir will come. In this case the specific information is the time. The messengers report that נֵעָת הָיוָה הַלַּחְדֵּל הְבָּן. Also, the conclusion of the Lot narratives in Gen 19:30-38 is interesting because it records the birth of Lot’s sons to his two daughters. The text associates these two sons with the Moabites and the Ammonites, hostile neighbors to the east of Israel. In other words, this narrative would appear to associate Lot with the line not of promise. There is some controversy as to whether or not Lot should be seen as a contender for the role of heir to Abraham. In my view, this text would weigh in favor of seeing Lot as a potential heir (though not decidedly). If that is the case, then this final text makes an actuality of what God promised Abram in Gen 15 because it removes Lot as a potential candidate. In other words, what God said would be the case in Gen 15, that the heir would come from his own body, becomes an actuality with the narrative of Moab and Ammon in Gen 19:30-38. In such an interpretation, Lot steps in as a representative of those who are not of Abraham’s body and are his potential heirs. By
separating Lot from the line of seed the text confirms that neither Lot, nor anyone like Lot, will be the heir.

In Gen 20 we have yet another instance of a narrative that puts the heir at risk when Abraham passes Sarah off as his sister. Unlike the first narrative in Gen 12, this narrative makes it clear that there were no sexual relations between Abimelech and Sarah. Therefore, once again the narrative ends where it began in terms of the provision of an heir. The narrative moves on in Gen 21:1-21 with the story of the birth of Isaac and the rejection of Ishmael as the line of promise. These narratives at first glance appear to completely resolve the narrative tension of the Abraham story because what God made clear that he would do in Gen 17 he has now done—he has provided Abraham an heir that comes both from his own body and from Sarah. The birth of Isaac and the rejection of Ishmael work together to clarify this issue and completely resolve the tension that arises with regard to the identity of the heir. Curiously, however, these two narratives are couched between two Abimelech narratives. This seems strange because it puts them in a non-climactic position in the text. Does it make sense for the climax of the narrative to be in a non-climactic position? One might answer that the text has deferred the final conclusion for a more climactic one in Gen 22 with the testing of Abraham. This certainly seems to be the case. But it raises the question as to the purpose for delaying the climax. Is it merely for dramatic effect? And what role do the Abimelech narratives play? And of course, we are still left with the question regarding the role of the Lot narratives.

32 Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26* (The New American Commentary 1B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 90. Mathews succinctly presents the standard view of the plot when he says that the “patriarch’s greatest obstacle is the provision of a son by his wife Sarah.” I am suggesting that the organization of the text may indicate that we should slightly modify our understanding of the plot.
Abraham’s Lack of Righteousness Threatens the Survival of the Seed

Thus far we have clearly seen that the Abraham narrative interacts with the Genesis plot and the survival of the seed. We have not yet taken up the issue of the righteousness of the seed but we must first ask whether or not the text itself warrants an attempt at relating the Abraham narrative to the Genesis plot and the righteousness of the seed. There are several moments in the text when the righteousness of the seed plays a key role. We can see the importance of this theme from the beginning. Exegetes have begun to take note of the fact that the construction of God’s call on Abraham in Gen 12:1-3 invites a different translation than that usually offered in English. The texts consists of two imperatives (…ךָלֶּךְ־לְמֵאְַרְצְךָ, and …וֶּהְיֵהְבְרֶךְ כְַה), each of which is followed by a string of cohortatives (וְְֲאֶֽעֶּשְךְָלְגוֹיְג דוֹלְוַאֲבְרֶֽכְךָרֶֽכְךְָוַאֲגַדְּל הְשְמְךָ following the first imperative and וַאְֲבְרֶכְכָה מְבְרֶֽכְכָה מֵמְקַלֶּלְךָ אֹרְוְנִבְרְכָה בּוָאֲרֶֽכְכָה מִשְפְחֹתְה אֲדַמְּכָה follows the second). In such a string of verbs, the cohortatives often indicate a sense of purpose. Thus it is quite likely that this text should be translated as follows:

Go from your land, and from your extended family, and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you:

that I may make you into a great nation,
and bless you,
and make your name great.

Be a blessing:

that I may bless those who bless you
and curse those who declare you cursed
and that by you all the families of the earth may be blessed.

33 Waltke and O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax, 575. Williamson’s relatively recent publication outlines the argument for this view and includes helpful references. Williamson, Abraham, Israel, and the Nations, 223.
When read in this way, this text requires obedience from Abram in order to bring into effect the promises and thus the survival of the seed.

The righteousness of the seed as an important motif becomes even more explicit in Gen 15:6 where Abraham’s faith is credited to him as righteousness. In the next covenant text of Gen 17, the idea of obedience as a requirement for the blessings of the covenant takes on an even stronger element. In Gen 17:1-2, in a construction similar to that of Gen 12:1-3, the ESV now opts for a translation like that above, “walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly” (emphasis mine). This makes it clear that YHWH requires Abraham to be blameless as a stipulation of his covenant with him and thus in his role of the seed of promise.

Interestingly, the text in which righteousness comes most explicitly to the fore is in the Lot narrative of Gen 18, especially in verses 23-33. This text will be discussed in detail below.

The above occurrences of the righteousness motif in the Abraham narrative provide adequate warrant for a connection to the Genesis plot. We should therefore try to understand how the righteousness theme in the Abraham narrative connects to the provision and survival of the heir. In this vein, the connection of the righteousness motif to the Lot narratives (18:23-33) is interesting. This observation may serve as an indication that the narratives which seem most disconnected from the heir tension in the plot provide the connection to the righteousness element. In order to see how this works it will be helpful to go through the Abraham narrative one more time, this time with the aim of understanding those texts that were dealt with only cursorily in the previous discussion.

The First Wife-Sister Story: Abraham’s Lack of Righteousness

The first narrative we dealt with only in passing is the first so-called wife-sister story in Gen 12:10-13:1. In this narrative Abram goes down to Egypt due to a famine in Canaan and, because he is afraid that he will be killed, he passes off his wife Sarai as his
sister. The result is that Pharaoh takes her into his house in exchange for gifts given to Abram. God then brings plagues upon Pharaoh and Sarai is subsequently returned to Abram. The text makes it clear that Abram has been enriched by this encounter in Egypt. As Mathews points out, the narrative neither explicitly condones nor condemns the behavior of Abram. And yet the text does have some characteristics that are rather suggestive. For example, the text can be divided into three parts by the occurrences of יְהִי in verses 10, 11, and 14 (these are instances that help us place the action in the sequence; in verse 16 we find יְהִי which serves a different purpose, namely to record Abram’s increase in wealth). The first instance of יְהִי marks the famine as the reason for Abram’s move to Egypt. The next two are quite similar to one another. The first of these two records the point of time at which Abram is nearing entrance to Egypt (12:11) and the second records his actual entrance into Egypt (12:14). The similarity draws these two sections together and the comparison is interesting since in 12:11-13 Abram anticipates what will happen to him in Egypt and so asks Sarai to say she is his sister so that his life will be preserved on account of her (בַעֲבוּרְךָ and then בִגְלָלָךְ). In the next section marked by the יְהִי clause things happen just as Abram predicted in the preceding section. The Egyptians see Sarai, that she is very beautiful (וַיִרְאוּ הַמִצְרִים אֶת־ה אֱלֹהֵי אֲרוֹם אֲרָבָּא אִשָּׁה כִּי־י פ הָּאִיםְְ אֲדֹנָּהּ), and things go well for Abram (וּלְאַבְרְם וֹאֵיב) on account of Sarai (בַעֲבוּרְךָ). But in each case, right after the text carefully records the fulfillment of Abram’s predictions it also points out that things went a little further than he anticipated. As Abram said, the Egyptians see Sarai and note her beauty, but not only that,

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34 Deroche seems to be slightly exaggerating, but points out the interesting irony that “after possessing both the land and the woman by which the blessing will be realised he abandons them both.” Deroche, “The Dynamics of Promise,” 71.


36 I think Petersen is perfectly correct with his assessment that the development of the text “suggests that Abraham had lost control of his plan. It had worked only too well.” David L. Petersen, “Thrice-
Pharaoh’s princes see her beauty and they praise her before Pharaoh. In fact, Pharaoh takes her as his wife! Then, just as Abram predicted, things go well for him on account of Sarai but not only that, God strikes Pharaoh and his house with great plagues as a result of this matter of Sarai, the wife of Abram (עַל־דְּבַר רַיְאֵשֶּת אַבְרֶם). What is Pharaoh’s response? He confronts Abram with the question, “What is this you have done to me?”

In the first section in 12:11-13, when Abram anticipates that things will go well with him in Egypt and that Sarai will preserve his life, we find two different expressions of “on account of you.” In the second half (12:14-20) we also have two such statements. The first, in 12:16, records that all goes well with Abram as he said and the text uses the same wording as the first instance in 12:13. The second however, we find after the text records that things went much further than Abram anticipated and the wording is different than the wording of Abram’s anticipation (עַל־דְּבַר רַיְאֵשֶּת אַבְרֶם). In fact, rather than making Sarai the responsible party, this turn of phrase shifts the responsibility to Abram.

There may not be an explicit condemnation of Abram and his conduct in this text, but there is implicit judgment of him if we read the text in this way. In this reading there is a fairly strong sense of irony. The similarity of the results to Abram’s anticipations leads

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Told Tale: Genre, Theme, and Motif,” BR 18 (1973): 37. Later he points out that the “narrative switches from a history under the control of Abraham’s plan, 12:10-16, to a history under control of Yahweh’s plan, vv. 17-20.” Ibid.

37 Mathews, Genesis 11:27–50:26, 123. Mathews finds several parallels between Gen 12:10-13:1 and the paradise narratives of Gen 2-4. If there were a clear connection, then it would be easy to conclude that Abram should be seen in a negative light in this text because his actions here should be seen in the light of the sins of Adam and Eve. However, the links lack both structural and contextual parallel that would confirm an intentional connection. Also, some of the lexical similarities seem to be merely coincidental, rather than intentional. For example, it is not clear how Abram’s “I know” in Gen 12:11 (I know you are a beautiful woman) should be seen as a parallel to “God knows” and “God, knowing” of Gen 3:5 (God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. ESV).

us to note that all goes just as Abram planned. But the little twist that is added to each of Abram’s predictions suggests that things got out of control. In the end, the accusatory finger of blame points implicitly in the direction of Abram (because of the matter of Sarai, the wife of Abram). In fact, in light of this reading we might go back to 12:13 and make note of the fact that instead of calling on YHWH as he does just a few verses later (13:4), Abraham is looking to Sarai for his preservation and blessing. We might also compare this to Gen 14 (also in the Lot narratives) where Abram refuses to be enriched by the king of Sodom (14:21-23), whereas here he seems perfectly willing to be enriched by Pharaoh. Therefore, while the text may be somewhat ambiguous it certainly presents some questions as to the righteousness of the seed.  

If we read this narrative in the context of the Genesis plot then we may begin to see a purpose behind this ambiguity. It was the immediately preceding narrative in which YHWH promised Abram that he would make a great nation of him. Having mentioned the barrenness of Sarai in the narrative immediately preceding that, the tension of the Abraham narrative so far revolves around the potential of Sarai providing Abram an heir. We should read Gen 12:10-20 as interacting with this tension and in the context of the righteousness and survival of the seed. In other words, Abram’s deceptive conduct, or his unrighteousness, has threatened the survival of the seed. This is suggestive of the theme we have seen significantly repeated so far in Genesis. The text, however, by opening up the possibility through a subtle

39 In looking at this passage from a social and legal perspective, Hoffmeier suggests that Abram may be attempting to deceptively pass off his wife Sarai as his sister in order to enter into a diplomatic relationship with urban kings. In this way Abram, as a pastoralist, would be able to gain much needed access to water rights for his flocks and herds. This is slightly different from, though not incompatible with the reason for Abram’s actions as explicitly recorded in Gen 12:11-13 and again in the second wife-sister story in Gen 20:12-13. Whether or not Hoffmeier is correct, his observations serves to underscore the fact that in any reading of the text Abram has passed off his own wife as his sister either for self-preservation or for economic advantage, or both. James K. Hoffmeier, “The Wives’ Tales of Genesis 12, 20 and 26 and the Covenants at Beer-Sheba,” TynBul 43 (1992): 92.
irony that Abram’s actions may not be completely righteous, even that he may be relying on himself rather than God for the preservation of his line, raises questions about how Abraham’s conduct will affect the fulfillment of God’s promises. We are meant to leave this text with the question, is Abram righteous? Could his unrighteousness potentially threaten the fulfillment of the blessing and thus the survival of the seed?

Earlier we posed the question, how does this wife-sister story of Gen 12 advance the plot? If the tension of the narrative revolves merely around the provision of an heir for Abram then the story begins as it ends with no significant advancement. But if we see the Abraham narrative in relation to the Genesis plot then the wife-sister story of Gen 12 raises the issue of the righteousness and the survival of the seed. In that way Gen 12:10-20 serves the narrative by making a deliberate connection to the plot of Genesis and thus actualizes or engages the Genesis plot within the Abraham narrative. When we discuss the parallel wife-sister story I will attempt to confirm that this is indeed the case and that these stories work together to introduce the primary reason for questioning the righteousness of Abraham and his lack of righteousness as a threat to the survival of the seed, thus setting the stage for the climax of the plot in Gen 22.

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40Deroche argues that the plot is advanced because Abram is looking for the land that God has promised him and the process of going down to Egypt is a part of his search. By ending up back in Canaan after his travels to Egypt, he discovers that God is going to work out the blessing through a “barren land” and a “barren woman.” Deroche, “The Dynamics of Promise,” 145. His argument is bolstered by the chiastic arrangement of locations that he finds in the text. The chiasm begins and ends in Moreh and centers on Egypt. Deroche, “The Dynamics of Promise,” 131. Even if Deroche is correct, though in my opinion the question of location in these texts does not rise to the level of motif that he suggests, it does not preclude the contribution to plot that I am suggesting. Deroche’s analysis is handicapped overall because he deals only with the first half of the Abraham narrative. I would argue that the wife-sister story of Gen 12 must be read in conjunction with Gen 21 in order to get a full understanding of its role in advancing the plot.
The Abraham and Lot Stories: The Importance of the Righteousness of the Seed

We next return to the parallel Lot narratives of Gen 13-14 and 18-19. I will take these narratives together in an attempt to show how Lot is meant to serve as a foil for Abraham and how these texts contribute to the theme of the righteousness of the seed, thus setting the stage for the final wife-sister story in the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת and the climax of the story in Gen 22. In this section it will not be possible to focus in detail on all four chapters and so I will be doing an overview of important aspects of the text that bring Lot and Abraham into juxtaposition and then I will deal in detail with the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative of Gen 18:17-19:38. It is necessary to deal in detail with the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative because more than any other text in the Abraham narrative it is this text that most explicitly juxtaposes Lot with Abraham and also most explicitly deals with the theme of righteousness, and does so in a way that connects the text quite deliberately to the overall Genesis plot.

According to my divisions of the text, Gen 13:1 ends the narrative of Abram in Egypt. This verse begins with a wayyiqtol which completes the action of the previous story. Interestingly however, this very last statement abruptly introduces Lot for the first time as a character with significance in the story (his first mention is in 11:27). This final verse therefore anticipates the subsequent narrative. It may seem therefore, that 13:1 should be considered the beginning of the Abram and Lot story, but the grammar points in the opposite direction because of the disjunctive waw on the subject, וְאַבְרְם in 13:2, which introduces background information relevant to the proceeding story. This is a rather typical way of

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41 George W. Coats, “Lot: A Foil in the Abraham Saga,” in Understanding the Word (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 113–32. In the discussion that follows I do not deal in detail with the Gen 13 introduction to Lot as a major character in the narrative. “However, Coats uses this passages to suggest it creates the Lot as foil motif, concluding that, “As exposition it sets up the following story about Abram and Lot, or perhaps better, a story about faithful Abram highlighted by Lot, a contrasting foppish foil.” Coats, “Lot: A Foil in the Abraham Saga,” 118.
beginning a new pericope in Genesis. In that case, the introduction of Lot at the end of the previous narrative anticipates what is to come and in so doing juxtaposes Lot with Abram.

The Abram-Lot episode proper then begins with אברם in Gen 13:2 which starts a short section of background information relevant to the story. The text then proceeds with wayyiqtol verbs that set the action of the story in motion. However, the action is interrupted by a new disjunctive waw on a new character, Lot (לֹּט). This construction likely emphasizes the “also” of Lot’s role in the narrative. That is, the fact that he is an addendum—almost a foreign element in the narrative. This idea is reinforced by the structure of the narrative so far. We have two introductory sections in Gen 13:2-4 and 13:5-7. One introduces Abram as the one who has an established relationship with YHWH, and who “calls upon the name of YHWH.” The next introductory section introduces Lot. Just as the content of the previous background section is to be associated with Abram, the syntactical structure suggests that the content of this background section, with Lot at its heading, should be associated primarily with Lot. In other words, the two introductory sections place Abraham and Lot in juxtaposition so that Abram is the one who calls on the name of YHWH and Lot is associated with the conflict between the shepherds of Abram and Lot. This is syntactically variant, but conceptually similar to the introduction of Cain and Abel in Gen 4 and the fact that we have conflict between the shepherds of Abram and the shepherds of Lot only reinforces the idea that Abram and Lot should be read against the background of the Cain and Abel motif. As a result, the introduction leads the reader to expect that Lot will play the role of the seed not of promise, or the foil, to Abram’s seed of promise.

Throughout the rest of the narrative in Gen 13 this contrast and comparison of Abram and Lot is maintained. Lot lifts up his eyes to Sodom and Gomorrah and settles there, outside the land of Canaan, while Abram stays within the land of Canaan. Subsequently, Lot associates himself with the extreme evil and sin of Sodom. Abram, on the other hand, receives confirmation of God’s promise of the land as belonging to him and to his seed
forever. The consequences of these decisions and their associations play themselves out in Gen 14 where we read the episode of the battle of the kings from the east with the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, the capture of Lot who is rescued by Abram, who in turn is blessed by Melchizedek, priest of God Most High.42

The Lot narratives of Gen 18-19 are reminiscent of those of Gen 13-14. Once again Abraham is in a position of interceding on behalf of Lot due to the problems he finds himself in as a result of his association with Sodom and Gomorrah. Chapter 18 begins with the visit of the three messengers to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre. This text plays into the theme of the promised seed as the messengers first report to Abraham about the birth of Isaac, yet because these same messengers then are sent to Sodom and Gomorrah, the text creates a link between the heir motif and the Lot narrative, or, as I am arguing, the righteousness motif.43

Abraham’s conversation with YHWH in Gen 18:17-22 is interesting because it makes righteousness an explicit motif of the Lot narratives due to Abraham’s negotiations with God. But we should not overlook the beginning of the conversation in 18:17-19 when God debates with himself as to whether or not he should reveal his plans of destruction to Abraham. In the end, the text reports that God decides to reveal his plans because of the fact and so that he will command his children and his house after him to keep the way of YHWH. In other words, YHWH is clearly presenting an expectation that he has of

42 As Coats points out, the battle with the kings of the east “becomes a literary tool to emphasize by contrast the failure of the invasion when the blessed Abram moves into the conflict, a point that contrasts with the inability of Lot to do anything to affect the events.” Coats, Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature, 121.

Abraham and his house after him. The narrative presents this as the reason that YHWH reveals his plans to Abraham but in all likelihood, there is more to the logic of the text. It is possible and I would argue likely, that this text is included here primarily to juxtapose Lot with God’s expectations of Abraham. Abraham, as the promised seed, must be righteous in order to preserve his line and continue with God’s promises. We have already seen that Lot has been set up as a foil to Abraham and this will play out more specifically in the narrative that follows.

Starting in verse 20 God reports his plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah on account of their great sin (כִּי־רִבעָה וְתַשְׁאָם כּיָּכְבָּרָה וְמִפָּאָה). There is some similarity between this situation and the situation of Gen 6 when God used a broad scale disaster to confront widespread wickedness. In Gen 6-9 God preserved a remnant of the seed on account of its righteousness. Due to the prevalence of the righteousness motif in this chapter the author may be leading us to expect that God will do the same here, especially in view of the presence of Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah. Is Lot among the righteous that will lead to the preservation of his line?

Starting in 18:22 Abraham engages in negotiations with YHWH, stepping in to defend the righteous (צַדִּיק) in the city that will be destroyed along with the evil (רָשָׁע). The narrative raises the question as to whether or not God will save the city on account of (בַעֲב וּר, Gen 18:21, 29, 31, 32) the righteous; whether fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, or ten. There is likely a purpose to these negotiations other than demonstrating God’s relationship to Abraham and certainly more than a mere record of events. The repeated

44 There may also be a parallel to Gen 11 and the Tower of Babel. There is a rather explicit lexical link in Gen 18:21 where the text records that God will go down and see (ירד and רָא) just as he goes down and sees in Gen 11:5 using the same verbs. In this chapter we also saw a broad sweeping reaction to widespread rebellion. This may develop the idea of a typical or expected reaction to evil. In Gen 18, the importance of righteousness creates additional expectations that link to the flood narrative.
reduction of the number causes the reader to wonder to what degree there will be enough righteous to save the cities. Especially, our thoughts should naturally turn to Lot and his family. Are Lot and his line righteous enough to save the cities?

As the narrative continues Lot is brought once more into juxtaposition with Abraham through the remarkable similarity of the text describing the visit of the messengers. Both texts follow the same overall structure. When the three men approach Abraham he is sitting at the door of his tent (וְהוּא יֹשֵב פֶתַח־הָאָחָלָה) while Lot is sitting in the gate of the city (וְלוֹט יֹשֵב בֶשֶׁר־סְדָם). Abraham and Lot both saw them but Abraham ran to meet them (וַיְלִקָר את ם) while Lot merely rose to meet them (וַי קםְלִקְר את ְם). Both then bow to their visitors and then Abraham addresses them offering to serve as host (וַיֹאמַר אֲדֹנִי) as does Lot (וַיְֹאמֶר הִנְה א־אֲדֹנַַ֗י). The visitors then give their response, the text describes the preparations that are made, and finally the description comes to a close when the visitors eat (וַיֹאכְלוּ).

As we saw in Gen 3-4, the similarities in the text invite us to take a closer look at the differences. At first it may seem difficult to determine whether or not the differences are significant. For example we might reason that the difference in the meals may be due to the fact that they arrive at Abraham’s in the heat of the day, whereas they arrive at Lot’s in the evening. And yet whatever the actual differences in the background of the text, we should keep in mind that the author determines what information is shared and it is completely within his control to make the two accounts appear more or less similar. In this case, we see clear similarity in the overall structure of the visit narrative, yet stark contrast precisely in those areas of the text which express the sincerity of hospitality on the part of Abraham and Lot.

The description of the preparations only adds to the contrast between the two. The section of the text that describes Abraham’s preparations (18:5-8) is the longest in the pericope, whereas in the case of Lot it is a mere one line (37 words as compared to 5).
Abraham’s description, he is running, hurrying, sending Sarah off for סֹלֶּת and then himself going for the בֶּן־בְּרֶרְכֵּם. then giving it to his servant to prepare, and finally presenting them with חֶמְא הְוָלָבָּה. Finally he stands over them while they enjoy the feast. Lot does nothing more than יִתְשַׁלְמַהְוָלָבָּה מֵאֲמוֹנָה אָפָה and they eat.

At the very least, we can assert with confidence that similarities in the texts confirm that Lot is to be juxtaposed with Abraham. In fact, it may be worthwhile to reflect on the beginning of the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative when God speaks with Abraham. God’s grounds for sharing his plans with Abraham are based on the fact that he has chosen Abraham to command his children and his house after him so that they will keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice. This text brings not only Abraham but his whole family into the picture. The fact that Abraham’s negotiations with YHWH end at ten may suggest that not just Lot is the foil for Abraham but Lot and his whole family. Now after Lot hosts the two men we find already a contrast that appears to put Abraham in a better light than Lot. The comparison so far, however, merely sets the stage for what follows.

As the text proceeds it provides a vivid example of the wickedness of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. But equally as important as the vileness of the sin they are seeking to commit is the author’s comment at the beginning of this episode. The author makes it clear that all the men of Sodom are surrounding Lot’s house (וְאַנְשֵׁיָה עִירְאַנְשֵׁי סְדֹםְנ סַבַעֲלֵהוָה מִנַעֲזַד־ז קֵןְכ ל־ה ע ם מִק צְֶּּ), that is, all the people—to the very last one. We should remember now that we are reading this text in light of Abraham’s previous conversation with YHWH and that in order for Sodom to be saved there must be ten righteous found in the city. The description in 19:4 makes it clear that the wickedness of those outside the house is as great as YHHW had expected. The question remains as to whether the righteousness inside the house will be enough to save the city nonetheless. Lot’s visitors even ask Lot whether he has any others that belong to him (19:13). At this point Lot approaches his sons-in-law but Lot’s righteousness does not extend to them,
and neither does his ability to preserve them. The next morning the men escort Lot, his wife, and his two daughters out of the city but at each step of the way Lot is reluctant and hesitates. He does so right away when first told to flee (יהוה). So that the men must take them by the hand. The text explicitly reports that the only reason for this is YHWH’s compassion (19:16). Once outside of the city the men instruct him to escape for his life by fleeing to the hills. They explicitly instruct him not to look back and not to stop in any valley. And yet even here Lot inexplicably finds bargaining room to ask that a city be spared on his account so that he can flee to that place. In the end, YHWH shows favor to Lot in this matter as well (19:21). Unfortunately, the number of those saved with Lot decreases yet one more time because his wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. It seems that the righteousness of Lot and his family decreases as the text progresses.

An interesting comment occurs in the text in verse 22. Here it records that the city to which Lot flees is preserved and because of these circumstances the city is called Zoar. This echoes the double repetition of מִנְשֵׁר in verse 20. The naming of the city based on the events makes one wonder how the name “small” relates to the incident described. I would suggest that it is important to remember how the narrative begins. As a result of Abraham’s negotiations with YHWH, if there are enough righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah then the

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45 Coats argues that Abraham’s negotiations are not concerned to interact with the righteousness of Lot. “The point here, however, is not so much that ten righteous could save a city full of wicked people. If that were the case, we would be forced to ask about five or even one righteous person whose merit might save the city. And we would need to explore the character of righteousness that could counter so much evil.” I would argue that the negotiations naturally bring to the reader’s mind the fact that Lot is located in Sodom and Gomorrah and when we also take into consideration the plot of Genesis, then we are all the more concerned with the righteousness of the seed. In fact, Coats’ comment that “we would need to explore the character of righteousness that could counter so much evil” is puzzling given that we can hardly avoid that question as a result of the flood narrative. That is the very question we are required to deal with when reading for plot in Genesis! Coats, “Lot,” 120. Coats himself draws the parallel between Lot and Noah, Coats, “Lot,” 124.
cities can be saved. In the end, the righteousness of Lot and his family is not enough to save Sodom and Gomorrah it is only enough to save Zoar, “a little.”

After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah the text returns once again to Abraham who awakes to see smoke rising from the cities. The fact that the text returns to Abraham is important. Especially important is the comment in 19:29 that God remembered Abraham (וַיִּזְכֹּרְאֱלֹהִים אֶת־אַבְרָהָם). This comment emphasizes that God has saved Lot because of his agreement with Abraham just as God saved Noah and his family because of his covenant with Noah (Gen 8:1), thus once again placing Lot in contrast to Abraham. In the end, this comment introduces the idea it was not ultimately Lot’s own righteousness that saved him, but Abraham’s. Returning to Abraham and his agreement with YHWH after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah also brings that original situation back to play in the narrative. At the beginning, God decides to share his plans with Abraham because through Abraham and his family all the nations of the earth will be blessed. And the reason for this is, in turn, that Abraham will command his children and his house after him so that they will keep the way of YHWH. As we discovered in the previous narrative, this is precisely what Lot has not done. As Coats aptly points out, “[t]he contrast develops between Abraham the righteous and Lot a foil to that righteousness, a fool in contrast to Abraham's blessedness.”

The narrative is not yet done, however. It now relates a scene that reminds us of Noah and his sons after the flood. At the same time, this final narrative section plays on 

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46 Gunkel, Genesis, 210. Gunkel argues that the Zoar reference is etymological motif and a “geological legend.” However, given the literary shaping of the text, we should prefer literary explanations. In fact, such statements are likely to be comments or evaluations of the narrative and for that reason by offering an explanation we provide strong confirmation of our reading of the text—at least to the degree that our explanation is reasonable. In this case the explanation seems possible but open to further insight. Sailhamer comes closest to expressing the interpretation stated here. Sailhamer, The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary, 172.

the main theme of the Genesis narrative, namely the survival and righteousness of the seed. In this case, Lot’s two daughters get him drunk in order to preserve his seed. In an ironic twist, the unrighteousness of the seed now actually preserves the line of Lot (נְחַיֵהּ מַעָּבִים). But he who laughs last, laughs best and the final irony is greater than the first. The genealogical nature of this narrative together with the implicit genealogical reference places Lot’s seed outside the land and seed of promise. And so even though Lot’s seed is preserved, its unrighteousness banishes it to the east, outside the line of promise. Thus this final comment makes the distinction between Lot and Abraham complete.

Our expectations of the narrative as we enter into the next portion of the Abraham narrative are shaped by the Lot episodes. Setting up Lot as a foil for Abraham has helped reinforce our expectation that in order for Abraham to fulfill his calling he cannot be like Lot. Righteousness is a requirement for the line of promise that will deliver not only itself but also the nations. At key points in the text, especially in the Lot narratives, we have been encouraged to see Abraham as righteous, or perhaps rather to expect righteousness from Abraham. But due in part to the wife-sister story in Gen 12 there have been moments that have put him in a less flattering light. Our expectations that Abraham must be righteous combined with those passages that have led us to doubt his righteousness, along with the simple fact that Abraham does not yet have an heir, leave the tension of the plot intact and the continuation of the seed has now been clearly connected to the righteousness of the seed.

48 Driver also comments on the contrast between Lot and Abraham in his discussion on this text. Driver, The Book of Genesis, 205.
Confluence of the Righteousness and Seed Motifs and the Climax of the Plot

As we have looked at each of the concentric layers within the chiastic structure of the Abraham narrative, each layer in the second half of the structure has brought clarity or emphasis to its corresponding layer in the first half. The covenant of chapter 17 adds the covenant of circumcision and the clear expectation that Abraham must be upright before YHWH. It also adds the critical information that Abraham’s heir will come through Sarah. The Lot narratives bring Abraham and Lot into a more stark contrast and emphasize the necessity of righteousness. By the end of the narrative a clear line is drawn between Abraham and Lot, between the seed of promise and the seed not of promise. I will argue that increased clarity in the narrative of Abraham and Abimelech brings increased focus to the point of tension of the narrative—will Abraham’s own unrighteousness threaten the survival of the line of promise? This in turn sets the stage for the climax of the narrative in Gen 22.

The Second Wife-Sister Story: The Righteousness of the Seed and the Nations

As Alexander has pointed out, this narrative presupposes the narrative in Gen 12:10-20. The narrative begins with a shorthand description of the accounts that occurred in Gen 12 because it assumes we are familiar with the first story. However, once we get to 20:3 the narrative slows down. Now we should give our attention to the details that are included here and keep in mind the details that are given in the first.

In Gen 12:10-20 Abram does not appear in a perfectly innocent light. This is presumed and now expanded upon in more detail in this narrative.49 Also, the tension is even

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49 Biddle observes that, “[e]ach account agrees, at this point, that the patriarch has behaved inappropriately in subjecting the ruler and his people to the penalties inherent in the impropriety undertaken or considered with respect to the patriarch’s wife. However, there are significant differences; each successive
more heightened in this narrative because it has now been explicitly stated that Sarah will be the mother of Abraham’s heir. In fact, we know that it will be one year or less. This certainly should catch the attention of the reader. The actions of Abraham have indeed put the righteous line at risk in a way that was not as clear in the first instance, which occurred before the narrative specified that the seed will come from both Abraham and Sarah.

In Gen 20:4 God comes to Abimelech in a dream and reveals to him that his life is in danger because of the woman he has married (יְהַנֶּג הַמָּלֶלֶה). This echoes a similar logic and phrase from Gen 12:17 (עָלְּדָבָר שִׁרְיוֹן אַשָּׁת אֲבֶרֶם). Because this phrase was an important part of the structure of the story in Gen 12, it is prominent here as well and reminds us of the implications it has for Abraham’s guilt. In addition to this, there may be a hint of irony in 20:4 when Abimelech asks God if he would put to death a righteous people (הֲגוֹיְגְַם צַדִּיקְתָּה). This sounds something like Abraham’s pleading with God in 18:17, only in the previous text righteous Abraham is pleading with God on behalf of Lot. In that text, I argued that the righteousness of Abraham is being contrasted with the lack of righteousness in Lot. But now it is Abimelech who is doing the pleading on his own behalf. Ironically, Abimelech has taken the place of righteous Abraham and Abraham has come treacherously close to taking the place of the less than righteous Lot. Abimelech asserts that what he has done is

50. The narrative goes to great lengths to demonstrate the innocence of the Philistine Abimelech.” Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 175.

51. Novick sees Abimelech as a parodic foil for Abraham. I agree that Abimelech is a foil for Abraham, just as Lot is a foil for Abraham, but in view of the Lot narratives, Abimelech is an ironic foil that points to Abraham’s faults. Tzvi Novick, “‘Almost, at Times, the Fool’: Abimelekh and Genesis 20,” *Proof* 24, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 277.
not his fault, for Abraham had told him that the woman was his sister, not his wife. He claims he has acted in the integrity of his heart and in innocence (בְתֵּם־לָבֵךְ וּבְנָקֵיָּכְןַפֲׂי עִשְׂרֵיהָ) Not surprisingly, God agrees with him and the similarity of wording in his confirmation serves to emphasize the truth of Abimelech’s claims (יִנְאָנִי יָדְעָהְי וּבְתֵּם־לָבֵךְ). Nonetheless, though Abimelech is innocent, a great sin has come upon him. It follows that it must be Abraham who has done wrong and though Abimelech is innocent, he bears the objective weight of the guilt.

52 Ibid., 280. Novick refers to this as Abimelech’s “exaggerated concern with his own righteousness.” But here I would point out that the motif of righteousness is usually overlooked as a major motif in the book of Genesis. When this is taken into consideration along with my assertion that the plot of Genesis requires that the promised seed be righteous, then the contour of the text changes. In that case, the author is not pointing to Abimelech’s exaggerated concern for righteousness, but the author himself is concerned with righteousness. Also rather condemning of Novick’s reading is the simple observation that God agrees with Abimelech regarding his innocence.

53 In Alexander’s comparison of the wife-sister stories he points out that the dream plays an important and distinctive role in this particular narrative. “The dialogue which constitutes the dream revolves around the issue of Abimelech’s innocence … [o]bviously the dream highlights an issue which neither of the other stories consider.” His point adds weight to my argument that the author is providing clarity to the Egyptian narrative by emphasizing the innocence of Abimelech. Alexander, “A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis,” 148.

54 Thus Petersen concludes that “[i]ntention is not the dominant concern here. The sin is apparently in the action.” Petersen, “Thrice-Told Tale,” 39. Yet because God is willing to forego his punishment, motivation is clearly shown to be of concern. The idea must rather be that an objective wrong has been committed against God for which restitution must be made in order to clear the guilt. Thus Biddle says, “although no one may be said to be solely guilty, it remains the case that Elohim has been affronted.” Biddle, “The Endangered Ancestress,” 601. In this sense Petersen is correct that the sin is in the action as an objective offense against God. I would compare this to unintentional killings for which the land cannot be cleansed until the death of the perpetrator (despite the fact that he did not kill intentionally) or the death of the priest. A violation against God’s holiness has occurred and a penalty must be paid. If this is the case, we need not look elsewhere to identify Abimelech’s guilt, cf. Alexander, “A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis,” 152. Also see Biddle’s discussion on אָשָׁם, though that discussion deals with the Gen 26 text. Biddle, “The Endangered Ancestress,” 605–607.

Once we have concluded that Abimelech is guilty, however, we cannot also conclude that Abraham is innocent. Abraham, on the contrary, and in contrast to Abimelech, is guilty by intention. Petersen argues that Abraham is shown to be innocent because he told the truth when he said that Sarah was his sister. Petersen, “Thrice-Told Tale,” 40. But this can hardly excuse him. He may have told the truth about Sarah being his sister but it is not at the same time ethical that he did not also tell the truth that Sarah was his wife, which is the fact most relevant to the situation.
Abraham’s guilt is further confirmed in Abimelech’s confrontation which also contains echoes of the confrontation with Pharaoh (in Gen 12:18 Pharaoh’s inquiry begins מַה־זֹאתְע שִית ְלְִ and Abimelech’s begins וּמֶּה־ע שִית ְלָנ). Despite the similar beginning, however, the Abimelech confrontation is significantly expanded and includes more detail. Pharaoh merely asked Abram why he said his wife was his sister and there is no record of Abram’s response. In the Abimelech confrontation, Abimelech is quite direct, accusing Abraham of bringing on his kingdom a great sin and doing what is not done (כִי־הֵבֵאת ְע לַיְוָוָו וְעַל־מַמְלַכְתִּיְחֲטֹא ְהְגְְהָדֹל הְמַעֲשִיםְאֲשֶּרְלְֹע שְִית ְעִמ דִי). We should not forget that God has already been seen to be in agreement with Abimelech’s innocence. This places Abraham in a bad light, as does his response. Abraham believed that there would be no fear of God in Gerar (כִי אָמְרֵהִי רְק אֶרִירֵאת אֶלֹהִים בַהוֹ), But the text specifically contradicts this claim in 20:8. After Abimelech reports the dreams in which God speaks to him regarding the matter and warns him of the consequences, all his servants are afraid (וַיִירְאוֹה אֲנ שִיםְמְאְֹֹֹֹּד), we could speculate that Abraham might have been right in being skeptical of Abimelech, but the fact that the author textually contradicts him on this point is exegetically relevant. What is more, Abimelech has accused Abraham of “doing to him what is not done” (מַעֲשִיםְאֲשֶּר לָא־יֵע שוְּע שִית ְעִמ דִי). The niphal places emphasis on the deed as one that is universally recognized as wrong. To make matters worse for Abraham, we next read of his justification for saying that Sarah is his sister. It is, after all, true—just not the whole truth. But this hardly excuses or even mitigates the fact that he has brought this great sin upon Abimelech and his kingdom (20:9). In the end, the author has painted Abraham’s actions as disingenuous and rather than the fear of God lacking in Gerar, one wonders whether or not the fear of God is lacking in Abraham.

The opposite is true again of Abimelech. In the text that follows Abimelech’s confrontation of Abraham, he enriches Abraham with gifts of sheep and oxen and servants similar to Pharaoh’s gifts in Gen 12. There is an important difference, however. In Gen 12
the gifts are given to Abraham in exchange for giving Pharaoh his “sister” as a wife. In other words they are given before Pharaoh realizes the truth about Sarah. In the case of Abimelech, however, the gifts are given as he sends Abraham away, as a way of making up for the sin that has come upon him. Abimelech recognizes that what has happened is indeed a sin that he has become associated with and he goes beyond what God has instructed him in order to make reparations.

The text places Abimelech alongside Abraham and it is Abimelech who turns out to be the righteous one. Indeed, God will not kill a righteous nation (20:4). And so there is an ironic twist in this narrative. Because of his innocence, Abimelech has saved himself and his kingdom from God’s annihilation and yet the threat of his annihilation has come upon him due to the unrighteousness of Abraham. Once again it appears as though Abimelech has taken over from Lot as a foil for Abraham.55 In this case, however, Abimelech is doing what Abraham should be doing and Abraham is doing what the seed should not be doing.56

And yet it is also true that the healing of Abimelech and his kingdom comes about by the intercession of Abraham (cf. Gen 20:7, 17). Abraham may be depicted as unrighteous here, yet he is still the one with whom God has a covenant and the one through

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55 Biddle, “The Endangered Ancestress,” 609. “This notion of the patriarch as intercessor calls to mind not only Gen 12:1-3 but also Abraham's intercession for Lot in Genesis 18, an intercession in which the patriarch mediates blessing to Lot and, in the long term, to his descendants, Ammon and Moab. Few commentators recognize the possibility of an allusion to Genesis 18 in Gen 20:7.”

56 Alexander, “A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis,” 152. Novick also sees Abimelech as a “parodic foil” to Abraham but in the opposite sense. He says Abimelech is “a figure of middling piety who lays claim to great piety.” Novick, “Almost, at Times, the Fool,” 277. However, in light of the fact that God confirms Abimelech’s righteousness in the matter of Sarah, there does not seem to be much textual warrant for criticizing Abimelech. Authors sometimes accuse Abimelech of overstating his innocence or “defensive self-righteousness” but that is in impression left more likely by our presuppositions for Abimelech (and Abraham’s) than those given to us by the text. Novick, “Almost, at Times, the Fool,” 279.
whom God has promised to bring the seed. This unique mention of Abraham as a prophet, which runs against the grain of the narrative, may be an ironic way of bringing to mind what Abraham is supposed to be to the nations in comparison to what he actually has been. 57 Thus we leave this text with heightened tension. Abraham, the seed, must be righteous but the text has now painted him as unrighteous. Will this jeopardize the survival of the seed as we might expect?

The seed that God has promised to Abraham through Sarah finally arrives, just as God had said, in the first narrative section of Gen 21. As expected, the line of promise is delineated from the line not of promise in the subsequent narrative about the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. To complete this concentric layer of the Abraham chiasm we have another narrative involving Abimelech. It is interesting that in this concentric layer, which stretches from Gen 20:1-21:34, the birth of Isaac is enfolded between two narratives concerning Abraham’s relations with Abimelech. In the first, which is the wife-sister story we just read carefully, Abraham’s unrighteous behavior creates tension in the narrative because he creates a potential threat to the survival of the seed. In the next, there continues to be contention between Abraham and Abimelech. This text, along with God’s promises to Ishmael would appear to put Abraham once more in the context of the nations. I argued with respect to the table of nations in Gen 10 that this genealogy purposefully keeps the seed of promise in the context of the nations. Abraham is to be a blessing to the nations but his conduct in Gen 20 has brought not only his own line into question but his ability to be a blessing to the nations as well. This may be the main thrust of the short Abimelech narrative in Gen 21:22-34. On the one hand, we see animosity that has developed between Abraham’s

57 As Biddle notes, “the stories may best be understood as complementary to the blessing-to-the-nations promise.” Biddle, “The Endangered Ancestress,” 604.
people and Abimelech’s. This is likely the result of Abraham’s own unrighteousness. Yet despite the conflict Abimelech also recognizes that YHWH is with Abraham and seeks blessing through that relationship.

If we take these texts together, that is the entire concentric layer from Gen 20:1-21:34, then we may gain a better understanding of its role in the narrative. Our first observation is that the birth of Isaac, which we may have expected to be the climax of the narrative, is engulfed in the Abimelech narratives and thus by virtue of its position loses climactic thrust. The Abimelech narratives bring the righteousness of Abraham into doubt and thus his capacity to serve in the line of promise which we are expecting to bring blessing to the nations. These two features of the text create heightened tension in the narrative. The lack of righteousness of the seed is threatening the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham. Even though Isaac has been born and Ishmael has been separated just as God had said, the birth of Isaac in the context of Abraham’s unrighteousness delays resolution of the plot. As readers, we wonder if Abraham is really fit to represent the line of promise. Is there something that could yet happen in the story that might reverse the successful ending? This expectation is immediately confirmed as we enter into the penultimate concentric layer of the Abraham narrative.

The Akedah: The Ultimate Threat to the Seed

The first verse of Gen 22 plays on the tension as it was just described and brings it to the fore for the narrative that follows, ויהי אָבֹרְכֶּם אֶלֹהִים וַאֲנָשָׁה נַעֲשֵׂה אַבְרָהָם. The first clause relates Gen 22 to the state of the plot as we left them at the end of the previous concentric layer. The next clause specifically draws our attention to a testing.

58Ibid., 609.
Abraham’s status as the seed of promise was brought into question by the previous narrative and now God will test him to see if he measures up.59 It is also important to our reading of the text to point out that the strange test which God has chosen puts the survival of Abraham’s line, and thus the seed of promise at direct risk.60 There is an irony at work in this test. Abraham’s obedience to God will put the seed at immediate risk, whereas his disobedience would save it. And yet according to the plot of Genesis, his disobedience, or lack of righteousness, would put the continuation of the line of promise at risk.61 The test therefore creates an apparent no-win situation for Abraham and therefore creates heightened tension of the plot.

The narrative proceeds along the lines of this tension with a healthy sense of drama. It is not until Abraham has stretched out his hand and taken the knife to kill his son that the angel of YHWH calls on him to stop him from offering up Isaac as a sacrifice. At that moment he says to Abraham, “Now I know that you are a fearer of God” כִיְעַתּ הְיַדְעָהוּ כִּי־יְרֵאָלֹהִיםְאַָתּה. This is precisely the question that was raised in the previous chapter.

59 Alexander even argues that Gen 22 is the ratification of the covenant that was suggested in Gen 17. He believes that the oath of Gen 22:16-18, for example, belongs to the ratification of that covenant. In other words, from Gen 17 until now the covenant with Abraham has been an open question. This view sits well with the interpretation of the Abraham narrative offered here. He also points to the similarity between the Gen 17 covenant and the Noachic covenant. T. Desmond Alexander, “Genesis 22 and the Covenant of Circumcision,” JSOT 25 (1983): 17–22. Williamson elaborates even further on this argument, Williamson, Abraham, Israel, and the Nations, 245–246. Also see Turner who agrees that Abraham’s previous acts had placed the promise under threat, Turner, Announcements of Plot in Genesis, 110.

60 Moster argues that Gen 22 is the climax of the narrative. In conjunction with this idea he points out the parallels between Gen 22 and Gen 12, suggesting that this text provides some conclusion to the tension introduced in that part of the narrative. Julius B. Moster, “The Testing of Abraham,” Dor le Dor 17 (1988): 238.

61 As Coats articulates it, the test puts Abrahahm in a no-win situation because it is both, “(1) a call for obedience as a test for Abraham, with the patriarchal promise to Abraham at stake should he fail the test, and (2) a threat to the life of Abraham's first born, with the patriarchal promise at stake should Abraham carry through on the instructions to their bloody end.” George W. Coats, “Abraham’s Sacrifice of Faith: A Form-Critical Study of Genesis 22,” Int 27, no. 4 (1973): 393.
There it appeared that the people of Gerar did fear God and that it was instead Abraham who lacked the fear of God. Genesis 22 therefore puts Abraham to the test on precisely this point. In the end Abraham demonstrates he does, after all, fear God and, as a result, YHWH confirms his covenant with Abraham and in so doing specifically mentions the two points that were brought into question in the previous narrative, namely, the seed and the blessing to the nations.

Thus Gen 22 serves as the fitting climax to the Abraham narrative. Not only has it established Isaac as the promised seed but it has also resolved the issue of Abraham’s righteousness. Moster says of Gen 22, “Prior to chapters 21 and 22, Abraham’s faith had a long way to go to attain the required goal of total belief in him.” Even though he is not perfectly righteous, at the points in the narrative when it is most important Abraham responds with obedience and faith and thus through him God establishes his seed of promise through whom humanity will be able to return to God’s creation-sanctuary of rest.

*The Terah Plexus Summary*

In the early narratives of Genesis, the text began to make a distinction in the seed of the woman so that it divides into two lines. One line is the righteous line of promise and the other is the unrighteous line that falls outside the line of promise. The Cain and Abel

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episode began this trajectory within the book but it was confirmed in the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת. Also in the early narrative we found that sin tended to expand into chaos and it threatened the survival of the line of promise. Through the chaos of the flood God stabilized the chaos of sin and established a new order that serves as the environment in which God can work through the seed to return us to his creation-sanctuary of rest. By the time we reach the Abraham narrative we know that Abraham’s line is the seed of promise and we therefore expect righteousness from him. Up until this point, it was the unrighteousness of the line outside the line of promise that threatened the survival of the seed. Now, however, in the Abraham narrative the unrighteousness of the seed of promise has become a threat to its own survival. At points it even threatens the nations. Nonetheless, Abraham proves righteous in the end, righteous enough to move the seed of promise forward.

The Abraham narrative with its emphasis on righteousness has further confirmed our identification of the plot of Genesis as revolving around the righteousness and survival of the seed. The promised seed must be righteous in order to lead humanity back to God’s creation-sanctuary. Yet while the Abraham narrative confirms our understanding of the tension of the plot it also moves the plot forward and increases the reader’s uneasiness with regard to complete resolution. As mentioned, in the Abraham narrative the threat of unrighteousness has become internalized. It is no longer the unrighteousness of the seed outside the line of promise that threatens the survival of the seed but the unrighteousness of the seed itself has been brought into question. Abraham, in the end, is confirmed as righteous, but can we expect further progressive internalization of the threat of unrighteousness? This, I will argue below, is the contribution that the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת makes to the Genesis plot. The Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus introduces ambiguity with regard to the righteousness of the seed and in this way increases the reader’s confusion about the status of the seed of promise. Then, in the final תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus the status of the righteousness of the
seed becomes clear. The seed is not righteous. This discovery prepares the way for the climactic conclusion to the book of Genesis.
CHAPTER 7
THE MIDDLE OF GENESIS III: THE ISAAC תּוֹלְדוֹת PLEXUS AND THE DISSONANCE OF CONTRAPUNTAL PLOT MOVEMENTS

Kevin Walton has pinpointed the crucial issue that faces the interpreter of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת. It relates to a nagging paradox that runs throughout the story. “On the one hand are clear indications of divine revelation and purpose for Jacob. On the other hand are the events surrounding Jacob, as well as his own character and actions, which show little evidence of divine presence or faithful response.” In order to understand the Jacob narrative we must understand the interplay of these two, apparently paradoxical motifs. I will be arguing that the best way to do that is to understand the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת in the context of the wider biblical plot and in intertextual relation to the previous תּוֹלְדוֹת plexuses. These two aspects guide our interpretation of the narrative and especially our evaluation of Jacob’s actions.

As in the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus and in line with our findings from the Prague Linguistic Circle, in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת we find an interweaving of plots. Again we have two axes of thematic progression where the first axis operates uniquely in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת

1 Kevin Anthony Walton, Thou Traveller Unknown: The Presence and Absence of God in the Jacob Narrative (Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 1. Walton ends up finding in this paradox the theme of the Jacob story which he defines specifically as “the presence and absence of God.” When he speaks of theme, he means the statement that captures the essence of the plot in the same sense that Clines speaks of theme. I would argue that the presence and absence of God is a motif that we must understand in order to get to the theme, but it is not the theme itself.
plexus and the second interacts with the broader Genesis plot. And once again we cannot see together the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus without understanding the integrated interplay of these two axes of plot. In the discussion that follows we will identify and follow these two axes. However, whereas in the previous discussion we separated the two plots from one another in the interest of clarity, we will now take advantage of clarity gained to take a more integrated approach and deal with the text according to its structural order. I will first argue for a modification of an existing suggestion for the chiastic arrangement of the text and then I will work through each section in turn from beginning to end.

The Structure of the Narrative

Once again, several authors have argued for a chiastic structure for the text, the most important being Fishbane, Rendsburg, and Wenham.² Fishbane was the first to suggest a structural outline and the rest (with the exception of Gammie) built their structures off his. Below I present a modification of Fishbane’s structural outline with a brief explanation to support the differences. Also, since Wenham offers some important alternative divisions, I make a few notes in comparison to his structure as well.

²Michael A. Fishbane, “Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen 25:19-35:22),” JJS 26 (1975): 20; Fishbane, Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts, 42; Rendsburg, The Redaction of Genesis, 65; Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 16–50 (Word Biblical Commentary 2; Nashville: Nelson, 1987), 169. An alternate structure has been suggested by John G. Gammie, “Theological Interpretation by Way of Literary and Tradition Analysis: Genesis 25-36,” in Encounter with the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible (ed. Martin J. Buss; The Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Supplements 8; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 117–34. However, Gammie’s structure has a number of problems. First of all, he ignores the תּוֹלְדוֹת heading as a textual division and inserts Gen 25:1-11 in the “A” position of the chiasm. Many of his textual divisions are not thought through very well from a grammatical or literary perspective, but seem forced into a particular schema. Similarly, he has cut and pasted verses at the end of the structure to accommodate his thematic patterning. Though writing after Fishbane, he does not interact with Fishbane’s proposal.
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<tr>
<th>Layer</th>
<th>Chapter - Verse</th>
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<td>25:19-34</td>
<td>Jacob and Esau: The older will serve the younger</td>
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<td>26:1-26:33</td>
<td>Jacob’s father and a foreign king</td>
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<td>26:34-28:9</td>
<td>Jacob and Esau: Jacob leaves the land</td>
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<td>Jacob and God: God promises blessing</td>
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<td>Jacob and Laban: Jacob comes to Haran</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>Rachel and Leah: struggle over sons</td>
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<td>D’</td>
<td>32:2-33</td>
<td>Jacob and God: Jacob struggles with God for blessing</td>
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<td>33:1-20</td>
<td>Jacob and Esau: Jacob returns to the land</td>
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<td>Jacob’s sons and a foreign king</td>
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<td>A’</td>
<td>35:1-29</td>
<td>Jacob is established in the land as promised line of seed</td>
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There are three differences of substance between my structural outline and Fishbane’s. In the first four layers (A-D) I have followed Fishbane almost exactly. The only difference is that, along with Wenham, I place the account of Esau’s marrying Judith (Gen 26:33-34) at the beginning of the C layer. The previous narrative of Isaac and Abimelech comes to a natural close with the explanation of the name Beersheba. The fact that Gen 26:33-34 introduces Esau, giving
first E layer, however, Fishbane takes the whole chapter, 29:1-35, whereas I shift the last four verses to the F layer. In terms of grammar, there is no compelling indication that we should take one division over the other since we have an unbroken chain of wayyiqtol verbs. This leaves us to consider the changes of scene, character, and other literary aspects of the text. It is precisely for these reasons that I have chosen to divide the text at 29:30 instead of the end of the chapter. The first part of chapter twenty-nine describes Jacob’s arrival in Haran and his marriages to Leah and Rachel. Verse thirty-one, on the other hand, begins the record of the births of Jacob’s first eleven sons and the competition between Leah and Rachel. This competition, which continues to 30:24, works as a single narrative. In addition, Gen 29:31 introduces YHWH as a major player in the narrative as it is he who opens the wombs of both Leah and Rachel (Gen 29:31 and 30:22). Also, the structure of each of the birth accounts is remarkably similar. Of the eleven sons born, all but Gad and Asher follow the same pattern of conceiving, giving birth and then naming (in a series of three wayyiqtol verbs), using nearly identical wording. As a sampling of this structure I have included accounts of Simeon and Naphtali below:4

חזרו עוד
ונולד בן
ותאמנים
פִּרְשְׁנֵה יִרְחָה כִּירִישְׁנַה אֲנֵיכֶּה
וְַתיָּלְלֵי בִּגְאַרְתָּרָה
וְַתָּכְּרַא שָׁם שְּמָעָו׃
(Gen 29:33)

his age and marriage to Judith, makes this a natural point to begin a new narrative section. Also, the accounts of Esau’s marrying foreign wives create an inclusio around the C section. Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 202.

4Even the Gad and Asher accounts bear a resemblance but the exactness of the other nine sets these two apart. Later I will suggest that the breakdown of the structure may indicate a breakdown in the narrative due to the conflict between the sisters.
This similarity of structure, which spans from the end of Gen 29 through Gen 30 suggests that the birth narratives should be read as a single pericope.

The next and most significant difference between Fishbane’s arrangement and mine is in the next, or F layer, where I follow Rendsburg. Fishbane does not see another division in the text until the end of chapter 30, whereas I have separated the birth accounts (Gen 29:31-30:24) in Fishbane’s level F (Gen 30:1-43) from Jacob’s struggles with Laban over the flocks (Gen 30:25-43). This creates a second layer F so that while Fishbane has a single and central F layer, I have two parallel F layers where the birth of Jacob’s children parallels the account of the birth of his flocks.

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Table 5. A comparison of Fishbane’s structural divisions to those used in this study.

The division is further supported by the fact that in Gen 30:25 we have one of the few places in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת where the grammar itself suggests a break in the text. The phrase וַיְהִיְכַאֲשֶּּרְיָּ לְד הְר חֵל supports our perception that we have a shift in narrative content. Indeed, as the narrative shifts away from the birth accounts, Rachel and Leah disappear from the narrative and Laban enters as a significant player. Whereas the struggle in 29:31-30:24 is between Leah and Rachel, the struggle in 30:25-43 is between Jacob and Laban.

ROSS-BURSTALL seems to want to downplay Leah’s struggle with Rachel. But the mandrakes episode and the narrative structure which places her giving of her maidservant in response to Rachel’s almost as a tit for tat would suggest that she also is struggling against her sister. Joan Ross-Burstall, “Leah and Rachel: A Tale of Two Sisters,” WW 14 (1994): 167.
Finally, the third difference of consequence is my inclusion of Gen 35:23-29 in my structural outline. These verses, which conclude with the death and burial of Isaac provide a fitting and almost necessary summary and conclusion to the narrative, especially in view of the genealogical shaping and the similar ending to the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת (where the death of Abraham, not Terah, is recorded, since Terah had already died in Haran).\footnote{Wenham, \textit{Genesis 16–50}, 169. On this point I am in agreement with Wenham.}

The above notes should suffice to explain the reasons I deviate from Fishbane and Rendsburg but Wenham has a few interesting innovations that I have elected not to follow. In Fishbane’s conception, his E layer of the chiastic structure included narratives of Jacob meeting Laban, Jacob marrying Leah and Rachel, and then the birth of his first eleven sons. I have already made note of the fact that in line with Wenham I believe the birth of the first eleven sons should be separated out from this narrative. The result is two central F layers, instead of Fishbane’s one. Yet Wenham has suggested that the first two portions of this narrative should also be separated so that Jacob meeting Laban and his marrying Leah and Rachel become two independent units. This creates yet another layer and slightly shifts the parallel relationships at the center of the structure. The two parallel E layers maintain a similar relationship. However at the F layer we now find Jacob marrying Laban’s daughters in the first (Laban outwits Jacob), and God giving Laban’s flocks to Jacob in the second (Jacob outwits Laban). This leaves the birth of Jacob’s sons in an additional, central layer of the narrative.
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Table 6. A comparison of Wenham’s structural divisions to those used in this study.

Wenham offers a viable alternative to Fishbane’s structural outline. By dividing the text between 29:14 and 29:15 he follows a natural division in the story even though the *wayyiqtol* chain is not broken. Genesis 29:14 ends with a time statement indicating that Jacob stayed with Laban for a month and 29:15 begins what appears to be a new topic. On the other hand, one might expect a greater shift in the narrative. The main characters and the setting all remain the same. Also, despite significant differences in the substance of the story, this narrative bears similarities to the account of Abraham’s servant going to Haran to find a wife for Isaac (Gen 24:1-67). These similarities are strong enough to suggest to the reader that the pericope should come to its fruition with the marriage of Jacob
and Rachel. In the end, these literary considerations seem to give slight preference to Fishbane’s structure.8

Wenham offers one other alternative textual division that changes the chiastic relationships between layers of the text. Instead of his second half D-C layers being 32:2-33 (Jacob’s preparations to meet Esau and the wrestling scene) and 33:1-20 (meeting with Esau), as I (following Fishbane) have offered, Wenham believes that these two texts should be divided instead such that 32:2-3 creates the first division and 32:4-33:20 the second. In this way, 32:2-3 is an instance in which “Jacob meets angels of God at Mahanaim,”9 parallel to Jacob’s meeting of God at Bethel in 28:10-22. Wenham’s division has a very important weakness. Up until now in Genesis, subdivisions in the text at this level have always played an important role in developing some aspect of the plot of both Genesis and the תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus under discussion. Rather than mere textual units, they have been episodes. Genesis 32:2-3 appears out of place as a clause among paragraphs in comparison to the other narrative divisions. It therefore seems quite unlikely that the author would have intended such a textual division. Furthermore, Jacob’s calling of the place where he saw the angels מַחֲנַיִם is an important potential link to the text that immediately follows in which Jacob splits his party up into two camps. Also, it is interesting that the subject matter of Jacob’s Bethel encounter is to a large measure related not only to 32:2-3 but to Jacob’s entire encounter with God in 32:2-33. Consider for example the fact that Jacob recalls God’s promises made to him

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8 With respect to my overall thesis, though a slightly different reading results, I found Wenham’s structure to be equally, or more amenable to my reading of Genesis. In my reading with an F-F center, I will speak of the internalization of Jacob’s struggle for blessing as seen in the struggle between Rachel and Leah. This particular aspect of the narrative receives even more emphasis in Wenham’s structure since it lay at the center, or G layer, of his structural outline.

9 Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 169.
at Bethel in 32:10 and that the whole point of the wrestling scene appears to relate to that narrative as well.\footnote{The major weakness of taking 32:2-3 as the beginning of the narrative layer in 32:2-32 is the petucha that appears at the end of 32:3.}

This completes the major discrepancies between the structural outline presented here and those suggested by other interpreters. In what follows I will move layer by layer through this structure.

*The Development of the Plot of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת*

Once again we will need to follow two axes of thematic progression. The first is the plot of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת itself, which has its own movement from tension to resolution which revolves around the fulfillment of the oracle in Gen 25:23. The second is the plot of the book of Genesis which is the ongoing question of the righteousness and survival of the seed. Up until now, the seed has been shown to be righteous and the line of promise has, as a result, continued. In the discussion that follows I will be arguing that the main contribution of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת is an increased sense of dissonance that arises as a result of the interaction of these two levels of plot. I will attempt to show that while the plot of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת comes to a successful conclusion because Jacob ends up in the line of promise and Esau does not, the tension in the plot of Genesis comes close to reaching its height because the righteousness of the seed is never confirmed. In other words, the two axes of plot move in contrapuntal relationship one to the other with one moving to resolution and the other to
greater tension. This contrapuntal movement creates a dissonance that sets up the climax and dénouement that will occur in the final, Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus.  

The Beginning of the Plot: The Older Will Serve the Younger

In the first, or A layer of the chiastic structure we find first the title followed by the clause that substitutes for the linear genealogy, followed by a background statement beginning with וַיְהַי, which includes a clear link to the previous narrative and setup for the subsequent. The narrative begins in 25:21 with Isaac’s interceding on behalf of Rebekah because she is barren. This should be read as a link to Sarah and the announcement of her barrenness in 11:30.  

Yet it is interesting, that unlike the Abraham and Sarah account when the barrenness is a central aspect of the plot, here the problem is solved as soon as it is mentioned—even in the same verse. It is puzzling that Rebekah’s barrenness is mentioned at all unless it is meant to be a link to the Abraham narrative. In that case it suggests we should expect both continuity and discontinuity between the Abraham and Jacob stories. There is continuity because Rebekah, like Sarah, is barren. It shows that Isaac and his line

11 Most interpreters of the Jacob story find a “turning point” in the character of Jacob when he changes from being a trickster to a worshiper of YHWH. In the interpretation which follows I argue that there is no actual turning point. Anderson would probably also argue that there is no turning point for he argues that God himself is a trickster just like Jacob. However, in the interpretation presented here, by reading for the plot of Genesis we see that God does not approve of the trickery of the seed and the fact that Jacob does not ever turn the corner is an important aspect of the tension of Genesis as we go into the last תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus. John E. Anderson, “Jacob, Laban, and a Divine Trickster? The Covenantal Framework of God’s Deception in the Theology of the Jacob Cycle,” PRSt 36 (2009): 4.

12 Wenham argues that “the author deliberately highlights some of the parallels in order to encourage comparison between the careers and characters of the patriarchs” Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 168. Similarly Clifford also finds the need to compare this to the Abraham narrative, Richard J. Clifford, “Genesis 25:19-34,” Int 45, no. 4 (1991): 399.

will, in some sense, carry on or be like the line of Terah and yet, the fact that the barrenness is solved immediately introduces discontinuity because barrenness will not play the same role in the plot. The tension of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת will center on a different issue. \(^{14}\) The play on continuity and discontinuity with Abraham narrative is a major feature of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת.

Though Rebekah’s barrenness does not play a role in the plot, what immediately follows does introduce the tension that will rule the narrative throughout the Jacob story. \(^{15}\) When Rebekah conceives, sons are struggling within her. When she inquires of YHWH, he announces that two nations are inside of her, they will be divided one from the other, and the older will serve the younger. \(^{16}\)

This reversal of a natural order, not to mention the struggle of the brothers in the womb, lends itself to a comparison to Gen 4. In the reading of Gen 4 I suggested that the Cain and Abel story is the crux of the Genesis narrative because it introduces the tension that will guide the plot of the whole book and yet now we begin to see the motif becoming more concretely akin to the Cain and Abel manifestation of these motifs. When Cain and Abel were introduced in Gen 4 we made note of the fact that the structure of the narrative, which oscillated between the brothers with alternating wayyiqtol and disjunctive waw clauses, resulted in a juxtaposition of the two. As the comparison developed it became increasing

\(^{14}\) Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 87. Ross says “the narrative includes two tensions, which develop the structure,” referring first to the barrenness of Rebekah. He then argues that her barrenness creates not only a link to Sarah but also to Rachel in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis*, 435.

\(^{15}\) Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 88.

\(^{16}\) Sarna is correct that “this oracle must be understood in relation to the circumstances that elicited the original query.” The oracle is explaining the struggle in the womb, thus the tendency to struggle for the blessing is deeply engrained in Jacob from the beginning. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (1st ed.; Heritage of Biblical Israel; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966), 183.
clear that Abel was the preferred brother. Interestingly, in this text we also find that Esau and Jacob are contrasted using a similar alternation between wayyiqtol and disjunctive waw clauses. In the text below the indented clauses are disjunctive and in every case relate to Jacob, who is juxtaposed with Esau.

When we read the introduction of the brothers in light of the Cain and Abel narrative, as well as in the light of the Genesis narrative as it has been developed up to this point, the selection of the word בת, used to describe Jacob, can hardly be insignificant. In the

17 Here also we have increasing clarity of preference, though in the end, Isaac prefers one son and Rebekah the other. This creates another element of dissonance in the narrative and increases the tension of the plot.

18 Simone Paganini, “‘Wir haben Wasser gefunden’: Beobachtungen zur Erzählanalyse von Gen 25,19-26,35,” ZAW 117, no. 1 (2005): 22. Paganini points out important places in the narrative of 25:19-26:35 where perfectives interrupt the flow of the wayyiqtol chain of action. The first occurs in 25:26 when Jacob comes out of the womb. Van Seters points out that Gen 25 follows the same sequence of themes as Gen 4, Van Seters, Prologue to History, 137. Van Seters concludes that this is evidence for a basic story form or model. That is certainly possible, though it is also possible that the author artificially constructed the commonality in order to draw an intertextual connection. This may be supported by the fact that Leah and Rachel are compared and contrasted in a similar way, though there is no commonality in sequence of themes.
Cain and Abel narrative the brothers are divided along the lines of the one whose offering is pleasing to God and the one whose offering was not pleasing to God. This set the stage for the division of the seed into the righteous and the unrighteous line. Even more significantly, Abraham, who became associated with the righteous line, was called upon by YHWH to be blameless (תָּם). And it was not only Abraham who was to be blameless, for God expects Abraham to pass his blamelessness on to his progeny (Gen 18:19). Though the versions are certainly correct in translating this instance of תָּם as they do, no commentator can ignore the fact that this is an exceptional usage of the term. Due to the narrative that follows, Mathews considers this an ironic usage, or a double entendre. He may be correct, though the word may also refresh and reactivate our expectations that the seed of promise, which Jacob is already being associated with by virtue of the oracle, must be righteous.

The conclusion of this first layer depicts Esau’s selling of his birthright. It sets the narrative in motion by actuating the struggle of the brothers in adulthood. What occurred in the womb and the accompanying oracle was a foreshadowing of what was to come. In addition, this struggle in adulthood introduces us to the characters and their modus operandi. While recording Jacob’s first victory over Esau, it also brings into question not only Esau’s character, which is explicitly commented upon (Gen 25:34), but also...

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19 Also compare Gen 20:5 and what Abimelech says of himself in contrast to Abraham, בְּתִם לְבַנְיָן כַּפַיְע שִיתִיָא.


21 “V. 27, connecting the birth to the following scene begins to clarify the differentiation between the twins as predicted in the oracle.” Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown*, 19. Also von Rad calls this narrative block “an expository preface to the whole,” stating that “in the form of a rather loose string of statements it acquaints the reader with those facts which are important for understanding the following story.” Von Rad, *Genesis*, 265.
but also Jacob’s which is left doubtful, though still open to evaluation. Openness with regard to the righteousness of the seed is a key feature of the Isaac ותולדות. By not saying explicitly whether Jacob acts well, we are left with some doubt. He continues to behave in ways that seem unrighteous and yet the promises continue to move forward as well. By leaving the question open the narrative forces us as readers to continue our evaluation of his character.

Like Father, Like Son

The next section, or B layer, in the chiastic structure of the Jacob narrative is a break from the narrative of Jacob akin to the kind of interruption we find in Gen 38. Skinner calls Gen 26 a “misplaced appendix” since apart from this one chapter all of the Isaac ותולדות is devoted “exclusively to the biography of Jacob.” And of course we have the issue of the third wife-sister story in the Genesis account. Certainly the source critical issues are complex, yet we have developed grounds for reading on the basis of plot and we will


23 Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, 538. Likewise von Rad asserts with regard to the Isaac material that these “traditions were written down essentially in their ancient version, without being harmonized with the subsequent large composition of the patriarchal stories.” Von Rad, Genesis, 270. Nicol argues for intentionality in the placement of this text but on different lines than I take here. He believes not only that the text is chronologically out of place, but that recognizing as much is important to its interpretation inasmuch as it is a flashback text. George G. Nicol, “The Chronology of Genesis: Genesis XXVI 1-33 as ‘Flashback’,” VT 46 (1996): 336. Though also compare Fishbane, Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts, 45. Fishbane makes a competent case for the parallel connection to Gen 34 and concludes that there must also be a reason for their insertion into the narrative at their respective points.
continue on that trajectory. Already we saw in the previous structural layer that the author has made connections to the Genesis plot. Here I will argue that these connections become even more explicit with the result that the Genesis plot becomes fully engaged and the righteousness of the seed becomes a key issue in the narrative.

The background clause that begins this narrative in Gen 26:1 (וַיְהִי רֵעֵב בֵּאברֶץ מִלְבַּדְה רֶבֶן אַבְרָהָם) once again develops a sense of continuity and discontinuity with the Abraham narrative. It creates an explicit connection to the Abraham wife-sister episodes and is therefore an invitation to read this account in relation to the previous wife-sister stories. The connection to the Abraham narrative is, of course, not limited merely to this introductory clause. The entire section (Gen 26:1-33) describes only activity of Isaac that is parallel to activity already described in relation to Abraham.

**YHWH’s Covenant Confirmation to Isaac**

YHWH’s appearance to Isaac is a key development in the narrative because he confirms that his covenant with Abraham now passes on to Isaac. All of the promises that YHWH had given to Abraham are now repeated to Isaac including the promise that all the

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24 In addition, Alexander argued cogently that there is a unity of plot in the Abraham narrative, where the wife-sister narratives also play an important role in the development of the tension. Alexander, “A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis,” 286.

25 Nicol looks at the references to Abraham in Gen 26 and concludes that “these references help to provide a measure of coherence throughout the Isaac narrative, and to integrate it into the patriarchal sequence, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” George G. Nicol, “The Narrative Structure and Interpretation of Genesis XXVI 1-33,” VT 46, no. 3 (Jl 1996): 352.


27 Woychuk, “The Rhetorical Functions of Genesis 26 in the Argument of Genesis,” 204. “Gen 26 will present Isaac as a new kind of Abraham.”
nations of the earth will be blessed through his seed.\(^{28}\) Also, and significantly, YHWH specifies that the promises are confirmed to Isaac on the basis of the fact that Abraham obeyed YHWH and kept his precepts, commands, statutes, and laws. This effectively actualizes our expectation that, like Abraham, the seed must continue in righteousness.\(^{29}\)

It is also significant that the confirmation of YHWH’s promises is placed in the context of Isaac’s wife-sister account. It could have been placed before or after and so presented as a separate account, but instead the author has embedded the covenant confirmation in the Isaac wife-sister story. The author therefore requires us to read the wife-sister story in the context of YHWH’s covenant including both the promises to Abraham and YHWH’s expectations of him.

*Isaac’s Wife-sister Story*

In terms of location, characters, and story development, Isaac’s wife-sister narrative most clearly resembles Gen 20-21 and Abraham’s sojourn in Gerar. Yet the narrative begins with reference to a famine, like Gen 12 but unlike Gen 20, and with reference to God’s specific instruction not to go down to Egypt. The narrative intentionally brings to mind therefore, not only the wife-sister story of Gen 20 but also Gen 12.\(^{30}\) We found in previous discussion that these two parallel layers in the Abraham narrative serve a

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\(^{28}\) This is the third time that this aspect of God’s promises has been mentioned. The first occurred in Gen 12:1-3. Neither of the covenants in Gen 15 or 17 mention this aspect of the promise and it is not specified again until Gen 22, when God either confirms the covenant of Gen 17, or, as Alexander argues, the covenant of Gen 17 is finally established, Alexander, “Genesis 22 and the Covenant of Circumcision,” 17.

\(^{29}\) E.g. Gen 18:19, but also the thrust of the narrative starting with Cain and Abel up to the previous chapter and the inviting play on תּ ם. See also Pinchas Kahn, “Jacob’s Choice in Genesis 25:19-28:9,” *JBQ* 29, no. 2 (2001): 81.

\(^{30}\) Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 187. Wenham offers more evidence that there is an intentional connection between Isaac and Abraham. However, he has a much more positive view of Isaac than I argue for here.
similar purpose. Their parallel positioning causes them to work together to demonstrate weakness in Abraham’s character and his lack of righteousness partly because of the progression from Gen 12 to Gen 26 which resulted in progressive clarity of Abraham’s guilt.

Comparing Gen 26 to Gen 12 and 20 demonstrates continuity in the progression of the narratives. First, Isaac lies in exactly the same way and with the exact same motivation (fear of death) as Abraham when he says that Rebekah is his sister. However, in Isaac’s case, it is not even a half-truth but an outright lie. Second, from Gen 12 to Gen 20 we found that the outcome of the lie was increasingly benign. In Gen 12 it appears that Pharaoh may have slept with Sarai, but in Gen 20 it is clear that Abimelech did not. Here, Abimelech does not even take Rebekah into his home, YHWH does not appear to Abimelech to warn him and reveal the lie, and finally, since no wrong has been committed, Abimelech does not compensate Isaac to atone for wrong done. In fact, like the barrenness of Rebekah, there would be no story here if it were not for the fact that it bears a similarity to Abraham’s.

The similarities, it appears, focus on the wrongness of Isaac’s deed. When Abimelech confronts Isaac he first makes plain the offense (Gen 26:9). ‘You said she was your wife, but in fact she is your sister.’ Isaac offers the same excuse as Abraham, but Abimelech does not accept it and follows with a phrase that has been repeated with only slight variation in each of the three accounts, מַה־זֹאתְע שִית ְל ְ (Gen 26:10, cf. Gen 12:18


32 Walton, Genesis, 553.

33 Alexander notes that, “[o]nce the ruse has been revealed to the reader the narratives diverge considerably.” Alexander, “A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis,” 139.
The fact that nothing has actually happened to Abimelech and Gerar means that Abimelech has not sinned but it does not mean that Isaac has not sinned. There was only a little lacking before one of the people might have slept with Rebekah and brought guilt on them (26:10). The same guilt that was born by Abraham is now born by Isaac.\(^{35}\)

The final element of progression is the fact that each wife-sister account includes a description of the patriarch’s increased wealth. In the first case, Pharaoh deals favorably with Abram on account of having taken Sarai as a wife (Gen 12:16). The narrative ends with the note that Abram leaves Egypt with “all that he had” (Gen 12:20, cf. 13:1-2). In the second account Abimelech gives gifts as a way of atoning for the wrong that was done to Abraham and Sarah and in order to gain Abraham’s favor so that he will pray for healing (Gen 20:14-18). Interestingly, in the case of Isaac, his increased wealth is not related to the wife-sister account at all—and yet by proximity the author has closely associated the record of increased wealth with the wife-sister account.\(^{36}\) This would suggest that the author likely intends us to read this similarity in light of the other accounts. One possible interpretation is that the author is pointing to a progressive breakdown in relations between the patriarchs and the surrounding nations. In the Egyptian account Pharaoh gives gifts because he has an

\(^{34}\) Of the similar vocabulary that has been pointed out by Gunkel, this is likely the most significant. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 223. Wenham argues more strongly that this phrase shows Abimelech is in the right, not Isaac since it is the same incriminating phrase with which God addressed Eve and Cain (Gen 3:13 מַה־עֲשָׂתָהּ בְּשִׁיתָהּ, Gen 4:10 מַה־עֲשָׂתָהּ בְּשִׁיתָהּ). Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 191.

\(^{35}\) “All three wife-sister stories in Genesis (chaps. 12, 20, 26) have in common that the foreign monarch is more concerned about morality than is the patriarch.” Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 291.

\(^{36}\) Pappas makes note of this and argues that Gunkel is therefore likely correct in arguing that Isaac’s account is later than Abraham’s wife-sister account and is an attempt at purging the account of its offensive elements. Harry S. Pappas, “Deception as Patriarchal Self-Defense in a Foreign Land: A Form Critical Study of the Wife-Sister Stories in Genesis,” *GOTR* 29, no. 1 (1984): 42.
amicable relationship with Abram (since he gives the gifts before he discovers the truth), in Gen 20 Abimelech gives gifts in order to gain Abraham’s favor so that Abraham will mediate between him and YHWH, and in Gen 26 Abimelech gives no gifts at all. Quite the opposite, the increase of Isaac’s wealth is antagonistic to his people. As we are reminded when YHWH confirms his covenant with Isaac, the line of promise is supposed to be the cause of blessing for the nations. The relations between Abraham’s line and the nations, however, are becoming increasingly antagonistic as a result of the unrighteousness of the seed. Put in the context of the biblical and Genesis plots, the seed is supposed to lead all nations back to YHWH’s creation-sanctuary of rest, and yet its unrighteousness casts doubt on its ability to do so.

One additional note can be made about the significance of this text. Petersen has argued that there is a thematic usage of the wife-sister motif in Genesis and that it can be expressed in his statement, “the divergence between YHWH’s and men’s plans.” In other words, in each of these passages the patriarch has relied on his own efforts to provide for his safety, rather than relying upon YHWH’s presence with him, in direct opposition to what YHWH has promised. In the case of Abraham, this self-reliance is, in the end, overcome by his reliance upon and his fear of YHWH. But what will be the case with Abraham’s

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38 Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 191.

39 Petersen, “Thrice-Told Tale,” 38. In the case of the Isaac wife-sister story Petersen actually argues that the theme is “patriarchal success in a foreign context.” Petersen, “Thrice-Told Tale,” 42. In this case, however, I think he misunderstands the relationship of the wife-sister tale to the enrichment of Isaac. He believes the text makes the success of Isaac a result of Abimelech’s apodictic of protection, whereas I believe in comparison to the Abraham narratives Isaac’s enrichment is attributed to Yahweh and is one step removed from Abimelech demonstrating a breakdown of relations with the nations. See also Alexander, “A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis,” 144.
descendants? In the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת this motif of self-reliance will become a major feature of the text.

The Well Narratives

It is rather difficult to understand the significance of the well narratives, either with respect to their more immediate plots or to the plot of Genesis. The episodes seem rather banal. Wenham points out that not every aspect of a patriarch’s life is all excitement, all the time. However, he also points obliquely to the fact that these incidents can be seen to relate to the “blessing to the nations” motif. There are several characteristics of the text that point to them being highly stylized just to suit this purpose. We can point out that each incident is associated with the wife-sister stories, that they involve covenant making between the line of promise and Abimelech (who can be seen to represent the surrounding nations), and that they occur in the context of the blessing being actualized in the life of the patriarch. The well incidents describe a degree of strife between the line of promise and the nations and yet because the nations can plainly see that YHWH is blessing the line of promise, they find they have an interest in coming into a covenant relationship with the line of promise. The nations are recognizing that the way to the blessing, is through the line of promise.

As we compare the two well incidents we see that Isaac’s account advances the Abraham account from Gen 21. There can be no doubt that a connection to the Abraham account.

40 The life of the patriarchs was not made up only of excitement and crisis. As in most people’s lives, there were long periods of fairly humdrum activity of quiet pastoral and family life. This short story gives a glimpse of the more mundane side of patriarchal existence.” Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 94.

41 Ibid., 95.

42 Matthews provides some historical background regarding the wells. The article points to the importance of relations between the patriarchs and the surrounding cities and especially to the importance of those relations being well defined for mutual benefit. Victor H. Matthews, “The Wells of Gerar,” BA 49 (1986): 118–26.
narratives is being made here, both for the parallels we noted above, but also for the repeated association the text makes between the wells of Abraham and Isaac. The account begins in Gen 26:14 with a comment that the Philistines are jealous of Isaac’s blessing. There is no such record in the Abraham account. This combines with the fact that Abraham was invited by Abimelech to stay in the land (Gen 20:15) but Isaac was invited to leave (Gen 26:16) to create the impression that, following on Isaac’s wife-sister encounter with Abimelech, tensions between the two parties have increased.

The Abraham incident is primarily a covenant making account. The narrative begins and ends with Abimelech taking the initiative to form a covenant with Abraham. The covenant strikes the theme of harmony in their relationships while the well, which is an apparent aside in the covenant narrative, hits on the element of discord. In the Abraham narrative, the discord is minor and the focus is on the harmony. In the Isaac narrative, on the other hand, not only do we begin with the jealousy of the Philistines, but now the wells, which still serve to bring out the discord in the narrative, have come to dominate the narrative which begins and ends with well digging accounts. What is more, a total of four wells are dug in the Isaac account and only one is mentioned in the Abraham account. A first well is dug and quarreling ensues (Gen 26:19-20), a second well is dug and quarreling ensues (Gen 26:21), then they move on to dig a third well where there is a lull in the discord (Gen 26:22). From there they move on to Beersheba. The location is important because it is the location of the previous covenant between Abimelech and Abraham. God appears to Isaac here to confirm his presence and promises and then Abimelech arrives with Ahuzzath and Phicol (cf. Gen 21:22). Isaac’s greeting is striking in that it emphasizes the discordant state of his relationship with Abimelech (Gen 26:27).
This is a stark contrast to Abraham’s account and reminds us that whereas Abimelech invited Abraham to stay in his land he invited Isaac to leave. Overall, the fact that the well accounts have taken over the narrative, and that they are closely associated with strife would indicate that discord rather than harmony has come to characterize the relationship between the line of promise and the nations. Still, God’s blessing remains on Isaac and Abimelech recognizes this, hence his desire to establish a covenant with him. In the end the covenant is established and the two parties depart “in peace.” The account closes with the fourth and final well digging account. Again there is no mention of quarreling and so the harmony of the covenant seems to have overcome the strife of the wells.

Just as Cain’s sin was worse than the sin of his father, and the results of his sin led him further from God’s presence, so now Isaac’s sin is worse than his father’s and the results are worse as well. In the end it is God who gives the blessing and God has decided to continue to bless the line of promise, and the nations through it, but this second layer in the Jacob narrative has opened up doubts about the righteousness of the seed and its ability to serve as a conduit of blessing to the nations. And yet Isaac is not the main character of this narrative. It is precisely because he is not Abraham or Jacob that he serves best in this role of pointing in the direction that the narrative is going to take. Isaac’s narrative gives us a foreshadowing of what could potentially take place in the line of the seed. Unfortunately, in the companion layer of the chiastic structure, the reaction of Jacob’s sons to the rape of Dinah, we find that indeed the worst comes to pass.

Boase has argued that the primary role of Isaac is “as the one through whom the promise would pass.” This conclusion arises from her observations that Isaac rests in the shadows of the two more dominant patriarchs Abraham and Jacob and yet he serves to
connect the one to the other. These observations are crucial to our reading of the text. To a large degree she is in line with Fokkelman, who sees Gen 26 “as a foil to the next chapter in which the father solemnly transmits the blessing.” But instead of being merely a conduit for the promise, Isaac becomes the conduit for all things Abraham. What was true of Abraham should also be true of Jacob. God’s covenant is passed on from Abraham through Isaac along with the expectations of righteousness. But then, like Abraham, Isaac’s righteousness is brought into question as a result of the wife-sister account and his lack of righteousness leads to strained relations with the nations.

Jacob Steals the Blessing of Isaac

With the C level of the chiastic structure we now return to Esau and Jacob and the plot involving Jacob’s becoming the dominant brother. Since the interpretation of this passage is relatively uncontroversial, we will make only a few comments that will connect us to the next episode.

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44 Elizabeth Boase, “Life in the Shadows: The Role and Function of Isaac in Genesis—Synchronic and Diachronic Readings,” VT 51, no. 3 (July 2001): 322. She makes several valid observations concerning Isaac including the fact that he is frequently a passive character such as in Gen 22 (317), he is often defined in terms of his relationship to Abraham or Jacob (315), and that when he does act his actions mirror Abraham’s (313). Likewise Fokkelman notes that “nowhere is he [Isaac] worth narration for his own sake, and his experiences are not individual but typical,” Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 113. However, nowhere in her study does she treat Isaac in the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת separately from Isaac in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת. I would argue that his character serves different purposes in each of these narratives. As a result, she also does not recognize his role in the larger Genesis plot, as I am trying to show here.

45 Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 115.

46 And with Walton, “The reiteration of the covenant promises in 26:3–5 concludes on the aspect that was first introduced to the covenant clauses in 22:18, the obedience of Abraham. This emphasis on obedience to God’s commands stands in stark contrast to the questionable conduct of Jacob that ended chapter 25. The narrator thereby places Jacob’s character flaws and Yahweh’s covenant expectations in juxtaposition to one another.” Walton, Genesis, 559.

47 There have been some recent attempts at rereading this text. For example Zucker suggests Rebekah and Isaac worked together to deceive Jacob into thinking he was stealing the blessing. This reading is entirely unsustainable in the larger context and even within the immediate details of the text given by the
This episode revives the motif of rivalry between brothers, harkening back to Cain and Abel. The deception of Rebekah and Jacob results in Jacob receiving the blessing that Isaac meant to give Esau and Esau receives a sort of anti-blessing that reminds us of the curses from Gen 3 and 4 (Gen 27:39). Not only does Esau’s “blessing” bring to mind the fate of Cain, but now his intent to kill Jacob also brings Cain to mind and the fact that the seed of promise is in jeopardy. Once again, Rebekah steps in grammatically between her older and her younger son (Gen 27:42, cf. 27:15) and sends Jacob to her brother Laban in Haran just as Abraham had sent to Haran for a wife for Isaac. Her final statement to Jacob, “why should I lose two of you in one day” reinforces the tension, reminding us that the seed is in jeopardy.

Thus the plot has developed along conflicting lines toward resolution. The most immediate goal of the plot, that Jacob will usurp the position of his older brother, seems to be coming to pass. At the same time however, his life is in danger and he is forced to leave the land, thus introducing a threat to successful resolution. However, we cannot help but notice Jacob’s complicity in his own demise. We have seen that the unrighteousness of the line not of promise has threatened the survival of the seed. But here Jacob’s own deceptive narrator. The narrator records, for example, that Isaac did not recognize Jacob (Gen 27:23). Zucker’s reading flatly contradicts the narrator’s assessment of Isaac’s actions and conclusions. David J. Zucker, “The Deceiver Deceived: Rereading Genesis 27,” JBQ 39, no. 1 (2011): 46–58.


49 Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 212. “[Esau] is potentially a second Cain.”

50 The seed is in jeopardy whether we read with Mathews, who finds it more likely that this text refers to Esau and Jacob, or with Walton (and others) who thinks the text refers to Isaac and Jacob, Walton, Genesis, 556; Mathews, Genesis 11:27–50:26, 437.
actions have brought on Esau’s ire. In the context of a narrative that has so far confirmed our interest in the righteousness of the seed, this episode leads us to wonder about Jacob’s righteousness and how it will affect the progression of the narrative.

Jacob at Bethel

Encounters with YHWH mark significant moments in the lives of the patriarchs and so Jacob’s first encounter with YHWH at Bethel is an important text. Indeed, this episode reinforces both strands of plot that we are following and prepares us for an important shift in the narrative as we begin the series of texts that describe his sojourn in Haran. Since the full significance of this encounter comes to bear in the second half of the chiastic structure, for now we will point out important features of the text that will come into play in the second half and also make note of how this episode interacts with the thematic progression of Genesis and the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת.

First, taking a cue from Fokkelman we note the prominence of “the place” in this passage. The introduction to the narrative notes that Jacob left from Beersheba, reminding us of its prominence in Gen 26. Though we do not find out until 28:19, the place he arrives at is Bethel. Both of these locations were important in the Abraham narrative, especially as important locations in the relationship between God and Abraham. Bethel will come in to play again in Gen 35, at the very end of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת.

51 Mathews’ commentary on this passage expounds on Jacob’s deceit. Mathews, Genesis 11:27–50:26, 430.

52 “Jacob’s character flaws are considered just as much a threat to the covenant as the antagonism that threatens his very survival.” Walton, Genesis, 557.

53 Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 49.

54 Wenham also notes a connection between this passage and the Gen 13 Bethel passage in terms of the wording of the promise. Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 223.
Next we make note of the fact that God is here confirming the Abrahamic covenant with Jacob (Gen 28:13-15). This is yet another indication that Jacob has taken the place of Esau in the line of promise and indicates we are moving forward in the Isaac plot. Yet Jacob is leaving the very land that YHWH is promising to give him thus introducing a note of tension even while moving the plot toward resolution. God’s promise to Jacob in 28:15 (אנכי שמרתיך벨 אשריתךהו והשברתך אלהים היאה) only reinforces the tension because it reminds us what must happen in order for Jacob to continue in the line of promise and focuses our attention specifically on his return to the land. This might also be an appropriate place to point out that the tension over whether Jacob returns is not so important as how he returns. As descendants of Jacob, the original readers of this text were fully aware that Jacob would end up in the line of promise. What is more important for them, and us, is how Jacob ended up in the line of promise.

A number of authors believe the text indicates that Jacob is not fully developed in his relationship to YHWH. These authors say that unlike Abraham, who trusts God for what God has not yet done (Gen 15:6), Jacob seems willing to commit only after YHWH comes through with the blessing (Gen 28:20-22). But the text makes neither a

55 Walton believes “the text is putting Jacob in the position of an outsider with regard to the faith, even though he is destined to assume a prominent role in the history of the covenant.” Walton, Genesis, 574. Hamilton believes it is significant that Jacob is the only of the patriarchs to express fear when he receives a vision from God. Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50 (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 242. In the play between the words YHWH and Elohim in 28:12-13 Fokkelman finds impetus to raise the question, “will this Yhwh, who is the God of the grandfather and the father also be the God of the son?” He then asserts that in “the course of the story Yhwh and Jacob will both show their views and positions in the mutual relationship.” Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis, 56.

56 Walton rightly points out that, “we do not have the liberty to read Jacob’s vow against the background of demonstrated piety and commitment. If we read it in light of what we have seen of Jacob thus far, it looks suspiciously like another bargain. Jacob is in a “wait-and-see” mode and wants to have his benefits up front before he delivers on anything.” Walton, Genesis, 573. Cf. Victor H. Matthews and Frances Mims, “Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation,” PRSt 12, no. 3 (1985): 188.
positive nor negative evaluation of Jacob. The preceding texts have inclined us to read his actions with suspicion and the author may be leaving a degree of ambiguity in order to invite the reader to pay close attention to Jacob’s character, especially since intertextual connections have encouraged us to read Isaac’s line in light of Abraham.

Jacob Marries Leah and Rachel: The Beginning of the Betrothal Type-Scene

The E level narrative of Jacob’s arrival in Haran and his marriage to Leah and Rachel begins on an ominous note. Jacob now finds himself in the land of the “sons of the east.” In the parlance of Genesis, he has become a wanderer in the land of Cain’s children, outside the land associated with the presence and blessing of God. God has promised to be with him, but Jacob must certainly find his way back from this place.  

Once again the narrative plays on continuity and discontinuity with a narrative from the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת. In this case we can compare Jacob’s travels to Haran in Gen 29:1-30 with Gen 24, the narrative of Abraham’s servant’s quest to find a wife for Isaac. The two texts are quite different but certain aspects draw them into juxtaposition. Similar to Gen 24, Jacob’s first stop when he arrives in Haran is at a well where shepherds water their flocks. As in Gen 24, Jacob meets the daughter of his father’s family and she then escorts him to meet them. This is enough similarity in important details of the text that our attention turns to making further comparisons, which turn up equally significant differences.

We discover the most interesting difference when we notice the prominence of חְֶּסֶד in the Abraham narrative and its absence in the Jacob narrative. The word itself is

59 Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 463. But Mathews in the end sees more similarity in the stories. “The point in telling the Jacob-Rachel encounter similar to the servant-Rebekah meeting was to infer
not what is important, however, because it is only one aspect of the text that points to the way in which the wife is gained. In the Abraham narrative YHWH is the one who is responsible for assuring the success of the servant’s task of finding a proper marriage partner for Isaac. The fact that the servant’s journey is a success is three times placed in the context of YHWH showing בר סדר to Abraham (Gen 24:12, 14, 27; cf. Gen 24:49). The servant offers gifts and he departs for his master’s land the next day (Gen 24:54-56). In the Jacob narrative, rather than YHWH’s רָצִית, it is Jacob’s fourteen years of labor that earns him the wife he met at the well. This is a significant difference that should be noticed because it picks up on the struggle motif that has already come up in the text as Jacob has struggled with Esau to gain both his birthright and the blessing. As Mathew’s puts it, “Abraham’s servant had discovered Rebekah’s identity, he worshiped the Lord (24:24,26) but here Jacob flexed his muscle, proving his capacity to serve Laban’s house.”60 Whereas the servant responded to YHWH’s בר סדר with thankfulness to YHWH, Jacob responds by taking the situation into his own hands. This scene reveals something important about Jacob’s quiddity of being. As Jacob struggled with Esau, he will now struggle with Laban. This motif will continue to grow in importance as the narrative continues.

With this one observation we see how this narrative contributes to the two levels of plot. In terms of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת it plays on the struggle motif from the oracle. Jacob indeed is struggling to gain the upper hand and achieve the blessing that God has promised to him. In terms of the Genesis plot, we wonder about Jacob’s righteousness.

60 Ibid.
Instead of calling on the name of YHWH as Abraham did and as we could have expected him to do in the previous narrative layer, Jacob is counting on his own struggles and efforts to achieve blessing. This appears to be a central concern of the next two, central layers of the chiastic structure.

Rachel and Leah Struggle for Sons

The oracle of Gen 25:23 introduced a rivalry motif that we have argued picks up on the rivalry motif introduced in the Cain and Abel narrative.\(^{61}\) This same motif has now been picked up between Leah and Rachel in the first F layer of the chiastic structure. In Gen 29:16-18 Rachel and Leah are introduced side by side and the introduction ends with a statement describing Jacob’s love for Leah. This is again similar to the introduction of Cain and Abel in Gen 4:4-5 and Esau and Jacob in Gen 25:28. But the rivalry motif also bears similarities to the relationship between Sarah and Hagar simply by virtue of the barrenness of Rachel, antagonism between mothers, and the involvement of maidservants for the purpose of overcoming barrenness.\(^{62}\) This would indicate that the rivalry motif plays an important role in the report of the birth of Jacob’s first twelve children in Gen 29:31-30:24.\(^{63}\)

The structure of the text supports this observation. The text begins when YHWH sees that Leah is hated and opens her womb and then, with a disjunctive clause,

\(^{61}\)“In almost every case the authors use conflict to contrast the characters: Jacob with Esau, Jacob with Laban, and Leah with Rachel.” Matthews and Mims, “Jacob the trickster and heir of the covenant,” 190.

\(^{62}\)Barrenness is important to the narrative because it points to ultimate dependence upon YHWH for the blessing. Perry has referred to this as a device “God uses in order to increase his perceptibility.” Perry, “Counter-stories in the Bible,” 285. The barren wife motif, therefore emphasizes one of the main purposes of this text, that is to show the degree to which the protagonists do (or do not) rely upon YHWH for the blessing.

reports that Rachel is barren. Immediately after this statement we begin a stereotypical report of the births of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. The report for each child is structured in a remarkably similar way. The first three clauses of each birth report start with the same three wayyiqtol verbs: וַתְַּהַר, וַתְֵּלֶד, and וַתְֹּאמֶר (three times) or וַתִּקְר ְ א (once, in the first instance). This stereotypical method of recording the births serves to highlight the differences in each record, which lie in the specifics of the naming. Ross-Burstell points out that the naming justifications serve to highlight Leah’s struggle to be loved by her husband and Rachel’s struggle to have children.64

From the beginning, YHWH is clearly in control of who is having children and when (29:31). What is more, he often acts counter to the will or desire of the people involved. So right from the beginning YHWH sees that Leah is hated and so he opens her womb and not Rachel’s. In this case, YHWH acts counter to Jacob.

After YHWH opens Leah’s womb four sons are born to her in rapid succession and then, with one abrupt wayyiqtol clause she ceases having children (29:35 וַתַּעֲמֹדְמִלְֶּד). Next, not YHWH but Rachel sees and what she sees is that she is not having children. Just as YHWH’s seeing was followed by his intervention, now Rachel’s seeing is followed by her own intervention. This would be the first hint that the text sees her operating on her own terms instead of trusting in YHWH. Next she says to Jacob, “Give [הָבֶּה] me children—or if not I am dead!” Poignantly and ironically, Jacob recognizes that he is in no position to give her children, that it is God who opens the womb. By revealing Rachel’s state of mind, this short side commentary is important and we should read what she does next in the light of what she has said to Jacob. Clearly, just like Abram and Sarai, Rachel is scheming on her own to achieve the blessing she desires by offering her maidservant in an

effort to build her family. Her scheming appears to work since the verb sequence we noted previously continues with the birth of two additional sons by Bilhah (29:5-8). And yet we cannot help but note that YHWH has still not seen Rachel and that YHWH is not the one who opens Bilhah’s womb. Rather, as Rachel herself proclaims, it has been by Rachel’s own wrestlings with Leah (and with God?) that she has achieved the birth of these two sons (נַפְתּוּלֵיְאֱלֹהִים נִפְתַּלְתִּיְעִם נִפְתַּלְתִּיְגַם לְתִּי).

Next Leah also sees, as God and Rachel before her, and now she intervenes by following the example of Rachel. Leah gives her own maidservant (30:9-13) and two more sons are born. The story makes this appear as an act of tit for tat. But is it possible that the text also hints at a breakdown in the narrative? Now, instead of the pattern that has been established as stereotypical for the birth of the sons (וַתְַהֲר, וַתְֵלֶד, וַתְֵּאמֶר) we find a slight but possibly significant variation where the three wayyiqtolts are דְּאָמַר, לְד, וַתִּקְרָא (30:10-13). In other words, the conception part of the formula is missing almost as if to confirm that it is not YHWH who opened this womb. In a text where we have eleven instances of the birth of a son being reported and where nine of the instances closely follow a stereotypical pattern, these two birth reports diverge from the norm (also note the brevity of the naming formula). It may be possible that such a breakdown in the narrative is an indication that we are coming to the low point in the story. Indeed, in what follows we find a low point that instigates a shift back toward YHWH’s intervention.

The narrative continues in Gen 30:14 with the short narrative of Reuben’s mandrakes. Rachel intends to use the fertility potential of the mandrakes as a way of

obtaining children. This is the height of Rachel’s hopelessness and struggle (clearly her maidservant’s children have not been the sufficient appeasement she sought). During the scheming of the wives, YHWH has been absent, but now he intervenes once again at cross-purposes with human scheming. Just as YHWH saw at the beginning, now he hears (30:17) and it is clearly this that leads to Leah’s conception of two more sons and one daughter. YHWH’s intervention once again restores the stereotypical narrative structure of the birth report with two more sons born to Leah. The text then reports the birth of Dinah almost certainly in preparation for the Gen 34 structural layer. After this short aside, and without any intervention on the part of any human actor in the narrative, the text reports that God remembers Rachel. Naturally, Joseph’s birth report follows the expected structure.66

Being at the center of the narrative structure, we might expect this section to sharpen our focus on an important aspect of the text. Indeed, this pericope picks up on the struggle motif that has been prevalent throughout the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת and it brings it center stage. One of the more important aspects of the blessing is the continuation and multiplication of the seed. This chapter is therefore about the blessing. But the struggle motif is not between Jacob and Esau or any other outside influence. The struggle has been internalized and is taking place within Jacob’s own family.67 Leah and Rachel are like Esau and Jacob, struggling between one another and ultimately seeking the blessing of YHWH. Ultimately, it is somewhat ironic that in the context of Genesis and the context of the Esau and Jacob narrative, it is the older who seems to maintain the upper hand. Does this say anything about the narrative going forward?

66It may also be interesting that the narrative begins by using יְהוָה but when Rachel intervenes in Gen 30:1 the text switches to אלהים. It remains with אלהים until Rachel names Joseph in 30:24. This could be another indication of the way the narrative “breaks down” but is eventually restored by the intervention of Yahweh.

Perhaps the most noteworthy characteristic of this text, however, is the fact that YHWH and the human actors are working at cross purposes. YHWH does bless Leah and Rachel, and he does multiply the promised seed, but the text makes it clear that he does it independent of human effort and counter to human intention and desire. This is arguably the most important feature of this text because it brings into sharp focus a motif that will come to dominate not only the rest of the Jacob narrative but the rest of the book. It is worth quoting Walton at length,

this interplay of the self-contained Novelle and the wider Jacob story, as well as the variety of material contained within one simple story line, reflects the wider aspect of biblical narrative, where at each stage we deal with individuals and their stories piecemeal, each with a plot and integrity of its own. But then each is part of a whole, each story part of the main story, and the complex web of intertextuality invites the reader to see everything together.68

In this case, Rachel and Leah become paradigmatic for Jacob. They struggle on their own while YHWH operates independent of their struggles and intentions to carry out his plan. To read the Rachel and Leah episode together with the rest of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת strand is to see Rachel and Leah as the internalization of self-sufficiency within the line of the seed. In the next, parallel layer we will see Jacob behaving in accord with the paradigm set by Rachel and Leah.

**Jacob Struggles for Blessing**

The second central, or F layer begins with Jacob expressing his desire to return to Canaan (Gen 30:25). Even though his subsequent agreement with Laban defers its fulfillment, this initial statement engages the tension of the plot because it reminds us that he

must return in order to achieve resolution of the plot. In Gen 28:15 God specifically said he would be with him and return him to the land. Ever since then the text has emphasized both the fact that God has been with Jacob but also that Jacob (and his family) has not always recognized this and has continued struggling on his own.

This episode continues the struggle motif. Park has argued that we should see a motif of what she refers to as “trickery-involving-sight” in this narrative. The logic of Jacob’s efforts to increase his flocks is that they will produce according to what they saw. The irony is that it is really the unseen God who transforms the flock from Laban’s to Jacob’s. She argues that even though the word “to see” never occurs in the text, the story draws on the prevalence of the sight motif throughout the Jacob narrative. While the motif, if truly there, would be quite subtle indeed, the characteristic of the text that she points out is much stronger if read in conjunction with the accompanying F layer. In that case we see that just as Rachel and Leah struggled for blessing but YHWH blessed quite apart from their efforts, so in this case we have no reason to believe that Jacob’s efforts are of any real


70 Anderson makes several interpretive missteps at this point in order to support his idea that God is complicit in the trickery of Jacob toward Laban. As one example, he supposes that God takes part in the trickery of Laban because Laban is trying to keep the blessing (which he receives through Jacob) for himself. Anderson, “Jacob, Laban, and a Divine Trickster?” 18. But just as Jacob’s wives engaged in activity that God did not approve yet he blessed them anyway, so the same could be true of Jacob. This seems likely given the relationship between the two texts.
influence on the outcome.\textsuperscript{71} More than anything, they simply show, again like Rachel and Leah, that Jacob was not quite ready to trust in God’s promise to take care of the blessing.\textsuperscript{72}

Besides being parallel in the motif of struggle, these two sections also display God’s faithfulness to Jacob because each demonstrates that God is with Jacob and providing for his family according to his promise in Gen 28:15. The Leah and Rachel layer show that God is proving the seed and the Jacob layer that God is present with him to bring blessing.

This episode also interacts with the motif of the seed’s dealings with the surrounding nations. When Laban responds to Jacob’s desire to leave he says he has discovered that YHWH has blessed him on account of Jacob (Gen 30:27; cf. 20:17 and 21:22).\textsuperscript{73} In conjunction with this the text ends with a report of how Jacob’s wealth has increased at Laban’s expense (Gen 30:43; cf. 12:16, 20:14, and 26:13-14). These two statements create a connection to Abraham and Isaac’s wife-sister stories and their interactions with Abimelech (cf. Gen 12:16, 20:14, 21:22, 26:12-14, and 26:28). This aspect of the text sets the stage for the next episode.

\textsuperscript{71}Hamilton, \textit{The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50}, 280. “Jacob’s rods function much as do Rachel’s mandrakes. It is not the mandrakes that produce fertility, and it is not Jacob’s white rods that produce the right kind of offspring.” Joshua Backon, “Jacob and the Spotted Sheep: The Role of Prenatal Nutrition on Epigenetics of Fur Color,” \textit{JBQ} 36 (2008): 263–65.

\textsuperscript{72}It is a stretch to say that in the language of Jacob’s vow to Laban in 30:31 we see a parallel to his vow to Yahweh in 28:20-22. We find very little in common between these two statements other than the fact that they are vows and therefore that by this allusion “Jacob declares that he will trust in the Lord alone to provide for him, as God had promised at Bethel.” Mathews, \textit{Genesis 11:27–50:26}, 498. Walton also makes note of this fact and comes closer to Mathew’s interpretation than my own, Walton, \textit{Thou Traveller Unknown}, 178.

\textsuperscript{73}In Gen 21:22 Abimelech perceives that God is with Abraham and wants to create a covenant with him in order to partake in the blessing (21:23).
The first E layer of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת began the narrative of Jacob in Haran with the betrothal type-scene that we found to be parallel to Gen 24, this second E layer brings that betrothal scene, and the narrative of Jacob in Haran to its conclusion. The fact that this narrative encompasses four structural layers and twenty years of Jacob’s service to Laban contrasts starkly with the one night that Abraham’s servant spent with the family of Laban. If we continue along the lines of such a comparison then we also notice that Gen 24 was a sixty seven verse testimony to God’s חְֶּּסְֶּדְוְֶּאֱמְֶּת (Gen 24:49, cf. Gen 24:12, 14) to Abraham, whereas Gen 31 is a fifty five verse rehearsal of Jacob’s extrication from beneath the heavy hand of his uncle.  

As noted in the previous layer, the seed’s interactions with the nations is rising to the surface in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת. First, as I will argue more fully in the second B layer the two B layers together make the seed’s relations to the nations a prominent motif that engulfs and influences our understanding of the Jacob narrative. Second, there are intertextual links in Gen 31 (as there were in the previous layer) that connect us to the wife-sister stories and the related Abimelech narratives. This layer begins on a note of growing animosity between Jacob and Laban’s line. Also, I think it is not a minor point that in this text we find the fourth instance in the patriarchal narratives of the occurrence of a phrase similar to מֶּהְע שְִית. The other three occur in the context of the wife-sister stories (31:26, cf. 12:18, 20:8, 26:10, in Gen 1-11 see 3:13, 4:10). And finally, this whole narrative section is essentially the settling of a dispute between Laban and Jacob which is resolved through the establishment of a covenant. In this way, this text is like the well narratives (the only covenant texts outside

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74 Genesis 24 is the longest and Gen 31 the third longest chapter in the book of Genesis.
covenants with God are Gen 21, 26, and 31). If, as I have argued, one of the primary purposes of the wife-sister stories (and the associated well narratives) is to engage with the motif of the relations between the line of promise and the line not of promise, then it seems likely that this section also engages that motif. In the wife-sister stories we saw that relations become increasingly strained as we move from one to the next. This narrative continues that trajectory.

This text is presented as a sort of judgment scene where Jacob is being accused of wrongdoing. These allegations are reasoned through and investigated by the text in a way that presents an ambiguous picture of Jacob and his accuser, Laban. Genesis 31:19 starts with a disjunctive clause in which the action begins when Rachel steals (גנב) her father’s teraphim. The very next wayyiqtol verb is the same as the first, but now we read that Jacob has ‘stolen the heart’ of Laban the Amorite (an idiom using the verb גנה). We cannot help but observe the close proximity of these two ‘thefts’ as well as the fact that from here on out they take over the flow of the narrative. This opens the possibility that Jacob’s

75 Spanier calls this “a part of Rachel’s “continuing struggle for primacy within Jacob’s household.” Ktziah Spanier, “Rachel’s Theft of the Teraphim: Her Struggle for Family Primacy,” VT 42 (1992): 405. While it might be possible to agree with this point, the theft does not appear to have any real role in the narrative other than as a foil for Jacob’s theft of Laban’s heart, as I argue here. Therefore I cannot agree that it is also a “part of the original basis for the claim of the house of Joseph to national leadership.” Spanier, “Rachel’s Theft of the Teraphim,” 410.

76 “They are livestock he has acquired (רָּאָש) legitimately, says the narrator.” It may be true that Jacob’s goods are acquired legitimately, but the narrator’s comment here is interesting because there is no way we can understand Rachel’s acquisition of Laban’s gods as legitimate. The fact that these two thefts are brought into association is important. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50, 291.

77 The verb גנה appears nine times in Genesis but only one time outside this chapter (though still in the Jacob narrative, Gen 30:33). Six times the verb appears in reference to Laban’s accusations and twice it occurs in Jacob’s defense but not related specifically to either of Laban’s accusations. It may be argued that the prevalence of the verb in this chapter also supports the idea that these two thefts rule the narrative.
act has been cast in the mold of Rachel’s. Since Rachel’s can scarcely be seen in a positive light, Jacob’s own theft begins to look doubtful as well.\textsuperscript{78}

The narrative then recounts Jacob’s flight from Haran. After three days Laban learns of this and pursues him. When he overtakes Jacob after seven days the dispute is set up with two consecutive disjunctive \textit{waw} clauses.

The juxtaposition of Jacob and Laban sets the stage for the faceoff.\textsuperscript{79} Laban begins with a phrase that has become familiar to us in the context of these interactions between the line of promise and the nations, מֶּּהְע שְִית (12:18, 20:9, 26:10; cf. 3:13, 4:10). Then Laban’s very next statement accuses Jacob using exactly the same phrase the narrator used to describe what Jacob has done, תִּגְנֹבְאֶּת־לְב בְִי.\textsuperscript{80} Since this accusation takes up most of Laban’s confrontation it appears to be his major concern. In addition to addressing Jacob with regard

\textsuperscript{78}Fuchs argues unconvincingly that Rachel’s theft picks up on the \textit{lex talionis} theme in the Jacob narrative so that her theft is recompense for Laban’s earlier trickery. In this way, by placing Jacob’s theft in juxtaposition to Rachel’s, Jacob’s is shown to be righteous and Jacob is reformed. Esther Fuchs, “‘For I Have the Way of Women’: Deception, Gender, and Ideology in Biblical Narrative,” \textit{Semeia} 42 (1988): 74. As I argue here, I believe the context of the plot and intertextual relationships require a different reading of both deeds. Cf. Michael A. Fishbane, \textit{Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts} (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 55. It is more likely that Walton is correct, cf. Walton, \textit{Genesis}, 594. Rachel’s second wrong does not make a right and the stealing of her father’s gods cannot be seen in a positive light as Fuchs suggests.

\textsuperscript{79}Mabee argues that based on Laban’s accusations Jacob is in danger of having broken his contractual agreement, explaining that when “Jacob obtained the hand of Laban’s daughters there was clearly no understanding that he could freely depart from his father-in-law’s household at his own discretion.” Charles Mabee, “Jacob and Laban: The Structure of Judicial Proceedings (Genesis 31:25-42),” \textit{VT} 30 (1980): 195.

\textsuperscript{80}On the surface, we as readers know that both of Laban’s accusations are true because Laban has restated them as the narrator has presented them. Jacob must then show that he is innocent on both counts. Interestingly, the narrator’s presentation (which of itself is important) is somewhat muddled by the fact that we know the details of Laban’s accusation to be false, because the wives have come of their own free will. Ibid., 197. Therefore the accusation that Jacob has ‘stolen Laban’s heart’ is not clearly true, and yet the second, that someone in Jacob’s house has stolen Laban’s gods, is true.
to stealing his heart, Laban ends his confrontation by accusing Jacob of stealing his gods (31:30). In beginning the dispute therefore, Laban has brought up the two issues that were mentioned in 31:19-20. Jacob will in turn need to respond and so the text in 31:19-20, when these two ‘thefts’ are first mentioned, does indeed come to be dominated by these two issues in the dispute between Jacob and Laban.

In Gen 31:31-32 Jacob addresses Laban’s accusations by responding briefly to the first and then in more length to the second. Since he believes himself innocent with respect to the stealing of the gods, it is likely easier for him to defend himself and so he bases his challenge to Laban on the accusation of the theft of the gods, basically inviting Laban to search for the gods and prove his guilt. The narrative immediately moves on to recount that Laban searches for but, due to Rachel’s cunning rather than her innocence, does not find his stolen gods.

Next, in a flurry of four successive and succinct wayyiqtol clauses Jacob’s ire is raised and he responds to Laban in a lengthy diatribe against his father-in-law (31:36-42). Jacob is now able to use the unjust accusations of the stolen gods as a basis for his response to having stolen Laban’s heart. If he has been unjustly accused of the second charge, surely he has been unjustly accused of the first as well. That seems to be the logic of his approach.

But this is also the logic of the narrator’s approach, with a twist. From Jacob’s perspective, since he is innocent of stealing the gods, he should be absolved of trickery. The two go hand in hand in Jacob’s response to Laban. But the narrator has told us what Jacob does not know—that in fact Rachel has stolen the gods. Jacob’s logic therefore tends to turn the reader against him. The reader knows that Jacob’s house is guilty of the theft of the gods and, now using Jacob’s logic, if his house is guilty on the second count, is it not guilty on the first as well?

In the end, Laban will not give in to Jacob’s view of the affair and ends with one final assertion that (הַבָּנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶלָּא אַתּ הְרֹאֶּלִי—the daughters of Israel are not yours).
31:43). It appears this is a real dispute with neither side willing to give ground on their view of justice, and yet Laban calls for the making of a treaty, probably due to the dream in which YHWH instructed him not to do anything to Jacob. Based on his statements in the context of the covenant he certainly appears reluctant to give any ground to Jacob and quite willing to do him harm at the first opportunity.

I do not want to argue that Jacob is guilty of having stolen Laban’s daughters and grandchildren and flocks. The narrative itself seems to acquit him on this charge (Jacob’s wives go willingly). However, I do want to argue that the author has not designed this narrative in such a way as to absolve Jacob of all guilt. First, as I argued above, he at the very least clouds Jacob’s innocence with regard to his dealings with Laban. Even if he has not stolen the flocks and wives, he has ‘stolen’ Laban’s heart.

Second, Jacob’s defense against the accusation of stealing Laban’s daughters and flocks may be a sufficient defense against that particular crime, but it is a confession of another, the one of which the author has been accusing him all along. That is, Jacob confesses that he has been struggling of his own strength and cunning to gain the blessing rather than calling on the name of YHWH. In four full verses Jacob carries on about the length of his service with Laban (31:38, 41) and the extent of his expense and toil (31:39-40). It is not until the end that he credits God with having defended him. But even then God’s help is prefaced upon his having seen Jacob’s affliction and toil (אֶת־עַיִּי נְיִּיְוְאֶּת־יְגִיעְַכַפַיְר אֱלֹהִיםְוַיוֹכַח אֱלֹהִים יְיָכָח אֱלֹהִים יְיָכָח אֱלֹהִים יְיָכָח 31:42). For Jacob, even God’s help has come because of his struggling.

By the end of this narrative section the covenant between Laban and Jacob has been established but there is still a palpable tension between them. Jacob has escaped from Haran with his family and new wealth but he still faces questions about his righteousness and

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questions about how he will return to his land. After all, his mother has not let him know that
Esau’s anger has subsided and yet he is on his way back to his father’s land (Gen 27:45).

Jacob Struggles with God

In this next section, the text continues to invite us to evaluate Jacob’s attitude
towards God. As a structural layer it is parallel to Jacob’s first encounter with YHWH at
Bethel. We might expect another encounter with God at Bethel but this is delayed until the
very last narrative section of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת. We might also expect, as Jacob is returning to
the land of his fathers, having been blessed by YHWH, that he might fulfill the vow he took
in Gen 28:20-22. But he does not do this either. Indeed, though Jacob has been enriched by
his stay with Laban, he has not yet made it back safely to the land of his fathers. For some
reason, the author has elected not to style the narrative along these lines of our expectations
and we should keep this in mind as we interpret the story.82

Despite the fact that our structural expectations are not fulfilled, it is
interesting that a significant portion of this text is about Jacob’s second encounter with God
as if to tease our expectations. We also find here Jacob’s most significant expression of faith
in the entire narrative (he begins his prayer with וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֱלֹהֵיָא בִּיְאַבְרֹהֶם
וֵאלֹהֵיָא בִּיְיִצְחָק).83 Is it possible that in this chapter we have the change of heart that we have been
looking for in Jacob?84

82 Simpson rightly points out that exegetes who find a chiastic structure in the Isaac
תּוֹלְדוֹת do not find any relation between Gen 32 and 28 even though these are parallel layers in the chiasm. In my
analysis I do find significance in relating these texts because we expect Gen 32 to pick up on the previous
Bethel incident but it does not, thus deferring the resolution we expect and thus increasing the tension of the
narrative. Timothy Lee Simpson, “An Analysis of Gen 32:23-33 as a Unit and as Placed Within the Jacob
Cycle” (Ph.D. diss., Deerfield, IL: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1999), 196.

83 Walton takes a skeptical view of Jacob’s prayer. He may be correct in doing so but many of
the features of the text he doubts could be read as sincere. For example, Jacob does not call on Yahweh “my
God” instead it is the God of my father Abraham and the God of my father Isaac (32:10). He also says Jacob
sounds almost as if he is accusing God of not holding up his end of the bargain when he says basically, “you are
In the exposition of the parallel layer we noted a certain pattern according to which Abraham met YHWH at Bethel and called on his name (Gen 12:8
וַיִבֶן־שָׁםְמִזְבֵּחַ לְיהוֹוָה יֵכְרָא בְשֵם יְהוָ֑ה), then met YHWH and called on his name again at Bethel (Gen 13:4
וַיֵּכְרֵא אֶשֶׁר אַבְרָאֵם בְּשֵם יְהוָ֑ה), then met YHWH and called on his name at Beersheba (Gen 21:33
וַיִּטָּעֶשֶׂל בֵּרְשֵׁבֹת בְּשֵם יְהוָ֑ה). This pattern gets taken up by Isaac and Jacob in reverse order in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת as Isaac meets God at Beersheba (Gen 26) and then Jacob meets God at Bethel (28:10-22) and then again at Bethel (Gen 35). Also, to pick up the pattern, just as in the three cases of Abraham, the narrator reports that Isaac calls on the name of YHWH in Gen 26. The narrator does not, however, report in either instance at Bethel, that Jacob calls on the name of YHWH. Even in this text the narrator does not report that Jacob called on the name of YHWH, he relates the incident when Jacob called on the name of YHWH. There is a difference. In the first case, by making the statement that Abraham or Isaac called on the name of YHWH, the narrator not only reports the deed but he presents his evaluation of the motivations behind the deed. Abraham and Isaac called on the name of YHWH—they expressed their trust in YHWH. But in the case of Jacob, the narrator has merely reported the incident and leaves it up to us to evaluate its genuineness. In Hebrew narrative it is quite often enough to report the incident and we should then evaluate the character through his actions. But here I will argue that we must evaluate Jacob’s actions not

the one that told me to return.” But it could just as easily be that Jacob is evoking the faithful God of the covenant to be faithful to Jacob now as he was faithful to his fathers in the past. It is notoriously difficult to read motivations behind a character’s statements. Instead of looking at the prayer, I will focus my attention on structural or literary aspects of the text. In these we see the author’s hand at work guiding our interpretation. Walton, Genesis, 604.

84 In reference to Jacob’s wrestling with ‘the man’ in Gen 32 Kodell notes that in “the scholarly consensus, the episode portrays an experience of the divine through which Jacob becomes a ‘changed person’ Jerome Kodell, “Jacob Wrestles with Esau (Gen 32:23-32),” BTB 10, no. 2 (1980): 65. He later says that the “story of Jacob in Genesis is a tale of transformation.” Kodell, “Jacob Wrestles with Esau,” 66.
merely on the fact that he calls on the name of YHWH because in this same pericope the author has elected to include other details of Jacob’s behavior that cast doubt on his sincerity. This fact alone is significant. The author could have isolated this encounter with God in such a way as to indicate a turning point in Jacob’s character. He has not done that. Instead, he has couched this encounter with God in Jacob’s meeting with Esau and it is this structural feature of the pericope that shapes our interpretation of Jacob’s prayer.

According to our divisions of the text, this pericope begins with an apparently unrelated report that when Jacob went on his way he was met by ‘messengers’ of God (מְלָּאֵיִים אֱלֹהִים) and that based on this encounter he named the place “double camp” (מְחַנֵּים). It is interesting that in the very next wayyiqtol clause Jacob then sends out messengers (מַלְאָכִים) and later in the text, based on their report, he divides his company into two camps (לִשְׁנֵיָּמַחְנָוֹת). I do not believe the juxtaposition is incidental. Jacob is on his way back to his father’s land at the instructions of YHWH who at the same time assured him that “I will be with you” (Gen 31:3). Jacob has also just parted from his father-in-law who had it within his power to harm Jacob but did not, due mainly to YHWH’s intervention (cf. 31:24, 29, 42). Now, two camps of YHWH’s angels have just met Jacob and Jacob has acknowledged this. Wenham points out that “two camps’ sounds military, and it may be that Jacob saw armies of angels.” 85 In other words, the author seems to have purposely given us enough detail to believe that Jacob should be aware of God’s presence to protect him and his intent to conduct him safely to the land of his fathers. And yet by using the same vocabulary found in 32:2-3 to describe Jacob’s subsequent actions he has ironically pointed out that even now Jacob will not trust in God’s messengers and two camps, but will send out his own messengers and create his own two camps. As if these will be more effective than God’s!

85 Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 281.
There are other aspects of this text that raise questions. Jacob refers to Esau as “my lord” (32:5), he does not give credit to YHWH for his wealth (32:6), and he shows great fear in an instance when God has promised to be with him (32:8). Such fear often points to a lack of faith or obedience (as in the wife-sister stories). The pericope begins, therefore, by casting doubt on Jacob’s attitude toward God and even if there is some degree of sincerity in his supplication, it is difficult to see this leading to a true change in his attitude toward God.

In fact, his prayer leads to no change at all. It seems the author has placed the prayer in the middle of Jacob’s preparations so that if the prayer is removed, the narrative flows just as well without it. Jacob’s actions after the prayer still seem in line with his continued struggle. We might ask, if Jacob has really just called on the name of YHWH, then where is the altar or the sacrifice? In that case the prayer is situated perfectly in the narrative because instead of giving gifts to YHWH, Jacob is giving gifts to Esau (32:14) while presenting himself to him as his servant (32:19). In doing this, Jacob’s hope is that by sending this gift ahead he will win Esau’s favor (32:21). Afterwards, when he meets him he believes Esau may see him favorably (32:22). In these closing verses describing Jacob’s preparations for meeting his brother we find an almost forced concentration of the word פֶּן, which makes us think it is being used deliberately, perhaps in an attempt to draw our attention to its prominent use at the close of the following narrative block after Jacob wrestles with the angel, when he declares that (32:31).

The climax of this short narrative takes place in the description of Jacob’s wrestling with “the man.” All through the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת we have been led further and further down the road of trying to understand Jacob’s character. Is he the righteous seed? Will he call on the name of YHWH? Does he truly recognize that behind the scenes it has always been God at work in protecting and blessing him? Part of understanding Jacob’s character has been in perceiving the presence and absence of God in the narrative. When God is not
mentioned in the narrative of Jacob’s flocks increasing, does Jacob recognize that it is ultimately God who blesses him? These two motifs: Jacob’s struggling for the blessing and God’s ephemeral presence come to a climax in this scene. The collision course is set when God reveals his two camps of angels to Jacob but he seemingly ignores this and continues with his own efforts to appease his brother. It comes to a head when God becomes very concrete, apparently taking on the form of a man who struggles physically with Jacob. But at no point will Jacob give up his own struggling. This scene represents concretely what has been happening in the narrative all along and so it serves as the metaphor through which we should perceive all of the Jacob narrative. Jacob is wrestling with the God who is there, but who remains somewhat hidden and behind the scenes. All of Jacob’s struggles with Laban and Esau have really been struggles with God and Jacob has refused to cease. We think that name changes are supposed to mark a new era in God’s working through a character, like when, in the life of Abraham, it marked the coming of the era when Abraham would become the father of nations. In the case of Jacob, however, the new name seems only to confirm that Jacob’s tendency to struggle is in the very quiddity of his being.

The ambiguity of Jacob’s character is now expressed in the ambiguity of his victory. The man sees that he cannot prevail (32:26) and Jacob seems able to set the terms of

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86 Simpson points to ambiguity as a key feature of this text. He notes especially lexical and grammatical ambiguity that leaves it unclear just how Jacob is wounded, and, at different stages in the text it is unclear who the narrator is referring to. Simpson, “An Analysis of Gen 32,” 98. These ambiguities add tension to the narrative but also contribute to the ambiguity of Jacob in the line of seed.

87 Walton, Thou Traveller Unknown, 92.

88 Simpson also makes the important and interesting observation that unlike the patriarchs before him, Jacob’s negative qualities are mentioned before he receives God’s promises. Therefore, “from the very beginning of the story of Jacob his negative characteristics are emphasized.” Simpson, “An Analysis of Gen 32,” 103. Later he speaks of the “heavy emphasis on the failings of Jacob.” Simpson, “An Analysis of Gen 32,” 107.
his release (32:27). And yet the man also demonstrates dominance over Jacob by touching the socket of his thigh to put it out of joint. He then changes Jacob’s name and refuses to tell him his own name, indicating that he has ultimate dominance over Jacob.\(^89\) It therefore seems that while he has power over Jacob, he does not exert his power over Jacob’s will to struggle.\(^90\) In the end, Jacob’s demand seems more the result of audacity than victory.

The naming itself is also significant. In the process of naming Jacob the man declares that Jacob has struggled with God and with men and has prevailed. It reminds us of Rachel’s struggling and prevailing in 30:8.\(^91\) But we argued in that narrative layer that Rachel’s struggles were not in line with God’s provision and they were meant to serve as a way of seeing Jacob’s struggles with Laban in the subsequent narrative. If we can relate Jacob’s struggles once more to the struggles of Rachel, then the naming only confirms what we have surmised all along—Jacob’s struggles have not been an expression of his trust in God, but his own vain attempts at achieving blessing. The narrative of Jacob’s struggling with God is only the concrete confirmation of Jacob’s character, and the mark left on his body becomes the indelible mark for all of Israel.\(^92\)

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\(^{89}\) Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown*, 86. Von Rad also makes the point that Jacob does not receive the blessing right away but only after the man’s demands are met and after Jacob’s request to know his name is refused. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 323.


\(^{91}\) In addition to Rachel’s wrestling paralleling Jacob’s wrestling, chs. 30 and 32 have another motif in common. Rachel wrestled and prevailed (yāḵōlî, “I emerged victorious”). Jacob also fought with Elohim, and he too prevailed (tūḵāl, 32:29 [Eng. 28]). The “man,” however, did not prevail (yāḵōl, 32:26 [Eng. 25]) against Jacob.” Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, 272.

\(^{92}\) Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown*, 95. Walton also makes the important point that the final statement of this narrative relates this narrative to all Israel. For Israel, Abraham is the distant patriarch from whom they descend. Abraham is the example of what their faith should be like. Jacob gives his new name to the tribes that come from him and so the distance of time is traversed by his name. Israel should be like their distant father Abraham, but in fact they are like their father Jacob and should see themselves in this text.
Jacob and Esau

Just as the threat of Esau was the impetus for Jacob’s exile from Canaan, so now Esau is the gatekeeper for his reentry. The narrative begins this second C layer by reminding us of Esau’s four hundred man escort and the very real threat he poses from the standpoint of the narrative. When Rachel instructed Jacob to leave she told him that she would send for him when Esau’s anger had subsided (27:44-45). Jacob is now returning but he has received no such message from his mother. It is therefore natural for us to assume that Esau poses a real threat to Jacob. As a result, this scene creates a point of heightened tension in the Isaac חנה plot. How will Jacob be able to return to his father’s land and so inherit the blessing? Based on the previous narrative we will not put out much hope that Jacob will become truly dependent upon God, but that question still remains open.

In the end, the threat of Esau’s revenge turns out to be anticlimactic. He poses no threat whatsoever. The tension built up by the narrator’s note of four hundred men turns out to be no tension at all and the reader is left to wonder whether it is because Esau has somehow mellowed over the years, because of Jacob’s gifts, or, most likely of all given the presence of the two camps of angels in 32:2-3, YHWH’s intervention. The plot of the Isaac חנה therefore seems to move on toward its quick resolution. And yet, regarding this tension, the narrative seems to raise disturbing questions on other counts. For example, in this text we find Jacob bowing to Esau seven times (33:3) and offering to Esau “my blessing” (33:11). Taking this narrative as the counterpart to Gen 27, when Jacob stole the blessing from Esau, this is a reversal. But is Jacob returning what he stole or is he reversing our expectations from the narrative? If the story will end properly we expect the older to serve the younger, but here it appears the younger is serving the older (33:5, 8). Is this the undoing of the plot?

By the end of this narrative we have, at a certain level, advanced toward resolution of our plot. Jacob is on his way back safely to the land of Canaan with nothing
apparently in the way of his taking up his role in the line of promise. And yet there are aspects of the narrative that disturb us. Jacob seems to have an ambivalent or at least capricious attitude toward God. He seems poised to become the next in the line of promise, but what of his righteousness? The next section may provide more clarity in this regard.

Jacob and the Nations

This narrative section is parallel to the Isaac narrative of Gen 26. Large chunks of the Jacob story deal specifically with Jacob’s relations or struggles with Esau and Laban. These two narrative sections, however, (Gen 26 and 34) diverge from these main narrative blocks. Yet despite the fact that these two sections are often considered narrative interruptions, I would argue that they create the framework according to which we are to read the entire Jacob narrative.

By eliding the C-F layers we might see the overall construction of the Jacob narrative as follows:

A 25:19-34  Introduction: the beginning of the Jacob plot

B 26:1-26:33  Narrative Aside 1: Jacob’s father and a foreign king

C-C’ 26:34-33:20  The middle of the Jacob plot

B’ 34:1-31  Narrative Aside 2: Jacob’s sons and a foreign king

A’ 35:1-29  Conclusion: the end of the Jacob plot

93 Jon Choi, “The Significance of Narrative Interruptions in the Patriarchal History” (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005).
In this outline we clearly see the supposed narrative interruptions come immediately after the introduction and before the conclusion. In the introduction the tension of the Jacob narrative is set and, as we will see, in the conclusion the tension is brought to a dissonant resolution. The narrative asides pause the narrative and envelope the middle of the Jacob plot. In so doing they create a filter through which these narratives should be read. They create this filter by working in unison like the wife-sister stories in the Abraham narrative.\textsuperscript{94}

In the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת, these two narrative asides raise doubts about the righteousness of the seed just as the analogous narratives in the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת. In Gen 26 Isaac shows himself to be prone to the same errors as his father and the results lead to the expected increased antagonism with the nations. This sets the stage for Jacob. Will he carry on in this same tendency? Throughout the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת Jacob appears to follow the pattern of his fathers by engaging in deception as a way of securing his well-being or blessing. In the case of Laban it leads to increased tension between the line of promise and the line not of promise. Now in Gen 34 we have the final and most poignant instance of these relations between the seed of promise and the seed not of promise. Here we find arguably the most unrighteous behavior of the seed and the most antagonistic relations result. If Gen 20-21 serves to bring the righteousness of the seed into doubt then this narrative even more so.

In order for this reading to be successful, however, we must read the text counter to the one who wrote the book on the poetics of biblical narrative. According to Sternberg, the poetics of biblical narrative is based on an epistemological revolution. The omniscient Hebrew author controls the flow of information in such a way as to lead the

\textsuperscript{94}Fishbane, Rendsburg, and Wenham offer more detailed analyses of the connections between these two narrative layers. Fishbane, \textit{Text and Texture}, 47; Rendsburg, \textit{The Redaction of Genesis}, 58; Wenham, \textit{Genesis 16–50}, 186.
reader to the conclusion he desires. Based on his understanding of the Hebrew author’s tendency to reveal only that which we need to understand the unfolding of the plot he argues that the deception of Levi and Simeon is ultimately justified by the apparently inconsequential comment that Dinah was still detained in the house of Shechem (34:26). This one fact is key to Sternberg’s interpretation “since the retrospective effect of discovery compels us to reevaluate character and reinterpret the whole sequence of events.” Sternberg admits that what the brothers have done goes contrary to the reader’s sense of justice but he argues that is precisely the point. The author has designed the narrative in such a way as to persuade us to sympathize with Levi and Simeon despite our habitual reading that would naturally counter such an interpretation. This would be an example of ‘foolproof composition.’ The text is so artfully designed that we cannot but help read along the lines of the author’s intentions even when it goes against our natural inclinations.

But Sternberg’s interpretation goes against more than just our natural inclinations; it also goes against Jacob’s later assessment of their deeds in the context of his oracle (Gen 49:5-7). Even in the mouth of Jacob, coming as it does at the end of the book and in the context of an oracle, it seems a rather authoritative evaluation. This of course alone will not invalidate Sternberg’s reading, but it might cause us to reevaluate.

95 Sternberg refers to this as his “regulating principle” which is “the interplay of the truth and the whole truth.” Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 89. Apropos to the Jacob narrative is his observation that “the Bible’s partiality for complex character and motive, in short, its multiple systems of gap-filling describe a whole range of logical relations in ambiguity.” Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 89.

96 Ibid., 468.

97 Ibid., 470.

98 Ibid., 50.
In the first place, we cannot help but compare this incident to the wife-sister stories both on the basis of the deed (an Israelite woman in the house of a foreigner) but also on the basis of how the deed is described in 34:7, namely, ויהי לא אשה. This compares to Abimelech’s indignation in Gen 20, ממשה איש לא אישה ודרי. Now the tables are turned but ironically it does not put Israel suddenly in the right because what they themselves have been guilty of in the past (but arguably worse) and seemed to shrug off as a nonevent suddenly evokes them to passionate violence. In this case, they engage a deceit that once again leads to the enrichment of Jacob’s family with flocks and herds and donkeys at the expense of their neighbors (34:28). In other words the comparison serves to highlight their overreaction rather than emphasize the wrong done by the Hivites. In the end, Wenham is certainly correct to point out that “[n]o one in the tale escapes the narrator’s implied curse.”

This final episode relating the line of promise to the line not of promise has raised the stakes considerably. Both the righteousness and the survival of the seed are at stake. The narrative makes it clear at several points that the survival of the seed is at stake when we read that the Israelites could intermarry, dwell with, and become “one people” with the Canaanites (34:9, 16, 22-23). With this prospect we have stepped well beyond a “mere” wife-sister story. But the deceit that the sons have taken up is also an escalation of the deceit of their fathers. It appears that the unrighteousness of Jacob’s line has reached a new height. Predictably, so has the resulting antagonism with the surrounding nations. Jacob is often accused of self-interest for his comments in 34:30, and perhaps rightly so, but these words, when read in the context of the plot are really the narrator’s assessment of the deeds of Simeon and Levi. The resulting hostilities are a testimony to the unrighteousness of the seed.

99 Wenham is certainly correct in saying that “though there is an element of justice in their revenge, it is clearly disproportionate, as the narrative makes clear.” Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 315.
Jacob’s closing words bring only further tension to the plot of Genesis, “I will be destroyed, I and my house.” And yet the plot of the Isaac תּוֹלוֹדוֹת seems to move quickly to its close.

The Anticlimax of the Jacob Narrative

In the first line of the final layer in the Isaac תּוֹלוֹדוֹת, YHWH calls to Jacob to return to Bethel. In a very real sense, this is the moment we have been waiting for in the narrative. God had promised to be with Jacob and to bring him back to “this land” (28:15). Jacob, in response, made a vow that he would offer a tenth of everything YHWH gave him if he would bring him back “in peace” (Gen 28:20-22). If the narrator had confirmed Jacob’s return in peace, if Jacob were to fulfill his vow, and if Jacob were to call on the name of YHWH as Abraham had when he was at Bethel, then that would suffice to signify the successful resolution to the Isaac תּוֹלוֹדוֹת in harmony with the Genesis plot. Then the Isaac תּוֹלוֹדוֹת would have a similar ending as the Terah תּוֹלוֹדוֹת in terms of bringing both plots to a point of harmonious pause. But none of these expectations are fulfilled.

And yet the narrative ends with God’s confirmation that his promises to Abraham and Isaac hold for Jacob as well. After God calls Jacob to Bethel, Jacob and his house prepare for the encounter. Jacob’s first instructions to his household include the command to put away the foreign gods that are in the midst of those who were with him.

100The closest we come to such a resolution is in Gen 33:18-20 where Jacob arrives peacefully and then builds an altar and calls it אֵלְאֱלֹהֵיְיִשְרָאֵל. But this report is immediately marred by the narrative that follows, as I argued above.

101Fretheim probably misses the point in asserting that Jacob does not gain the blessing by stealing Esau’s. In the end, even if Jacob seems to be serving Esau, the essence of the oracle is fulfilled because Jacob belongs to the line of promise and Esau does not. The fact that Jacob seems to be bowing to Esau muddies the waters and makes us wonder if things are as they should be, but that, as I argue, is the nature of this תּוֹלוֹדוֹתplexus. It leaves us with dissonance with regard to the tension of the plot. On the one hand it seems to move the tension toward resolution, on the other hand we have questions about why this is so. The fact that the plot moves forward does the opposite of what Fretheim argues, it shows that despite human failure, God’s plans are not thwarted. This will become clearer as the argument develops. Fretheim, “Which Blessing,” 289.
This is a jolting revelation. It could be explained by the fact that the Israelites have only recently ransacked Shechem, but the narrator need not include such detail and the fact that he does is a commentary on the spiritual state of Jacob’s house. Yet the text continues to offer mixed signals, for immediately following Jacob speaks of God as

We cannot help but notice that this has been characteristic of the Jacob narrative throughout. The author has continually refused to allow a clear evaluation of Jacob. In every section of the narrative he has pointed to redeeming qualities in Jacob but these are always mixed in with actions that point more toward his continued reliance on self. Commentators tend to look for a point in the narrative when Jacob finally experiences a change in character. But looking for such a point ends up forcing the commentator to ignore important features of the text (like foreign gods). Most importantly, my argument is that we must read the plexus together as interconnected pieces of one story with one plot. When we do so, then we must read Jacob in relation to Abraham. In the case of Abraham, Gen 22 served as a clear test of Abraham’s faith in YHWH, a test that he passed and that served as the basis for his and his descendants’ ongoing relationship in the covenant. With Jacob, that test or turning point is conspicuously absent. The author never releases the reader from the tension of wondering whether we should evaluate Jacob’s character as righteous or self-sufficient. I am inclined to think that the author has constructed the Jacob narrative in


103 Holmgren points out some of the problems with attempting to find a specific turning point in Jacob’s character by showing that Jacob is never quite free of deceit in the narrative. Fredrick Carlson Holmgren, “Holding Your Own Against God: Genesis 32:22-32 (In the Context of Genesis 31-33),” Int 44, no. 1 (1990): 9.
such a way as to create a Jacob character that defies evaluation. Jacob’s character is persistently enigmatic.

*The Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת Plexus Summary*

The Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus advances the Genesis plot along the expected trajectory. At the end of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת we noted that the lack of righteousness of the seed and the consequent threat to its survival was internalized in the Abraham narrative. In the end, Abraham passes the test of righteousness but it creates a precarious situation. Will the seed always pass the test of righteousness? In the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת this question has risen to prominence (the rheme of the Abraham narrative has become the theme of the Jacob narrative).

And so the narrative comes to a conclusion that appears to reach resolution by a play of contrapuntal plots. First, the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plot is indeed successfully concluded. Not forgetting that the Esau תּוֹלְדוֹת completes the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus, Jacob has indeed taken the place of his brother, essentially fulfilling the oracle of Gen 25:23. As the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plot developed it also required that God fulfill the promises he made to Jacob at Bethel (these became a part of his taking the place of Esau), namely to be with him and bring him back to the land. These are essentially fulfilled by the end of the narrative as well.

Second, the closing details of the narrative bring a degree of closure to the narrative. Rachel gives birth to Benjamin, which brings completion to the number of Jacob’s sons. This leads to Rachel’s death and eventually to Jacob’s genealogy in 35:23-26. This is then followed by the death of Isaac which brings closure to the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת. Of course the Esau תּוֹלְדוֹת brings ultimate closure to the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus by separating the line of Esau from the line of promise.

All of these factors work together to move the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus toward dénouement. We would tend to see the Abrahamic covenant as confirmed with Jacob. Based
on the Genesis narrative so far, we therefore expect Jacob to be righteous, since the promised seed must be righteous and must survive. Since the text throughout points to glimmers of light in Jacob’s character, we may be lulled to this conclusion and we are certainly tempted, as commentators usually are, to look for the crucial turning point in his character.\textsuperscript{104} But, as I have argued here, it is the equally persistent indications of his lack of righteousness, especially when taking Jacob in light of Abraham, and especially when we read according to the structure of the תּוֹלְדוֹת strand, which allows the narrative aside the first and last word on the character of the seed.\textsuperscript{105} This leads us to an ultimate sense of a lack of resolution with respect to the Genesis plot.\textsuperscript{106} The seed must be righteous and it must survive—but it is not. Thus the Genesis plot is left open and in a state of tension. This tension is made all the more stark by the apparent dénouement of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plot. As readers we cry out, “Wait! This cannot be the end, the seed is not righteous!” The two melodic lines of plot have appeared to move in opposite directions—one toward resolution and one toward greater tension. The result is a story that ends on a note of contrapuntal dissonance.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{104} Simpson also argues that this really cannot be the case. Simpson, “An Analysis of Gen 32,” 145.

\textsuperscript{105} Berman picks up on the fact that unlike Abraham, Jacob’s faith, or righteousness, was never proven by a test: “he never partook in the kind of spiritual forge that was the Binding of Isaac. Jacob never got the chance to test and show his full spiritual stuff.” Thus the Abraham narrative questioned the righteousness of the seed but then resolved it with a test. Something similar happens in the Joseph narrative as we will see (cf. Gen 42:15-16), but nothing of the sort ever happens to Jacob and so his faith (righteousness) remains uncertain. Joshua Berman, “Mishneh Bereshit: The Form and Content of Genesis 48,” Tradition 25 (1990): 39.

\textsuperscript{106} The text persists in this even into the closing remarks as it is here when the author chooses to include the account of Reuben’s sleeping with Bilhah.

\textsuperscript{107} Counterpoint occurs in music when two polyphonic melodies move independently of one another in terms of rhythm or contour. In the Abraham narrative the Genesis plot and the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת plot moved with each other but in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת we can think of the two plots as contrapuntal because though intertwined, one does not move rhythmically in step with the other—one has come to resolution and the other has not. This creates a narrative dissonance, because it creates a need for resolution in the mind of the reader. Hence I have referred to this as contrapuntal dissonance.
As readers we are left off balance. The author has built the tension of the plot just as we enter the final הָרְקִיעָה plexus and the climax of the Genesis narrative. We cannot help but wonder what will happen with the righteousness of the seed. Will it also affect the survival of the seed as we have come to expect in the Genesis narrative?
CHAPTER 8
THE END OF GENESIS: GOD WILL ENSURE THE
RIGHTEOUSNESS AND SURVIVAL
OF THE SEED

As we approach the final תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus, we must briefly reconsider our reading strategy. I have argued that the lack of resolution in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת with regard to the righteousness of the seed increases the tension of the Genesis plot. Alternatively, it could indicate that we have misidentified the tension of the plot. Perhaps the righteousness of the seed is not important for the resolution of the plot and that is the reason there was no resolution achieved in the previous narrative.

In this chapter we will find that is not the case. In fact, making sense of the ending of Genesis is crucial to verifying our identification of plot and there are two major ways that will be accomplished. First, despite the amount of research that has been done on the placement of Gen 38 in the Joseph narrative, and the fact that much of it has been of immense help to our understanding of Gen 37-50, I believe there is still a missing piece that is filled in when Gen 38 is understood not only in the context of Gen 37-50 but in the context of the plot of Genesis as a whole.¹ In fact, I would argue that we cannot truly understand the

¹Several authors including Humphreys and von Rad have pointed out that there seems to be a difference between the Joseph narrative and the other patriarchal narratives of Genesis. For Humphreys, the difference might be seen as genre. Humphreys classifies the Joseph narrative as a novella because the pericopae which make up the Joseph narrative “stand alone as distinct and complete stories, as might, for example, the several distinct units that make up the cycles of material dealing with Abraham and Jacob,” W. Lee Humphreys, Joseph and His Family: A Literary Study (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 22. See also Von Rad, Genesis, 433. Partly because of this difference, Humphreys believes that while the Joseph narrative “may provide an extended transition between these two
importance of Gen 38 to the Joseph narrative unless we understand the importance of the Joseph narrative to the plot of Genesis. The second major way that I hope to confirm my identification of the plot is by showing that not only does the Joseph narrative come to a satisfactory conclusion, but the Joseph narrative resolves the tension of the book of Genesis, thus bringing the book as a whole to a satisfactory conclusion as well. This is crucial. As Aristotle asserts, the end is that after which no other incident is necessary. It is the nature of plot that it makes a single whole out of a series of events. If there is no whole, there is no plot. At the end of this chapter I must be able to show that the book of Genesis is not chronologically truncated, but has actually resolved the tension of the book and brought the plot to a satisfactory conclusion.

The Structure of the Narrative

As with the תּוֹלְדוֹת strands of Noah, Terah, and Isaac; some exegetes have found a chiastic structure in the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת strand. From the standpoint of the proposed themes that treat Israel’s ancestors in Canaan and then in Egypt, as it now stands in relation to them it is not quite a perfect fit.” Humphreys, Joseph and His Family, 195. Humphreys is certainly correct in pointing out that the Joseph narrative is set apart from the rest of the Genesis narrative and certainly from the book of Exodus, but I will argue here that it does fit perfectly as a transition from the one to the other by serving as the conclusion to the Genesis plot. It is also easy to see how in doing so it anticipates the Exodus narrative.

2 Curtis comes closest to making a similar claim when he says that “it is only when the unit [Gen 38] is seen in the context of the patriarchal narrative and God’s promise to Abraham that the full significance of the story can be appreciated.” I would expand this to include all of Genesis. Edward M. Curtis, “Genesis 38: Its Context(s) and Function,” CTR 5 (1991): 249.

3 Rendsburg, The Redaction of Genesis, 80–92; David A Dorsey, The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 60; Mathews, Genesis 11:27–50:26, 680. The three suggestions are fairly similar, though Dorsey finds the core layers to be 42:1-38 and 43:1-44:3, whereas Rendsburg and Mathews both demarcate the core layers as 44:1-34 and 45:1-28. Also see Wenham who has identified a pattern according to which two sections of the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת move toward a peak in three sections, thus producing a structure that follows a pattern of A-B-C-A’-B’-C’. It is important to note that these layers are not parallel in concept but simply as a three part movement toward peak. Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 344. Interestingly, like Rendsburg, Wenham found a chiastic structure in each of the three previous narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת strands. Unlike Rendsburg, he does not find one here. The same is true of Longacre who does an extensive study of the Joseph narrative. Longacre identifies a variety of chiastic and other types of
parallel layers, there are pairs that demonstrate a rather convincing parallel relationship. What is more, the resulting structure lends itself well to the narrative analysis that follows in this chapter. It is also not a problem that there are slight differences in the narrative divisions as suggested by each of the authors. This has been the case in each of the previous תּוֹלְדוֹת plexuses. However, in trying to arrive at a particular narrative structure for the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת, it proved too difficult to defend some of the suggested textual divisions. For example, in both Rendsburg and Mathews an important textual division occurs at Gen 44:1 which sets off the two parallel core layers. And yet in 44:1 we have no break in the wayyiqtol chain of the narrative action, no change in setting, no change in characters, and a possible, but not clear change in the plot or action described. Coats and Wenham, for example, take all of 43:1-45:28 as a single section describing the second visit of Joseph’s family to Egypt.⁴ Upon closer examination, after Gen 41:57 where we have a disjunctive waw clause that introduces the background for the narrative that follows, we have very few instances of grammatical or narrative shift that would clearly delineate the beginning of a new section of narrative until 46:8, where we find the clause “These are the names of the sons of Israel.” In between, Rendsburg’s and Mathew’s divisions of the text are quite subjective, almost arbitrary to the point that one could divide the text as one wishes in order to produce the desired structure.

There may be a reason that the structural divisions are not clear in this part of the text. Exegetes of every stripe have observed that the Joseph narrative, more than any of the previous patriarchal narratives, functions as a single narrative whole (with the exception

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⁴Coats, Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature, 259; Wenham, Genesis 16–50, 344.
of the Gen 38 intrusion).\(^5\) It should be no surprise that the text is more difficult to delineate. What is more, Gen 41:57-46:8 is precisely the point of the Joseph narrative where the plot reaches its climax. We might thus expect that as the tension increases and the action becomes more dense, then the text rushes off toward climax, resisting textual divisions.\(^6\)

That is not to say that the divisions of Rendsburg, Dorsey, and Mathews are entirely unconvincing. It does suggest, however, that even in the presence of a chiastic structure, the one after another of the plot dominates the Joseph narrative. Therefore, due to the subjectivity involved in determining textual divisions,\(^7\) which in the end could provide artificial support for our exegesis, and due to the apparent dominance of the movement from tension to resolution, it seems best to approach the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת through the plot and leave aside the proposed chiastic structures.

**Identifying the Plot of the Narrative: Cain and Abel Redivivus**

Even if it is difficult to find clear structural units at certain points in the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת, the first two are quite clear due to the intrusion of the Judah and Tamar narrative.

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\(^5\) Coats, for example, asserts that in contrast to the earlier patriarchal narratives, the Jacob saga, as he calls it, is “[n]o series of independent tales.” Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, 259.

\(^6\) Everett puts it differently. He says that, “The book thus moves from a rapid-fire mix of stories to a more sustained narrative and, in so doing, effects strong movement of thematic material, with magnification of its concerns and ultimate resolution in the Joseph story. Simply put, the narrative process in the book of Genesis gradually slows down and concentrates, culminating in the high drama of chapters 37-50.” Both of us are making note of the fact that the narrative focuses on the resolution of the tension and I believe most readers would readily agree with this assessment. Everett Fox, “Can Genesis Be Read as a Book?” *Semeia*, no. 46 (1989): 34.

\(^7\) Of course there was subjectivity involved in each of the previous structures as well. In those cases, however, it was possible to defend the divisions based on a combination of narrative or grammatical indicators. In the Joseph narrative, this evidence is much more difficult to put forward. Also, the differences in textual divisions proposed by exegetes are more pronounced.
Thus Gen 37 introduces the Joseph narrative as a whole. It is an extremely important pericope not only because it defines the tension of the Joseph narrative, but also because it picks up the dissonance we were left with at the end of the Jacob narrative and interacts with motifs that have dominated the Genesis plot from the beginning. In so doing, Gen 37 (in cooperation with Gen 38) sets the Joseph narrative in motion at the same time that it moves the Genesis plot toward its highest point of tension while also pointing to its eventual resolution. Genesis 37, I will argue, definitively confirms our reading that the seed is not righteous but also confirms our reading that the unrighteousness of the seed does threaten the survival of the line. By confirming this reading, the narrator brings us to the height of the tension. Even the promised line of seed has proven its unrighteousness and, as a result, has threatened its own survival. And yet Gen 38 will also give us hope for resolution. The question, as it has been all along, has not been whether the seed will be righteous and whether or not it will survive, but how.

Genesis 37: The Beginning of the End

Genesis 37 clearly sets the tension for the Joseph narrative. The text first of all introduces us to Joseph and his dreams. Brueggemann points out that “the dream functions in the Joseph narrative as the oracle of 25:23 does for the Jacob materials.” Similarly, these dreams create expectations as to how this narrative should turn out. Despite

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10 Bob Becking, “‘They Hated Him Even More’: Literary Technique in Genesis 37:1-11,” *BN*, no. 60 (January 1, 1991): 40. Also note Jacob’s response to the dreams is to “keep the matter.” This certainly works to alert the reader that these dreams are important to the future development of the narrative, Hugh C. White, “The Joseph Story: A Narrative Which ‘Consumes’ Its Content,” *Semeia* 31 (1985): 61.
the fact that Joseph’s dreams are never interpreted, we are led to expect Joseph to be the one to continue the line of promise. These expectations then work together with the sale of Joseph into slavery to create the tension of the Joseph narrative. Once sold as a slave into Egypt, how will Joseph ever be able to continue in the line of promise?

As with each of the previous patriarchal narratives, the plot of the respective תּוֹלְדֹּת strand does not operate merely on its own but interacts with and contributes to the Genesis plot. Also as in the previous narratives, the key to understanding the interaction is to notice the connections to the previous תּוֹלְדֹּת strands. In the case of Gen 37, it is well recognized that motifs appear that are similar to previous narratives. Perhaps most cited is favoritism. Just as Isaac favored Esau and Rebekah favored Jacob over the rival sibling, so now Jacob favors Joseph over all his brothers. Equally as important are the motifs of sibling rivalry or the supplanting of the primogeniture. These are motifs that have been important in each of the patriarchal narratives. And yet we should remember that these motifs were originally introduced in Gen 4, which I have argued is the matrix of motifs for the book of Genesis. The recurrence of these motifs connects us to the plot of Genesis and the righteousness and survival of the seed.

In addition, these motifs have developed in such a way as to bring us progressively and ominously closer to the Cain and Abel narrative. I will be referring here specifically to motifs that relate back to the Cain and Able narrative. Cassuto, who first proposed the “recognize this” connection, has suggested other connections to the surrounding narrative. Umberto Cassuto, “The Story of Tamar and Judah,” in Biblical and Oriental Studies (Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973), 30. Since then, many others including Robert Alter have picked up on this and noted other apparent allusions.
narrative God prefers Abel’s sacrifice to Cain’s. Cain is jealous and kills his brother. At the end of the narrative we find out that Seth has supplant ed his older brother Cain in the line of promise. In the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת, there is no real favoritism unless we count Sarah’s or God’s favoritism for Isaac. Also, there is no active rivalry between the brothers themselves, nor jealousy of one toward the other. In the end the younger usurps the older and the older brother is excluded from the line of promise. In the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת, Jacob and Esau come closer to the Cain and Abel analogy. Rebekah favors Jacob and Isaac favors Esau, there is a struggle or rivalry between the brothers so that Esau threatens to kill Jacob, and in the end the younger supplants the older. In the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת we come even closer. There is palpable rivalry between Joseph and his brothers bred in part by Jacob’s preference for Joseph over all his other sons. As a result, the others become jealous and have every intention of killing him. They devise a plan and begin to carry it out before opting to sell him into slavery instead. In the end, Joseph is granted a position of prominence over his brothers, even usurping the blessing of the firstborn.

At the end of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת we were unsure of the righteousness of the seed. But now these motifs, which have their root in the Cain and Abel narrative, have worked to bring us ominously full circle back to their point of origin. Cain was the original murderer of his brother. It was through the Cain and Abel narrative that we discovered the

14. The text says a “seed in place of Abel.” However, as I argued earlier, Cain forfeited his status as primogeniture to Abel due to his unrighteousness. Seth thus takes over for the righteous seed.

15. White suggests the text implies that the rivalry between Hagar and Sarah extends to their sons. (He cites Gen 20:10 as evidence but this text seems unrelated to his claim. White, “The Joseph Story,” 57.)

line of the woman would be divided between the line of promise and the line not of promise. And now those descendants who have the potential to fall within the line of promise have come to be associated with the line not of promise. In so doing, they have all but excluded themselves. What is more, by selling Joseph into Egypt it seems they have eliminated the brother most likely to carry on the righteous seed (based on the role of the dreams in the plot). Just as we have seen throughout Genesis, the unrighteousness of the seed has put the survival of the seed at risk. And thus we arrive at the nadir of the book of Genesis.

And now we can see how the plot of the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת strand interacts with the plot of Genesis. The Joseph narrative is about far more than the fate of Joseph, and even far more than the reconciliation of Joseph to his brothers, it is about the fate of the line of promise which we know must encompass all twelve of the sons of Jacob.

**Genesis 38: The Nadir of Genesis, Reprise**

An astounding volume of work has been done in an attempt to understand the positioning and purpose of Gen 38 in the Joseph narrative. Scholarship has moved decidedly away from the position represented by Emerton, who would claim there is little to be found here besides an explanation for the current tribal arrangement. While there is little doubt

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17 A rather large number of authors have found the Joseph narrative to be primarily a story of family reconciliation. E.g. Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, 266, 292. If this were the case the narrative would find its ending somewhere around Gen 47, as Coats asserts. The fact that the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת is about more than just reconciliation is what drives White to a different conclusion, though I believe if he had seen the Joseph narrative in the context of the Genesis plot he would have come to the conclusion that there is proper closure to the narrative. White, “The Joseph Story,” 49.

that the story of Judah and Tamar is an intrusion into the Joseph story, there is also now little doubt, contra Soggin, that it has been placed in its current position quite intentionally.\textsuperscript{19} This observation, stated perhaps most clearly by Fentress-Williams is crucial since our understanding of Gen. 38 is impossible without a discussion about the relationship, i.e., dialogue between this chapter and the surrounding narrative. Moreover, this approach will argue that the meaning of the surrounding material would be limited with the omission of chapter 38.\textsuperscript{20}

Moving even further, there also seems to be a consolidation of opinion around the purpose of its positioning. Some authors have now argued that the Judah and Tamar narrative is the Joseph narrative in miniature.\textsuperscript{21} According to Lockwood, this reinforces the

\textsuperscript{19} Among the plethora of articles written on Gen 38 the following especially address the placement of Gen 38 or its relation to the surrounding context. Cassuto, “The Story of Tamar and Judah”; F. J. Hoogewoud, “Juda en Tamar: een poging tot kontekstueel lezen (Gen 38),” in Verkenningen in een Stroomgebied (Amsterdam: Huissdrukkerij Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1974), 20–29; Alter, Biblical Narrative; George R. H. Wright, “The Positioning of Genesis 38,” ZAW 94, no. 4 (1982): 527; Phyllis A. Bird, “The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts,” Semeia 46 (1989): 119–39; Anthony John Lambe, “Genesis 38: Literary Design and Context” (Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada), 1994); Jan P. Fokkelman, “Genesis 37 and 38 as the Interface of Structural Analysis and Hermeneutics,” in Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 152–87; Wilfried Warning, “Terminological Patterns and Genesis 38,” AUSS 38, no. 2 (Autumn 2000): 293–305; Klaas A. D. Smelik, “Genesis 38 Revisited,” in Om voor te lezen (Maastricht: Shaker, 2005), 114–20; Judy Fentress-Williams, “Location, Location, Location: Tamar in the Joseph Cycle,” Bible & Critical Theory 3, no. 2 (June 1, 2007); Peter Weimar, “Gen 38: Eine Einschaltung in die Josefsgeschichte,” BN, no. 138 (2008): 5–37. We should also note that even Emerton acknowledges that there has been redactional adaptation to smooth the transitions to the surrounding narrative not unlike, for example, what Weimar has argued. The difference, however, is that Weimar argues the redactional adaptation to smooth the transitions to the surrounding narrative does not just that the redactor has made room for the Judah and Tamar narrative but that the Judah and Tamar narrative is designed to further the argument of the surrounding text. “Was auf den ersten Blick wie eine mehr zufällig zustande gekommene Abirrung aussieht, die dementsprechend wenig Beachtung verdiente, zeigt sich vor diesem Hintergrund als eine sorgfältig geplante und mit Bedacht inszenierte Einschaltung, die unverkennbar mit der Initiative Judas in Gen 37,26+27 zusammenhängt und bei diesem angesichts der herausfordernden Handlungsweise Tamars eine Erkenntnis hinsichtlich seines eigenen Verhaltens auslost (Gen 38,26).” Weimar, “Gen 38,” 14.

\textsuperscript{20} Fentress-Williams, “Location, Location, Location,” 20.2. See also Hoogewoud who says that “the story is ‘colored’ by the context, but the context is ‘colored’ by the story,” Hoogewoud, “Juda en Tamar,” 27.

message that is common to both of these texts, namely “the rehabilitation of wrongdoers and the resolution of family strife.” Hence the apparently growing dual consensus that the story of Judah and Tamar is inserted primarily to show the development of Judah’s character and that the Joseph story is about the reconciliation of the family. Though I agree that the interpretation of Gen 38 has vastly improved since we have begun to read it in the context of the Joseph narrative, we have still stopped short unless we read the Judah and Tamar narrative in the context of the Joseph narrative, in the context of the Genesis narrative. If,
after all, the Judah and Tamar narrative is primarily about the reformation of Judah and reconciliation of the family, then we are left with the enigma of the record of the births of Perez and Zerah. Are they a mere epilogue or worse yet, extraneous details tacked on post dénouement?\textsuperscript{25} Undoubtedly, O’Callaghan is correct in observing that the narrative is not essentially about either Judah or Tamar, but about the preservation of Judah’s line.\textsuperscript{26} And to O’Callaghan we will add that the narrative is about the threat to the survival of the line that is posed by its lack of righteousness.

The narrative begins as Judah goes down from his brothers to live among and intermarry with the Canaanites (38:1-2). This introduction of Judah can only be read negatively when taken in the context of the wider Genesis narrative and especially on the heels of what has just happened in Gen 37.\textsuperscript{27} The text then records the birth of Judah’s three sons in rapid succession (38:3-5) and then, one after another, the deaths of Er and Onan are recorded. In each case we know that it is YHWH himself who has put them to death on account of their wickedness (38:6-10). The rapid succession of births: Er, Onan, Shelah; followed by their nearly as rapid deaths: Er, Onan…; leaves one with the impression that Shelah is next. The narrator surely wants us to come to this conclusion because when Judah sends Tamar back to her father’s house, he discloses Judah’s motivation for withholding Selah from Tamar (כִיְא מַרְפֶּן יָמוּתֵהוּ אֶלְּכָּאָח 38:11).


\textsuperscript{27} Walton, \textit{Genesis}, 666. Walton believes that Judah’s intermarrying indicates that a time has come when intermarriage is no longer such a taboo “presumably because the family identity has been well established.” But given the consistent aversion to Canaanite wives in Genesis and the fact that the author need not have included these details, this seems rather an odd conclusion.
Commentators have pointed out that an important factor in the telling of this narrative is the information that the narrator has revealed to us, the readers, in comparison to the information that is available to the characters in the story, especially to Judah. From the beginning the reader is informed that Er and Onan died due to their wickedness. Judah, on the other hand, is unaware of this and is made out to be oblivious to his sons’ unrighteousness. He is aware that his line is at risk but in attempting to save his line he deceptively withholds his seed from Tamar, unaware that he has aligned himself with the wickedness of his son Onan. By behaving like Onan, he has placed himself at risk of Onan’s and Er’s fate and so ironically, by trying to save his line he has actually put its survival at risk. By the time we get to Gen 38:11 we are at a point in the Judah and Tamar narrative that is analogous to the end of Gen 37. The unrighteousness of the seed has put the survival of the seed at risk. The crisis of the story—the survival and righteousness of the line of Judah, converges with the crisis of the Joseph story and Genesis as a whole.

As the Gen 38 story continues Tamar emerges as an active character. A few authors have pointed out the contrast between Tamar and Judah. Cowan points out that


29 Wénin, “La ruse de Tamar (Gn 38): Une approche narrative,” 278.


31 Lindsay Wilson, Joseph, Wise and Otherwise: The Intersection of Wisdom and Covenant in Genesis 37-50 (Paternost Biblical Monographs; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 82.

Tamar’s evaluation of events is more accurate than Judah’s. Judah believes incorrectly that Tamar is the cause of his sons’ deaths (38:11) and that Tamar is a prostitute (38:15) while Tamar understands correctly that Judah does not intend to give Shelah to her (38:14). Also, Judah attempts to deceive Tamar by withholding his son but his plans fail. Tamar intends to deceive Judah by dressing as a harlot and her plans succeed. Cowan points out the use of ראה in 38:14 and 15 (Tamar sees correctly, Judah incorrectly) to further this contrast.33

The narrative reaches its climax at the point when the survival of the seed is most at risk. When Judah finds out that Tamar is pregnant by prostitution he finds his opportunity to be freed from her once and for all and orders that she be burned (38:24). This is surely an unjust act on the part of Judah. So far in this narrative, YHWH has been consistent in punishing the wicked. Judah’s order threatens not only the life of Tamar, but the survival of his child(ren), whom, unbeknownst to him, she is carrying. At this point, Judah seems unaware of his wickedness just as he seems unaware of the threat he poses to his own line.34 When Tamar brings out Judah’s signet and cord and staff we arrive at the decisive moment in the story. How Judah reacts, whether righteously or unrighteously, will determine the fate of his seed. When Tamar makes her revelation, Judah becomes aware of all for the first time. He confesses, as Ska points out, what the reader has known from the beginning.35 The point of his confession, therefore, is not to inform the reader, but to demonstrate his sudden self-awareness. “She is more righteous than I,” Clifford points out, could be

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35 Ska, “L’ironie de Tamar (Gen 38),” 263.
translated, “She is righteous, not I.’” The Hebrew could be rendered more literally as, “in comparison to me, she is righteous.” Judah, it seems, has become aware of his own unrighteousness and his confession marks the turning point of the narrative. What follows is the dénouement and not mere epilogue and certainly not detail unrelated to the primary plot of the story. Two sons are born to Judah to replace Er and Onan, effectively insuring the complete restoration of Judah’s line. It is not until the birth of these two sons that the tension of the narrative is finally resolved.

O’Callaghan is correct in pointing out that the main character in this narrative is neither Judah nor Tamar. The tension does not revolve around Judah, nor around the fate and well-being of Tamar, though these are important in the narrative. Instead, the narrative tension revolves around the survival of Judah’s line. Judah stands in as the main representative of his own line. But Er and Onan also represent the line of Judah inasmuch as they also influence both its survival and righteousness.

Likewise Tamar, though important in the story, is not the central character. She is rather the foil for Judah just as Lot and Abimelech served as foils to Abraham and Isaac. It is interesting that Tamar is likely a Canaanite woman, yet nowhere does the narrator offer this information. Likewise, Tamar is probably acting in her own interests, yet nowhere does the narrator offer this information either. In the end, in a narrative dominated by wicked behavior, Tamar emerges pristine. Clifford says she is righteous like Noah. Shields points

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out that Judah “is forced to accord her the quality given only to two others in Genesis, Noah and Abraham.” Van Wijk very nearly overstates her case, but she is correct to point out that “the concern here is with righteousness and who promotes it.”

It is important to see how Gen 37 and 38 work together to interact with the dissonance of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת and advance the plot of Genesis. At the end of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus we were unsure of our reading of the plot. Jacob and his sons appear to be less than righteous yet the covenant seems to have been confirmed to Jacob and his line. All through Genesis the unrighteousness of the seed has threatened its survival. How can it be that this is not the case at the end of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת? Could it be that we have misread the narrative and righteousness is really not crucial to the continuation of the line of promise? Or perhaps we have misread the text and Jacob and his sons are righteous after all. These reader uncertainties are created by the dissonance left to us at the end of Gen 36. Genesis 37 and 38 resolve the dissonance because they confirm to us that indeed the seed has continued on its unrighteous trajectory even to the point of becoming nearly like Cain—in fact, more like Cain than any other. At the same time, the narrative confirms that the seed’s unrighteousness does indeed threaten its survival. Thus the dissonance has been resolved, but our worst fears have been realized. For that reason, the resolution of the dissonance left over from the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת brings us to the nadir of the narrative.

Now I think we can see why the narrator elected to use the strategy of creating narrative dissonance at the end of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus. Leaving the reader with a sense of cognitive unease at the end of a major textual division is an extremely effective way of

40 Mary E. Shields, “‘More Righteous than I’: The Comeuppance of the Trickster in Genesis 38,” in Are We Amused? (New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 33.

41 Van Wijk-Bos, “An Eyeopener at the Gate,” 121.
signaling that the plot is moving toward its point of highest tension. In Gen 37 and 38, by making Joseph’s brothers out to be like Cain more than any other character in the book has been, the author has brought this dissonance to a resounding conclusion. Jacob and his line are unrighteous and they are threatening the survival of the promised seed.

The Judah and Tamar narrative further confirms both the negative resolution of the dissonance and the arrival at the nadir. God will not let unrighteousness continue in the line. YHWH himself intervenes to curtail the spread of unrighteousness in the line of promise when he kills Er and Onan. Therefore in Gen 38 Judah stands in as a representative of what might happen to the line of the others who participated in Joseph’s demise. The very fact that Judah stands in for his brothers may be another purpose of this narrative. From now on Judah will emerge as prominent among his brothers and his transformation is also an important reason for this narrative. It would be a rather strange turn of events if Judah offered to go into slavery in place of Benjamin if we had not already seen him come to the realization of his unrighteousness and the threat it poses to the survival of his line. As we move forward in the Joseph narrative, we have hope that this will occur in the larger story as well.

**The Final Test of Righteousness**

Genesis 39-41 are significant chapters in the Joseph and Genesis narratives. First of all they develop the character of Joseph. In Gen 37 he appears as a young boy, perhaps a bit of a brat and braggart who is maybe even partly responsible for the bad

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42 Lambe, “Judah’s Development: The Pattern of Departure-Transition-Return,” 59. Humphreys argues that Judah develops in the narrative so that he rises above his brothers as the most effective. This is demonstrated especially by being contrasted to Reuben. Humphreys, *Joseph and His Family*, 83. Interestingly, this is the opposite of the Judah and Tamar narrative where Judah is contrasted with Tamar and shown to be ineffective and unaware in comparison to Tamar. This is another way that we can see Gen 38 as a turning point in Judah’s character.
relations with his brothers. In Gen 39 we find that wherever Joseph goes YHWH is with him and gives him success in all that he does (Gen 39:1-6, 21-23). This is recognized by those over him who recognize that by elevating his status they can participate in his success. This is quite reminiscent of other texts in Genesis where the surrounding nations recognize that God is with the patriarchs and as a result they desire to enter into a relationship with them to participate in the blessing. I have argued that these texts promote the motif of the seed’s relations to the surrounding nations. When the seed is righteous the nations experience blessing through the seed, but as that righteousness becomes questionable, so does the blessing. This idea was developed in the wife-sister and well narratives and then was picked up in the Jacob and Laban narrative. We also noted that relations tended to disintegrate as we

43 The bulk of the evidence for this view rests on the interpretation of the single phrase, וַיִּבֶא יוֹסֵף אֶת־דִּבְּרֵי הַאֲבִיהֶם, which seems to have an almost entirely negative connotation in its other eight occurrences (Num 13:32, 14:36, 37, Jer 20:10, Ezek 36:3, Ps 31:14, Prov 10:18, and 25:10).


45 Cf. Gen 21:22-23, where Abimelech and Phicol say to Abraham, אללה יִפְקֶת בָּנָלְךָ יַעֲשֶׂה הָאָבִים, Gen 26:29 where Abimelech says to Isaac, רֹאָא אֶלִימִית יִהוָה יִפְקֶת, and Gen 30:24 where Laban says to Jacob, נִשְׁתַּחַת וְנֵרָבָּה יִרְאֵהוּ בְּךָ.
moved through the book. Here, Joseph has restored these relations and it appears it is due to his upright behavior as manifest primarily through the story of Potiphar’s wife.

Genesis chapters 39-41 are also important because they relate the necessary details of Pharaoh’s dreams and the impending famine to explain Joseph’s improbable rise to power in Egypt. These same details provide the circumstances that drive Joseph’s brothers to Egypt to seek food. By the time we reach Gen 42 it does not seem so strange that Joseph’s ten older brothers are bowing down before him (42:6). At the beginning of Gen 42 the author provides specific details that set up the action that is about to take place. For example Jacob does not send Benjamin with his brothers for fear that some harm might befall him (42:4). Joseph then recognizes his brothers, but he makes himself unrecognizable and speaks harshly to them (42:7 and again in 42:8). Next the narrator lets us know that Joseph remembers the dream that he had about his brothers back in Canaan (42:9). This statement, by virtue of its placement, explains his next act, which is to accuse his brothers of being spies (42:9).

Interestingly, in their effort to prove that they are honest men and defend themselves against this accusation they proclaim that they are all brothers, sons of one man, and that, in fact, there are twelve of them altogether counting the youngest who is still with their father and one other who “is no more” (42:13). This statement in their defense plays into Joseph’s hand who now declares a test of their honesty. One of them shall go back and get the brother that has been left with their father. If they do not, then he will know they are spies (42:15-16).

We might be inclined to compare this test to Gen 22, when God tested Abraham.\(^{46}\) The word used for Joseph’s test of his brothers (תְּנַסֶּס) is different from that used

\(^{46}\) Hamilton draws a general association with the Abraham narrative but I am arguing that they play a similar role in developing the plot. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, 522. Also see Longacre, who finds a chiastic structure in 42:14-16. The chiastic structure would contribute to marking this as a key statement in this narrative, Longacre, *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence: A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Genesis 37 and 39–48*, 35. Longacre’s study of the macrostructure of the Joseph
in Gen 22:1 when God tested (נָסָא) Abraham. In Gen 22 it was God who instigated the test whereas here it is Joseph. Yet in terms of the plot the relationship is much closer. In both cases the test is the climax of the narrative, resolving the issue of the righteousness of the promised line. Abraham’s righteousness came most into question as a result of the Abraham and Abimelech narratives that immediately preceded in Gen 20-21. The test, therefore, was intended to prove that Abraham really did fear God despite prior lapses. Abraham followed through with God’s instructions and so proved himself ultimately ‘righteous.’ As a result, God confirmed his covenant with Abraham (22:16-18). In the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת, Jacob’s sons reached the low point of knavery in their last encounter with Joseph when they sold him into slavery. Now, Joseph has devised a way of examining them to see if they have changed. The test that he devises will eventually offer them the opportunity to commit the same crime

narrative also suggests that the test is central to the story. “Without some such process as Joseph put his brothers through could there have been a genuine reconciliation? And does not the macrostructure imply and require such a reconciliation?” Longacre, *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence: A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Genesis 37 and 39–48*, 48.

47 The use of these two words is an interesting study. נָסָא occurs in only these two instances in the Pentateuch, where נָסָא is far more common (15 occurrences) and is often used of Israel “testing” God (e.g. Exod 17:2) but also of God testing Israel ‘to see whether or not they will walk in his torah’ (Exod 16:4).

Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 778. נָסָא is used more frequently with God as the subject and often in a sense of testing to purge or check for righteousness (e.g. Jer 20:12, Zech 13:9), sometimes in parallel with צָרְף (Ps 26:2, 66:10). Outside of Genesis the word is used almost strictly in the prophets, Psalms, Job, and Proverbs (with one other occurrence in 1 Chr 29:17). The usage of the word gives slight support to the assertion that this testing is related to the plot of Genesis and the righteousness of the seed. It is also interesting to note that as we move through the book of Genesis God increasingly moves behind the scenes. He is still active, but his presence is not made as readily known. This use of testing reflects that tendency.

48 Miscall calls Joseph “a ruthless, arbitrary despot in this part of the narrative” because the text ascribes no particular motive to Joseph for putting his brothers through this trial. Miscall, “The Jacob and Joseph Stories as Analogies,” 34. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 425. Gunkel sees little more than revenge in Joseph’s actions. But the text is actually clear about the sorrow Joseph experiences as a result of the test as well. The key to reading the test is understanding it in the context of the plot and especially in relation to Abraham’s test by virtue of their analogous roles in their respective plots. Wilson presents a cogent argument for seeing Joseph in a more positive light and the purpose of the test as being to see if Joseph’s brothers have truly changed, Wilson, *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise*, 145–149.
against Benjamin, the new favored son (42:4), that they committed against Joseph. In fact, the best reading of the narrative that follows shows Joseph orchestrating events with precision in order to tempt his brothers into repeating their nefarious deed. I believe we can find support for this reading even in 42:21-22 when the brothers themselves acknowledge that their current state of affairs is due to their previous treatment of Joseph. 

Genesis chapters 42-43 are also important because they set the stage for the final test and confirm Judah as the son who is rising to prominence among the eleven remaining in Canaan. By emphasizing Jacob’s reluctance to let Benjamin go down to Egypt (42:36-38) the text also creates a situation in which it becomes clear that in the eyes of Jacob, Benjamin has taken Joseph’s place as most favored son. Genesis 43:1-6 especially emphasizes Jacob’s reluctance to part with Benjamin. Judah’s response may indicate a true change of heart, but the reader may wonder if he will follow through on his promise if the situation actually arises (43:7-10).

The brothers may think that they have been relieved of the accusations once they have returned with Benjamin and been cleared of the theft of the silver (43:23) but the arrival of Benjamin is the necessary condition for the implementation of Joseph’s test. Joseph has succeeded in orchestrating events so that Benjamin is brought down to Egypt and now he deftly carries out his plans to enslave Benjamin and see how his brothers will react. This must be understood as the test he mentions in 42:15-16.
Joseph cultivates whatever jealousy his brothers may harbor toward Benjamin by giving special treatment to him at the feast he has prepared (43:33-34).\(^49\) This should be seen as Joseph creating the ideal conditions for his test. The same is true of smuggling his cup into Benjamin’s saddle bag (44:1-2). In doing so, he creates a situation in which his brothers could do to Benjamin just as they had done to Joseph.\(^50\) They could easily be rid of the favorite son by giving Benjamin up to be a slave in Egypt and take their goods and grain and return to Canaan, this time with a legitimate story to tell their father.\(^51\) Joseph has set up an ingenious plan in which he has made it as easy as possible for his brothers to send Benjamin into slavery.\(^52\) They would bear no guilt for this incident. But to save Benjamin from slavery would require no less than Judah making good on his pledge to his father and standing in for Benjamin (אֲנֹכִיְאֵּעֶרְבֶּנוְּמִי דִיְתְּבַקְשְֶּּו). The brothers (represented by Judah) cannot pass this test unless they have truly changed.\(^53\)

Judah’s speech is often cited for its prominence in the Joseph story (44:16-44). This is the point of highest tension in both the Genesis and Joseph narrative. The

\(^{49}\) Mathews points out that “[i]f jealousy toward Benjamin had existed among the brothers, this special goodwill by so powerful a figure as the lord of the land would have surely chafed the men. The later arrest of Benjamin for the theft of the cup would have been viewed as a great boon to spiteful rivals.” Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 791. See also Wilson, *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise*, 162.

\(^{50}\) The allusion to the items of transport suggests that this time the brothers are reenacting the role of the Ishmaelite traders, bringing the other son of Rachel to an uncertain fate.” Ackerman, “Joseph, Judah and Jacob,” 2:93. For this test as a repetition of their first deed see also Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 293.


\(^{52}\) Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, 292.

question of the righteousness of the seed rests on his response. So does the reconciliation of their relationship to Joseph and thus the restoration of the complete twelve sons/tribes of Israel.

Judah begins his speech by acknowledging their predicament: מַה־נְדַבֵרְוּמַה־נִצְטַֹדּ ְ (44:16), they have been found to be unrighteous. The question is—how can they be found to be otherwise? What follows seems to be a confession of sorts, but not necessarily a confession of having stolen the cup. Judah proclaims that all of them are guilty, that מַה־נְדַבֵרְוּמַה־נִצְטַֹדּ ְ (44:16). Earlier, the brothers had associated their predicament in Egypt with their guilt at having sold Joseph into slavery (וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישֶּׁלֶּא חִי נִוּ יְאֳב לְאֲשֵמְיָנַהָלְךָ, 42:21-22). When Judah says, “God has found out the iniquity of your servants,” he seems to be associating their current predicament to their previous sin, just as the brothers had done before. The text painted Judah as the one primarily responsible for Joseph’s fate. Here, Judah recognizes his previous unrighteousness and he is taking responsibility for it. In his speech that follows, after Joseph proclaims that only Benjamin will be taken as a slave, Judah corrects his previous unrighteousness by putting himself in the place of his brother. It

54 Gunkel comments on such interpretations. “It is customary to say at this point that the brothers behaved in a more brotherly fashion toward Benjamin than toward Joseph and that this very improvement was Joseph’s ultimate intention,” by saying that they are “modern intrusions.” Gunkel, Genesis, 433. However, we could easily argue the opposite. Just as source critics were unable to see the purpose of Gen 38 in the Joseph story, they are often unable to “see together” the episodes of the narrative to see how the plot moves from tension to resolution. There seems to be plenty in the narrative that supports the view that the development of Judah’s character is an important aspect of the narrative.

55 Ibid. Contra Gunkel. On the one hand, Gunkel acknowledges that this “misfortune, too, must therefore be caused—in the brothers’ opinion—by their guilt, even though they are convinced that Benjamin is no thief, and even though they do not know what sin they have committed. They do not think of a specific sin (such as the sin against Joseph).” But this is an entirely disjunctive reading of the text that uses psychological reasoning and attempts to get to the thoughts of the characters behind the text rather than narrative reasoning and “seeing together” the events of the text as presented by the author. Whatever we might think seems most realistic, the narrative has all along been making the connection to the original Joseph incident of Gen 37 and the brothers themselves have already expressed that their predicament is due to their behavior toward Joseph. So with Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 137.
is precisely at the point when Judah makes this statement in 44:33-34 (וְעַתּ הְיֵשֶּבֶנְאַ עַבְדְךָּ תַחַתְהַנַעַרְעְֶּ בְֶּ דְלַאדֹנְיַ יְוְהְנַעְריִימַאֶּח ְ ייו, 44:33) that we have reached the climactic and final turning point in the narrative.  

Judah has proven his righteousness and preserved the seed of promise. Everything that happens through the rest of the book is the dénouement and is the direct result (in a logic of plot) of Judah’s presenting himself as a substitute for Benjamin.

The Dénouement: The Righteousness and Survival of the Seed

From here on out the plot of both the Genesis and Joseph narratives are unraveled and resolved. Joseph has become ruler over his family, just as his dreams suggested. The text even seems to hint that Joseph has received the blessing of the first born, inasmuch as he receives a double portion of the blessing and the prominent position in the inheritance (48:5). This fully resolves the plot of the Joseph story. But even more than these final chapters bring closure to the Joseph story, they bring closure to the plot of Genesis. Joseph and his eleven brothers are reunited so that the tribes of Israel are once more intact. Just as Judah’s recognition and confession of his sin in Gen 38 led to the restoration of his line through Perez and Zerah in Gen 38, now Judah’s confession and the reversal of his

56 Gunkel is not always without narrative sensitivity, “Now, finally, after such a long climb, the narrative has finally reached the climax.” Gunkel, *Genesis*, 436. Westermann is not exaggerating when he points out that “[a]ll exegetes regard and evaluate this passage as the high point of the story.” Westermann, *Genesis* 37-50, 137.

57 In my reading, we come to the dénouement because Joseph is satisfied that Judah has passed his test. In Gunkel and O’Brien especially, Judah effects a change in Joseph and Joseph can no longer continue in his hardened state. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 434; O’Brien, “The Contribution of Judah’s Speech, Genesis 44:18–34, to the Characterization of Joseph,” 445. However, if it is true, as I am suggesting, that the test be read in conjunction with Abraham’s, then the test is about the change in Joseph’s brothers, not about Joseph’s change. Also, these interpretations tend to read Joseph’s character (e.g. 47:13-26) by modern sensibilities and against the grain of the data given (that the Egyptians credit Joseph for their salvation, or Joseph’s persistent weeping over his brothers). See also Wilson, *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise*, 167–168.
unrighteous act has led to the restoration of the tribes of Israel. These last chapters of Genesis paint a picture of a restored Israel that, even though refugees in Egypt, can look forward to the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham.\textsuperscript{58}

Genesis 47 is concerned with the arrangements that lead to the preservation of the twelve sons and their families. In Gen 46, God reconfirms his commitment to Jacob and his family even though they are going down to Egypt, for he says, אֲנִי אָרֵד מֶשְׁרֵי מִצְרַיִם וְאֲנִי עַלְךָ. The preservation of Jacob’s line and the idea that all of Jacob’s sons fall within the line of promise is confirmed by the list of those who go down to Egypt in 46:8–27. Once the family arrives in Egypt and is settled in the land, the text recounts how Joseph successfully preserves all of Egypt during the harsh years of the famine. It is also significant that during this time Jacob’s family וַיִּプְרֹתָּו וַיִּרְבּוּ. This is vocabulary reminiscent of the first blessing from Gen 1:28. To experience this blessing is to return to God’s creation-sanctuary. In a sense, we have an indication that the righteousness of the seed has led us back to God’s creation-sanctuary. In fact, this is the first instance of these two verbs (be fruitful and multiply) that records an actual state of affairs.\textsuperscript{59} Everywhere else they are blessings, or commands, or reassurances.\textsuperscript{60}

In Gen 48 Jacob blesses Joseph, essentially granting him a double portion of the blessing and the blessing of the firstborn.\textsuperscript{61} Also, Jacob grants to Joseph the plot of land


\textsuperscript{59}Hamilton, \textit{The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50}, 622.


\textsuperscript{61}For other views on Joseph’s inheritance as firstborn see Van der Merwe, “Joseph as successor of Jacob”; Seebass, “The Joseph Story, Genesis 48 and the Canonical Process,” 31; Hoop, “‘Then Israel Bowed Himself ...’ (Genesis 47.31),” 474. Cf. 1 Chr 5:1-2.
in Shechem, לעל איךו (rendered “one portion more than your brothers” by the NASB or “rather than to your brothers” by the ESV). This fulfills our expectation from Joseph’s dreams, which according to the logic of Genesis, led us to expect that Joseph would supplant the firstborn.62

In Gen 49 Jacob gathers his sons and says to them ע״א לכב את א׳שר קרא אח״כ באתרות הלימי. Based on how Jacob describes what he is about to tell them and based on the content itself, it seems these are best thought of as oracles rather than blessings. There has been nearly as much controversy over this chapter as there has been over Gen 38.63 The focus is usually on Judah and Joseph as these are the most prominent figures in the narrative and, likewise, in the oracles. But rather than become embroiled in controversial issues we can note the more important features of the text that nearly all interpreters agree with. These important features will help us better understand how the text functions in the plot of Genesis.

The first important feature of this text is that for each brother mentioned in greater detail the oracle corresponding to that brother relates to the detail provided.64 This is the case for Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, and Joseph. In each of these cases the brother is

62 But the text also confirms that all the brothers are in the line of promise and so Joseph’s selection as replacement for the firstborn does not preclude inclusion of the other brothers in the line of promise as it was for others. All of Jacob’s family will come up out of Egypt and return to the land God promised Abraham.


64 Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50, 647.
clearly judged either negatively or positively, as opposed to the other brothers for whom the judgment is not as clear. Thus Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are judged negatively perhaps losing their prominence as a result, while Judah and Levi receive more positive judgments. In fact, the next clear characteristic of the text is that Judah and Joseph are given places of prominence. The final important feature of the text that has received consensus among interpreters is that the oracles are proleptic. Being proleptic, they anticipate not the fate of the brother but the fate of the tribe associated with that brother. This is done both by the details given in Jacob’s statements (e.g. Simeon, Levi, Judah, and Zebulun) and by the narrator’s closing statement in 49:28, כִּי אֲלֵיהָ שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. Thus there is a movement from sons (49:1) to tribes as if to bridge the time of the text to the time of the text’s provenance.

Given these more or less uncontroversial features of the text we may now be able to draw some conclusions about the function of Gen 49. First of all, the purpose of the text may be partly to bridge the time of the text to the time of the original readers. In other words, the readers were to understand this text to be about them—it is their history and the actions of their forefathers have affected their current situation. This idea, coupled with the fact that the oracle relating to each brother is positive or negative based on their actions as described in the text would indicate that the degree to which the various tribes participate in the promises of God is related to the righteousness of their forefathers. As a final note, we

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65 There has been a positive tendency to look at the “blessing” of Judah more critically and some have begun to see it in a slightly more negative light at least in the sense that some of the references point to Judah’s past sins. However, the overall evaluation remains generally positive. Edwin M. Good, “‘Blessing’ on Judah, Gen 49:8-12,” JBL 82 (1963): 427–32; Calum M. Carmichael, “Some Sayings in Genesis 49,” JBL 88 (1969): 435–44.

66 For these reasons it is not quite true, as Treves asserts, that “this poem is presented as Jacob’s blessing to his sons.” Marco Treves, “Shiloh (Genesis 49:10),” JBL 85 (1966): 354.
also observe that the line of promise is both righteous and unrighteous. Implications of this will be discussed in more detail below.

Finally, we arrive at Gen 50 and two final aspects of dénouement. First we note the deaths and burials of Jacob and Joseph (49:29-50:14, 50:24-26). Both of these narratives strongly emphasize the importance of returning to the land and thus constitute a sort of apologetic in defense of their temporary sojourn in Egypt. This is not new to Gen 50, God’s appearance to Jacob in Gen 46:2-4 and even God’s somewhat cryptic statement to Abram in Gen 15:13-16 prepare the reader for this turn of events.\(^67\) However, just as in the case of the burial of Sarah, at least one significant purpose of these texts is to assure the reader that the establishment of the patriarchs in the land has been satisfactorily accomplished to the degree that is appropriate for the respective stage of the plot.\(^68\) In this case, these texts defend the sojourn in Egypt as both approved by God and temporary. This allows our anticipation of the fulfillment of the land promise to be deferred into the future especially since this is not a part of the tension that drives the plot of Genesis.

The last and most important aspect of the dénouement appears in Gen 50:15-21. This passage has a parallel in 45:1-15 when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. These two passages occupy prominent places in the text.\(^69\) The first appears in the immediate vicinity of the climactic moment of the Joseph and Genesis plots, just after Judah’s speech


\(^{68}\) Ibid., 228. We will naturally connect the burial of Jacob to the purchase of land for the burial of Sarah in the land of Canaan but Sailhamer also points to a possible connection to Gen 24 when Abraham makes his servant swear not to take a wife for Isaac from the Canaanites. Cf. Gen 24:2 and 47:29. Just as the final narratives of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת confirm both the importance of the land and the uniqueness of Israel within Canaan, so do these final narratives in the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת confirm the importance of the promise of the land and the uniqueness of Israel within Egypt.

\(^{69}\) Similarly, Wenham points out that the “statements about God’s overruling of human affairs are undoubtedly the key to understanding the whole Joseph story.” Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 432.
and Joseph’s revelation of his identity. The second occurs just before the death of Joseph at the very end of the book of Genesis as a penultimate statement of the book. Whereas Joseph’s very last words look forward to and prepare us for the continuing story of the Pentateuch, this penultimate statement looks back as a summary of the significance of the Joseph and Genesis stories.

Both of these texts express a logic that is crucial for understanding the significance of the resolution to the tension of the Genesis plot. In these statements Joseph comforts his brothers,

5 וַתְּאַלְּנֵי הֵם שָלָה תַּעֲנֵהוּ
6 וְעַתּ הְאַל־תֵּע צְב וְאַל־יִחַרְבְּּוּ יִכְּרֶ בֵּינתָה
וְעַתּ הִשְׁאַר יוֹרֵב בְּבַקָּר וְעַתּ הִשָּׁנִים אֱשֶּׁר חַרְשְׁוְק צִיר׃
7 וַיִּשְׂלַחְּ הֵנַּה שְלַחְּתֶּם שָלָה תַעֲנֵהוּ לָכֵם לְהַחֲיוֹתֵ לָכֵם לְפֶלֶג הָגְדֹל ה׃
8 וְעַתּ הְלֹא־אַתֶּם שָלַחְתֶּם שָלָה תַעֲנֵהוּ לָכֵם אֱלֹהִים

70 “I would submit that 50:20 is not just the lesson of the Joseph story, but the conclusion of the book of Genesis as well.” Walton, Genesis, 723.

71 Looking at Gen 50:20 and the phrase “you meant it for evil but God meant it for good,” Gaiser argues that due to the canonical shaping of Genesis there may be a connection back to the tree of life. Thus we should read the Joseph story as the “Adamic story.” This is really an alternate attempt at making a connection back to the earlier parts of Genesis. I believe the connection is in the plot and that the plot rules the connections between motifs rather than the motifs themselves establishing connections and guiding our interpretation. This is a significant difference and a key aspect of the role of plot in exegesis and theology. Frederick J. Gaiser, “‘You Meant Evil Against Me; but God Meant It for Good’: Thinking Genesis 50:20,” in God, Evil, and Suffering: Essays in Honor of Paul R. Sponheim, 2000, 39.
Here we see that it was not because of the righteousness of the seed, that the seed was preserved, but rather it was in spite of the unrighteousness of the seed that God has preserved the promised line. From the beginning of the Genesis narrative we have been convinced that the promised seed that will lead us back to God’s creation-sanctuary must be righteous in order to succeed at its task. This has been confirmed throughout the book whenever the righteousness of the seed was in doubt. And yet the doubts persisted and the righteousness of the seed seemed to deteriorate, culminating in the dissonance of the Jacob narrative and the nadir in Gen 37 and 38. The Genesis narrative seems to be suggesting that the righteousness of Noah, Abraham, and Judah was both necessary and sufficient to move us forward toward resolution but never enough to lead us back to God’s creation-sanctuary. Even if Judah has proved “righteous enough” will the narrative continue along this trajectory? In each succeeding case the unrighteousness of the seed gradually increased until it threatened to take on the dimensions of Cain’s and put an end to the program altogether. Even with Judah’s final victory, can this be a satisfactory ending to the plot of Genesis?

Joseph’s comments at these two crucial points in the narrative answer this question and provide ultimate resolution for the Genesis plot. According to the logic of Joseph’s statements, the seed is unreliable, tending always toward unrighteousness. Genesis 49 even points out that the line of promise includes both those that are ultimately judged as righteous as well as those judged as unrighteous. The seed itself cannot ensure its own survival. God is the one who will ultimately ensure the survival of the seed, and, by

72 Partly based on comments like these, Brueggemann argues that the narrative centers on the giving of life and that it all hangs on the life of Joseph. I believe this is not far from correct except that he has failed to associate the Joseph narrative with the plot of Genesis. This is often the case, that interpreters recognize important aspects of the text like reconciliation, preservation of life, etc. However, they are not able to see the ultimate significance of these motifs because they do not place them in the context of the larger narrative. Walter Brueggemann, “Life and Death in Tenth Century Israel,” JAAR 40 (1972): 100.
implication, the righteousness of the seed that will eventually lead us back to God’s creation-sanctuary.
CHAPTER 9
ASSESSMENT AND IMPLICATIONS: THE ROLE OF PLOT
IN EXEGESIS AND THEOLOGY

In the beginning I noted that this dissertation operates at two levels of inquiry. The first level relates to the nature of plot and its impact on narrative and the second to how a nuanced understanding of plot shapes our reading of Genesis. In order to arrive at the implications of our understanding of plot on exegesis we will work ourselves out of these nested loops by first of all summarizing the nature of the argument. I will posit here that any strategy we develop for reading plot is, due to the nature of plot, both subjective and circular. This cannot and should not be avoided, but acknowledged. Then I will summarize the support for the reading strategy that has been presented throughout this study. This will be done first at the level of the Genesis plot and then at the level of the plot of Scripture.

The Nature of the Argument: Assessing Plot

In Longacre’s analysis of the macrostructure of the Joseph narrative he begins by pointing out that his argumentation is necessarily circular. Some may find this disturbing. In fact, White suggested some time ago that the “reluctance in Old Testament studies to move toward a more literary mode of analysis is due to the uncertainty of the criteria by which one should analyze large units of text. This opens the possibility of excessive subjectivity and arbitrariness.”¹ It is quite true that literary analyses are often plagued by

¹Hugh C. White, “Reuben and Judah: Duplicates or Complements?” in Understanding the Word (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 74.
excessive subjectivity and arbitrariness. But this does not mean we can avoid the circular argumentation that Longacre speaks of. Circularity is a feature of linguistic analysis since, as Longacre goes on to point out, “the whole legislates the parts, while, in turn, a study of the parts is necessary to the comprehension of the whole.”

And herein lays the rub. If plot is a part of the discourse structure of the text then we have no choice but to engage the text at the level of plot. The plot of Scripture will legislate our reading of the plot of Genesis, which will in turn legislate our reading of each of the subplots we find within the book. At the same time, every lower linguistic level, starting with phonology and working up, will inform our reading of plot, just as the episodes in Genesis inform our reading of the whole. Circularity cannot be avoided.

So how can we be sure that plot is a feature of the text? In chapter two I argued that the book of Genesis presents itself as historical discourse about Israel and that historical discourse is necessarily mimetic. Even if this argumentation is disputable, it more than justifies an investigation to determine the possibility that plot is the organizing principle for each.

In chapter three I used an extension of the Prague Linguistic Circle’s Functional Sentence Perspective to argue that plot makes a coherent whole of a series of episodes by interconnecting them within a thematic progression from tension to resolution in what Aristotle refers to as a “single action.” Reading for plot, therefore, is a matter of “grasping together” or “seeing together” these episodes in relation to one another and within that unifying structure of movement from beginning to end; from tension to resolution. Therefore, since we have shown that plot is likely present in the text as a matter of the nature

of historical discourse we can move on to bolster our argument by positing a specific strategy for reading Genesis and Scripture according to plot and by then applying it to the text to see if the our strategy “fits” the text. If we can show that our identification of plot offers a measure of “fittedness” then we can say that we have some degree of support for our identification of the plot.

The question is: how can we assess or measure fittedness? To come to some sort of method of assessment I suggest it will be helpful to recognize the distinction between the plot of the narrative, which is inherent in the text and our identification of plot, which is an attempt at spiraling in on the plot that inheres in the text. Therefore if our identification of plot matches the plot of the narrative then our identification of plot will make sense of the organization of the text. In other words our identification of plot will not be forced on the text but it will rather engage its various features such as its structure, motifs, *Leitworte*, or character development to name just a few.

In what follows I will attempt to take a synthetic look at the plots of Genesis and Scripture and assess them according to three measures of “fittedness.” In the first case, our identification of plot or our plot strategy will provide a measure of fittedness if it is a well formed plot (it has a beginning, middle, and end that moves from tension to resolution). This implies that as we read the text we will be able to see how the beginning introduces a tension that is resolved in the end and that in the middle each episode connects the one before it to the one after it in a chain that creates a “single action.” This is a subjective assessment that helps us develop a general sense of whether the plot is inherent in the text or foreign to it. The second measure is an extension of the first. There are certain features of the Genesis text that are widely recognized, such as the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure of the book, chiastic structures of whole תּוֹלְדוֹת strands, and certain motifs or intertextual connections that are consistent throughout. We can assume these motifs and patterns are used throughout the book because they contribute to the message the author wishes to convey. If the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure or any of
these motifs or intertextual relationships is found to work independently of or contrary to our identification of plot then we should seriously doubt our strategy. If, on the other hand, the proposed plot does engage with the structure and the motifs in a way that highlights their significance, then we have strong support for our strategy. Thirdly, in the book of Genesis there are certain features of the text that have long remained conundra for interpreters, or at least they have evaded a broad consensus. These include a satisfactory understanding of the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure, the purpose of the birth of Ishmael at the chiastic center of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת, or the relationship of certain texts to their contexts (e.g. Gen 26, 34, and 38), among many others. If our suggested plot helps us to better understand these enigmatic features of the text then we have further support for our identification of plot.

It is important to note that I have referred to these three criteria for assessing the plot of Genesis as measures of “fittedness.” Fittedness is apropos because it implies a degree of subjectivity that necessarily inheres the nature of the argument. If we cannot avoid circularity and subjectivity, then we must embrace it. That is not to say that we should be satisfied with lesser evidence and so lower the bar for our argumentation, it is to say that we must be satisfied with lesser certainty and be more modest in our assertions. Therefore I will not claim to have definitively identified the plot of Genesis and Scripture; rather it is more in line with the evidence and the nature of the argument to make the following two summary statements of what I believe I have been able to demonstrate. First, I believe it is possible to assert with reasonable assurance that Genesis has a plot in the Aristotelian sense according to which I have defined plot, that is, as a movement from tension to resolution that creates a “single action.” Genesis does not merely come to a convenient stopping point in preparation for the continuing story of the Pentateuch, but it has its own tension that arrives at resolution independent of the Pentateuch, though it is certainly an episode within the larger pentateuchal and biblical story. My second assertion is that the strategy for reading plot presented here is better than any other suggested strategy. I find it extremely unlikely that my strategy for
reading plot is the best possible strategy conceivable. Instead, I believe that further reading will help us spiral in on an even better strategy for reading the plot of Genesis. Throughout chapters four through eight I have attempted to assemble the evidence for these two assertions and so in the following section I will only summarize some of the main points.

As for the plot of Scripture, here we must settle with even less certitude because it falls outside the scope of this dissertation. However, as I have consistently argued, because Genesis is a macro-episode within the biblical plot which therefore impacts our interpretation of the plot of Genesis, we were required to attempt a preliminary reading of the biblical plot. This was done in chapter four where we leveraged the syntagmatic nature of plot by exegeting the prologue and first תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus (Gen 1-4) in an attempt to identify its tension. This preliminary reading must then be reviewed as being confirmed or denied by our final reading of Genesis. That is the role of the third section of this chapter and it is again a matter of spiraling in on the meaning and function of the text.

Assessing the Plot of Genesis

Chapter four explored what we referred to as the Prologue to Genesis and the first תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus. We argued that these chapters set in motion both the plots of Scripture and the book of Genesis. We might say that Gen 1-2 paints a picture of the ideal state of human existence; creation is a temple in which people are able to experience the unmediated presence of YHWH God and the blessing of his provision and protection. Unfortunately, this state of affairs comes to an abrupt end in Gen 3 with the fall of humankind. As a result of sin we are removed from God’s presence and are now outside his provision and protection. The curse of the fall has reversed the blessing of the original creation resulting in a tension for the reader who wonders if it will be possible to return to God’s creation-sanctuary. But even at the center of the curse (Gen 3:15) the reader is offered hope when God indicates that through the seed of the woman humanity will experience victory over the serpent.
On the basis of our exegesis of Gen 3 we argued that we can define a preliminary strategy for reading the plot of the Bible. The tension that drives the plot of Scripture is the return of humanity to God’s creation-sanctuary. Genesis 3:15 indicates that this return will come about somehow through the seed of the woman and its victory over the serpent. If return to God’s creation-sanctuary will come through the promised seed of the woman and if we read for plot, then naturally our interest as the story continues will be in the seed of the woman. Here already we can see the influence of plot on our reading because our interest in plot influences our attention to textual detail. Even before we begin Gen 4 the plot has prepared us to watch for the promised seed.

Genesis 4, however, introduces its own twist, or tension, into the narrative. We might expect the seed to be Cain, or Abel, or both. But as the story develops we discover that neither Cain nor Abel can be the promised seed. Abel cannot be the seed because he does not survive and Cain because he is not triumphant in his struggle with sin (Gen 4:7). In the end, Seth continues the line of the seed of promise but not before introducing the reader to a new tension in the narrative: Will the seed be righteous and will it survive to lead us back to God’s creation-sanctuary? This, we proposed, is the tension that drives the plot of the Genesis narrative.

I would argue that already in Gen 4 we can point to a degree of fittedness with the plot as we are proposing it. In my exegesis of Gen 4 I called it the matrix of motifs for the book of Genesis. Many of the most important motifs in the book of Genesis find their origin in this chapter. The fact that the inauguration of the tension that defines the plot, or we could say the matrix of the plot, is collocated with the matrix of motifs offers a measure of fittedness. Even if we have not properly identified the plot of Genesis, we at least have some support for finding it in Gen 4.

The rest of Genesis divides into four תּוֹלְדוֹת plexuses according to the ten remaining תּוֹלְדוֹת headings of the book. We can already see in the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure of the
book a convergence with our plot strategy. First, we found that those תּוֹלְדוֹת strands that are linear genealogies work together with the narrative תּוֹלְדוֹת strands to trace the seed of promise in one continuous line from the beginning to the end of the narrative. In other words, the structure of the book picks up the major interest of the plot, which is to follow the line of promise. Those תּוֹלְדוֹת strands that were segmented genealogies, however, usually served to trace the expansion of the line not of promise outside the land of promise. This effectively cut off the line not of promise from the line of promise and that particular line was never engaged again. The segmented genealogy frequently referred to as the table of nations served a different purpose that was also in line with our plot strategy. The table of nations traced the spread of the nations, including the line of promise, throughout the earth. We argued that its purpose was to relate the line of promise to the line not of promise without cutting off the line not of promise. This effectively keeps hope alive for the line not of promise so that it also will be able to return to God’s creation-sanctuary through the line of promise. Finally, the arrangement of the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure also fits with the plot. When multiple strands make up a single plexus the order is linear genealogy, narrative, and then segmented genealogy. In this way the linear genealogy joins the current narrative to the previous so that the line of promise continues uninterrupted. The segmented genealogy, as noted, clarifies the exclusion of the line not of promise from the covenant relationship. We can say that the תּוֹלְדוֹת structure exhibits all three characteristics of fittedness. It engages our identification of the plot, we have a recognized feature of the text that is best explained in the context of the plot, and the plot actually helps us to better understand the variety of תּוֹלְדוֹת headings and their arrangement—a feature of the text that has long puzzled exegetes.

Next we can go through each of the remaining תּוֹלְדוֹת plexuses and make comments of fittedness along the way. In the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus, we saw that the narrative most certainly picks up on the righteousness and survival of the seed just as in the Cain and Abel narrative the unrighteousness of the seed threatened the survival of the seed. But one
seed, Noah, emerged as righteous and was able to preserve the line of promise. At the same
time the narrative showed that the unrighteousness of the seed has a startling tendency to
spread into chaos and that God, through the flood and his covenant with Noah, performed an
act of recreation and brought new order out of the chaos of evil. The Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus,
which is an episode in the middle of the Genesis plot, without a doubt engages the plot of
Genesis as we have identified it because it picks up the theme of the plot and advances it,
thus serving as a connection between the episode that came before and the episode that
comes after it.

In the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus we also noted that the narrative engages our
strategy for reading plot. In this episode we found two major tensions, one of which operated
primarily at the level of the plot of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת and one at the level of the Genesis plot.
The first was the identification of the seed which God promised to Abraham and the second
was the righteousness of Abraham. These two tensions converged in Gen 22. According to
our exegesis, the idea that Abraham must be righteous was confirmed throughout the
narrative especially through the Lot narratives where Lot’s lack of righteousness served as a
foil to Abraham’s righteousness. The wife-sister stories, on the other hand, worked together
in the structure of the narrative to bring in to question the righteousness of Abraham as well
as to threaten the continuation of the line of promise. The climax of the narrative occurred in
Gen 22 with God’s test of Abraham. Because Abraham proved his fear of God (his
righteousness) the seed was preserved and God’s promises to Abraham were confirmed.

We should point out that our exegesis of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus is very
much dependent upon our identification of plot, just as it was in Gen 4. I would again
reiterate that this is the nature of plot and we cannot avoid this kind of circularity. However,
we still meet our first measure of fittedness because we can confidently assert with almost all
exegetes that the identification of Abraham’s seed is a key tension in the narrative. This
commonly held observation alone provides support for our identification of plot. The same is
true of the righteousness of the seed. I am offering a specific reading of the survival and the righteousness of the seed but it is quite clear that righteousness is a key motif in the Abraham narrative.

The plot as identified here also engages widely understood features of the Abraham narrative. It engages the promises and covenants between God and Abraham, the tension over the identity of Abraham’s progeny, the wife-sister stories, and the chiastic structure of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת strand. In addition, I believe the understanding of plot offered here also helps to clarify the purpose of each of these features. For example we have been able to suggest that the birth of Ishmael occurs at the center of the chiastic structure because it is the point of greatest confusion over the identity of the seed. From the beginning of the narrative until the birth of Ishmael we moved toward increasing confusion over the identity of the seed and from this point on we move toward increasing clarity. Likewise, we were better able to understand the role of Lot as a foil to Abraham and the role of the wife-sister stories in bringing into question Abraham’s righteousness. This in turn helps us to see how Gen 22 occurs at the climax of the narrative where both the righteousness and survival of the seed are in greatest doubt.

In both the Noah וֹלְדוֹת and Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexuses we finished with a sense of satisfaction that we are moving forward successfully toward resolution of the plot. In the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus we saw the promised line preserved through righteous Noah and God’s establishment of a covenant with Noah. In the end, however, questions were raised about the righteousness of his line. In the Terah תּוֹלְדֹת plexus we also saw that the promised line was preserved through the righteousness of Abraham, but again the righteousness was brought into question because though the narrative depicts Abraham as righteous, it makes it clear that he also falters. In both of these narratives, the righteousness of the seed plays a key role in the survival of the seed.
In the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת our identification of plot is most in doubt. The narrative does not engage with the righteousness motif as directly as in the Noah and Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת strands. For example, in the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת strand words for righteousness or blamelessness appear ten times (צדקֵי) Gen 15:6, 18:19; צְדִיק Gen 18:23, 24, 25, 26, 28; 20:4; נָחַת Gen 20:5; and יְהוָה תֹּם Gen 17:1) and in each case these mentions are significant to the motif of righteousness. In the case of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת strand such words occur only twice (צדקֵי Gen 30:33 and תומ Gen 25:27) and in both cases the usage appears to be peripheral to the righteousness motif. If we take the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת on its own, then righteousness does not appear to be an explicitly dominant motif. On the other hand I would argue that it is implicit in the narrative due to the predominance of the motif of deception. This much can be asserted without assuming the plot as suggested here.

However, when we look at the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת in the context of the plot of Genesis, we can go further. I argued that the purpose of the third wife-sister story in Gen 26 was to associate the deception of the seed in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת with the deception of the seed in the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת. Since the key role of the wife-sister stories in the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת was to question the righteousness of the seed, I concluded that Gen 26 thus serves to associate the deception motif with the seed’s lack of righteousness. Therefore, when taken in the context of Genesis the Jacob narrative can be seen to engage the righteousness motif, even if only implicitly.

The tension of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת began primarily with the oracle received by Rebekah. The oracle in essence informed us that Jacob, rather than Esau, would be the preferred line of seed. We argued that this was threatened by Jacob’s unrighteousness. Jacob’s deception of his father and brother incited Esau’s anger and resulted in a threat to his life that forced him to flee to his uncle in Padan Aram. Not only is the survival of Jacob’s line at risk due to Esau’s threats but Jacob has been forced to leave the land of promise contrary to our expectations from the line of promise. In the end, this is resolved when Jacob
returns and Esau, surprisingly, poses no threat. Jacob and his children are established in the land of promise as the line of promise. In this way the narrative comes to a satisfactory conclusion at the level of the plot of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת. However, I argued that at the level of the plot of Genesis we are left with a strong sense of dissonance because Jacob has been established in the line of promise without having been established as righteous.

So far, I have argued that the righteousness of the seed and the survival of the seed are both motifs inherent in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת, even if only implicitly. However, the dissonance that arises at the end of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת can be interpreted as running counter to the measure of fittedness that we are searching for in order to confirm our identification of plot. This is the point at which the argument becomes most subjective. I have tried to argue that this dissonance is intentional, that the author places it at the end of a major section to create doubts in the reader that challenge their reading and increase the tension that is experienced. The only way to confirm whether or not this reading provides a measure of fittedness is to continue reading to see if the author engages and somehow resolves the dissonance. We will do that when we move into the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת. For now, let us point out the fact that we have argued that both the righteousness of the seed and the survival of the seed are important themes in the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת and so they hint at a degree of fittedness with the plot of Genesis as we have identified it.

We can now move on to our other two measures of fittedness. We noted the chiastic structure of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת strand, the wife-sister story in Gen 26, the rape of Dinah in Gen 34, the important motif of deception that runs at many levels throughout the narrative, interaction with the surrounding nations, and also the motif of struggling. In my exegesis of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus each of these features contributed significantly to the development of the plot of Genesis. Again, some of these features have also been somewhat enigmatic, such as the purpose of Gen 26, which many have seen as an intrusion to the Jacob narrative. In the exegesis provided here, Gen 26 creates an intertextual link between the
unrighteousness of Isaac and the unrighteousness of Abraham. Isaac, along with his seed, is unrighteous just as Abraham is. In addition, Gen 26 and 34 appear in parallel positions in the chiastic structure of the תּוֹלְדוֹת strand and serve in a way similar to the wife-sister stories of the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת by bringing into question the righteousness of the seed. As a result, we are justified in arguing that our interpretation offers a degree of fittedness in both of these last two measures as well.

Finally we come to the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus. Here again we can find the themes of the righteousness and survival of the seed without assuming the plot. The righteousness of the seed arises when Joseph’s ten older brothers plot to kill him and then decide to sell him into slavery instead. Then Er and Onan are explicitly described as wicked and Judah declares “she is more righteous than I” or “she is righteous, not I.” In both of these cases the unrighteousness of the seed interacts with the survival of the seed just as we have seen elsewhere, namely, the unrighteousness of the seed puts the survival of the seed at risk. In the first case the survival of Joseph’s line is at risk and in the second the survival of Judah’s line.

When these themes are read in the context of the plot of Genesis it becomes even clearer that the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus interacts with the plot of Genesis according to our strategy. Picking up with the dissonance that we were left with at the end of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת we find that indeed the unrighteousness of the seed does threaten the survival of the seed. This becomes clear in dramatic fashion in Gen 37 and 38 after Joseph’s own brothers become Cain-like by plotting to kill him. In Gen 38 God himself intervenes to cut wicked Er and Onan off from the line of promise. Then, when Judah becomes complicit in the unrighteousness of his sons we find the first significant use of צדק since the Terah תּוֹלְדוֹת—“she is righteous, not I.” With these words, the dissonance of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת has dissipated into dissolution bringing the narrative to a high point of tension. After the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת where Jacob was confirmed in the covenant despite his apparent lack of righteousness the
reader might wonder if righteousness is all that important to the survival of the seed after all. After Gen 37 and 38, however, it becomes clear. The narrative effect produced is that the reader becomes acutely aware that righteousness is important and the lack of it has put the survival of the seed at serious risk.

Having come to this realization, the seed is now put to the test, just like Abraham was put to the test in Gen 22. At the crucial moment, Judah, who has come to represent the ten brothers, steps up and begins a lengthy speech with the second significant reemergence of צדק since the Abraham narrative. Now Judah declares to Joseph, “How can we prove our righteousness [וּמַה־נִצְטַדּ][וּמַה־נִצְטַדּוּ]?” This is a rhetorical question that expresses Judah’s sense of futility in their situation. There is no way to prove their righteousness and Judah does the only thing left to do. He resigns himself to fulfilling the vow to his father and volunteers to take the place of Benjamin. In doing so, however, he does not realize that he has ironically done the only thing that can be done to prove their righteousness.

There is also another level on which the narrative interacts with the survival and righteousness of the seed. The famine that struck for seven years also threatened the survival of the seed; and not just the survival of the seed but the survival of the nations as well. At this level God preserves the seed by taking advantage of the seed’s unrighteousness. In doing so the author answers a nagging question that emerges as we read the story of Genesis. If the seed must be righteous, and if the seed continually demonstrates its unrighteousness and thus threatens its own survival, how can we ever hope for a seed that will return us to God’s creation-sanctuary? The answer is that God himself is at work to ensure the survival of the promised seed.

With this conclusion to the Genesis narrative we find, in my opinion, the ultimate sense of fittedness and the ultimate measure of the first criterion for engagement with the plot. Not only does the Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת engage the plot of Genesis as identified here, it brings it through climax to the resolution of the tension that has driven the whole narrative.
Will the seed be righteous and survive? Yes, because God himself will provide for the righteousness and survival of the seed.

We can also find support for our reading strategy in the other two measures of fittedness. The Jacob תּוֹלְדוֹת strand is marked first and foremost by the intrusion of the Judah and Tamar narrative. This reading strategy interacts with the Judah and Tamar narrative. It also interacts with the Joseph narrative as a story of family reconciliation and as an explanation for Israel’s exile to Egypt in preparation for the book of Exodus. Not only does it engage with these features of the text, this reading strategy also helps us better understand them. Most importantly, we not only understand the Judah and Tamar narrative and its role in the context of the Joseph narrative but also in the context of the whole Genesis story. We can then better understand the significance of Judah’s role as representative for his brothers, his transformation as a character, the importance of the reconciliation of the family, the preservation of the seed through the famine, and even the preparation for the Exodus narrative. All of these come into clearer focus and give us a strong sense of fittedness, supporting our strategy for reading the plot of Genesis.

If it is the nature of plot that it makes a whole out of a series of events, then it makes sense that we will only be able to judge a strategy for reading plot based on an assessment of the whole. In my subjective view of the text, the plot offered here provides a satisfactory way of viewing the text as a whole even if improvements can be expected. It only remains to consider the limited evidence for our strategy of reading the plot of Scripture.

Assessing the Plot of Scripture

If plot can work at all as a strategy for reading Scripture then we can expect that at the beginning we will find indication of the tension that drives the plot. Therefore, if Scripture has a plot then we can be confident that we can at least attempt a first guess at the tension by reading the early chapters of Genesis. In the exegesis presented here we identified
the tension of the plot of Scripture as the quest to return to God’s creation-sanctuary through the promised seed of the woman. We can now assess our reading of the plot of Scripture with respect to Genesis according to our three measures of fittedness in the same way that we assessed our reading of the Genesis plot with respect to each הַתּוֹלְדוֹת plexus.

As we consider whether or not Genesis engages the plot of Scripture we should make note of precisely what we are looking for. We are not likely to find much of the temple in Genesis since it does not emerge until the book of Exodus. However, in Gen 1-3 the idea of being in God’s temple was expressed especially in the blessing of 1:28, the richness of the garden such as described in 2:10-16, and in the impression of living in God’s presence that is given in these early chapters (2:16, 3:8). Along with these motifs we will also look to see indications of the promised seed of the woman.

The first indication that the Genesis narrative engages the tension of the plot of Scripture can be seen in the הַתּוֹלְדוֹת structure of the book which has long been recognized as dividing the text into sections and essentially making of it a single linear genealogy that has been overrun with narrative additions. The fact that the book is structured as a genealogy and that this genealogy highlights a particular line indicates that Genesis in its very structure is designed to trace the line of the promised seed of the woman. This is further supported by the fact that seed is a major Leitwort in Genesis. The word seed (זֶּרַע) appears fifty-nine times (more than 25% of its total occurrences in the Old Testament) and most of these are significant to the motif of the seed of the woman. The seed is important in the story of Cain and Abel, in the plot of Abraham, and the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In my exegesis of Gen 4 I argued that immediately after the tension of the scriptural plot is introduced, the narrative of Cain and Abel engages the expectation of the seed of the woman. The narrative opens with Eve’s giving birth to Cain and her statement קְנֵיהָ אִיתָ אָלֶיהָ. It closes with
Genesis 4 has not generally read in light of Gen 3:15 as I have proposed but these statements and the development of the narrative indicate that it is fitting to do so.

In the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת plexus, Noah is introduced with the statement זֶּהְיְנַחֲמֵנוְּ מִמַעֲשֵנוְּוּ מֵעִצְבוֹןְי דֵינוְּ מִמַע עִמֵּהּ אֲד מ ְ הְאֲשְֶּרְוְר הְּיְהו ְ ה. This naturally builds the expectation that through Noah we should find a reversal of God’s curse on creation. This is a direct connection to the tension of the plot as we have identified it. At the end of the Noah תּוֹלְדוֹת strand we noted several allusions to the original creation account which seem to point to a recreation after the devastation of the flood. This also interacts with the plot by providing hope that through this stabilization of creation we will be able to return to God’s creation-sanctuary. Genesis 9:1 especially points to a return to God’s creation-sanctuary because it repeats a part of the creation blessing in Gen 1:28. In fact Schmutzer has shown that this is a motif which runs (with development) throughout the book of Genesis, as I also noted at the end of the exegesis of the Isaac תּוֹלְדוֹת (Gen 47:27) where we have the first ever report of this blessing actually being fulfilled.

The fruitfulness and multiplication of the seed becomes a part of God’s promises to Abraham and his children (Gen 17:6, 20, 35:11). Through this we can see that the Noachic and Abrahamic covenants work together to move us toward a return to God’s creation-sanctuary. In the Noachic covenant God stabilized creation and in the Abrahamic covenant God gives promises to Abraham that are reminiscent of the Gen 1:28 creation blessing. In other words, if the curses of Gen 3 reversed the creation blessings of Gen 1, then we can read the blessings of Abraham as eventually reversing the curses of Gen 3, thus returning us to God’s creation-sanctuary.

When we glance at each of the details mentioned above we find out not only that there are motifs and features in Genesis that engage the plot of Scripture but we find that they move us forward in our understanding of how we will return to God’s creation-sanctuary and who or what kind of seed the promised seed of the woman will be. For
example, as pointed out by Alexander and others, the book of Genesis carefully delineates the line of seed so that we know eventually to follow Abraham’s line. Then we follow not Ishmael’s or Lot’s but Isaac’s and so on until the twelve tribes of Israel emerge. We also find out that our return to God’s creation-sanctuary will in some way be associated with God fulfilling his promises to Abraham in the Abrahamic covenant that is then passed on through the line of promise. The plot of Genesis itself reinforces the plot of Scripture because we find out that the promised seed of the woman must be righteous and that though its survival is sometimes in doubt, God will ensure that the promised seed survives to provide us a way back to his creation-sanctuary.

We have therefore seen that in many ways the Genesis narrative engages the plot of Scripture and moves it forward toward resolution. This satisfies our first measure of fittedness. But we have also seen already that the plot of Scripture engages important features of the book of Genesis by interacting with the structure of the book, the זֶּרַע Leitwort, the covenants, and the motifs that find their origin in the Cain and Abel narrative. In terms of features of the text that have traditionally been puzzling to interpreters, most of these are likely better explained by their operation within the plot of Genesis rather than the plot of Scripture. Nonetheless, I would argue that by reading Genesis according to the plot of Scripture and by therefore letting the plot shape our reading of Gen 4, we are able to identify a tension in Gen 4 that sets up our reading of the whole book. In this way, we are, in the end, able to have a much better understanding of how the various parts of the book are interconnected into a whole. We can also better understand that the motifs which have their origin in Gen 4 do not merely place emphasis on certain aspects of God’s dealings with his people (for example that God does not prefer one line over another based only on birth order) but we can see that these motifs actually work together in advancing the plot. Even these motifs are interconnected with each other and with the plot of the book.
Again we must emphasize the subjectivity and circularity of this argument, but this does not mitigate the fact that the end result is a powerful argument from fittedness, that the plot as we have identified it is a step in the right direction toward a better reading of Genesis.

**Plot as a Beautiful Theory for Exegesis and Biblical Theology**

Good theories are both simple and complex. They are simple ideas that explain a complex reality. They are both comprehensible and comprehensive. This is what makes a theory beautiful, when we are startled at how something so simple is so powerful in its ability to explain so much of the world around us. These final sections are about the simplicity and power of plot. I am not arguing merely for a reading strategy for the book of Genesis or even for Scripture. I am making an argument for the nature of the text and that a given nature requires a corresponding methodology. The nature of the text determines our approach to the text. If this is true, then it is also true that there will be important implications for the exegesis and theology of Genesis and Scripture.

In the case of exegesis I have argued that if narrative as organized by plot is the highest level discourse of Scripture then plot must be taken into consideration when

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3 Scientists often speak of “beautiful theories” using Einstein’s general theory of relativity as an example. Weinberg offers three characteristics of a beautiful theory: simplicity, inevitability, and symmetry. By simplicity he means simplicity of idea, not mechanical simplicity. By inevitability he means a sense of there being nothing major about the theory that should be changed in order to help it better fit with reality. And finally, by symmetry he means that when reality is looked at from certain variant viewpoints the theory still holds (for example Einstein was not satisfied with his special theory of relativity because it only adhered in certain circumstances—he worked for another ten years to come up with his general theory of relativity). In my “definition” of simplicity I have tried to informally capture the essence of these characteristics. Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory* (1st ed.; New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 134–137.

exegeting any pericope. If we do not see together a text within the context of the plot of Scripture then we risk misinterpretation. In other words, plot provides an important and necessary control in exegesis.

In terms of theology I will argue that if plot is the organizing principle of the biblical narrative, then it must also be the organizing principle of biblical theology. Again it is a matter of the nature of the text. The kind of text we are dealing with determines the way theology arises from the text and should therefore determine our approach to doing theology based on the text. Also once again, plot acts as an important and necessary control for theology.

The Role of Plot in Exegesis

In chapter two I argued for an Aristotelian view of plot according to which plot is the key force that organizes a text both paradigmatically and syntagmatically. I argued that episodes, which often have their own plots, are organized internally (in and of themselves) and externally (relative to one another) so that they are subordinated to the highest level discourse, which is the overarching plot of the narrative. In my application of this understanding of plot to the biblical text, the plot of Scripture is the highest level discourse and thus the organizing principle for the entire biblical text. Genesis is a macro-episode within the plot of Scripture and the episodes of Genesis are sub-episodes and so on.

We can readily see the effect of this dynamic on our reading of Gen 4. In Gen 3 we found the tension of the biblical text and we then read Gen 4 as a narrative that is subordinate to the biblical plot. In doing so, we read with the expectation that the promised seed of the woman would be found in this chapter. It is only by reading in this way that we were able to identify the tension of the Genesis narrative as being the expectation that the promised seed of the woman must survive and must be righteous. In other words the plot of
Scripture directly affected our exegesis of Gen 4 and, likewise, all of the Genesis narrative. This is an example of the power of plot to guide exegesis.

In chapter two I referred to this as potential energy stored in the text. When the author introduces a tension in the narrative, he uses the kinetic energy exerted in authoring the text to store potential energy in the plot of the text. In a very real way the plot stores potential energy like a spring that has been loaded through the exertion of a force. Through the potential energy stored in the plot the author is able to exert a force on the reader through time and space that guides the reader’s interpretation of the text. It does this because once the readers identify, or experience, the tension of the plot their attention is focused on the details of the text that can potentially lead to its resolution. Certain details of the text become more prominent because of their potential to resolve the tension. This dynamic is perhaps most evident in a “whodunit” where the reader is constantly looking for clues to the identity of the villain. In the case of Gen 4 the detail that became more prominent is the birth of Eve’s children since we read this detail in the light of the tension and therefore as having the potential to fulfill the role of the promised seed of Gen 3:15.

When explained in this way we can see the significance of plot for our interpretation in the fact that it influences every level of the text below it. To read for plot means to keep our eyes open for resolution at every point in our reading. I would call it a matter of “keeping our eyes on the road” or navigating the text. This does not lead us to read into the text what is not there, but it does lead us to take the clues of the text and anticipate connections and developments, always checking our reader anticipations against the emerging actualities of the text.

But the influence of plot on exegesis goes beyond the force it exerts on readers that influences or guides their interpretation of the text. Plot produces a different kind of relationship between events than modernists are accustomed to and this results in a different kind of reading logic in order to get to the meaning of the text. According to
Ricœur, this different relationship is due to mimesis, in this case the idea that our “being in time” is invested with *Sorge*, which gives meaning and significance to time. This mimesis of living life shows up in the narrative as emplotment which in turn gives meaning and significance to the narrative that transcends any meaning possible through mere chronology or even cause and effect.

We can illustrate the significance of plot by comparing the nature of relationships between events in different genres. We can think of a text as being made up of events A, B, and C. Different genres will relate these events to each other in different ways. For example if we had before us a royal log, then the relationship between events A, B, and C might be one of mere chronology. Event A is recorded first because it occurred first, then event B, and finally C.

In a positivistic view of history, events would be related according to more than a mere chronological relation because the goal is to understand the cause and effect relations between events. We could picture the relationship between events A, B, and C by adding arrows that represent a cause leading to its effect as follows: A→B→C. In this ordering of events the chronological relationship is not lost, it is just that the cause and effect relationship adds a degree of significance. Not only did event A happen before B but A is the cause of B and B is the cause of C. In a cause and effect relationship, event A determines C and natural laws move us from one event to another in the happenstance of history.
In an emplotted narrative there is yet an additional degree of significance in the relationship between events A, B, and C because C is the desired goal of the agent who directs them. In this case, while cause and effect relationships still hold, they are superseded by an emphasis on event C as the goal of the agent. Therefore, rather than event A along with natural laws determining the outcome of C, event C as the goal of the agent gives rise to the sequence that begins with A. In essence the three events are seen together as passing through...

Figure 1. Relationships between events according to genre.
a beginning, middle, and end from tension to resolution, under the guidance of an agent whose goals are acted out within the limitations of a particular worldview.

The purpose of the drawing above is merely to illustrate the point. The relationships of chronology and cause and effect are still present (as dashed lines), but they recede into the background as plot, the main organizing principle of the narrative, supersedes them. Plot is now the bond that holds together and organizes the events of the narrative. The implication of this is that the biblical text cannot be approached by following a primarily historical logic but rather by following the logic of emplotment. For example, in the case of the Judah and Tamar narrative, historical critical scholars looked for chronological or historical reasons that the author located the narrative in the middle of the Joseph story. The first explanations were aetiological; the narrative is here to provide a reason for the extinction of the lost clans of Er and Onan and there was no better place to put it. By applying the logic of emplotment we come to a much more satisfactory conclusion. The Judah and Tamar narrative is related to the Joseph narrative because it advances its plot toward resolution. This is accomplished first by helping us better and more fully understand the importance of the righteousness of the seed and the risk it faces due to its unrighteousness and then by helping us see the potential for change in the character of Judah. This alone is a strong indication that historical-critical scholars tended to apply an exegetical logic that is foreign to the text. If we want to read the text in line with the intentions of the author we must pay attention to the genre of the text. The kind of text we are reading determines the logic we apply. A text organized by plot requires an approach that applies the logic of emplotment.5

5When Goldingay says, “Speculation that Luke intended a third volume testifies to the biblical story’s final lack of such narrative closure,” he has likely come to a false conclusion. Speculation that Luke intended a third volume testifies to our inability to read according to the logic of emplotment. Goldingay, Israel’s Gospel, 33.
The great fault of the historical-critical approach to Scripture was its inability to overcome Lessing’s ugly ditch. This is the reason that the historical-critical approach eventually led to the collapse of history. But if plot is an organizing force at work to guide our exegesis then given our discussion of plot in chapter two it is only a small step to the conclusion that it is also the organizing force that guides the theology of Scripture.

*Plot and Lessing’s “Ugly Ditch”*

In chapter two we pointed to Aristotle’s argument that mimesis differs from diegesis because while diegesis deals only with the contingencies of history, mimesis is more “philosophical” or “scientific” and is therefore laden with meaning and significance. Because of this, the claims of the text have the potential to be more than mere record of the contingent truths of history but they are also claims to the necessary or general truths of divine revelation. Vanhoozer declares, “To speak of the biblical *mythos* is to indicate that complex dramatic whole that renders not only the action but also the reality of God. As such, *mythos* has theo-ontological significance.”

We can see this playing itself out from the beginning. Creation is described not only (if at all) as a historical account of the events involved in the creation of the universe but mimetically the author has pictured creation as a temple. Even before the plot is set in motion we are presented with far more than a record of events. He is making a claim about the nature of the world and is offering a theologically rich picture of creation as it should be—a place where people were meant to live in the presence of a holy God who blesses his creation. As the plot unfolds, Adam and Eve sin against God and are exiled from the temple.

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and therefore from his blessing. This sets the plot in motion with a tension that turns our eyes toward future resolution. From this point on every action of the story will be read in relation to the goal of returning to God’s presence in his creation-sanctuary. Every action in the narrative is laden with theological meaning because of how it is seen in relation to the progression of the narrative from tension to resolution. For example, at the end of Gen 3 we know very little about our return to God’s creation-sanctuary. We have only the vague indication that our return will come about as a result of a struggle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, with the woman’s seed gaining victory over the serpent’s. But then with each new episode we gain new information about the seed that we will associate with the progression from tension to resolution. Each new episode not only clarifies how our eventual return to God’s creation-sanctuary will take place, but adds theological significance to our understanding of the seed. In Gen 4, therefore, we find that the seed of the woman bifurcates into two lines that find their significance in relation to how they advance the narrative toward resolution. One line of seed is seen as that which fails to lead us back to God’s creation-sanctuary. This line becomes associated with the seed of the serpent; the line which remains in exile from God and even obstructs our return. The other line of seed comes to be associated with the seed of the woman, the righteous line that leads us back to God’s presence. These are not just statements describing hoary antiquity; these are theologically rich statements about the nature of humanity. Every reader should see themselves in relation to the bifurcated lines of seed. But the bifurcation also makes it increasingly clear just what kind of struggle we are facing; a struggle with sin and for righteousness and a struggle, surprisingly, where the seed of the serpent actually seems to come from the line of the woman. We begin to see that what defines the seed is not so much its lineage as its righteousness. As the story develops it fills in a worldview metanarrative with implicit theological assertions about who we are, where we are, the basic problem with the world we live in, and what must happen for the problem to be corrected.
Plot and the Diversity of Scripture

Plot provides potential solutions to other typical problems that have plagued biblical theology. Plot provides a framework that maintains the unity of the text while offering the flexibility we need to accommodate the diversity found in Scripture. The unity comes from the overarching narrative that extends from the beginning to the end of Scripture tied together under the single goal of returning to God’s creation-sanctuary. Vanhoozer talks about his project to remythologize Scripture as acknowledging “the supreme authority of mythos, the overarching theodramatic plot of Scripture that depicts the whole and complete self-communicative action of the triune God.” And yet the narrative at the same time provides flexibility for a variety of genres to contribute to the advancement of the plot. And so Vanhoozer also says that remythologizing “means attending to biblical polyphony and recognizing the dialogical nature of theodramatic testimony and theological truth.”\(^7\) We can begin to see this in Genesis where genealogical (Gen 5) and poetic (Gen 49) literature is used to move the plot forward or perhaps to pause the action and reflect upon the nature of the seed. In an analogous way can see how prophetic, poetic, and wisdom books, and also narratives such as Esther would be able to contribute to the plot even in cases when they do not engage the movement from tension to resolution directly. Wisdom literature is often the greatest challenge for biblical theology. And yet wisdom literature is essentially about the quest to live in God’s creation the way he intended and especially the challenge of doing so in a fallen world. Wisdom works in unison with plot to explode the confines of the story’s historical situatedness, teaching us to live a creation-sanctuary life in a world of modern exile. Therefore, like the plot itself, wisdom literature reaches for resolution and pushes the

\(^7\) Ibid., 29.

\(^8\) Ibid., 30.
text toward its goal. In the same way, plot allows for the diversity of multiple genres so that each can make its own unique contribution to the advancement of the plot.

If we carry this one step further we can also see that plot could potentially help us understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Because plot is not a static framework it does not get caught up in the uncomfortable position of trying to encompass both the Old and the New Testaments as if in one rigid, theological system. Instead, plot develops organically over time. Each new development of plot depends on each previous development, but because we live at a new stage in the plot, we live in a different relation to the earlier characters and events of the narrative. For example in Genesis Abraham plays an important role in the line of the promised seed. Belonging to the seed of Abraham defines a person as belonging to the promised line of seed both in the Old and New Testaments. In Genesis this involved being associated with the physical seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After Moses and the Sinaitic covenant it involved being associated with the nation of Israel, with its law and temple. God’s act of establishing his covenant with Israel changed the identity of Israel because the plot had moved forward toward resolution. While Abraham remains the father of the line of the seed, how one came to be a part of that line changed. We can extend this into the New Testament. What Christ accomplished on the cross moved the plot from tension toward resolution and redefined what it means to be a child of Abraham or a part of Israel. Abraham played an important role in moving the plot forward. Abraham is just as important to the New Testament believer and is important in the same way as he is to the twelve sons of Jacob. But the significance of his role in the plot has developed and our relationship to him is mediated by all the events of the narrative that lead from Abraham to the New Testament. Abraham remains the father of the line of the seed but how we see ourselves becoming a part of that line has been changed by the dynamics of plot. From the New Testament perspective this is true of both Jew and Gentile.
Because plot joins all events from beginning to end into a single action it provides genetic unity. Because it is organic (allowing for growth in different directions according to the genetic code of plot) and dynamic (developing over time) it allows for diversity. Of course there are many other aspects of diversity in Scripture but we can begin to see plot not as an overarching canopy that encompasses the various genres or motifs or theological claims of the text but as a matrix in which they can each develop toward the single goal of resolution.

*Plot and Biblical Typology*

Plot is also a matrix and control for typology. The major question of biblical typology is in regard to the control which governs our typological interpretations and it has usually been understood in contrast to allegory. Daniélou argued that “its [typology’s] specific difference is historicity, for it denotes a relationship between various events belonging to sacred history.”9 Michael Goulder disagrees with this view, arguing that typology is a kind of intertextuality where one story is modeled on another. According to Goulder, this allows mimesis to sneak in and so typology is not properly seen as historical but literary. He concluded that Luke composed “myths out of scripture which should illuminate the meaning of what actually happened, even if they are not of themselves factually true.”10 Frances Young followed up on Goulder and confirms in her study that the basis of typology is not in “historicity” but in correspondence. She says “it is not the historical event as such which makes typology what it is; more often it is the discernment of recapitulation, the ‘impressing’ of one narrative or symbol on another, the one ‘fulfilling’


another and so giving it meaning through what we might call ‘interillumination.’”

That typology is a form of intertextuality and that it is mimetic are, in my opinion, crucial insights offered by Young and Goulder. Typology must be seen as a matter of textuality and not as a matter of historicity. And yet we are still left with the question of just how we assess “correspondences” (what serves as the control guiding our imagination) and also the matter of the relation of typology to history. After all, since Scripture is a work of historical writing the ultimate reference is historical.

Our understanding of plot and especially the concept of mimesis that we have developed here help us with both of these challenges. We will use the seed as an example for the discussion. In the plot of Scripture “seed” is the character that will lead us back to God’s creation-sanctuary. But as the story proceeds, this character becomes far bigger than one personality. Noah takes on the role of the seed and brings rest to creation. But so do Abraham and Joseph and still others all within the Genesis story. Each can be seen as a mimesis of seed because it fulfills some aspect of what we expect from the promised seed but not completely. Because each mimetic representative, or antitype, serves in the role of the seed and moves us toward resolution just as the seed should, each also has the potential to add some new perception to our understanding and expectation of what the ultimate seed must be like. In that sense, the antitypes of seed are noemata of the larger character “seed.”

11Frances M. Young, “Typology,” in Crossing the Boundaries (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 45. She also provides a helpful definition of typology stating that it is “a ‘figure of speech’ which configures or reads texts to bring out significant correspondences so as to invest them with meaning beyond themselves.” Ibid., 48.

12Frye suggests that typology is analogous to causality and offers an extended comparison of the two, mainly pointing out how typology is to be distinguished from causality. For example, causality is past directed and typology is future directed. Much of his discussion is quite interesting but I think it could be improved with a better understanding of typology as controlled by plot, rather than history. Northrop Frye, The Great Code: The Bible and Literature (1st ed.; San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 81.
provide a perspective on the seed but not the whole picture. The antitypes are rooted in the plot because they play the role that has been defined for “seed” even though they do not completely fulfill it. The various representatives work together to give us a view of seed “from all sides” and complete our understanding of what the seed must be. In doing so they point to the ultimate seed that will lead us back to God’s creation-sanctuary. When that seed arrives in the narrative we have a sense of movement toward climax because our various perceptions of seed have converged into a single individual.

Thus plot offers us a textual or literary control for our typological imagination. If my reading of the Genesis plot is correct then we do not need to speculate about whether or not we should see Noah as the promised seed. The text itself, through the ṭוֹלְדוֹת structure, the development of the plot from Cain and Abel to Noah, and Noah’s father’s prophetic pronouncement causes us to come to this conclusion. We read Noah as the seed and might even expect him to be the promised seed, right up until he fails to complete the expected resolution. The narrative itself has placed Noah in the role of the seed and so the narrative itself has made Noah a mimetic representative or antitype of the promised seed. In the case of the seed in Genesis we might say that the text actively develops a typology of seed that enhances our expectations of the promised seed by making implicit theological claims as to the nature of our return to God’s creation-sanctuary. In Genesis we see the importance of the righteousness of the seed and the difficulty, near impossibility, of any human fulfilling that expectation. The text seems to indicate that God himself will make sure that the righteous seed will come. With some extrapolation beyond this study we can see how the plot engages Moses, Israel, the judges, David, the kings, and others because of their role in the plot and how each of these falls in line with our accumulated expectations and creates new expectations that enrich our theological understanding of the seed and our return to God’s creation-sanctuary. Even from these early stages we can begin to see that plot has potential as a matrix and control for typology that leads to a rich biblical theology.
At the same time, because our understanding of mimesis and how it relates to reality has been altered by Halliwell’s contribution so that we now understand plot to be an isomorphism of reality, mimesis does not create a break from history, as Goulder argues, but a connection to history and its significance. Plot offers us a typology that is rooted in the text but connected to historical reality. The correspondences we find are indeed textual or literary relations. It cannot be stressed enough that history is not the control that guides our typological interpretations. Goulder and Young are correct in this regard. At the same time, the original authors surely meant to claim that the typological representatives of seed played real historical roles that were types of a real historical “seed” that will actually facilitate our return to God’s creation-sanctuary. Thus plot serves not only as a matrix and control for typology but through mimesis it maintains a connection between the literary nature of typology and the text’s claim on historical reference.

Plot and the Mitte of Biblical Theology

Regarding the quest for a center of Old Testament theology, Hasel seems to represent the consensus when he asserts that “[i]t is evident that even the most carefully worked out single center or formula will prove itself finally to be one-sided, inadequate, and insufficient, if not outrightly erroneous, and therefore will lead to misconceptions.”13 But just when consensus seemed to have been reached, a number of prominent conservative Old Testament theologians doubled down on their efforts to identify the Mitte to rule all Mitten.14

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In the face of my argument that plot is the organizing principle for biblical theology, it might seem plot supersedes Mitte as an organizing principle for biblical theology. Surprisingly, plot may actually offer a degree of legitimacy to these endeavors even while offering a critique on the attempts made thus far.

It will be best to begin by reviewing the theme/motif distinction made in chapter two. Throughout this work we have tried to maintain consistency in the use of the terms theme and motif. Theme has been used to refer to what Clines defined as a conceptualization of plot or the main idea of a narrative. Motif has been used to refer to any intertextually significant or recurrent idea. Both of these have their place in any biblical theology but they are two different entities. One is textual; one is textually derived. A narrative can have only one theme but it will likely have many motifs. While a motif certainly contributes to the plot it is not a conceptualization of the plot as a theme is. To identify the theme, a reader must correctly identify and summarize the single action of the plot which requires understanding the movement from tension to resolution. To identify a motif, however, a reader only needs to recognize that an idea has intertextual prominence in the narrative. Theologians have readily identified important themes in Genesis such as the seed, conflict between brothers, non-preference for the primogeniture, and many others but this has not necessarily led these theologians to a proper understanding of how the plot functions. Motifs may enrich or fill in our understanding of the plot but we cannot arrive at the theme of the narrative by way of an analysis of motifs.

Given this clarification we can make two observations about the search for a center for biblical theology. First, if plot is the organizing principle of biblical theology then...
we will be able to identify a single conceptualization of the plot of Scripture that we can properly refer to as the theme of Scripture. As stated, this conclusion runs head on against Hasel’s conclusions and what seems to be the general consensus among theologians. However, the second observation is that if we are going to talk about a Mitte of Scripture then it must be related to the plot and most likely will be identical to the theme of Scripture’s plot. This is where we can begin to critique the quest for a Mitte.

When Hasel criticizes the quest for a center to Old Testament theology he raises the question as to “whether or not a single central concept, though taken from the biblical material, is sufficient and adequate in bringing about an organization of the OT materials in terms of a systematized structural unity.”¹⁵ From this it becomes clear that Hasel is concerned rightly about a central concept that would systematize the Old Testament or force a structure onto it that is essentially foreign to at least some of the Old Testament material. Later he posits the rhetorical question, “Will not any center which is to serve as an organizing principle for the entire OT world of revelation and experience always turn out to be a tour de force?”¹⁶ And this leads him to express his full concerns:

Those who would systematize on the basis of a particular center obviously have to superimpose that center upon the diverse and manifold encounters between God and man over so long a period and are able to deal adequately only with those parts of the rich Biblical witness that fit into the framework of that center, no matter what it is. Would it be sound methodologically, adequate hermeneutically, and proper theologically to lose sight of, neglect, or totally disregard theological insights, aspects, and emphases because they do not fit the framework of a particular center that is chosen as a unifying element?¹⁷

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¹⁶ Ibid., 158.
¹⁷ Ibid.
These are important and legitimate concerns that the most recent attempts of Wright, Hamilton, Kaiser and Waltke have attempted to avert. Hasel’s most basic assumption is that any attempt at finding a center necessarily results in neglecting or totally disregarding some aspect of the Scriptural witness (now extending his argument to Scripture as a whole). However, even in the face of theological, generic, cultural, or chronological diversity, it is still possible that there is an essential unity in the text. If there is a unity, we disrespect both the unity and the diversity if we ignore it. If there is unity then we have no choice but to acknowledge it and attempt to understand it. In the process, however, Hasel’s warning is spot on. We must be methodologically, hermeneutically, and theologically sensitive. Otherwise we will force our external structure on the text.

We could paint a caricature of the quest for a Mitte that searches for motifs in the text, organizes them into a system hierarchically and thus eventually comes to the conclusion that there is, after all, one crowning motif that encompasses all others and out of which all others arise. In that case, Hasel’s critique is apropos. But this is not the approach that is generally taken whether we consider Eichrodt, von Rad,\textsuperscript{18} or Wright. Each of them begins with an understanding of what the text is. Their understanding of the nature of the text subsequently determines their approach methodologically, hermeneutically, and theologically. Each offers a legitimate attempt at approaching biblical theology because they began with a bona fide effort at letting the text determine the approach. Their attempts succeed or fail based on whether or not they have correctly understood the nature of the text. In the end, the multiplication of proposed centers may testify to the impossibility of arriving at one theme to rule all themes. But we must understand that this conclusion does not

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 146. Von Rad vehemently denies a center to Old Testament theology but Hasel argues that he works from a “secret center.”
necessarily follow (*abusus non tollit usum*). Instead it may testify to our inability to properly understand the nature of the text. This is precisely what I have attempted to argue. We have approached the text as a diegetic rather than a mimetic witness to history and this misconception of the text is the source of our trouble.

If we consider the four recent conservative attempts at finding a center (Wright, Hamilton, Kaiser, Waltke) I think we find a remarkable coherence in their suggested themes despite their divergences. This may be because they are all evangelical scholars who bring a very similar set of presuppositions which they artificially impose on the text. But again, this is not necessarily so. It may also be, as I would argue, that they have similarly correct understandings about the nature of the text. Each of these authors speaks of a metanarrative that unifies the biblical witness and each of them, in their argumentation, builds their approach on their reading of the plot and its movement from tension to resolution. Nonetheless, I believe they each fall short because they operate with less than full understanding of how plot functions. I believe that none of them has correctly identified the tension that sets the plot in motion. In addition, they have failed to recognize, as I am arguing, that the plot should be the matrix out of which our biblical theology arises.

To improve these recent attempts at biblical theology we should take plot and its implications into more careful consideration. Plot, not theme, organizes the biblical narrative. Plot, as I argued above, is a matrix that allows for diversity, growth over time, increased precision in our understanding of seed, righteousness, law, etc., and sometimes a surprising change in expectation as we move from tension to resolution. Theme therefore is a way of expressing the unity of Scripture by expressing its single goal in a simple statement but as an abstract of plot it cannot ultimately be the organizing principle of biblical theology.
In my opinion, plot is a beautiful theory for biblical interpretation because it offers us simplicity with complexity. Plot is simple because it is nothing more than reading with the text from tension to resolution and because by its very nature it brings meaning and significance out of the happenstance of history. Paying attention to plot is what we do innately whenever we watch movies or read novels or even live life. But plot is also powerful because it presents a literary configuration of reality. As a literary configuration of reality the plot invites the reader, or sometimes even subversively coerces the reader to see reality in line with its configuration. And now we can see the true power of plot. If plot can really shape a reader’s perception of reality, and if humans are influential actors in history, then plot has the power to reconfigure reality into its own image. It is my hope that this project will help us to better understand the role of plot in exegesis and theology and that as a result we will be better equipped to move from exegesis to living out our theology in everyday life.
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