SARAH OF GENESIS 17: THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE COVENANT ACCORDING TO THE GENESIS NARRATIVES

Jordan Stuart Murray Pickering

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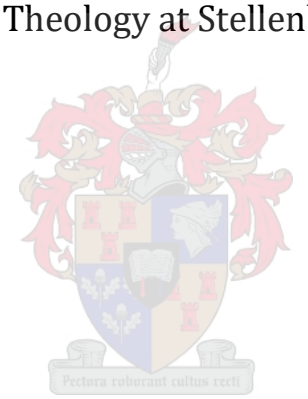

Supervisor: Prof. Hendrik L. Bosman

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ABSTRACT

Sarah's covenantal status in Genesis is rendered ambiguous by God's covenant-making speech in chapter 17: on the one hand, she is included by name in God's plan for the first time, but on the other hand, God gives a sign of the covenant that is applied to men only. This has yielded various interpretations that attempt to reconcile this ambiguity, some of which consider her to be parallel to Ishmael—a covenant outsider. In the absence of new exegetical evidence, this study seeks evidence, particularly the dominant theme, from overarching structures and patterns in the book, in order to ascertain the meaning and purpose of the book as a work of literary communication. This provides the "grain" according to which the parts of the book can be read, and by which we can assess the place of Sarah in the book and her relationship to circumcision.

The study of structure, plot, and theme suggests that Genesis is concerned with the overturning of the intrusion of curse into creation, and that the role of the "woman's seed" is central to the unfolding of this plan. The book is structured according to the *toledot* motif, implying a focus on movement down the generations. The story itself traces a single line of descent from Adam to Jacob, to the exclusion, for example, of other possible branches of the family line (such as those of Ishmael and Esau), until the climactic moment at which Jacob is renamed Israel and all of his children are included. The thematic discussion underlying the story has to do with the faith implications of the covenant of blessing that God establishes with Abraham. YHWH's promises aim at reversing the "exile" from God that is effected at Eden, and the re-establishment of covenant relationship demands dependence and faith (rather than autonomy) and blameless living. There is a strong emphasis on the promises needing to be passed on through generations in hope of their fruition, even if their fulfilment seems remote.

Structural and thematic emphases on women, childbearing, and the tracing of a lineage help to establish with greater likelihood that Sarah as mother of the chosen line is fully included within the covenant. Similarly, the focus on long delays in the fulfilment of the promises helps to explain the need for a permanent mark that is passed on in perpetuity. The most likely reason that the sign of the covenant is the circumcision of male infants is that it marks the organ of generation *of the next generation*, pointing to hope in the fruition of promises made to the chosen line. Women are excluded from the sign because the male "planting of seed" is the action offered in hope. The woman's *production* of seed (i.e., physical descendants) is incipient *fulfilment* of that hope. Men bear the sign, but in childbirth women bear the fulfilment, and together the parents mark on the male child the sign of hope carried forward into the next generation.

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OPSOMMING

God se verbondsrede in Genesis 17 beeld Sara se verbondstatus dubbelsinnig uit: aan die een kant word sy ingesluit in God se plan, maar aan die ander kant gee God 'n teken van die verbond wat slegs op mans van toepassing is. Verskeie interpretasies poog om sin van hierdie dubbelsinnigheid te maak. Sommige sien haar as ooreenstemmend l met Ismael— as 'n buitestaander tot die verbond. In die afwesigheid van nuwe eksegetiese bewyse, soek hierdie studie na getuienis, veral na die dominante tema, van oorkoepelende strukture en patrone in die boek, om die betekenis en doel van die boek as literêre mededeling te bepaal. Dit bied die “grein” waarvolgens die dele van die boek gelees kan word, en waardeur ons die plek van Sara in die boek en haar verhouding tot die besnydenis kan beoordeel.

Die bestudering van struktuur, intrige en tema dui daarop dat Genesis gemoeid is met die omkering van die inbraak wat vloek maak in die skepping, en dat die rol van die “vroulike saad” sentraal staan in die ontvouing van hierdie plan. Die boek is gestruktureer volgens die *toledot*-motief, wat 'n fokus plaas op ontwikkeling deur die geslagte. Die verhaal self volg 'n enkele afstammingslyn van Adam tot Jakob, met die uitsluiting van, byvoorbeeld, ander moontlike vertakkings van die familielyn (soos dié van Ismael en Esau). Dit ontwikkel tot die klimaktiese oomblik wanneer Jakob hernoem word as Israel en al sy kinders ingesluit word. Die onderliggende temas in die verhaal het te make met die geloofsimplikasies van die seënverbond wat God met Abraham sluit. Die beloftes van YHWH is daarop gemik om die “ballingskap”—weg van God— wat by Eden plaasgevind het, om te keer, en die herstel van die verbondsverhouding vereis afhanklikheid en geloof (eerder as selfbestuur) en ‘n onberispelike leefstyl. Daar word sterk klem gelê op die beloftes wat deur geslagte oorgelewer moet word in die hoop dat dit vrugte sal dra, selfs al blyk dit dat daar slegs n geringe kans op vervulling is.

Strukturele en tematiese beklemtonings van vroue, swangerskap en die naspeur van 'n geslagslyn maak dit hoogs waarskynlik dat Sara wel, as moeder van die gekose lyn, volledig in die verbond ingesluit is. Ooreenkomstig help die fokus op lang vertragings in die vervulling van die beloftes om die behoefte aan 'n permanente punt wat ewigdurend deurgegee word, te verklaar. Die mees waarskynlike rede dat die teken van die verbond die besnydenis van manlike babas is, is dat dit die geslagsorgaan van die volgende geslag betrek, en dui op *hoop* in die vervulling van die beloftes wat aan die gekose lyn gemaak is. Vroue word uitgesluit omdat die manlike “inplanting van saad” die aksie is wat *in hoop* aangebied word. Die vrou se saadproduksie (d.w.s. fisiese nasate) is die *vervulling van daardie hoop*. Mans dra die teken, maar tydens swangerskap dra vroue die vervulling, en saam plaas die ouers die teken van hoop wat na die volgende geslag oorgedra word op die manlike kind.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1 Chron	1 Chronicles	Isa	Isaiah
2 Chron	2 Chronicles	Jer	Jeremiah
1 Kgs	1 Kings	Josh	Joshua
2 Kgs	2 Kings	Judg	Judges
1 Sam	1 Samuel	Lev	Leviticus
2 Sam	2 Samuel	LXX	Septuagint
A.D.	*Anno Domini*	Mal	Malachi
ANE	ancient Near East(ern)	masc.	masculine
B.C.	Before Christ	Matt	Matthew
ca.	circa	MT	Masoretic Text
ESV	*English Standard Version*	NIV	*New International Version*
Exod	Exodus	Num	Numbers
Ezek	Ezekiel	pl	plural
Gal	Galatians	Prov	Proverbs
Gen	Genesis	Ps	Psalm
Deut	Deuteronomy	sg.	singular
Heb	Hebrews		

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1. INTRODUCTION

Among the most familiar stories in Genesis are those of Abraham and Sarah, the couple who become parents of the child of the promise in their old age. The familiarity to us of Sarah's motherhood often obscures the fact that it is only in Genesis 17—after some decades in the land—that God confirms that Sarah has a place[1] in his plans to make Abraham into a great nation. Before this time, there is ambiguity about the source of his heir. The announcement of her motherhood ought, then, to be a celebration of her vindication, but instead the chapter raises what Cohen (2005, p. 13) has dubbed the "Sarah paradox": as well as including Sarah in the plan, God introduces the sign of his covenant with Abraham: circumcision—a sign that women do not bear and which seemingly excludes Sarah and her daughters from the covenant.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

My interest in the role of circumcision in Genesis was sparked by an earlier study of Christian baptism, which is often considered to be parallel to circumcision in its role as the sign of the New Covenant. Since the validity of this connection has been disputed by Jewish scholars such as Cohen (2005, p. 91), I was prompted to investigate the rite in its own terms.

I have been motivated to study the implications of circumcision for Sarah and and her daughters because the application of the covenant sign to males only raises an obvious problem for the status of women—one that has real-world ramifications for their treatment in communities influenced by the Hebrew Bible. This problem is not new; the ambiguous status of women in Judaism was the cause of disputes between Jewish and Christian apologists throughout the Christian era (Cohen,

[1] I have chosen to use the word "place" (i.e., in terms of Sarah's *place* in the covenant) because it is general enough to include the question of covenant *status*, as well as Sarah's role and position in God's plan relative to the male characters in Genesis 17 (Abraham and Ishmael).

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2005, pp. 91-92),[2] but it is not one that has received much scholarly attention outside of Jewish circles. It is striking, for example, that some of the most prominent pre-feminist commentators on Genesis, such as Skinner (1930), Speiser (1964), and Von Rad (1972), had seemingly no interest in the implications of Genesis 17 for women.

The question of the place of women in the Abrahamic covenant remains an important one because, whether explicitly or implicitly, Judeo-Christian religious communities (and the societies influenced by them) derive social and ethical values at least partly from biblical texts. Even narrative texts, which are not overtly concerned with law and command, function as "Torah", providing "materials which, when pondered or absorbed into the mind, will suggest the pattern or shape of a way of life lived in the presence of God" (Barton, 1998, p. 128) . Thus, a poorly understood narrative can justify or even *produce* poor ethical behaviour.

Opinions in scholarship about the place of women in Genesis range from seeing it as subsumed under a patriarchal order, thus implying that the book operates with the assumption of male superiority (Lee, 2002, p. 2),[3] to seeing it as offering evidence of a high view of women (Eskenazi & Weiss, 2008, p. xxxix). However, in spite of the ambiguity in the text concerning the place of women, certain interpretive communities have taken strongly polarised positions and adopted attitudes and practices that confine women to a lesser status than men and (in extreme cases) that are discriminatory and oppressive. For example, in a traditional daily prayer, Jewish men thank God for not having made them female. While some attribute this simply to gratitude for the extra responsibilities given to men in the Torah (Segal, 1999, p. 10), many have interpreted it as sexist (Hart, 2013; Ilan, 2000; Kahn, 2010, pp. 103-4). Religiously motivated oppression of women remains a pressing issue in some conservative communities in Israel (Epstein, 2016).

My own conservative Christian tradition largely identifies with cultural positions and interpretations of Scripture that assign men and women clearly defined gender roles, and that make the subordination of women to male headship a universal order established by God at creation. This view is based very heavily on a reading of Genesis, and it leads to mainstream theological perspectives that forbid women from teaching in church or even from holding social roles that give

[2] Cohen adds, however, that this was not motivated by concern for the equality or wellbeing of women, but rather it was an attempt on the part of Christians to score easy points against their Jewish opponents. Both groups accepted the basic rightness of female subordination to fathers and husbands.

[3] See also Eskenazi (2008, pp. 3-4).

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them directive power over men.[4] At its extremes, the primacy of men over women has led to abuse of women, distrust of women who report abuse, and the protection of abusers in some religious communities (Downen, Olsen & Tedesco, 2019). However, even well-meaning perspectives in conservative Christianity can be guilty of obscuring the role of women in God's activity in the world, or ushering women off of the stage entirely. For example, in his classic book on spiritual leadership, Sanders (1994, p. 144) makes the following indelicate claim:

> "God's greatest gifts to Israel, better than the land itself, were men such as Moses and David and Isaiah. God's greatest gifts are always men; His greatest endowment to the church was the gift of twelve men trained for leadership."

While reference to "men" here is presumably intended to be inclusive of women too, the fact remains that such language removes women from view, and all of his examples are steadfastly male.

The present study has been motivated by the conviction that Scripture—and Genesis in particular—is assumed to be strongly patriarchal and read as such, but in fact it offers a much more mixed verdict on male priority than is generally recognised. Frequently, the text seems to advocate a position of dignity and equality for women that cuts against patriarchal assumptions.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

The problem that this study aims to address is centred on the paradoxical status of Sarah in Genesis 17 and the implications of this for Sarah's daughters, that is, women whose status in Judeo-Christian religion is affected by the implied place of women in this covenant.

The "Sarah paradox" arises out of Sarah's seeming inclusion in God's covenant plan (by motherhood of Isaac) and exclusion (by her lack of circumcision) within the same chapter. Like Ishmael, she is described as blessed; but without any covenant made with her, is she, like Ishmael, also excluded?

> "The status of Sarah mirrors the status of Ishmael. Sarah does not bear the mark of the covenant on her body, but she is nonetheless essential to the perpetuation of the covenant and is part of the covenantal people. In contrast, Ishmael is circumcised, as are slaves… but neither his circumcision nor theirs gives any of them special status in the divine order. Hence a double paradox… *The Sarah paradox:* if the covenant is circumcision, then Sarah, and by extension all Israelite and Jewish women, who are not circumcised, must be excluded, but they are not excluded. On the contrary: motherhood matters… *The Ishmael paradox:* if circumcision is the covenant, then Ishmael, and by extension all circumcised gentiles, should be part of the covenantal people, but they are not." (Cohen, 2005, p. 13)

[4] See Piper (1991, pp. 50-52).

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Some scholars emphasise the parallel language of blessing that she shares with Ishmael and conclude that—at least according to the source on which Genesis 17 is based—Sarah is excluded from the covenant and enjoys only adjunct status (Bernat, 2009, pp. 19-20, 34; Shectman, 2009b, p. 176). Others stress the parallel language that her blessing shares with God's promises to Abraham and conclude that she is of equal status to him, or, like Cohen (2007, pp. 35-42), they recognise the inclusion of women in the covenant at Sinai and suggest various ways in which women are related to circumcision.[5]

This leaves the question at an impasse. There is evidence in the text to support Sarah's inclusion or her exclusion, depending on what one chooses to privilege, but there is no exegetical solution. The aim of this dissertation, therefore, is to look for additional evidence through a rigorous study of literary context—namely, a detailed investigation of structure, plot, and theme—which will give us a stronger framework by which to evaluate the exegetical evidence.

1.2.1 Research question

This study aims to answer the following question:

> "What does the study of the structure, plot, and theme of Genesis in its final form suggest is the overarching communicative aim of the book, and how does it shape our evaluation of Sarah's paradoxical status in Genesis 17?"

The main thesis of this study is that the study of Genesis as a whole is able more accurately to describe the literary context in which individual episodes are set, and to unveil the key concepts and motivations that are the *raisons d'être* of the book. This will provide a framework within which to better understand the component parts, such as Genesis 17, and the reason for the choice of male-only circumcision as the covenant sign within this chapter.

In terms of the title of this dissertation, the non-circumcision of Sarah and her daughters in Genesis 17 calls into question the place of women in the covenant. The end goal is to better understand Sarah's relationship to the covenant and circumcision *according to the Genesis narratives*—that is, by understanding the overarching theological and ethical framework of the book, as revealed by the study of structure, plot, and theme.

[5] Cohen himself charts the discussion of the "Sarah paradox" through Judeo-Christian history, preferring not to offer a resolution to it himself.

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This study is based on the following working hypotheses:

1. Genesis is sufficiently coherent and unified to have an overarching structure, plot, and theme.
2. The pursuit of these elements will uncover sufficient evidence to help us to understand Sarah's place.
3. There is a *prima facie* case that Sarah's status with respect to the covenant in Genesis 17 and the non-circumcision of women are taken to be paradigmatic for the place of women in the covenant(s) more generally.

1.2.2 Key questions

There are two parts to this study: the first establishes the overall communicative aim of the book (mainly expressed in theme), and the second uses the theme as a mechanism by which to evaluate (a) Sarah's status in Genesis 17, and (b) the meaning of circumcision and its implications for women. The key questions that we aim to answer are as follows:

- What does the study of structure, plot, and theme suggest are the storyline, purpose, and conceptual centre of the book of Genesis?
- What do conclusions about the book as a whole suggest about the literary context and function of Genesis 17 within the book, and what does this imply about the place of Sarah and her female descendants in the Genesis covenant(s)?
- Do the conclusions concerning structure, plot, and theme suggest a reason for the selection of circumcision as the sign of the covenant?

If there is sufficient unity in the final form of the book to yield a coherent structure, plot, and theme, these will enable us to produce a thematic statement that describes the key concepts and rhetorical purpose around which Genesis was composed. Since the parts of a text should be explicable in terms of its overall purpose, the thematic statement provides the "grain" according to which interpretations of difficult parts can be judged to be with the grain or against it. Therefore, it should be possible to identify which solutions to the Sarah paradox and to the meaning of circumcision are likely and which are not.

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1.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVE CRITICISM

The approach to the problem that we will adopt in this study is primarily literary-critical and directed at the final form of the book as a whole. As such, this study will be largely inattentive to historical-critical methods such as source criticism. In approaching the text in this way, I do not wish to disregard the contribution of historical methods. I agree with Barton (2007, pp. 25-26) that the distinctions drawn between historical and literary, diachronic and synchronic, are overly strong; they have much more overlap than is often acknowledged, because all such methods are directed at understanding the text as literature and on its own terms. Barton (2007, p. 187) further argues that it is not possible to understand texts in a purely synchronic way. "In reading a text, one needs a sense of its anchorage in a particular period, but also some understanding of what sense it makes as part of the total literary 'system' of that period." Wenham (2000, p. 3) reminds us that a variety of approaches is required to gain a full appreciation of the communication strategy of a text:

> "Historical criticism is required because every work originated at a specific time in a particular culture, so that if we do not understand the sense of the words in that period and what concepts and institutions they refer to we shall never grasp the message the work was written to convey. The techniques of literary criticism are necessary to appreciate the organisation of a piece of literature, the ideas it embodies, and the standpoint of the writer… Rhetorical criticism uses the observations of literary critics to illuminate the communicative and persuasive techniques built into every text."

Because the goal of this study is in particular to understand the literary and rhetorical function of the book, the concern is to establish what the implied author intended to communicate to the implied reader—to the extent that there is a coherent communication attempt evident in the text. To this end, the main historical concerns that occupy us are those of the context in which the stories are set and those of the context that gave it its final form.[6] Because I am attempting to discern to what degree there is unity in the final form, the consideration of sources is not strictly relevant.

1.3.1 Narrative criticism

The methodological approach that I have adopted fits within the field of narrative criticism. Clines (2015, p. 149) regards narrative criticism as a subset of critical methods "that scholars… undertake when they are considering texts as works of literature". It approaches final-form texts as artistic productions in their own right and focuses on literary elements such as structures, themes, and

[6] By this I mean the major authorial or redactional process that organised its component parts into a plot and structure; I acknowledge that further editing may have taken place between this point and its canonisation.

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characters. Clines (2015, p. 153) defines it as "a systematic analysis of narrative: its interests are in plot and plot devices, in identifying and distinguishing narrators from implied, ideal and actual authors and readers, and in distinguishing the 'story' (or, 'fabula', the sequence of events) from the 'discourse' (the manifestation of the story in a text)." In other words, there is a distinction to be made between the sequence of events of a story and the *presentation* of those events. The former can be described in terms of "what happens" in the story; the latter requires an examination of the selection, arrangement and purpose behind the story as it has been told.

Powell (1995, pp. 240-43) identifies one of the goals of narrative criticism as being to reconstruct, from details in the text, the implied author's perspective, as well as that of the implied reader (that is, the reader who responds in ways consistent with the expectations of the implied author).[7] Narrative criticism pays attention to what the author thinks that a reader knows and does not know. It assumes that readers obey a contract to accept the dynamics of the story and to suspend disbelief if the story demands it. The focus on textual clues as to how the author expected the story to be received helps to limit the subjectivity of analysis.

Narrative criticism pays attention to normative reading; that is, it assumes that texts are to be read sequentially and as a whole. It therefore relates the meanings of pericopes to their roles in the complete work. It gives attention to order, duration, and frequency of events, to causal links, conflict, characters and characterisation, empathy, point of view, settings, symbolism, irony, intertextuality, and structural patterns (Powell, 1995, pp. 244-48).

The goal of this study is to describe Genesis in terms of its overall purpose or communicative aim. Many of the techniques of analysis employed in narrative and rhetorical criticism operate on a level of detail that, if sustained throughout the length of Genesis, would far exceed the limits set for this study. For this reason, I have selected techniques of analysis that are best suited to tracing developments of the discourse and key concepts across the extent of the book, and where episodes emerge as important (e.g., the theophanies), we will apply more focus to the narrative details.

[7] Please note that any subsequent reference that I make to the author of Genesis should be understood to be the *implied* author, that is, the apparent authorial perspective in the text, as distinct from the person(s) in history responsible for penning it, whose circumstances and identity are not of direct concern in this study.

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The main areas in which I will focus the investigation are as follows:

- **Structure:** The *arrangement of the discourse* of a narrative or its parts, which often meaningfully establishes points of focus or interconnection.
- **Plot:** The *way in which story events have been artfully arranged* to imply the rise of conflict and the quest for its resolution.
- **Theme:** the *conceptualisation of the plot* of a narrative—the rationale for its arrangement (or, loosely speaking, its overall purpose as a communication attempt) (Clines, 1997, p. 19).

Apprehending how these function in the book should provide a framework of meaning and purpose that enables us better to assess the role of its parts. The main focus, however, will be on the thematic core of the book, since our aim is to understand *why* Genesis was written—that is, what it aims to communicate—in order to assess whether and how Genesis 17 serves that purpose.

1.3.1.1 Study of structure and plot

We will consider the question of the arrangement of Genesis in some detail, in terms of both its overall structure and its plot development.

The study of structure attempts to identify and account for dividing markers that have been written into the text, particularly if a patterning device or repeated motif has been used for this purpose, because these help to give certain episodes or concepts greater prominence.

The study of plot structure differs from this because its focus is on the *logical* arrangement of the content as a function of storytelling. Plot is driven forward by conflict, and plot structure is given its shape by conflict and resolution (Amit, 2001, pp. 46-47). The study of plot investigates how the events of the story are deployed to build tension around the central conflict and to narrate its eventual resolution.

1.3.1.2 Thematic study

We will discuss in more detail the theoretical and practical approach to the study of theme in chapter 3. As a discipline within narrative criticism, the techniques that we will use in order to discern elements of thematic importance are those that focus on locating and evaluating key concepts and points of emphasis in the development of the discourse. These include:

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- structural devices, which highlight elements that are parallel, pivotal, climactic, and so on;
- repetitions, especially of motifs and type-scenes;
- allusions, particularly between episodes within Genesis; and
- comments from omniscient, trustworthy characters (namely, the narrator, angels, and God).

In this way, we can trace the various ways in which the parts of the book interconnect and develop those connections.[8]

If there is no unity in the book—if it is a compendium of largely unrelated episodes discussing whatever was of interest to the sources from which they were derived—there should be no pattern to the findings of these various avenues of investigation. If there is unity of theme, there should be repeated confirmations from all avenues that discussion is taking place within a single conceptual sphere. There is a cumulative effect to the gathering of evidence that radically limits the subjectivity and speculation involved in the identification of theme.

We will attempt to summarise the communicative aim of the book in a thematic statement. The tests of the fittingness of a thematic statement are, firstly, whether it successfully provides an underlying rationale for the inclusion of all the episodes in the plot, and, secondly, whether it offers interpretive insight.[9] This study is set up in expectation that a well-observed thematic statement will be able to offer insight into the question of Sarah's status, and so its explanatory power will be examined in this way.

1.3.1.3 Close reading of Genesis 17

In addition to the techniques of grammatical-historical exegesis, close reading pays careful attention to the internal features of the text, which in narrative include "theme, imagery, metaphor, paradox,

[8] Although some scholars argue that the sections of Genesis are virtually independent of one another (Ska, 2016, pp. 210-15), Wenham (1994b, p. 461) claims that the book regularly uses "analogy between episodes as a narrative technique". He lists almost thirty "cross-linkages" to earlier episodes in the last three chapters of Genesis alone. These, he argues, provide a sense that a natural stopping point in the story has been reached.

[9] Clines (1997, pp. 17-18) argues that progress in literary interpretation usually depends on "insight". All forms of text reconstruction or interpretation (historical or literary) are based on a body of facts—chiefly observations from the text—but the act of reconstructing or interpreting is to *narrate* those facts. One *supplies* order, priority, and connection. The explanatory power and coherence of the narration of those facts can be described as "insight".

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irony, ambiguity, key words, motifs and the like", as well as to form and structure, which are integral to the communication of literary meaning (Clines, 2015, pp. 152-53).

Although Genesis 17 is dominated by God's speech, which has a formal, contractual tone to it and therefore exhibits fewer of the narrative features that Clines has in view, the literary approach remains a useful mode of analysis, particularly as our concerns are limited to the canonical form, rather than, for example, the recovery of source texts. We will focus on:

- translation and discussion of key decisions;
- the structure of the passage and its influence on meaning; and
- the discussion of relevant issues from each structural subsection.

The main purpose of the exegesis is to discuss the evidence relevant to the status of Sarah, and so we will adopt a level of detail appropriate to this task. We will conclude with an evaluation of this evidence based on the thematic study of the book.

1.3.1.4 Literary study of the meaning and role of circumcision

The final part of this study will involve a literature review concerning the meaning and role of circumcision and the means by which women are related to circumcision. I will briefly list some of the earliest non-biblical explanations of the meaning and role circumcision, as well as perspectives evident in recent scholarship. Finally, we will compare the compatibility of these views with the results of the thematic and exegetical studies in order to suggest how the sign of circumcision relates to the argument of the book and what it might mean for Sarah and her daughters.

1.3.2 Relationship to feminist criticism

Although this study has Sarah in its title and women at its centre, I have opted not to take a feminist-critical approach as my primary methodology for several reasons. The first and most important of these reasons is that the purpose of this study is not to examine Sarah herself, but to consider how the *argument of the book as a whole* locates Sarah—and all the women of Genesis—in the covenant plans of God. Examination of the narrative argument and structural patterns of the book are more directly within the scope of narrative criticism than they are of feminist criticism.

Secondly, the main concern of this study is the textual-meaning component of the interpreter's task, rather than the reception and significance components. I am hoping to clarify certain textual issues

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that present us with an apparent paradox, and thus I am largely engaging in an examination of the implied author's communication attempt. This is not to diminish the importance of exegetical, rhetorical, and ideological work done by feminist scholars; I have attempted to read widely and to draw benefit from various perspectives and schools of thought, feminist as much as any other, and it is an advantage of narrative criticism that it is a broad approach that allows for consideration of rhetorical and ideological slants within the text. Feminist scholarship is regularly at the forefront of such work. This is also not to diminish the real-world impact that male-centred interpretation of the text had—and continues to have—on women. Several texts in Genesis have been construed to mean that women are subject to men and occupy a secondary position in its religious order. This has been used to justify subjugation and abuse of women, religiously, relationally, and socially. Because of this, it is tempting to want to address reception and context in order to correct such abuses if possible. However, an indispensable first step in addressing biblically based abuse is to examine to what degree the use of the biblical text is legitimate. It is *this* task that is the focus of this study, and one for which narrative criticism is well suited.

Therefore, although I intend not to spend any length of time on how Genesis has been used and abused through history, I do intend that this study should speak to modern readers who regard the biblical text as authoritative in faith and practice. This study aims to reveal to what degree the meaning and purpose of Genesis can legitimately be seen as an opponent or an ally to the equality of women, and this should be of immediate concern to all interpreters who would use the text to determine the position that women should now occupy in the faith. Furthermore, in spite of limited attention given to context, this study fits broadly within the shared concerns of both narrative and feminist criticism. For example, the findings that narrative techniques yield will be directly beneficial to feminist scholarship in the area that Schneiders (1995, pp. 350-52) calls "retrieval", that is, identifying ways in which a text relates to women's interests, or has illegitimately been read with androcentric assumptions. I envisage that the conclusions of this study could provide a useful foundation upon which further studies—feminist and otherwise—can build, particularly in its application to historical and current contexts.

1.4 TEXTS AND DATA

The following discusses the texts and data that will be used in this study.

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1.4.1 Biblical texts

The main body of primary data from which this study draws is the text of Genesis in its final form. I acknowledge that the term "final form" is somewhat artificial; the text presumably did not remain static after it was first structured and emplotted in a form that we would recognise as being the book of Genesis. Various branches of scholarship, such as text criticism, study the development of the text and changes that accumulated through transmission. However, given that this study deals largely with the broad strokes of structure and theme, it is unlikely that much will hinge on text-critical issues, and given that my interest in the meaning of Genesis is in large measure motivated by the theological and ethical significance of this text to Judeo-Christian communities, it is prudent to focus on the text that such communities acknowledge as authoritative for faith and practice. For these reasons, unless stated otherwise, I have chosen to use texts that are in widespread use, namely, the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*[10] and the English Standard Version (ESV) translation. The main consideration is their popularity and availability in Jewish and Christian communities; nothing is implied about their value relative to other critical texts or translations.

1.4.2 The use of the final form

Although the study of the final form of Pentateuchal texts has become more popular in the last few decades, their use in critical scholarship raises questions about both the *validity of the final form* as an object of study and the *critical value of broad studies*, which necessarily must sacrifice depth.

1.4.2.1 The unity of Genesis

There is a general consensus that Genesis consists of a number of source documents or oral traditions or both, and it is widely believed that the redactors of the Pentateuch were passive compilers who avoided imposing a viewpoint of their own (Berman, 2008, p. 8; Whybray, 1987, p. 19). For those who hold such a view, Genesis necessarily reflects the diverse values, theologies, and attitudes of its original sources rather than its final redactor(s).[11] Determining the structure, plot, and theme of a text requires that it can be viewed as a unit, since these elements are an expression

[10] When interacting with the Hebrew text of key passages, the English translation is usually my own and not that of the ESV.

[11] The four sources of Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis have largely been abandoned in favour of a distinction at least between P and non-P material, based on differences in "language… cosmology, anthropology, and theology" (Nihan, 2009, p. 87). Our main text, Genesis 17, is often assigned to P.

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of the implied author's purpose in composing that text. However, if a text is not a unit, it is possible to speak of the theme only of *parts* of the book, or, if it is significantly fragmented, such discussions can take place only once the *reconstruction* of unified texts has taken place.

While the awareness that the text is not homogenous and uniform is important, judgements about the coherence of the text are often made using anachronistic or unrealistic criteria (Barton, 2007, pp. 23-25), and some of the elements previously regarded as discontinuous now have good literary explanations. For example, the so-called wife-sister stories (in which a patriarch hides the inconvenient fact of his marriage by claiming that his wife is his sister) were widely regarded as the clearest evidence of the conflation of sources (Van Seters, 1975, pp. 155-57; Whybray, 1987, pp. 50-51) and as evidence of contradictions introduced by such conflation (Speiser, 1964, pp. xxxi-xxxii). However, Alter (1981, pp. 96-97) has offered a compelling literary explanation of these as "type-scenes", which form part of a rhetorical strategy. In other words, even the elements in Genesis often regarded as most obviously a feature of incompatible sources can be seen as the product of a single, harmonious literary process. Discontinuity should not be too lightly assumed.

Baden (2016, pp. 247-51) acknowledges that scholars over the past two centuries *have* too lightly assumed the discontinuity of Genesis, advancing as evidence of plural authorship features such as inconsistent vocabulary, multiple genres, and theological diversity, all of which are actually consistent with single-author texts. He argues that the major feature that renders the text of the Pentateuch "unreadable" is its "thorough-going internally contradictory plot".[12] As an example, he offers that Noah's story describes the waters raining or prevailing upon the earth for 40 days and 150 days.

Ska (2016, pp. 209-15) similarly argues that Genesis displays no continuity of plot across its main structural units and too little consistency within them. Of the three story cycles that make up the ancestral narratives, he argues that the Joseph story is the most unified, because it features a single storyline and only the story of Judah and Tamar is "clearly a digression inserted into this cycle", and the Abraham story is least unified, featuring several digressions that are not integrated into the

[12] Baden is not appreciative enough that false perceptions, once formed, are "remarkably perseverant" (Kolbert, 2017). The perception of discontinuity in Genesis has been reinforced by faulty evidence for two centuries—do plot discontinuities really render the text incoherent, or is its alleged incoherence a result of the persistent vision of a faulty past consensus? It is deeply questionable that the discontinuities that he claims as evidence are nearly strong enough to render the text unreadable (and even single-author texts may exhibit plot holes and contradictions!). The work of, for example, Patterson (2018) on plot shows that the book can be read as a coherent whole.

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search for an heir that he considers to be the primary conflict in the story. Ska defines a unified plot as "a narrative where all the elements are necessary and where every episode is the consequence of what precedes and prepares for what follows". He offers the *Iliad* as an example and identifies Achilles's anger as the unifying element. By contrast, he sees Genesis as a compendium of four parts with four plots, each of which can be read without the others. Thus, he says, "we have stories; we do not have a real plot in the book of Genesis, and surely no unified plot." If this is so, then there is also no possibility of finding *the* plot or theme of Genesis, only the plots and themes of its units.

However, his example of Achilles's anger is also potentially an argument against his own position. He does not find a single feature, such as a "hero", that unites all of Genesis (although he unwisely ignores the role of God as a uniting character), but the example of Achilles still demonstrates that unity can be found in elements more abstract than main characters; Genesis may be a continuous discussion of something that Ska has not identified.

Any consumer of literature or film is aware of complex narratives that involve multiple storylines but are nevertheless thematic unities. It is very common, for example, for a narrative to feature what is called an A-story and a B-story (or plot and subplot) that are united into a single narrative by virtue of possessing a common thematic purpose. The subplot tends to be less directly connected to the narrative mainline (the predicament that is being resolved) but more directly related to thematic exploration. Such plots will often violate Ska's definition of plot unity, because the connection of episodes with one another is not necessarily as linear or immediate as his definition requires.

The use of intercalation in the Gospels is a good example of complex storytelling from ancient narratives. In these intercalations, one episode interrupts another, seemingly as a digression from the main plot of the first, but their thematic unity *is the point* of the juxtaposition of these episodes. Not only is thematic unity present in spite of an apparent detour in the storytelling, but it is established by the identification of a common element that might have been too muted were the "digression" not introduced. In the case of the healing of Jairus's daughter (Luke 8:40–56), the main story is interrupted by an episode in which a woman is healed of a bleeding disease. Both have in common that they are healing stories, but the insertion of *this particular story* emphasises that Jesus' ministry addresses that which is beyond human help (8:43, 49, 53), and that Jesus requires faith (8:48, 50).[13] In this case, the stories are linked by both featuring Jesus in a single setting, but it

[13] For a discussion of framing devices such as this, see Davidson (2011, p. 153).

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demonstrates that even ancient storytellers were familiar with complex plotting and the use of devices such as juxtaposition—the device that narrative scholars also argue explains the presence of Judah and Tamar's story in the Joseph cycle.

In short, scholarship is divided over whether there is sufficient unity to talk of the structure, plot, and theme of Genesis, but as both Baden and Ska demonstrate, discontinuity should not be confused with *complexity* in narrative. Past characterisations of ancient Hebrew literature as unsophisticated have unfairly weighted conclusions in the direction of the former—conclusions that have progressively been dismantled. More recent appreciation for the subtleties of Hebrew storytelling, evident for example in the work of Alter (1981), gives us warrant to re-evaluate to what degree the story of Genesis has been told with a unified purpose in mind. The only way of knowing to what degree the final form of the book possesses unity is by *looking for it*, and since structure, plot, and theme are all functions of unity, the coherence of each of these elements is required to demonstrate the unity of the final form. If unity cannot be found, or if the argument for coherence is too often forced, it will be clear that the effort has failed.

1.4.2.2 The use of Genesis alone

The Pentateuch in its final form is a continuous narrative, with each book resuming from where the previous left off. Exodus 1 begins with a genealogy—material that is common in Genesis—and it references Jacob and Joseph. Exodus 6 even includes a genealogical *toledot* formula, of which there are several in Genesis. For such reasons, Sailhamer (1992, pp. 1-2) suggests that the Pentateuch may have been composed as a single, undivided book. This raises the possibility that our study of the unity of Genesis should also consider materials from the rest of the Pentateuch.

In this study, we will take it that Genesis is a unified composition for at least the following reasons:

- The traditional divisions of the Pentateuch should be given some weight.
- Genesis ends with a sense of closure, pronouncing long poetic blessings upon the sons of Israel and presenting epilogues concerning the deaths of Jacob and Joseph.
- Hebrew narratives often end with poetic material (Sailhamer, 1992, p. 35) or use it as an *inclusio* (Tsumura, 2007, p. 67); the long poetic blessing scene in Genesis 49 is a likely indication that the book is reaching a conclusion.

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There is likely to be benefit in studying parts of Genesis or the relationship of Genesis to the wider Pentateuch, but Genesis does seem to function as a unified composition, and there are sufficient grounds to pursue the question of its unity.

1.4.2.3 The critical value of synchronic, thematic study

A narrative study of the kind that is undertaken here may raise questions concerning its value as a work of *criticism*. Barton (2007, p. 3) points out that study of the biblical text does not presuppose a critical stance—there are anti-critical, pre-critical or post-critical approaches. Unlike many of the historical-critical methods, narrative criticism does not attempt to chart composition history or isolate source units or to contest the text itself, but rather uses the final form. This might be construed as an *uncritical* assumption about the text; however, critical examination can be applied in other directions than the historical study of the text.

Barton (2007, pp. 5-7) suggests that critical studies share in common the ability to engage with the literary character of texts, showing sensitivity to depth, subtlety and multiple layers of meaning. Critical study aims at *understanding*, particularly through the application of reason. It involves reading the text contextually, on its own terms, without reading alien meanings into it. Though the objectivity for which it aims may be elusive, critical study is free from the pressure to conform the text to the desired outcomes of ecclesiastical (or other) traditions. Narrative criticism is, therefore, able to serve as a critical discipline because it contributes to the recovery of what Barton refers to as the "plain sense" of the text through the use of tools that are sensitive to the narrative genre, and which are attentive to the communication devices and rhetorical methods that are employed in storytelling. Barton (2007, p. 114) says, "Biblical texts are for the most part resonant texts, not to be treated as workaday texts like recipes or instructions", and the exegete's task is to consider "the many strands of meaning such a text may contain." Narrative-critical analysis is a critical discipline because it is directed towards recovering and evaluating the subtle means by which point of view is communicated in resonant narratives.

1.4.2.4 The hermeneutical necessity of holistic study

The scope of material that I have chosen—fifty chapters—is unusual, because rigorous academic study usually aims to study a subject exhaustively. The approach that I have adopted in this dissertation may seem too broad to be able to attain to satisfactory levels of depth for a critical study, running the risk of being too superficial and too general to be of any use. Even Clines's classic

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study of the theme of the Pentateuch could be criticised for this. Clines (1997, pp. 22-23) considers the theme of the Pentateuch to be about the partial fulfilment of God's promises of blessing to the patriarchs, which is very general and gives the reader little sense of its underlying purpose—that is, what is the Pentateuch saying *about* the partial fulfilment of promise? When treating a body of literature as vast as the Pentateuch, one must suppose that the redactors selected and shaped traditions with a broad goal in mind, and so a statement such as that of Clines must necessarily also be broad, and in spite of its generality, Clines's thematic statement has proven influential and useful to interpreters.

This present study has several advantages over that of Clines because there is a greater likelihood that Genesis is a unified composition than is the case with the Pentateuch, and although Genesis is very long, we are still able to assess its contents in far greater detail. This enables us to make a more rigorous case, since we are able to apply the tests of comprehensiveness and coherence to its parts.

However, it would be a mistake to think of this kind of study merely as a shallow version of those that take narrower focus; it has an entirely different set of strengths and weaknesses. It is true that the volume of material that must be covered means that there will be interpretive gaps that might render its conclusions challengeable, but by taking this approach, we are able to observe features of the text—and to reach conclusions—that are unavailable via deep, atomistic studies (Clines, 1997, pp. 9-11). It is equipped to track the larger inter-relationships between parts of a text, and these relationships illuminate what atomistic studies are unable to see. The approach of this study does not give us total apprehension of the text, but it does give us the ability to apprehend the text as a totality. According to Clines (1997, p. 21), these overarching devices (specifically theme in his case) function as controlling rubrics that prevent "large-scale misunderstanding of a work" because they enable us to move between the perception of the work as a whole and the function of its component parts.

The study of larger patterns in a text that give us access to its overall purpose is not just valid as an interpretive exercise but is also essential to good hermeneutics. In 1808, Friedrich Ast[14] described the "hermeneutical circle", saying, "The foundational law of all understanding and knowledge is to find the spirit of the whole through the individual, and through the whole to grasp the individual". Barton (1997, p. 18) denies that this is a "vicious circularity", but rather argues that the movements between parts and the whole have a "cumulative effect"; the interplay of reading and understanding

[14] Quoted by Mantzavinos (2016).

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is “mutually corrective”. Osborne (1991, p. 22) therefore prefers the image of a spiral—the movements between parts and whole allow for refinements of our hypotheses and draw us closer to the intended meaning of a work. Thiselton (2009, p. 14) describes it as “an upward and constructive process of moving from an earlier pre-understanding to a fuller understanding”. The movement between the parts and the whole allows for correction or change of the pre-understanding with which one approached the text initially, and the stronger grasp of the whole allows for clearer appraisal of the parts. The methodology of this present study is an attempt to achieve precisely this end: we aim to use the insights of atomistic studies on parts of the text in order to construct an apprehension of the whole book (to find its “grain”), and thus to read one of its parts (Sarah and circumcision in Genesis 17) “with the grain” in the hope of yielding a better interpretation.

It remains possible that individual parts of any given work might (intentionally or otherwise) represent imperfections on the surface of the whole—some passages might not be readable “with the grain”. Nevertheless, establishing the general shape and purpose of a work can at least suggest which interpretations are in conformity with the whole and which are idiosyncratic.

1.4.3 Literature review

I will consult relevant secondary literature pertaining to Genesis and its reception throughout this study, but because each chapter has a very different focus, it is more appropriate for each to have its own literature review, rather than to attempt a single review chapter at the start of this dissertation.

In the next chapter, we will begin our investigation with an examination of the structure of Genesis.

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2. STRUCTURE IN GENESIS

In this chapter, we investigate the structure of Genesis as a whole in its final form. The intention is to identify the shape of its arrangement and its focal areas in order to better direct subsequent study of its contents. As a hypothetical example, if structural analysis were to reveal that Genesis has a single point of focus at its centre, it would matter entirely to our study of the book to know what that focal point is. It would become necessary to account for the importance of that focal point and to relate the other elements in the book to it.

Furthermore, structural analysis often identifies repeated elements according to which the book has been arranged, and these give us a hint of the thematic interests of the implied author.

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of structure in narrative aims to identify markers by which the implied author has signalled divisions in the text. Structural analysis is not merely a formal matter—that is, of outlining the contents—but rather it primarily concerns the relationship between structure and meaning. We aim to determine by what criteria the author has arranged the contents of the book and what these criteria imply about the author's communication strategy (Amit, 2001, pp. 65-66).

Two main features are identified as structurally significant in Genesis:

- Consideration of style and the distribution of certain concepts leads some scholars to argue for a division of the book into two parts.
- Other scholars prioritise the so-called *toledot* formulae, associated with genealogies, which has produced various configurations.

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2.1.1 Two-part structures

One school of thought sees Genesis divided into a primeval history or prologue (chapters 1–11, broadly speaking) and the ancestral history (chapters 12–50), with these two histories narrating the origins of the world and of Israel respectively.[15]

Von Rad (1972, pp. 21-24) argues that the bulk of the ancestral narratives were written to supply the backstory to the Mosaic narratives, and that the primeval narratives were added later to provide an introduction to the ancestral stories. Thus, the book of Genesis tells the origin story of the nation of Israel, which is prefaced by the origin story of the world and the nations. Van Seters (1992, pp. 197-99) also follows this basic two-part division, though he acknowledges that the genealogies have a structuring function. They are, however, a secondary creation "used to bind together the disparate stories or traditions". Towner's (2001) major commentary on Genesis is not explicit about structure, but the organisation of his comments reflects the two-part view. Carr (2011, p. 323) is explicit in his structural analysis that the book should be divided into primeval and ancestral narratives.

This two-part division of Genesis is ubiquitous enough that McKeown (2008, p. 2) can say: "Even a cursory reading of Genesis reveals that the book has two main sections: chapters 1–11 and 12–50. This division is on the basis of subject matter: the first 11 chapters are universal in content and outlook, while the remaining chapters have a narrow focus on one family line".[16] However, the division and the criteria offered in support are not as clear as he suggests. Firstly, there is no hard division between the two sections—a fact that is evident in the disagreement in scholarship over the best place to locate the start of the second part (for example, Von Rad starts the second part at Genesis 12:10, and Van Seters at 11:27). Secondly, it is true that creation and flood are both universal and the ancestral stories are more local, but the focus throughout the book remains on nuclear families within the single line of descent of Israel—Adam, Seth, Noah, Shem and Terah are all fathers within the same line. If one were to decide that Genesis is about a *different* key topic—such as "family" or "covenant"—it would be just as self-evident that the book should be divided into three or five or ten. The universal–local division is obvious only because of the consistency with which it is asserted, not because "cursory readings" would always lead to this conclusion. As McKeown (2008, p. 2) acknowledges, the structure of a book should be decided on a far more careful appraisal of internal evidence than this.

[15] See, for example, Arnold (2009, pp. 6-7).

[16] Cf. Brueggemann's (1982, p. 8) description of the structure as "traditional and obvious".

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2.1.2 *Toledot* structures

The second school of thought is that the *toledot* formulae are the primary structuring mechanism. Opponents of this view, such as Speiser (1964, p. xxiv), have argued that formulae such as the *toledot* are typical of P and are a distinct genre from the narrative surrounding them. Thus, they conclude that the formula is incidental to the narrative itself. More recently, scholars have acknowledged that even if the *toledot* material had once existed in a distinct source, this would not preclude these formulae from being deployed structurally in the final form.

Genesis contains eleven occurrences of a formulaic noun clause featuring the word *toledot*. They are as follows:

- These are the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth (2:4–4:26).
- This is the book[17] of the *toledot* of Adam (5:1–6:8).
- These are the *toledot* of Noah (6:9–9:29).
- And these are the *toledot* of Noah's sons (10:1–11:9).
- These are the *toledot* of Shem (11:10–26).
- And these are the *toledot* of Terah (11:27–25:11).
- And these are the *toledot* of Ishmael (25:12–18).
- And these are the *toledot* of Isaac (25:19–35:29).
- And these are the *toledot* of Esau (36:1–8).
- And these are the *toledot* of Esau (36:9–37:1).
- These are the *toledot* of Jacob (37:2–50:26).

Although it is clear that there is a structural function to the *toledot* formula, the way in which it functions is a matter of some dispute. Much of the difficulty arises out of the observation that the *toledot* are headings of very different sorts of material—some are connected with genealogies, and some with narrative. This has caused a great deal of discussion about the meaning of the word itself and what these variations mean for structure.

[17] It is unclear why this *toledot* statement is uniquely called a *book* (or document). Schreiner (2004, p. 584) suggests that it indicates the incorporation of pre-existing material, but it is not clear why it is alone in this. I am proceeding on the assumption that it is an inconsequential variation.

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2.1.2.1 Meaning of toledot

Toledot is a nominal form of the verbal root ילד ("to give birth, beget") and refers to the result of that bearing—it basically means "begetting, fathering" and by extension "people who are related" (Schreiner, 2004, pp. 582-83; Thomas, 2011, pp. 22-23) or "generations" (Brown, Driver & Briggs, 2000, p. 410; Von Rad, 1972, p. 63). This is all very well when the word is used to introduce genealogical lists, which would seem to be the most natural material to fall under such a heading. However, five of these headings are followed by narrative. This would be relatively unproblematic if all of these narratives concerned the children of the named father—indeed, Walton (2001, p. 548) claims that "the *toledot* of someone deals with his children"—but at least in the case of Noah's cycle it is Noah himself who is the main actor in the story, and in Genesis 34, in the *toledot* of Isaac, the *grandchildren* play a significant part. Furthermore, the first *toledot* heading in the book is not named after a personal father at all, but is "the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth" (Thomas, 2011, p. 23).

For these reasons, most scholars argue that *toledot* must have extended its semantic domain beyond the base idea of "giving birth" in order to fit these contexts. Von Rad (1972, p. 63) assumes that this term has been used in the case of the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth for consistency's sake, though it does not really fit the context. He takes it figuratively to mean "story of origins". McKeown (2008, p. 3) similarly suggests that this first use of *toledot* ought to be translated differently from the others. According to Schwartz (2016, p. 4), some suggest that "the works of creation" should be considered the offspring of the cosmos, and so the meaning of *toledot* need not change in Genesis 2. She objects that the heavens and the earth are not reproductive entities, and to make them the progenitors of the works of creation would lend them a creative power that opposes the general biblical perspective that God is sole creator. Her solution (2016, pp. 11-13) is rather that *toledot* had by this time absorbed a second meaning—the idea of continuation in a historical or narrative sense (i.e., a "chronicle" or "family story"). Blenkinsopp (2011, p. 4) observes that in modern Hebrew *toledot* has indeed come to mean "history". Similarly, Kohlenberger and Mounce (2012) view the meaning as varied enough to include all of "account, record, genealogy, family line" among its glosses.

Although there is nothing objectionable about the idea that *toledot* might have multiple meanings, I would argue, with Schreiner (2004, p. 583), that in Genesis—especially with so much focus on problems and promises to do with childbearing—the "basic meaning is always present to some extent". I suggest that understanding *toledot* to mean "generations" allows sufficient flexibility to account for the uses in Genesis, whether it is to quickly trace a line of generation (i.e., a cluster of

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generations in a genealogy) or to pause and examine one of those generations (i.e., to focus on the exploits of the generations of a family at a certain point in time). The narrative *toledot* can be seen as discussing *the generations of a particular father at the time of his family headship*, which is why the *toledot* ends once the father dies. Whether the father or the children in that generation are of greater interest to the narrator is irrelevant. Thus, the idea of a family story encapsulates well how Genesis uses the formulae, but I prefer to translate it as "generations" because it helps to preserve a clearer sense of the book's foci on progeny and *movement through* generations. The family stories are not isolated from one another.

2.1.2.2 Suggested structures based on toledot

The various types of information introduced by the *toledot* headings have occasioned much discussion about what these variations mean for structure. The following examples represent three distinct solutions.

Blenkinsopp's two-part structure

Blenkinsopp's (2011, pp. 4-5) view is something of a hybrid of the traditional two-part structure and those based on *toledot*. He considers the first eleven chapters of Genesis originally to have been an independent text, and thus treats them as a distinct section in the final form. He considers the *toledot* headings to be confirmation of the independence of these two sections, because each, he argues, is a coherent pentad consisting of five *toledot* headings:[18]

[18] One might also add Arnold (2009, pp. 6-7) as a proponent of this view. He observes that five of the ten *toledot* relate to the origins of the universe and humanity in general, and five relate to the family history of Israel, which (*pace* Von Rad) begins in 11:27.

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Figure 1: Blenkinsopp's structure of Genesis

Heavens and earth (2:4–4:26)	Terah (11:27–25:11)
Adam (5:1–6:8)	Ishmael (25:12–18)
Noah (6:9–9:29)	**Isaac (25:19–35:29)**
Noah's Sons (10:1–11:9)	Esau (36:1–8; 36:9–37:1)
Shem (11:10–26)	Jacob (37:2–50:26)

He argues that each *toledot* pentad emphasises its central section. In the primeval history, the central event is the flood, which divides the narrative into the thematic sections of creation, uncreation, and re-creation. He considers the second pentad to be following an identical pattern: the central unit—the *toledot* named after Isaac but focused on Jacob's life—is narrating a similar pattern of destruction and re-creation. It describes Jacob's exile (judgement) followed by his "passage to a new identity and a new relationship with God".

While the creation, uncreation, and re-creation motif is an attractive one, I am not convinced that a detailed study of structure bears this out. Among other things, its apparent symmetry is undone when one considers the types of material introduced by the *toledot* headings—something that Childs takes into account.

Childs's three-part structure

Childs's analysis of structure in Genesis is based primarily on distinctions between the sorts of material that each heading introduces,[19] and he offers insightful suggestions for both the structure itself and the effect of that structure on the meaning of the text.

Childs (1979, pp. 145-46) notes that there are two broad groups of *toledot*—those that introduce narrative passages, and those that introduce genealogical lists—and the latter group can be subdivided further into *vertical* (tracing a single line of descent between two key ancestors) and *horizontal* (tracing the "relationship of various subgroups within a family", i.e., the key branches of an ancestral family).[20]

[19] These distinctions were suggested before Childs by Wilson and Scharbert (Thomas, 2011, pp. 54-55, 84).

[20] These are often referred to as linear and segmented genealogies, though we will retain Childs's labels.

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In Childs's (1979, p. 146) view, the vertical genealogies are primary and function to trace the line of descent from Adam to Jacob, which provides a framework into which the narratives of the patriarchs can fit. This yields a three-part structure that might be diagrammed as follows:[21]

Figure 2: Childs's structure of Genesis (probable)

Section	*Toledot*
1	Preface (1:1–2:3) These are the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth (2:4–4:26)
This is the book of the *toledot* of Adam (5:1–6:8)	
2	These are the *toledot* of Noah (6:9–9:29) And these are the *toledot* of Noah's Sons (10:1–11:9)
These are the *toledot* of Shem (11:10–26)	
3	And these are the *toledot* of Terah (11:27–25:11) And these are the *toledot* of Ishmael (25:12–18) And these are the *toledot* of Isaac (25:19–35:29) And these are the *toledot* of Esau (36:1–8; 36:9–37:1) These are the *toledot* of Jacob (37:2–50:26)

In terms of the overall relationship of the *toledot* statements to the meaning and purpose of Genesis, Childs (1979, pp. 146-53) argues that they provide a unified structure to the book that connects the creation of the world with the story of mankind, and with "the divine will for a chosen people" in particular. Giving the vertical *toledot* primacy is important to him, because he identifies the purpose of genealogies as "legitimating royal dynasties and registering the… political claims of groups". Childs reckons that the biblical lines of descent do not authorise political power, but rather provide "religious affirmation", that is, legitimating an elect line of righteous ancestors that leads eventually to the birth of the nation of Israel.

Childs's identification of the three types of *toledot* and his attempt to describe the structure of the book in terms of the different functions of these types are both important steps forward in the assessment of the structure of Genesis. However, linguistic fields have focused attention on variations within the formula, and this data also requires consideration.

[21] Childs himself does not offer a structural diagram.

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Thomas and DeRouchie on asyndeton within the formula

Thomas (2011) brings various observations from linguistics to bear upon the question of *toledot* in the Pentateuch. DeRouchie's (2013) work builds upon much of what Thomas observed.

Thomas (2011, pp. 31-41) argues that the function of the formula is to provide cohesion to the text—linking one generation with the next. It also functions to signal the start of new material, both by providing background information and by introducing the progenitor in question. It moves the story from known ancestor to new offspring. Based on the concepts in linguistics of theme and rheme (or presupposition and assertion),[22] he argues that the *toledot* statements have a bridging function whereby they begin with the known ancestor (who invariably features in the previous episodes) and then transition to new generations who are unknown to the reader. This, he argues, allows us to infer that the *toledot* is a heading. The *toledot* formulae are also verbless clauses, which serve as a pause—again, as headings do. Their transitional nature means that there might be double reference—that is, to conclude the previous narrative and to introduce the next—but functionally, he argues, they should be seen as headings to what follows.

The major contribution from linguistics to the structural debate arises out of the observation that the *toledot* formulae are not completely uniform. Thomas (2011, pp. 69-73) identifies the presence or absence of a *waw* at the start of the *toledot* formulae as the most significant variation—one which seems to affect the way in which the formula interacts with the material before it. Without a *waw*, he argues, the clauses are independent, whereas those in which the *waw* is present are coordinate. In Thomas's view, the independent clauses tend to introduce new material, whereas the coordinate clauses present information with which the reader is familiar. In short, the independent *toledot* represent main headings, whereas the coordinate *toledot* are subheadings. DeRouchie (2013, pp. 229-33) follows Thomas in viewing asyndeton in the *toledot* formula as the primary macrostructural marker in the book and has developed these observations into the following structural diagram:

[22] That is, the distinction between those elements in communication that represent a known or presupposed starting point, and those elements that are related to the topic and are intended to be new (the rheme or assertion).

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Figure 3: Thomas–DeRouchie's structure of Genesis

Panel	Section	*Waw*	*Toledot*
			Preface (1:1–2:3)
1	i	Ø	These are the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth (2:4–4:26)
2A	ii	Ø	This is the book of the *toledot* of Adam (5:1–6:8)
	iii	Ø *waw*	These are the *toledot* of Noah (6:9–9:29) And these are the *toledot* of Noah's Sons (10:1–11:9)
2B	iv	Ø *waw* *waw* *waw* *waw*	These are the *toledot* of Shem (11:10–26) And these are the *toledot* of Terah (11:27–25:11) And these are the *toledot* of Ishmael (25:12–18) And these are the *toledot* of Isaac (25:19–35:29) And these are the *toledot* of Esau (36:1–8; 36:9–37:1)
	v	Ø	These are the *toledot* of Jacob (37:2–50:26)

The *toledot* formulae have been grouped firstly by the presence or absence of a *waw* at their start. The asyndetic formulae stand as main headings, dividing the book into five sections (with the first creation story standing outside the structure as an introduction).

Thomas (2011, p. 73) offers the rationale for each of these section divisions—they each represent a progressive *narrowing of focus* from the whole of creation to the nation of Israel, as follows:[23]

1. Heavens and earth (2:4) → all creation
2. Adam (5:1) → humanity in general
3. Noah (6:9) → all surviving humanity (after the execution of the rest)
4. Shem (11:10) → a subset of surviving humanity
5. Jacob (37:2) → Israel

The mechanism at work in the narrowing from (1) all creation to (2) humanity in general is given as "the simple choice of species" (Thomas, 2011, pp. 43-46). The narrowing mechanism from all humanity to (3) "all surviving humanity" is the execution of the wicked and the resultant covenant with Noah's line—the sole survivors. From then on, the narrowing involves the mechanism of choice—that of one family from within the nations and then one son from within that family line. This principle is exercised in the subsections of the Shem section (with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob being chosen from among their brothers), until finally with Jacob the narrowing stops and all twelve tribes that stem from him are equally in focus.

[23] This list is adapted from DeRouchie (2013, p. 235).

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DeRouchie (2013, pp. 242-44) argues for a structuring layer above these main sections, grouping them into "panels". This is based largely on two observations:

- Firstly, the order of the *toledot* alternates between narrative and genealogical, except in the case the *toledot* of Noah's sons and that of Shem, both of which are genealogical. This he takes to be an indication of a hard division between the two.
- Secondly, there is symmetry in the structure, with Noah's story and the story of the patriarchs both beginning with a vertical genealogy and consisting of two main section breaks. He adds that the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth—being the only one given of a non-human progenitor—marks it as distinct.

Thomas (2011, p. 105) is not explicit about the division into panels, but he does argue that there are shifts in the criteria by which the "narrowing" of focus takes place—it moves from all of humanity, to all surviving humanity, and finally to those who are chosen—and the rationale for those shifts is the presence of a new divine–human covenant. These covenants represent a change in the way in which God and humanity relate, and consequently, changes in the focus of the story. Thus, in Thomas's thinking, there is also support for three main covenantal eras as overarching structural sections.[24]

Thomas and DeRouchie give considerable attention to the types of *toledot* that Childs identified (narrative, horizontal and vertical). The following observations are pertinent:

- Thomas (2011, pp. 55, 84) notes that the main dispute over how individual *toledot* should be classified concerns the vertical genealogies of Adam and Shem. Some scholars group them with the genealogies, but others classify them as narrative because, being linked by a succession of *Wayyiqtol* verbs, they serve to move the story forward.
- It is generally agreed that the horizontal genealogies interrupt the flow of the story. Thomas (2011, pp. 56-57, 81) argues that their purpose is firstly to include the enumerated descendants within the *previous* promises while also excluding them from the narrowing

[24] In spite of this, Thomas (2011, pp. 107-11) seems more taken with the idea that there are rhetorical parallels between the five main sections of Genesis, and that these give it a *chiastic* shape. This allegedly puts the central focus of the book as a whole upon the reassertion of blessing after the flood. For this to be the case, I would require evidence that the thematic and conceptual content of the book supports this observation. It is, after all, an argument that *the (implied) author* intended to designate Noah's covenant as the centrepiece of the book, and so it should be explicable in terms of the author's purposes more broadly. In my judgement, his evidence and explanation are weak, and it does not appear to me to meet this criterion. Though DeRouchie's work is heavily dependent on Thomas, he does not adopt this line of argument.

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that follows. Secondly, they serve to preserve and honour the family lines that are outside the main narrative thread.

- DeRouchie (2013, pp. 236-42) notes that the horizontal *toledot* slow down the discourse, and that they serve to dismiss the family lines from the remainder of the story. This causes him to ask why the author would want us to slow down and to remember the peoples excluded from the line of promise. He argues that these genealogies are a reminder of Israel's divine image-bearing and their commission to be agents of blessing to the nations governed by curse.[25] Israel was created *for the world*.

In conclusion, as in Childs's structure, the vertical *toledot* emerge as primary to the division of the book into its major parts, but unlike in Childs's structure, linguistic features identify five particular *toledot* statements as main headings; the remainder are subheadings of those sections. The purpose of this structure is to plot successive phases of the narrowing of God's promises and blessings—from all of humanity, by degrees, to the election of one family of Israel. As these stages of narrowing progress, the horizontal genealogies serve to honour the non-elect sons of the patriarchs, and perhaps in this way to remind Israel of her mission to be a blessing to the nations.

Observations concerning asyndeton

While much of the work of Thomas and DeRouchie concerning the structure of Genesis is persuasive, I am hesitant to endorse asyndeton as the determining factor in the structuring of the *toledot* in Genesis. It is questionable whether such a subtle feature would be suitable for this purpose across such a long book, and the presence or absence of a *waw* does not seem to function structurally elsewhere in this manner. For example, all the narrative books from Exodus to Kings, with the exception of Deuteronomy, open with a *waw*, with Exodus even including a similar formula at its start (וְאֵלֶּה). It is hard to believe that a hearer would recognise asyndeton as structural in the case of the Genesis *toledot* but regard it as arbitrary elsewhere. There is a greater burden of proof to show that asyndeton *does* function macro-syntactically in the *toledot* formulae, not just that it *can*.

Thomas's argument also appears at times to lack coherence. He argues on the basis of linguistics that the asyndetic *toledot* headings introduce new information, whereas the others carry forward

[25] I have often preferred to use "curse" and "blessing" without an article, particularly where reference to a specific curse or blessing is not intended. The Garden of Eden story seems to establish an ideal state of right relationship and favour before God, which is a paradigmatic state of blessing, and a state that I have designated "curse", which includes the damaged network of relationships that is the result of their rebellion.

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information already familiar to the reader. It is not clear to me by what criteria information is judged to be new or familiar. The horizontal genealogies all present new information—families not yet introduced—but are *coordinate*. Conversely, Noah's heading is preceded by a short narrative that introduces him and God's plan to eradicate wicked humanity, and the narrative section that follows it expands on this introduction, yet his heading is asyndetic. Jacob's asyndetic *toledot* also follows a section that dwells for a considerable length of time on him and the birth of his sons.

Problems with the criterion of newness of *information* are not necessarily fatal to the argument, however, because Thomas and DeRouchie argue that the main reason for the use of an asyndetic formula rather than a coordinate one is that it represents a new *narrowing*.

Narrowing

Several authors besides Thomas and DeRouchie have identified the narrowing of scope in Genesis as an important concept in the book.[26] It is, after all, the primary thematic reason for the two-part structures discussed earlier. However, the role that Thomas gives this concept structurally is not without its problems.

If the independent *toledot* represent a new narrowing of covenant focus, it seems necessary that each section should consistently describe either *how* the new narrowing takes place, or what happens once a new narrowing *has* taken place (i.e., in the previous section). But there is no such consistency—some new sections narrate a new narrowing, and some *follow* a narrowing.

For example, section v, the *toledot* of Jacob, narrates the stories of Jacob's sons, all of whom belong to "Israel"—that is, the narrowing to one nation from among the nations has already taken place in the preceding section. However, in Noah's case, the narrowing to all surviving humanity is confirmed only at the end of the story, and in Shem's case, there is no specific moment in Noah's story at which his election is stated. In Genesis 9, Ham's line is cursed, but although Japheth will "dwell in the tents of Shem", *both* sons seem to be commended. The narrowing of focus—the election of Abraham from his line— occurs in Shem's own section, not in the section before.

Thomas (2011, pp. 42-44) acknowledges that this is an "overall trajectory" but that some sections do not follow this pattern. He suggests that the *toledot* of the sons of Noah is an example in which

[26] DeRouchie (2013, p. 226) cites Blenkinsopp as an influence in this regard; Arnold (2009, pp. 6-7) cites Schreiner.

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narrowing does not take place, but which prepares for the Tower of Babel story. However, I think the main problem with the narrowing concept is not that there sometimes *is not* a narrowing, but rather that, from as early as Genesis 4, the book is consistently focused on the election of one son over another within a single family. Only in the Tower of Babel story does collective humanity feature directly as a character; besides the Babel episode, Genesis always has family units within a single genealogical line in view.

Thomas (2011, p. 44) says, "After the story of the Tower of Babel, we are met immediately with the *toledot* of Shem. Here, for the first time, we have the *toledot* for one family who does not encompass all of humanity." This is surely not so. Section i narrates the creation of Adam and the *narrowing of his line to Seth*: there is already a division of "humanity in general" into a "subset of humanity" in Genesis 4. Cain does not receive his own *toledot* statement, but there is a genealogy for him—one that traces his line vertically to Lamech, only to branch out horizontally at that point. Lamech, of course, is significant for his amplification of Cain's violence—the thing that precipitates the flood in the narrative that follows. This implies that there are *alternative* lines: one for Cain that terminates in violence, and one for Abel (via Seth as his proxy) that is characterised by the calling on the name of the Lord (Gen 4:26) (Clines, 1997, p. 73).

Thomas (2011, p. 45) makes a similar point when he describes the narrowing of Seth's line to Terah (and shortly thereafter to Isaac). For him, this represents the election of a *smaller subset of humanity* by the principle of choice. While there obviously is the election of one son from among the children, is this best described as a *narrowing*? Every stage of the descent of promise to the next important ancestor (from as early as Seth) involves one family line and the selection of an individual from among the rest of humanity. The motion is always the choice of one line and not another, rather than a smaller and smaller group. Thomas (2011, pp. 113-14) acknowledges exactly this point with regard to Shem's vertical genealogy—naming only one descendant in each generation when other siblings are said to have been involved represents the continual application of choice. Oddly, however, he does not recognise that this must apply to the earlier vertical genealogy of Adam too.

Therefore I am not persuaded that the concept of narrowing is a secure criterion to explain the movements in the book. The principle *throughout* appears to be election. From the first generation, the acceptance of one line and the rebellion of another are in view. If asyndeton is a crucial structural feature, the rationale behind it requires more careful examination.

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The problem of the vertical toledot *and section breaks*

There is an additional lack of symmetry with regard to the vertical genealogies. According to Thomas's and DeRouchie's reconstruction, Adam's vertical *toledot* is followed by a short narrative (6:1–8), which they take to be an addendum to it, and is followed by a main heading (the *toledot* of Noah); Seth's vertical *toledot*, on the other hand, is followed immediately by a subheading (the *toledot* of Terah). It is not clear why Noah is introduced in 6:1–8 only to insert a new main section at 6:9; nor is it clear why there is no introduction of Terah, but his genealogy is made a subheading. Or, if one takes it that Genesis 6:1–8 narrates something that makes it appropriate to insert a hard break, it is not clear what that something is.

It is not clear (at least not to me) what makes it appropriate for the vertical *toledot* to be followed by a main heading in one case but not the other.

Horizontal toledot *as acknowledgement of inclusion within the previous blessings*

While the combination of asyndeton and the concept of narrowing do not fully persuade, I am appreciative of Thomas's and DeRouchie's contributions to understanding the function of the horizontal *toledot*.

Horizontal *toledot* have often been thought of as *excluding* a line of the family in question, and in some measure this is true. Each of the horizontal genealogies (barring Shem's) does seem to relate to sons who are set to move offstage. However, Thomas and DeRouchie argue that the horizontal genealogies are less about excluding these sons and their descendants and more about acknowledging their place in the preceding promises, and (in DeRouchie's argument) serve as a reminder of Israel's covenant responsibility to their neighbours.

This is most clearly true of Ishmael. The horizontal genealogy is appropriate because he is a son who is explicitly blessed by God in Genesis 17:20, and Genesis 25:16 speaks of his descendants using the language of "twelve princes", borrowed from his blessing in Genesis 17. This acknowledges that the blessings to which he was party were fulfilled. Thus, it is likely that the horizontal *toledot* serves to show that this blessing has taken place and to preserve memory of his offspring (Thomas, 2011, p. 93). Esau's case is similar, but it is not clear what divine blessing applies to him that would explicitly justify the idea of horizontal *toledot* being used for the honouring of blessed lines. Thomas (2011, p. 116) suggests that Esau receives a secondary blessing via Isaac in Genesis 27:39–40. Perhaps Genesis 34:8–11 offers stronger evidence of his receipt of some limited blessing that would warrant his memorialisation. In this text it is clear that Esau has prospered—both Esau and Jacob "have

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enough"—and Jacob explicitly offers him a blessing because of God's gifts to him, which Esau accepts. Perhaps Esau is blessed because of his association with Jacob (in conformity to Genesis 12:2–3). Similarly to the genealogy of Ishmael in Genesis 25, Genesis 36:31 emphasises the *kings* of Esau's line that reigned in Edom before the monarchy of Israel. Just as Ishmael's genealogy confirms the fulfilment of princes from his line, Esau's genealogy confirms the fulfilment of the promise (also from Genesis 17) of kings from Sarah's line—both her grandchildren were the heads of lines of kings.

Therefore, it is possible that the horizontal *toledot* serve as a reminder of God's intention to bless the nations by memorialising lines of descent that stand outside of direct inheritance of God's promises, but whose ancestry includes them within blessings of a more limited scope.

Conclusion

Thomas and DeRouchie have both made important contributions to the discussion of the structure of Genesis, and the role of asyndeton within the *toledot* formulae is a feature worthy of further study, particularly as the evidence from linguistics mounts. I remain unpersuaded, however, that the explanation as it currently stands is sufficiently coherent, nor that the concept of narrowing is the best interpretation of the text evidence. Until further study produces a more complete solution, I take it that the presence or absence of *waw* in the formulae is not a primary factor.

2.2 PROPOSED STRUCTURE

The structural analysis that I propose is a development on the observation of the three types of *toledot* used in Genesis. I will argue that the strongest structuring device is the patterned deployment of these types of *toledot* in specific roles.

The narrative *toledot* seem to be main headings that serve to divide the book into five sections, and the horizontal *toledot* perform the role of epilogues. The vertical *toledot* are transitional in some way, and we will give them more focused attention below.

I suggest that Genesis as a whole is structured as follows:

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Figure 4: Suggested structure of Genesis

Part	Section	*Toledot*
1	i	Introduction: Creation (1:1–2:3) **Narrative: These are the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth (2:4–4:26)**
		Vertical: This is the book of the *toledot* of Adam (5:1–32)
2	ii	Introduction: Uncreation (6:1–8) **Narrative: These are the *toledot* of Noah (6:9–9:29)** *Death of Noah (9:28–29)* Horizontal: And these are the *toledot* of Noah's sons (10:1–32) Epilogue: Babel (11:1–9)
		Vertical: These are the *toledot* of Shem (11:10–26)
3	iii	**Narrative: And these are the *toledot* of Terah (11:27–25:11)**[27] *Death of Terah (11:32)* *Death of Abraham (25:7–11)* Horizontal: And these are the *toledot* of Ishmael (25:12–18)
	iv	**Narrative: And these are the *toledot* of Isaac (25:19–35:29)** *Death of Isaac (35:28–29)* Horizontal: And these are the *toledot* of Esau (36:1–8; 36:9–37:1)
	v	**Narrative: These are the *toledot* of Jacob (37:2–50:26)** *Death of Jacob (49:33)* Epilogue: Commitment to the Promised Land (50:1–26) *Death of Joseph (50:1–26)*

In the work of most of the scholars considered above, the horizontal *toledot* tend to be discussed as a *phenomenon*—that is, what does the *fact of* the horizontal genealogies mean in Genesis? In terms of their role in the *structure* of Genesis, most scholars seem only to note that the narrative and genealogical *toledot* tend to alternate. However, the storytelling in Genesis follows a fairly consistent pattern in which a new narrative section is announced by means of a *toledot* of a certain patriarch, and it concludes with his death notice and a horizontal *toledot* dispensing with his non-elect son(s). Immediately thereafter, the cycle begins again with the narrative *toledot* of the elect son, who takes over as the family head of the chosen line.

[27] The *toledot* of Terah begins with a list of the children that he fathered, which leads DeRouchie (2013, p. 242), and Croatto, whom he cites, to classify this as a genealogical *toledot*, not a narrative one. I agree with Thomas (2011, pp. 83-84) that a genealogy is a *formulaic* presentation of lines of descent, not merely a connection of father to children. Terah's fathering of Abram, Nahor, and Haran appears in the formulaic way in 11:26, whereas its repetition in 11:27 serves to introduce Lot, who is important to the narratives that follow. The same device is used to introduce Canaan (9:18), and there is a similar means employed to introduce Rebekah (22:23), Leah (29:16), Zilpah (29:24), and Bilhah (29:29). This should be classified as a narrative *toledot*.

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Because there is widespread evidence of formulaic patterning as a predominant means of structuring Hebrew narratives—such as the use of concentric structures in the sections of Genesis, or the use of the narrative cycle in Judges, or the use of regnal formulae in Kings—the structure that I propose privileges the patterning of *toledot* formulae over other details, such as asyndeton. Of course, there are some inconsistencies with the pattern that require comment, but first let us pay more careful attention to the role of the vertical *toledot*, seeing as these stand outside the regular structural pattern.

2.2.1 The role of the vertical *toledot*

The two vertical *toledot* in Genesis are not part of the repetitive cycle formed by the other two *toledot* types, but they do have structural value. I agree with the common suggestion that the vertical *toledot* serve to accelerate through time to the next featured generation's family stories and to provide a connection between the family narratives.[28] However, other observations suggest that they might have an additional structural role.

Firstly, although "covenant" is such an important concept in the book, God covenants directly with only two characters in Genesis: Noah (Gen 6:18; 9) and Abraham (Gen 15; 17). Subsequent generations are included in the *scope* of these covenants, but no other characters receive covenants of their own. This means that the two vertical *toledot* provide bridges into the next covenant-making era. In other words, there seems to be a goal-directedness about the vertical genealogies too: they do not merely connect one key ancestor to another across time; they jump forward to a new era that begins a covenantal relationship between God and humanity.[29]

The first era (Gen 1–4) likely requires no covenantal language because it begins with unbroken relationship between God and humankind. The story of the Fall, Cain's violence, and the curse of the ground indicate the severing of that peace. The covenants serve to broker a new means by which rest can be achieved.

[28] That this form of genealogy features the age of each ancestor would support that it intends to communicate the passing of time.

[29] The next vertical *toledot* occurs in Exodus 6, explicitly tracing the line from Levi to Moses—the one who inaugurates the next covenant era.

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Secondly, as we will discuss in the next chapter, both Noah[30] and Abraham are presented in ways that subtly connect them to Adam, a pattern that does not extend to any of the other patriarchs in the book. The vertical *toledot* seem to make explicit the connection of Adam, Noah, and Abraham, who all represent new beginnings.

In conclusion, it seems as though the vertical *toledot* function as transitions into new covenant "movements" in which God addresses the problem of divine–human separation. They provide a coherent line of development from one covenantal movement to the next.

2.2.2 Inconsistencies in the pattern

Asymmetries are not unexpected in structural analysis; they can be accounted for in a few ways. Firstly, story structures serve the ends of the story; the story does not serve merely to populate the structure—some of the structural rules might need to be bent in service of the plot, for example. Secondly, variances in a pattern are potentially emphatic—an author might put an episode in an unexpected place in order to draw special attention to it. Thirdly, it remains a possibility in the case of books with an extended compositional history that certain episodes may have been added after the main editing process and disturbed symmetry that once existed. The reader is left to judge how many exceptions are tolerable before a structural analysis breaks the bounds of credulity.

In the case of Thomas's structural analysis, it may be that my criticisms demand too much regularity from the structure, and that the difficulties can be accounted for as mere asymmetries. While this is possible, it seems to me that its complications have to do with its core features—that is, the way in which sections are derived, and the criterion of narrowing that Thomas offers as its rationale.

Many of the problems relevant to the structure that I have proposed are those that every *toledot*-based structure shares, namely:

- Why is the first *toledot* named for the heavens and the earth?
- Why is there a *toledot* for Terah but not Abraham?
- Why does Esau have two conjoined horizontal *toledot*?

We will discuss these in greater detail below. The remaining asymmetries in my analysis seem to me to be trivial enough not to threaten its coherence seriously, but deserve some comment:

[30] See Schwartz (2016, p. 17).

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- **There is no death notice of the patriarch or horizontal *toledot* statement for Cain:** The lack of a horizontal *toledot* for Cain may simply reflect that he was a recipient of curse rather than blessing, and his line was cut off in the flood—none of his descendants remained to memorialise him. The lack of a death notice to conclude the heavens and the earth cycle might have to do with its non-human progenitor—an issue we will discuss at greater length below.
- **There are extraneous narratives, such as the Babel episode and Genesis 50:** It is common for narratives to make use of introductions, bridging episodes, and epilogues. These may be anomalous in the structure if the needs of the story outweigh the desire for symmetry. The Babel story may occur in its location because its topic is the division of nations, which makes it likely that it is a bridge between the Table of Nations (Gen 10) and the promise of blessing on the nations (Gen 12:1–3) (Wright, 2004, p. 49). It may also be that there *is* symmetry and each part of the book does have its own epilogue: Cain's story or some element of Genesis 4 (e.g., Lamech's brief cameo) would serve this role for part one, Babel for part two, and Genesis 50 for part three.
- **There is no horizontal *toledot* to close off Jacob's cycle:** This is expected, seeing as there are no siblings that God rejects from inheriting the covenant; this is the family to which the book has been leading, and it ends with Jacob blessing of all of his sons, rather than with a genealogy that dismisses any of them.

2.2.2.1 The toledot *of the heavens and earth*

The *toledot* of the heavens and the earth is controversial for a few reasons, the first being that many think it should be understood as a conclusion, not a heading. This is based on evidence from Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets that conclude with a *toledot* statement as a colophon (DeRouchie, 2013, pp. 222-24). Von Rad (1972, p. 63) argues that the P source has an affinity for formulaic material (such as *toledot* formulae), and so the *toledot* in Genesis 2:4 should be kept with the formulaic creation story that precedes it. However, given that the four other narrative *toledot* operate as headings of non-P material, the *toledot* in 2:4 need not be any different. Schreiner (2004, p. 587) argues that 2:4 should be seen as a conclusion to 1:1–2:4 because it corresponds to the superscription (1:1). Against this view, Wenham (1987, p. 5) points out that 2:1–3 already reiterate the terms of 1:1 in reverse order (he created—God—in the beginning [1:1] // in the beginning [2:1]—God [2:2]—he created [2:3]), which serves the role of summary sufficiently well. Thus, I have

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taken it that 2:4 operates in the same way as the other narrative *toledot* and is the heading of what follows.

The other point of discussion concerns the ascription of generations to a non-human progenitor (the heavens and the earth). This seems a relatively inconsequential objection, and in any case, Adam's "birth" renders him unique; he is formed from earth and he is named after the earth. If one adopts the view that *toledot* narratives concern the family stories of a single generation (i.e., the events that transpired during the lifetime of the named ancestor), then Genesis 2–4 can be seen as focused on the exploits of humanity's first generation. It may be that the author wanted to avoid implying that Adam was a direct descendant of God, and so he roots his origin in creation. That the *toledot* is of the heavens and the earth forcefully underlines the createdness of humanity and our responsibility towards the created order.

2.2.2.2 The toledot *of Terah*

The *toledot* of Terah poses a problem because his role in the story is insignificant and he dies within a matter of a few verses of his introduction; very little would seem to be lost if he were elided entirely. Abraham is then introduced without an expected *toledot* formula. This has led to what Schwartz (2016, p. 20) calls "the accepted division of three ancestral narrative cycles within the book of Genesis: those of Abraham, Jacob and Joseph… [implying] that there is no narrative cycle concerning Isaac".[31]

Schwartz (2016, pp. 20-22) suggests that there is no *toledot* formula for Abraham because his fatherhood being in question is central to his story, and so a *toledot* for Abraham is absent to create literary suspense. She argues that the *toledot* of Isaac does double duty: it is the heading of the Jacob traditions, and an epilogue to the Isaac traditions that precede it. While this is possible, it is doubtful that any historical audience of first readers would have been in suspense over Abraham's fatherhood; what is more in question is the manner in which the promises come about, not *whether* they will come about.

Thomas (2011, pp. 130-31) suggests that it is appropriate for the *toledot* to be that of Terah because the rest of Genesis concerns both the men of Terah (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) and the women of Terah (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel); furthermore, in the marriages of Rebekah to Isaac and Rachel and

[31] See also Carr (2011, p. 317).

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Leah to Jacob, there is a reunification of the three sons of Terah (cf. Gen 20:20–24). In the twelve sons of Jacob, then, the family of Terah "moves ahead as a unit". However, this does not fully explain why Isaac and Jacob are allocated *toledot* of their own, but Abraham is not. Genesis 12:1 could easily begin with one.

The announcement of a patriarch's death brings his role in the story to a close, even though in practice many of the events of the next *toledot* section seem to take place while the preceding patriarch is still alive. See the table below:

Table 1: Relative ages of contemporaneous ancestors

Dated event	Terah	Abraham	Sarah	Isaac
Abraham's birth (11:26)	**70**	0	-	-
Abraham's departure for Canaan (12:4)	145	**75**	66	-
Isaac's birth (17:1, 17, 21)	170	**100**	**91**	0
Terah's death (11:32)	**205**	135	126	35
Sarah's death (23:1)	-	136	**127**	36
Isaac's marriage (25:20)	**-**	140	-	**40**
Esau's and Jacob's birth (25:26)	-	160	-	**60**
Abraham's death (25:7)	-	**175**	-	75

In the timeline that Genesis supplies, Terah remains alive until Abraham is 135—a year before the death of Sarah. This means that practically all the Abrahamic traditions take place during Terah's lifetime. Abraham himself lives for 15 years after the birth of Jacob and Esau, even though this story is told after his death notice and within Isaac's *toledot*. This emphasises that the *toledot* structure is a construct. Irrespective of when in the story he actually dies, the death notice and the *toledot* of his son bid him farewell from the story. This being the case, the fact that the death notice of Terah is given in Genesis 11 means that his story and his headship of that generation are over. This should require a new *toledot* of Abraham.

I suggest that the *toledot* is ascribed to Terah because he is being depicted as an aborted patriarch—the story sets up expectation for Terah that he fails to fulfil.[32] Terah's abortive patriarchy is perhaps emphasised by a feature of the vertical *toledot*. There is clear symmetry in these genealogies: both follow only one line of descent, ignoring the names of any other sons and daughters, except in the case of the final ancestor, at which point the genealogy branches out and names *three* sons.

[32] This idea is suggested in my MTh (Pickering, 2013, pp. 38-39).

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Hamilton (2007, p. 255) says that the ten generations listed between Adam and Noah, and the ten again between Noah's son and Abraham, represent an explicit intention to connect Abraham to these two key ancestors. It is common, with Hamilton, to discuss the symmetry, but it is often missed that there is an *asymmetry* in these lists too. Hamilton's explanation does not mention that Genesis *avoids* listing the same number of generations in each list, though it surely would have been possible to do so (e.g., by putting Abraham and Noah in the final positions, rather than continuing on to Noah's sons). It *should be* as Hamilton says—there should be ten generations, ending with Abraham—but the vertical genealogy ends prematurely. Look at the following table:

Table 2: The generations listed under the vertical *toledot* of Genesis

Adam to Noah (Gen 5)		Shem to Terah (Gen 11)	
Adam	Jared	Shem	Reu
Seth	Enoch	Arpachshad	Serug
Enosh	Methuselah	Shelah	Nahor
Kenan	Lamech	Eber	Terah
Mahalalel	Noah	Peleg	(Abram, Nahor, Haran)
	(Shem, Ham, Japheth)		

It is possible that the length of each list was determined by history or tradition and there is no significance in their relative lengths. However, if it is intentional that Shem's *toledot* terminates one generation early, it might be drawing attention to the *inappropriateness* of Terah's *toledot*.

The reason for this, I would suggest, is that Terah's story begins with his intention to journey to Canaan—the eventual environment of God's covenant relationship with his people—but he is waylaid by family entanglements in Haran. Assohoto and Ngewa (2006, p. 28) add that, in Genesis 15:7, God claims to have brought the family out of Ur (i.e., he initiated the journey), and the call of Abraham sees him continuing the journey that his father had begun. The point seems to be that Terah had the opportunity to be a new beginning (a new Adam or a new Noah), but he turned aside from his purpose and remained alienated from the land. In contrast, when Abraham is called, he must leave aside family structures and go to the land.

This is supported by two features of Genesis 12. The first of these comes in 12:1, in which Abraham is told to leave behind his network of social relationships. The initial command in Genesis 12:1 (לֶךְ־לְךָ) can be understood as a call to go "by oneself", to leave behind (Wenham, 1987, p. 266), and the scope of these relationships narrows, starting with the broadest sphere of self-identification, his nation, then his intermediate network, his relatives, and finally the narrowest, his father's house.

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Abraham must shed those systems of trust and security and place himself in a position of radical trust in this God. This narrowing of scope is then counterbalanced by the blessings that God offers; it begins with the narrowest, Abraham himself, broadening to all those associated with Abraham (blessing those who bless him), and ends with the ultimate goal of this call: blessing for all nations. God himself provides the blessing and protection that Abraham has been called to set aside (Sarna, 1989, p. 89).

The second feature that implies that Terah was an aborted patriarch is the way in which Abraham's arrival in Canaan is announced in Genesis 12. Verse 5 seems redundant, as it largely repeats the notice of his setting out given in verse 4. However, this second statement of Abraham's departure for Canaan is an allusion to Terah's failed journey in 11:31 (Sarna, 1989, p. 90), as can be seen in the table below:

Table 3: Comparing Terah's and Abraham's arrivals

11:31b	12:5b
וַיֵּצְאוּ אִתָּם מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לָלֶכֶת אַרְצָה כְּנַעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־חָרָן וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם׃	וַיֵּצְאוּ לָלֶכֶת אַרְצָה כְּנַעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ אַרְצָה כְּנָעַן׃
And they departed together from Ur of the Chaldees *in order to go to the land of Canaan and they came* as far as Haran. And they settled there.	*And they departed in order to go to the land of Canaan*, *and they arrived* in the land of Canaan.

This repetition brings the two phrases into comparison, emphasising that Terah leaves *together* with his family, whereas Abraham is presented as having done as he was told (12:4), leaving his family behind. Furthermore, while both intended to go to Canaan, only Abraham reaches it.

In summary, Terah is the recipient of the *toledot* in order to raise expectation for his role—expectation that is very quickly dashed when he becomes entangled in the land and affairs of his relatives and the narrator serves a premature death notice. In contrast, Abraham, the eventual heir of the promises, extracts himself from family entanglements and completes that journey to Canaan (which only on his arrival is announced as the Promised Land). There is no *toledot* for Abraham, because to start and finish Terah's short tenure in the ordinary manner would be to legitimise it. Rather, it represents an opportunity lost—and one gained by the son who obeys God's call. Rather than the expected "new Noah" Terah, the vertical genealogy stopped a generation too early, and it is the childless husband of a barren wife who finds himself at the head of God's plans for the birth of a blessed nation.

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If this explanation is correct, it feeds into an important motif in Genesis—the good and bad of family. Terah's story can thus be seen as a cautionary tale. In the remainder of Genesis, the entanglements of family remain a persistent threat to loyalty to YHWH (for example, Abraham warns against Isaac returning to Haran [Gen 24:6–8], and a divine oracle is necessary to guarantee Jacob's return when he flees there [Gen 28:13–22]). Family represents both the means by which the promises will come and a threat to those who would be heirs of God. Secondly, it suggests a goal-directedness about the family line that the book seems to be pursuing. Belonging to the chosen family is insufficient on its own. Abraham must complete the journey that his father began and so take up headship of a new family. Having obeyed, it is the question of his fatherhood (and that of YHWH) and the nature of the blessings that occupy much of the focus in the ancestral narratives that follow.

2.2.2.3 The double toledot *for Esau*

The final problem common to *toledot* structures is that of the double *toledot* for Esau. In chapter 36 there are two horizontal *toledot* supplied for him.

Thomas (2011, pp. 75-76) offers Rashi's explanation, which is derived from the text—the first list concerns the children Esau fathered in Canaan (Gen 36:5), and the second those he fathered in Edom (Gen 36:9). Yet, this does not fully explain the phenomenon—if the implied author is using *toledot* as structural markers, why would the narrator use the *formula* again? After all, Noah's three sons each receive a horizontal genealogy, but there is only one *toledot* formula governing them.

I have no solution to this problem, but if the role of the horizontal *toledot* is to honour the non-elect son and his lineage as they depart from the story because of the blessings in which they *did* partake, perhaps the double *toledot* intends to place emphasis upon a negative aspect of Esau's life, namely that he progressively moves away from the land and the possibility of inheriting the covenant. There is no explicit statement of Esau's exclusion from the covenant, as there was with Ishmael. His exclusion seems to be a matter of his own choices—whether to despise his birthright or to walk away from the Promised Land.

In conclusion, the inconsistencies in the *toledot* structure are substantial, but none of them seems to me to pose a significant challenge to the overall coherence of the structure, and for at least some apparent problems, it may be that these are intentional variations that are theologically important.

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2.2.3 Contribution to communication strategy

Evidence of a consciously applied structure requires us to consider why the structure was chosen and what influence it has on communication strategy. The first consideration is the choice of *toledot* itself. The choice of *genealogical material* as a structural device—particularly differentiating between elect and non-elect sons—seems to imply that the book has an interest in *lines of descent*.

Pace Thomas and DeRouchie, the structure does not seem to have "narrowing" as its mechanism for the division of the book into sections, because Genesis consistently divides humanity into those who receive the Lord's favour and those who do not; those who are chosen to inherit blessing, and those who are not. Rather, there is a goal-directedness about the family line. The division into five parts headed by five principal ancestors suggests that the concern for descendants is following a purposeful trajectory. Superficially, we might point to the birth of the twelve tribal fathers (and thus the election of the nation of Israel) as a candidate for that goal, but a better understanding of the purpose requires more detailed thematic study.

2.3 PLOT STRUCTURE

Besides the consideration of structural devices that impose a shape on a narrative, it is possible to analyse stories in terms of their *plot structure*.

2.3.1 What is plot?

Stories differ from lists of events because only the former has plot. Ska (2016, p. 202) describes plot as the sequential element in narrative that predominantly features *logical connection*,[33] and Amit (2001, pp. 46-47) describes plot as the narration of *change*. Patterson (2018, p. 6) combines both these elements; he says, "To emplot is to construe human (or divine) agency into the form of a single unity of action that moves from complication to dénouement. The relationship of events that make up the plot therefore is not *chronos*-logical or one *after* another, but *muthos*-logical, one *because of*

[33] Ska (2016, pp. 202-4) makes a distinction between *story* and *plot* (similarly, we noted Clines's distinction between story and *discourse* in chapter 1). According to Ska, story is technically the consideration of events in chronological order, including genres such as chronicle or itinerary, whereas a plot includes the element of logical connection. Since the popular understanding of "story" is as a *plotted narrative*—i.e., the opposite of the technical definition—I have used it in the non-technical sense, and should the chronological sequence of events need to be contrasted with the plot sequence, I will rely on explanation rather than technical language to make the distinction.

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another". Plot hinges on a complication that changes an initial stasis and brings on the *necessity for change* that drives the central action of the story. Once the resolution is achieved, the denouement (unravelling) narrates the consequences of the change that has taken place, moving towards a new stasis.

Analyses of plot from as early as Aristotle have shown that stories typically move through discernible stages of development; classically, these were arranged in a pediment structure and identified as the *protasis* (introduction); *epitasis* (main action); and *catastrophe* (final resolution). Modern analyses vary in the terms and divisions used, but the basic concept is substantially the same. Freytag (1900) is often cited in connection with his "pyramid"—a five-stage analysis of plot—which modern analysts such as Amit (2001, pp. 46-48) have adopted largely unaltered. Amit's main change is to the names given to each stage, which she lists as follows:

Figure 5: Amit's basic five-stage plot structure

1. Exposition
    2. Complication
        3. Change (Climax)
    4. Unravelling
5. Ending

The role of each stage might be summarised as follows:

- The Exposition stage introduces some of the generic elements, main characters, the initial setting, and so on.
- The Complication stage typically centres on a predicament that upsets stasis and triggers a quest to solve the predicament. (Attempted resolutions may be single or many, successful or unsuccessful, and may introduce further complications to the original predicament.)
- The Change stage involves the quest to solve the problem; character growth may take place, and ultimately a climactic point is reached at which the predicament is resolved, whether happily or otherwise.
- The Unravelling stage tells how the complications raised in the story have been addressed, usually making explicit connections to the terms involved in the Complication stage, and the story moves towards a new stasis.
- The Ending announces that stasis has been achieved, and it provides closure.

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Not every story contains each of these stages, nor is the order immutable. Every plot is basically a movement from complication to denouement, and so it must include at least the Complication and Change stages, with a resolution that at least implies the addressing of the main predicament.

The analysis of plot structure bears similarities to the analysis of theme that we will apply in the following chapter. The difference between the two is that plot has to do with the *logical rationale* for the selection of episodes, whereas theme has to do with their *meaning and purpose*. While the analysis of plot determines the *rationale for what happens* in a story (its organising principle), the analysis of theme determines *what is being said* about what happens (its communicative principle).

Patterson (2018, pp. 6-13) suggests that the study of plot should answer two questions:

1. **"Do all the narrative episodes contribute to the plot-structure?"** The suggested organising principle should explain the roles of episodes and offer reasons for their inclusion in terms of the storytelling; if it cannot, this raises doubts concerning the validity of the organising principle that has been identified.
2. **"Does the proposed plot-structure work together with recognised features of the story?"** Genesis has been arranged by means of a *toledot* structure, it contains several repeated scenes (such as the wife-sister stories), and there are common motifs, such as barrenness and non-primogeniture. The explanation of plot should illuminate the roles of these features.

In other words, integrative methods, such as plot and theme, aim to evaluate the unity or integrity of a final text, and unifying principles are tested by their *comprehensiveness* and *coherence*.

2.3.2 Plot in Genesis

Although few doubt that Genesis is a composite work, likely made up of written and oral traditions that would have had plots of their own, this does not preclude the arrangement of these sources into a new plot governed by a new organising principle (Childs, 1979, pp. 149-50; Patterson, 2018, p. 8). For there to be plot, says Amit (2001, pp. 46-48), we must be able to observe the following:

- interconnectedness of events; and
- a unifying Change narrative—a crisis that explains the attempts at resolution through the main section of the story.

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There are no incontestable criteria for judging the existence of such features; one must merely judge which suggestion offers the most persuasive explanation of the text data—is it sufficiently comprehensive and coherent?

Patterson has written a detailed defence of the existence of a single plot-structure in Genesis.[34] He does not attempt a five-stage analysis of the type put forward by Amit, choosing to focus exclusively on the complication and its denouement. Patterson (2018, pp. 69-70) argues that the plot is driven forward by the questions, "Who is the seed [implied by Genesis 3:15], will the seed be righteous and will it survive?" and he aims to demonstrate that there is a "single action to the book of Genesis" that attempts the resolution of these questions. He finds the immediate candidate(s) for resolution in Cain and Abel, a chapter that sets out many of the dominant motifs that are found in the book of Genesis. For example, he identifies the motifs of division of the seed into two lines, scattering as judgement, non-primogeniture (and favouritism), unrighteousness and violence, and God as provider and sustainer. Importantly, each of these motifs is connected to the complication that he suggests—the question of the survival of the seed.

The limitation of the "single action" of Genesis to a concern for the survival of the seed seems at first blush not to fully address concerns for blessing and land that are inherent to the promises to Abraham, or (negatively) the loss of Eden. However, Patterson (2018, p. 29) recognises that Genesis "initiates… [and] contributes toward the development of the plot of Scripture", and so important elements raised in Genesis may be discussed elsewhere. His focus is to explain what Genesis itself predominantly focuses on. One way or the other, his work demonstrates that there is a high degree of coherence to the plotting of the book of Genesis.

Patterson's tests of comprehensiveness and coherence mean *inter alia* that the plot structure should be compatible with the *toledot* structure that we have already examined. In terms of Amit's categories, the first creation story (Gen 1) serves as Exposition, providing basic setting information and introducing main characters. Genesis 2–4 describe the Complication, expressed archetypically in the murder of Abel. The Change narratives include Noah's *toledot*, which meets with further complication at Babel, followed by Abraham's and Jacob's stories, which both contribute to the

[34] Patterson's work on plot is substantially parallel to my work on theme, but it was published in 2018 and came to my attention in late 2019—far too late for a detailed appraisal of his argument.

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resolution.[35] Joseph's story is the Unravelling episode, mirroring as it does the brotherly-conflict motif of the Cain and Abel story. The hint of Jacob's descendants' enslavement to Egypt (Gen 50:25) prevents total closure and prepares for the book of Exodus. While there is no Ending stage, in the deaths of Jacob and Joseph, some of the threads of the ancestral family stories are satisfactorily drawn to a close. These plot stages correspond to the sections delineated by the *toledot* outline as follows:

Figure 6: Structure of Genesis (simplified) with plot stages

Part	Section	Plot Stages	*Toledot*
1	i	**Exposition** **Complication**	Introduction: Creation (1:1–2:3) These are the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth (2:4–4:26)
			This is the book of the *toledot* of Adam (5:1–32)
2	ii	**Change: 1st quest**	Introduction: Uncreation (6:1–8) These are the *toledot* of Noah (6:9–9:29)
			These are the *toledot* of Shem (11:10–26)
3	iii–iv	**Change: 2nd quest and climax**	And these are the *toledot* of Terah (11:27–25:11) And these are the *toledot* of Isaac (25:19–35:29)
	v	**Unravelling**	These are the *toledot* of Jacob (37:2–50:26) Epilogue: Commitment to the Promised Land (50:1–26)

Our work on structure and Patterson's on plot both make a *prima facie* case that Genesis has been constructed as a unified whole and can be analysed in terms of plot and theme.

2.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have discussed recent developments in the study of *toledot* formulae, and what this entails for the structure of Genesis. Using the basic outline and criteria provided by Childs, I have produced an outline based on the patterned deployment of three types of *toledot*. The narrative *toledot* seem to be headings to five main sections in the book, the horizontal *toledot* seem to be epilogues that close off each section, and the vertical *toledot* seem to be transitions between covenantal movements.

[35] Although he does not employ the five-stage division, Patterson (2018, p. 29) also argues that these three sections work in concert to develop the complication, whether to modify or heighten it, and they form part of the "single action" moving towards resolution.

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I discussed at length the valuable contributions made by Thomas's linguistic study of the formulae, which argues for main sections delineated by asyndetic formulae. However, I suggested that there are significant flaws with the consistency of its application, particularly with the criterion of narrowing as the rationale for the division into sections. I was unable to reconcile the linguistic argument sufficiently well with the patterned deployment of the *toledot* types, nor could I find a rationale to replace "narrowing" that was able to explain the idiosyncrasies in the use of asyndeton. As such, I offered an alternative to Thomas's structure rather than a synthesis of his structure with other observed phenomena.

In combination with a brief plot analysis, we can conclude the following from this study:

- Genesis in its final form is a carefully structured, interconnected narrative arranged according to the patterned deployment of three types of *toledot* material. As a result, neither the common division of Genesis into prologue and ancestral narratives nor the associated suggestion that the book is *about origins* is well supported.
- The vertical *toledot* depict the long passage of time down generations. They seem to divide the book into three parts, with each part featuring an Adam-like figure and the establishment of covenantal relationship. The first part depicts the original ideal, and the next two parts represent two approaches to the recovery of that ideal.
- There are five narrative sections that focus on patriarchs and their families within the direct genealogical line of Israel. The sections are usually brought to an end with a horizontal *toledot* that dispenses with family lines of the non-elect son(s).
- The choice of *toledot* as a structuring device—along with the distinction drawn between elect or non-elect lines—indicates that family and lines of descent are central to the concerns of Genesis as a whole.

Structural analysis provides some of the general contours of the author's communication strategy, but to arrive at a fuller appreciation of the inner workings of Genesis, we must now marry structure with an investigation into the theme of Genesis.

* * * * *

In the following chapter, we will discuss what the study of theme entails, and we will make a detailed study of each section of the book, attempting to establish what the thematic emphases of each section are, and whether there are any trends that can be discerned in the book as a whole.

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3. THEME IN GENESIS: ADAM TO ABRAHAM

The study of theme in Genesis is often limited to broad observations about its role in introducing the promises, the (partial) fulfilment of which is a major concern of the rest of the Pentateuch, or in describing the origins of Israel and the circumstances that brought her into slavery in Egypt. Although the scope and volume of material in Genesis make it very difficult to attempt a comprehensive investigation of its theme, in this chapter we will attempt to understand how the book as a whole functions as a piece of communication.

3.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, we will discuss what the study of theme entails, how it relates to the historical context of a text, and some of the views of the overall theme of Genesis that scholars have suggested.

3.1.1 Theme as a concept

Theme is used colloquially to refer to any important or repeated concept in a literary work, and even in literary circles, Clines (1997, pp. 19-22) and LeCureux (2012, pp. 26-29) note that "theme" is often used as though synonymous with other repeated elements, such as "subject", "motif", or "*typos*". However, as a technical term, theme should not be understood in this way. Theme in music is less often confused and provides a useful analogy: it is the main melody upon which the variations are based (Svanoe, 2015). It is the auditory basis and rationale for the developments in the piece. In narrative, Clines (1997, p. 19) offers a succinct definition of theme as "conceptualisation of its plot". This is not to be confused with a *statement of the content* of the plot, but should be understood more specifically as the central or dominating idea that gives a *rationale* for the selection and arrangement of the material of the story, its structure and how it is developed. It is the "melody" that runs through the entire piece. It is "a summary statement of the unifying thought of the text" (Greidanus, 1988, p. 131).

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LeCureux (2012, p. 30) offers some useful distinctions between theme and some of the terminology with which it is often confused. Theme differs from subject or topic because it does not merely serve to *label* the area of interest of a work (such as "justification" or "Jerusalem"), but also attempts to identify what *statement about that subject* the work seems to be making. Unlike motifs, which are repeated elements that have a subsidiary role in developing conceptual aspects of the narrative, and of which there may be many, the theme is singular and encapsulates the overriding thought that unites the whole. "Theme shapes the work and… [describes] the relationship between various literary units".[36]

As the "melody" running through a text, the theme is often signalled by recurrence—the repetition of keywords, phrases, and motifs—but elements of a text that have thematic value may be identified by other means than repetition. In narrative, major points of emphasis occur at the foci of certain structural devices, and often at the climactic point of resolution of a plot. A statement about the theme of a narrative—what the story is, at its core, about—should take into account the presenting problem and its solution, even if these elements are not often repeated.

A thematic statement must answer the question, "What is the text about?" in a way that encapsulates the conceptual foundations of a text rather than merely summarising its contents. It should provide a *unifying rationale* for the contents of a text, and theme is therefore testable by asking whether the inclusion of elements of a text is explicable in terms of the suggested theme.

Clines (1997, p. 30) argues that the Pentateuch is a unity and that it therefore can be seen as having a single, overarching theme. He identifies the theme of the Pentateuch as follows:

> "The theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfilment—which implies also the partial non-fulfilment—of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs. The promise or blessing is both the divine initiative in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster, and are an affirmation of the primal divine intentions for humanity."[37]

[36] LeCureux unfortunately seems to reintroduce confusions that he had laboured to dispel. He (2012, p. 32) defines theme as "a recurring idea, communicated by word or phrase, which supports the main thrusts of the [text]… and gives theological shape and meaning to the work." Since by his own criteria theme must be a statement *about* the subject that provides a rationale for the selection or exclusion of material, it should not be implied that a word or phrase is sufficient to signal or communicate the theme. LeCureux (2012, p. 61) says that the dominant theme of Isaiah is "Jerusalem/Zion"—although, by his criteria, Jerusalem/Zion qualifies as a topic—and he says that the theme provides "the answer to the question, 'What is to become of Jerusalem?'" though he himself does not supply a clear answer.

[37] Clines (1997, pp. 128-29) in his afterword distances himself from this thematic statement saying, "How could the theme of a work be both one thing and its opposite [i.e., fulfilment and non-fulfilment]? What kind of

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Whatever one thinks of the idea that the Pentateuch can be analysed in this way, it provides an example of the sort of statement that renders the conceptualisation of plot.

3.1.1.1 Can there be more than one theme?

If we define theme as the conceptualisation of the plot, it is implied that there cannot be more than one theme, because it is rare—if not impossible—to bring two independent plots into a single narrative without implying any relationship between the two. Clines (1997, pp. 22-23) argues that there can be only a single theme in any work, because "unity of theme is a function of the unity of the literary work". He does concede, however, that composite works or collections are not necessarily unified, and so unity of theme cannot be assumed. LeCureux (2012, p. 31), on the other hand, claims that scholars have since argued for the possibility of there being more than one theme—as Clines himself does in the afterword.[38] LeCureux (2012, p. 42) agrees that multiple themes are possible—he cites five "themes" of Isaiah identified by scholars[39]—but also supports the idea of a "controlling theme" that is dominant and that "asserts influence over the others".

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formulation would enable two contradictory statements of theme to appear as if they formed one single theme?" This self-criticism appears largely unwarranted, because it is undoubtedly possible that a piece of literature may intend to communicate the partial achievement of a goal without being accused of self-contradiction. At worst, Clines's assertion of partial *non*-fulfilment was redundant, but it is not contradictory.

[38] This afterword was written for the second edition and gives Clines's reflections upon his original text. Clines (1997, pp. 130-33) argues for multiple themes on the basis of reader-response theories that allow for user-generated meanings for texts, and thus multiple user-generated themes. Reader-response methods have value in exploring the receiver's side of the communication attempt, but it is a mistake to relativise the *speaker's* side. As Van der Walt (2016, p. 10) observes, contextual awareness is crucial to hearing a text clearly, and the context of the various interpreters of a text forms part of the interpretive discussion. However, it is important to uphold a distinction between contextual matters that are relevant to textual meaning and those that are relevant to reception. The reception of a text by any readers other than the implied reader is not part of *the text's* contextual field of meaning. Reader-generated meanings are irrelevant to the meaning of a text as a communication attempt, but should rather be classified as the *significance* of a text. "Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. Significance, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable. […] Significance always implies a relationship, and one constant, unchanging pole of that relationship is what the text means" (Mantzavinos quoting Hirsch, 2016). Van der Walt is correct that diverse reading is essential to good interpretation, because all interpreters approach the act of reading with blind spots, biases, and preferences, and we need each other to identify such weaknesses. But *pace* Clines (1997, p. 133), interpretation is an evidential process, and thus not all readings are equally valid as representations of textual meaning. Critical reading aims to recover, as far as possible, the original meaning and intention of a text, and so to defend it from misinterpretation (Barton, 2007, p. 101).

[39] However, he presents each of these simply as keywords—Zion/Jerusalem; the Holy One of Israel; glory; Light; and Servant (capitalisation his)—none of which would qualify as themes as it stands.

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It must be possible to have more than one theme simply on the grounds that authors have freedom to be as consistent or inconsistent as they choose, or to have two or more reasons for writing a single work, but this is surely rare. More often, there is a central purpose to any piece of writing, even if it is complex and multifaceted, and an author makes decisions about plot, structure and content according to that purpose. Thematic study is an attempt to make that purpose explicit.[40]

3.1.2 The historical context of Genesis

The study of historical context may involve one of a number of possible time periods with respect to a text. Besides the implied context(s) in which the narrated events themselves play out, Trotter (2002, pp. 9-11) identifies three other contexts of a biblical text. First is the context of the original authorship of a text (or perhaps an oral tradition). Second, a text may have passed through a process of alteration, augmentation, and editing in which changes are made in view of new readers' contexts. Finally, there is the interpretive context of the final form, which represents the last recontextualisation of a text, after which its content was kept stable. The study of one or more of these interpretive contexts is essential, because each alteration of a text for the purposes of recontextualisation necessarily changes how the text is read.

Given that Genesis possesses a relationship to other ancient Near Eastern (ANE) texts, particularly in its creation and flood accounts, these are relevant to the dating of Genesis. For example, Babylonian epics such as Enuma Elish and Gilgamesh contain traditions similar to Genesis and are considered to be second-millennium productions (Mitchell, 1996, p. 478), as does the Book of Enoch, which is thought to contain material that dates from the Persian and Hellenistic periods (Bailey, 2013, p. 8).

Determining what these similarities mean for the dating of Genesis is difficult. To which, if any, of these myths was Genesis responding? Since Abraham himself is depicted as a Babylonian, borrowing from the Babylonian myths could have taken place in any era of Israel's history. On the other hand, drawing on traditions common to the book of Enoch would imply a post-exilic date. It is not always possible to know in what direction borrowing has taken place—if Genesis was early, then clearly the book of Enoch presupposes knowledge of Genesis; but it is not impossible that the final form of

[40] Some caveats are in order in the case of Genesis: It is most likely a composite work, and it may have undergone several revisions after it was given its current shape. There are no guarantees that these revisions were made with a full appreciation of the purpose underlying the original edition. This means that the unity of theme in Genesis may not be as total as would be the case in a book with obvious single authorship and time of writing. That Genesis is a unified whole cannot be dismissed, nor should it be forced.

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Genesis presupposes knowledge of Enoch. Nor is it even certain that such similarities require dependence of one text upon another. Walton (2006, pp. 21-22) warns, "There is a great distance between borrowing from a particular piece of literature and resonating with the larger culture that has itself been influenced by its literatures." He points out that one may use the aphorism "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" because one is familiar with its modern use and without having any awareness of the philosophy of Epicurus, from whom the thought is said to derive. Identifying similarities and differences between texts is insufficient. One needs also to evaluate how these similarities and differences function in terms of the larger work and the cultural context into which it was written—for example, if borrowing has taken place, is the borrowed text being *promoted* or *critiqued* (Walton, 2006, pp. 24-25)?

In short, historical context is essential to the interpretation of a text and yet also subject to a great deal of uncertainty and speculation. Any theory of reception is tentative.

3.1.2.1 A long period of transmission and development

While particular theories and reconstructions abound,[41] there is general agreement that the Pentateuch is the product of a compilation of sources taking place over long period of development. Carr (2011, p. 327), for example, says: "As a result of hundreds of years of scholarly analysis, we now know that the book was written over centuries by multiple authors, and we have a relatively specific and assured picture of the final stages of its composition (the combination of P with non-Priestly materials)."[42] While many scholars do not share Carr's confidence in the reconstructions of its composition, there is evidence that Genesis does present the reader with material from a range of time periods. For example, Schneider (2004, p. 15) suggests that reference to the Chaldeans (Gen 11:28, 31; 15:7) belongs to the late first millennium, whereas Sarna (1966, p. 87) says that the contrast between the moral and religious standards of the patriarchs and those of later ages (e.g., Abraham's marriage to Sarah) suggests that these stories are unlikely merely to be the product of "retrojections of later 'ideals'", but remain reflective of the era that the text purports to describe. Carr (2011, pp. 324-27) himself reckons that the actual writing of Genesis might have begun during

[41] Whybray (1987, p. 17) describes various hypotheses concerning the composition of written sources, such as the Fragment Hypothesis (a single editor joining a jumble of sources together), the Supplement Hypothesis (a single unified account with later additions by various editors), and the Documentary Hypothesis (there were several extensive works woven together over time by editors).

[42] See also Towner (2001, p. 4) for a perspective on oral traditions.

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the early monarchy, but that various layers of redaction were added and revisions made even into the Persian period, making Genesis a "chorale of voices", and not a document that presents a unified point of view. The degree of unity remains an open question, but it is likely that the text draws from various sources and may have undergone a long history of development.

3.1.2.2 Hurrian parallels?

Speiser (1964, pp. xxxix-xliii) argues that several puzzling elements in the Genesis story (namely, the wife-sister stories, the blessing of Jacob, and the theft of Laban's household gods) could be explained by connections to early Hurrian influence. In his view, the compiler(s) of Genesis relied on revered traditions that they preserved even when the explanation or meaning of the act described was lost. He argues that repeated links to Hurrian background, which "rules out the remotest possibility of coincidence", must mean that a body of traditions must have originated from there "sometime before the middle of the second millennium B.C." In spite of his confidence, many of these connections have been discredited,[43] and we cannot date these traditions as securely as these mooted parallels imply.

3.1.2.3 Monarchic parallels?

Brueggemann (2011, p. 2) argues that the J stratum of Genesis 1–11 belongs to the tenth-century Solomonic enlightenment period. He believes that the underlying purpose of Genesis is to show Israel in relation to the nations, and particularly the monarchy of David and Solomon in relation to its contemporaries. He says, "We can now safely conclude that these stories are an attempt to create legitimacy for the monarchy and speak a warning in the context of covenant to the ambitions of the Davidic house" (2011, pp. 2-3). Brueggemann (2011, p. 4) argues that Genesis 1–11 is based on similar ANE myths, but that it has been arranged *unlike* any of those myths because it is "dependent upon the career of the sons of David in their quest for the throne. The climactic affirmation of YHWH's graciousness in each Genesis episode is taken from the experience of the Davidic family". The theology of Genesis 1–11, he argues, is derived from what had been learned in history in the

[43] For example, Williams (1980, p. 111) summarises the arguments of Van Seters and Greengus, pointing out that the brother in the Hurrian texts that Speiser used does not *marry* his adopted sister; he simply has the obligation to see that his adopted sister, who would usually be regarded as socially inferior, is married to another man and receives a bride price for her.

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observation of David's house, and he argues that four parallel narratives from Genesis stand in parallel with the succession narratives of Samuel-Kings (see Appendix A).[44]

Brueggemann (2011, pp. 22-28) concludes that, while Genesis presumably draws on other sources, its kerygma—the theological underpinnings of the material—was shaped by the unfolding of the David story. He argues that the writer of the Genesis Prologue may intend, firstly, to provide a theological apology for the monarchy—especially for the overwhelming graciousness of YHWH in his dealings with the royal family—and secondly, that the experience of David and his family is in some ways part of the universal human experience before YHWH. He adds that the pattern of David's kingship seems to be in the background of what is happening in Genesis more generally.

Wenham (2000, pp. 41-42) also argues that the most likely time of writing was the early monarchic period, a conclusion based on the following perspectives evident in Genesis:

- Genesis seems to aim at building bridges between Judah and Joseph (i.e., mending the divisions between southern and northern territories).
- It presents Esau sympathetically (i.e., implying a good relationship with the Edomites).
- The Tower of Babel story mocks the pretensions of Babylon.
- The final blessings declare that the sceptre will not depart from Judah (i.e., there is a hopeful tone surrounding Davidic kingship).

The monarchic period fulfils all of these criteria: David's kingship had begun with disunity between north and south; David had conquered Edom, but conditions of peace were secured within the early monarchy period; Babylon was weak at this time;[45] and Jacob's blessing of his son Judah (Gen 49:8–12) was a strong motivator for supporting the Judahite kings.[46]

The other commonly suggested period of reception is that of the post-exilic period, which he considers a poor fit with most of these perspectives in the text. In this era, there was deep hatred of the Edomites; mockery of Babylon would be "odd"; and Judahite kingship had been put to an end. The need for mending relationships with the Samaritans was certainly true of this period, but Ezra

[44] Cohen (2005, p. 9) claims that many now date the P source to the 7th or 8th C.

[45] He suggests that Nebuchadrezzar I's ziggurat may also have been in ruins by then.

[46] He points out that both David and Solomon were anointed to rule ahead of older brothers who may have felt they had stronger claims, which would explain the regularity of the pattern of the election of younger siblings over older in Genesis.

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and Nehemiah (writing from this period) indicate hostility towards the north and rejection of any overtures from "Joseph" to be united once more. He also adds that Egypt had been incorporated into Persia and so peaceful overtures towards Egypt would make little sense.

While Wenham makes a good case for Genesis being a monarchic-era book, the case against a post-exilic date for the book is not as poor as he makes out. Firstly, strained relationships with Edom and Samaria in the Persian period need not compel every author to perpetuate that enmity; poor international relations may be a motivation for an author to portray a hoped-for ideal rather than the reality. Secondly, Babel is a laughing stock, perhaps, but it is not odd for Babel to play this role—this story offers a means of criticising empire indirectly. Persia would not take offense at Babel's scattering—but it is a reminder that empires can be scattered. Thirdly, the idea that the sceptre would not depart from Judah is somewhat strange after the sceptre seemingly had already departed, but recalling God's promises to David is appropriate also in the context of post-exilic hope in the restoration of Israel under a new "David".

According to Nihan (2010, p. 354), a significant number of scholars have moved away from the dating even of a Yahwistic thread to the early monarchic period. The consensus is that most of the Pentateuch was formalised after the exile, and the relationship of Genesis to the concerns of Ezra and Nehemiah continues to be important to the discussion.

3.1.2.4 Persian provenance?

There is a strong school of thought that places the final composition of the Pentateuch in the Persian period, perhaps given impetus by Persian policies that funded temples and promoted greater cooperation between the empire and local leadership. The Persian Zoroastrian religion was monotheistic, and they were open to the idea that other nations worshipped the one God by different names. This gave scope for the presentation of Israel's religion—particularly the monotheistic thrust within Yahwism—in terms compatible with the view of the empire. It is also thought that the Persian period provided the most amenable circumstances to the development of official literature in general and Torah in particular, especially given evidence in Ezra 7 of formalised legislation being taught under the auspices of Persia. Nihan (2010, p. 361) argues that the Pentateuch was the product of redaction in post-exilic Jerusalem, but that there are "several

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indications in the Pentateuch itself" that it was also intended to be accepted by the Samarians and the diasporas in Egypt, Babylon, and Persia.[47]

Persian provenance is favoured for Genesis because scholars also note an overlap in many of the concerns of the book with those evident in Persian Yehud:

Possibility of return

The travels of the Patriarchs in Genesis have echoes of alienation from the land and return to it that are reminiscent of exile. Amit (2016, p. 242) points out that, if the exile is in the mind of the narrator, it implies that it was written from a time in which return from exile was a possibility, namely in the Persian period. Genesis may have a concern to encourage exiles to return to the land.

Development of Torah

The command of the Persian king for Ezra to establish systems of legal oversight in Trans-Euphrates so that the people "obey the law of your God and the law of the king" (Ezra 7:26) is among the factors that has inspired the view that Persia *authorised* the writing of the Torah (Schmid, 2007, p. 22). Support for this theory has cooled recently; for example, Nihan (2010, pp. 355-57) points out that direct Persian authorisation of the Torah is unlikely given its length and genre, and given that it is written in Hebrew, not the imperial language. Nevertheless, he agrees that the Pentateuch may have been produced in this period to assist in shaping Israelite identity after the devastation of exile, while at the same time complying with the constraints of imperial rule. Schmid (2007, p. 22) adds that Ezra 7 remains strong evidence that the empire did promote codification of local norms, and that this period remains the best candidate for the impetus by which the Pentateuch gained its status as *Torah* (as distinct from other Hebrew scribal literature) and was recognised as such also by Samaria.

Post-exilic social issues

Many scholars perceive in Genesis an overlap with the social concerns of the post-exilic community evident, for example, in Ezra-Nehemiah. Bailey (2013, pp. 25-26) thinks that books such as Genesis

[47] For example, Nihan (2010, p. 361) suggests that the use of Mount Gerizim as a sanctuary site in Deuteronomy 27 was a concession made to Yahwists in Samaria. The heroic status of Joseph in Genesis and the inheritance of Jacob's blessing that was conferred on Joseph's sons also make sense as part of the bridge-building efforts between Jerusalem and Samaria.

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functioned to address such issues in the post-exilic community by presenting "paradigmatic situations from the past" in ways that resonated with their present. Brueggemann (2010, pp. 145-47), writing specifically of the Joseph narrative, similarly argues that Genesis stands alongside narratives such as Daniel or Esther that negotiate the balance between accommodation to, or defiance of, the empire.[48] The Joseph story clearly majors on accommodation rather than defiance—"accommodation that brings with it enormous rewards and benefits for him and his people" (Brueggemann, 2010, p. 147). In these sorts of ways, the book of Genesis can be seen as promoting a constructive relationship between the Yehudite community and the Persian Empire.

In Nehemiah, the covenant that the people made to keep God's law specifically lists elements that served as markers of Yehudite identity, namely:

> "a) to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord; b) not to give their daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for their sons; c) not to purchase from the people of the land on the Sabbath or a holy day; d) to forego the crops of the seventh year and the extortion of debt; and e) to place on themselves economic obligations to fund the temple."
> (Bailey, 2013, pp. 35-36)

This is followed in the book by practical implementation of these commitments. In the material thought to be Priestly in Genesis, there is some support for Sabbath regulations (2:1–3) and the observance of food laws (9:4),[49] and weighty support for circumcision in Genesis 17 (Bailey, 2013, p. 131). Nehemiah's emphasis upon funding of the temple also receives support in Abraham's presentation of a tithe to Melchizedek (14:20) and Jacob's promise to offer a tenth of all he had at the "house of God" at Bethel (28:20–22) (Bailey, 2013, pp. 134-35).

The most pervasive connection between Genesis and the programmes of reform exercised by Ezra and Nehemiah is that of intermarriage with outsiders. Bailey (2013, p. 33) notes the importance of the issue of endogamy in the book of Ezra:

> "Eradicating mixed marriages from all the people of Israel… is so important to the Ezra story that when it is complete, his story is complete; at least according to the version of the story we have now."

[48] He is not persuaded that Genesis should be dated to the Persian era, but he argues that the identity of the empire is unimportant, since the lesson is transferrable.

[49] As further support, Bailey might have mentioned reference to *clean* animals in 7:2. As a slight complication, Genesis 9 seems not to recognise clean and unclean animals with respect to food, allowing Noah and his descendants to eat *any* living creature.

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Ezra 9:1–2 claims that the "holy seed" has mixed itself with foreign inhabitants of the land, and in both Ezra and Nehemiah 9:2, the solution is for the "Israelites" to separate from that which is foreign. Genesis apparently shares similar concerns by problematising the acquisition of wives from the "wrong" source. For example, Hagar the Egyptian is not to be the mother of promise; Abraham's servant must return to Abraham's people to find a wife for Isaac so that he does not take a wife from among the Canaanites; and Esau displeases his parents by marrying Hittite/Canaanite women. These stories in Genesis are seen by some scholars as model approaches to the problems facing the post-exilic community; for example, Heard (2001, p. 176) says:

> "Such a deed [exogamy], once done, can be undone only through divorce and disinheritance, and his [Abraham's] is precisely the 'solution' depicted by the authors of Ezra and Nehemiah. Seen alongside this 'solution,' Abraham's dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael stands as both a paradigm for action and a reassurance for the men called upon to undertake similar drastic actions… Nor should the husbands and fathers involved in such procedures give a second thought to the welfare of their erstwhile wives and children. Their welfare is no longer the husbands' concern; it is now God's concern, so the husbands can go on about their business as usual."

It is clear that Genesis would have held significance for the Yehud community in their attempt to re-establish themselves in the land under Persian rule, and with the potential for the dissolution of their religious and cultural identity. However, Genesis does not oppose exogamy as consistently as Ezra and Nehemiah do. Thus, some scholars in favour of Persian provenance of Genesis are nevertheless opposed to the view that it fully supports the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Problematising Ezra-Nehemiah's reforms?

A second line of argument notes that the final form of Genesis seems directed towards *problematising* the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, perhaps promoting a more inclusive posture towards the nations. According to this view, text evidence suggests a perspective that is "deliberately opposed to the vision of genealogical purity advanced in Ezra-Nehemiah" and allows for "the accommodation of strangers in ways that are rarely imagined in Ezra-Nehemiah" (Brett, 2012, pp. 49-50).

Promotion of endogamy seems important to the earlier episodes of Genesis, but this focus inexplicably dissolves such that the marriages of Jacob's sons to Canaanite women pass virtually without comment (Shectman, 2011, p. 207). Shectman (2011, p. 219) argues that the change occurs because Jacob, Rachel, and Leah decide to formalise a break with the household of Laban, thereby

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dissolving the connection to their Aramean family and necessitating that their sons must marry from among the surrounding peoples.[50] While this is a largely satisfactory answer on a literary level, Brett (2012, p. 53) points out that it would be unlikely to satisfy post-exilic readership, for whom this was such a crucial issue.

Brenner (2010a, p. 5) suggests that the patriarchs' initial preference for endogamous marriages softens perhaps due to a need to "gain a formal hold in the land of Canaan" through what are effectively marriage alliances. However, Brenner (2010a, pp. 5-6) reads the story of Dinah and Shechem to indicate that Jacob's openness to exogamy was not followed by his sons, who were "separatist" again. Brett (2012, p. 52) responds by pointing out that the narrator seems to view Simeon's marriage to a Canaanite as an act of hypocrisy, and that Genesis 34 depicts the kidnapping of women and children as plunder after the sacking of Shechem, which represents a contradiction of their alleged separatist stance and a violation of Ezra's requirement of divorce from foreign women.

Furthermore, even the line of David begins with Tamar, a Canaanite, and the heirs of Jacob's blessing are Ephraim and Manasseh, sons of an Egyptian woman. The most promising lineages of Israel at the end of Genesis are linked with exogamy.

Genesis, even if a Persian-era document, may not intend to support one camp or the other. Eskenazi (1995, pp. 28-29) says that "great literature shapes readers' morality by *complicating* their sympathies." The redactor(s) of Genesis made little effort to obscure such difficult details as that Abraham's marriage to Sarah was defined as incestuous in the Holiness Code, not just as endogamous (Lev 18:9-11), and that Jacob's marriage to two sisters was also outlawed (Lev 18.18).

> "In effect, I am suggesting that the pious appearance of endogamy in the characterization of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is being relentlessly but indirectly exposed by the final editors as contrary to divine commands. This suggestion might well be considered preposterous, were it not executed with such consistency in the texts as we have them." (Brett, 2012, p. 53)

Brett (2012, pp. 55-57) suggests that the perspective of the "Holiness School" in Genesis may have been offered in response to exclusivist tendencies in Nehemiah's programme, and rather than insisting on endogamy, it suggests a level of permeability to the social boundaries of that era, and implies a route by which the nations surrounding Yehud might be included within the true people of

[50] Brett (2012, p. 54) argues that the use of the word מוֹלֶדֶת helps to underline the complexity of in-grouping and out-grouping in Genesis. Abraham is told to leave his מוֹלֶדֶת; Genesis 24 insists that a wife must be taken from his מוֹלֶדֶת, and then Jacob is commanded to leave and return to his מוֹלֶדֶת in Canaan. This dissolves the connection to Mesopotamia.

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YHWH. The separation that is required of a priestly nation is more to do with keeping from impurities than from other ethnicities. Torah-keeping is able to override nationality (Brett, 2012, p. 57).

3.1.2.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the dating of Genesis necessarily involves speculation and yields tentative results. It remains possible that Genesis received something like its present shape in an earlier era, with later redactors perhaps supplementing or revising it in order to highlight its significance for later eras, just as it is possible that early oral stories or documents depicting Israel's prehistory were given their current form relatively late in the Old Testament period.

The books from Genesis to Kings have been constructed so that each book resumes the story of the last, and these books terminate with Judah in Babylonian exile; this implies some level of redaction of Israel's traditions beyond the exile. The time at which Genesis, or an edition thereof, gained its status as Torah is likely to be that of Ezra, when there is evidence of cooperation between local governors or priests and the Persian Empire to produce legal codes. Genesis also has a coherent structure organised according to genealogies (usually regarded as being a feature of the Priestly source), which implies that it received its present shape relatively late. Whatever its origin, Genesis is likely to have received a post-exilic revision. It is fitting, therefore, that the concerns of the Persian period are a consideration in the interpretation of the book when we consider its rhetorical function.

What purpose it could have served for the post-exilic community must be more carefully established by thematic study, but it is clear that there are perspectives within the book that both support the sorts of reforms undertaken by Ezra and Nehemiah and problematise them. The fact of genealogies playing such a key role in the structure of the book is itself a hint that the preservation of a covenantal line is essential. The fact that the genealogies are regularly punctuated with *members who would seem illegitimate*—Canaanite and Egyptian women, for example, or patriarchs engaged in "illegal" relationships—is a hint that the book is not *about* merely propping up such reforms.

3.1.3 Perspectives on the theme of Genesis

It is rare for scholars to have given much attention to formulating the theme of Genesis, at least of the kind that we have described, largely because the book has long been regarded as too fractured to be thought of as having unity, and has been studied rather in terms of its underlying sources. Under such circumstances, it would be futile to attempt to express a theme, being as it is a statement of the unity of a work. Few commentators give anything more than hints as to what they

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consider the book as a whole to be *about*, and when they do, it is not clear that they consider themselves to be articulating a theme as we have defined it.

Some of the more common or more recent perspectives concerning theme and purpose of Genesis are as follows.

- ***Creation and redemption:***[51] Childs (1979, pp. 154-55) argues that the canonical shape of the book indicates the priority of creation and God's creative purpose for the whole world, not just Israel, but also testifies to Israel's "redemptive role in the reconciliation of the nations", which was purposed from the beginning.
- ***Origins:*** Genesis narrates the origins of the nation of Israel (Shectman, 2009b, p. 183). Since the so-called Prologue pre-dates Israel, scholars often suggest that it exists to explain how Abraham fits into world history (Wenham, 1994a, p. 57).
- ***Promise to the patriarchs:*** In line with Clines's (1997, pp. 22-23) theme of the Pentateuch, Von Rad (1972, p. 22) says that Genesis subordinates all its narratives to "the theme of the 'promise to the patriarchs': especially the promise of land, but also the promise of descendants". Wenham (2000, p. 22) argues that the storyline of Genesis 12–50 concerns the partial fulfilment of the promises of nationhood, land, covenant relationship, and blessing to the nations. He notes that the omission of "blessing to the nations" from Clines's analysis is strange because it is "very prominent in the most programmatic statements of the promise… It also serves as an important connection with the opening chapters, which sets Israel within the context of world history and relates its destiny to the other nations."
- ***Defining Israel:*** Nihan (2010, pp. 358-59) argues that the purpose of the Pentateuch as a whole is to provide a history of Israel that defines the nation as an ethnic group (in terms of ancestry, customs, religion, etc.). In response to the challenges presented by imperial conquests of the land and deportation of the people into diaspora communities, Genesis helps to answer the question, "Who belongs to Israel?"
- ***Polemic in favour of the returnees:*** In a similar vein, Bailey (2013, pp. 67-83) suggests that Genesis is advocating for covenant ideology (against, for example, the apocalypticism of the book of Enoch), and that the book offers paradigmatic examples from the lives of the

[51] In the interests of keeping definitions clear, I do not mean to imply that these summary phrases are themes. These are subjects on which a thematic statement would be passing comment.

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patriarchs, which model approaches to life under the empire for the Yehud community (2013, pp. 40-41). He argues that there is no single theme, but much of the purpose of its content seems to be to promote returnee propaganda implying that they are blessed and heirs of God's promises (2013, pp. 102-4).

- ***Appeal for inclusive attitude to life in the empire:*** Brett (2012, p. 58) argues that Genesis post-dates the reforms of Ezra-Nehemiah and is aimed at advocating for an inclusive attitude to empire and religion.
- ***Eschatological hope:*** Sailhamer (1992, pp. 36-37) points out that at the end of three large narrative sections (Gen 49; Num 24; and Deut 31) a central narrative figure makes a speech about what will happen in "the end of days". The Pentateuch had an interest in the past because of what it meant for Israel's future. Sailhamer (1992, pp. 60-61) considers it to have a similar interest in eschatological, new covenant hope, as is evident in the later prophets, "preserving a sense of trust in God and an expectation of his work in the future".

None of the above is a fully fledged thematic statement, and the ideas are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Scholars have identified these points because they are important to the book, and so we should expect to see many of these elements involved in the theme. Our goal, however, is to establish the theme in a systematic way.

3.2 APPROACH TO THE THEME OF GENESIS

The goal of thematic study is to give a succinct statement that describes the purpose behind the implied author's communication attempt. In non-technical usage, any regularly repeated concept may be described as a "theme", but theme as we have defined it is not established only by noting repetition. Clines (1997, pp. 17-18) describes the method by which one arrives at a thematic statement as trial and error: it is found by repeated movement between the parts and the whole—one identifies foci in the text and examines how these foci lead to evaluations of events or characters and how these evaluations lead one to draw conclusions about the meaning and purpose of texts. One then attempts to detect unity of vision in these conclusions and to synthesise them into a statement of that unity across the extent of the literary work. Thematic study makes use of a variety of features in the text in order to detect rhetorical foci and points of emphasis, especially:

- structure;
- the repetition of scenes, motifs, and keywords;
- intertextual connections (such as allusions, cross references, etc.)

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- important moments in plot development (such as complication and resolution); and
- statements by the narrator or characters (especially divine speeches) that indicate purpose or offer evaluation.

These elements show what the redactor considers to be central, a turning point, or climactic, and what concepts are consistently developed in the book.

Testing the explanatory power of a thematic statement demands a reappraisal of the parts of the book in comparison with the proposed description of the whole—that is, does the thematic statement account for all the material that has been included, or are there any key episodes or perspectives that are at variance with it? There may be many thematic statements that do justice to the text, because narratives such as Genesis are complex and interpreters might differ over which strands of the story ought to be privileged over the others. It is the criterion of explanatory power that seems to me to be the best help in judging which thematic statement among the possible options is most successful. A test of the explanatory power of our thematic statement will be the success of our attempts to explain the role of Genesis 17 in the book, and especially the role of Sarah and circumcision.

Because Genesis consists of a series of sections and subsections, the movement between parts and whole includes holistic consideration of the individual *toledot* sections too. For this reason, we will approach the discussion of theme by moving through the structure and key contents of each *toledot* section and considering its purpose; we will then bring together our conclusions into a statement that encapsulates the theme of the book as a whole.

Before the first *toledot* begins, however, there is an introductory creation story in Genesis 1:1–2:3.

3.3 INTRODUCTION: CREATION

Genesis 1:1–2:3 is positioned before the first *toledot* statement and, in terms of its role in the plot of the book, it functions as an Exposition stage—it lays out "a theological and moral universe" for the story (Birch, 1991, p. 72). Exposition usually refrains from engaging in the events of the story itself; it merely describes the setting and the rules according to which the story will proceed.[52] This stasis will

[52] This is what Amit (2001, p. 47) describes as the "opening conditions" and the "background elements" of the story.

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quickly be disrupted by the Complication stage, which is the initial intrusion of a problem that the story hinges on solving.

3.3.1 Structure

The introductory unit describes God's acts of creating in six cycles of day and night. These divide neatly into parallel panels in which the days form three sets of pairs. The seventh day forms an epilogue to the story. It might be diagrammed as follows:

Figure 7: Structure of Genesis 1:1–2:3

1:1–2	**Introduction:** God as creator	
1:3–5, 14–19	**Day 1:** Separation of darkness and light	**Day 4:** Populating of night and day with sun, moon and stars
1:6–8, 20–23	**Day 2:** Separation of sky and water	**Day 5:** Populating of sky with birds and water with fish
1:9–13, 24–31	**Day 3:** Separation of water and land; creation of plant life	**Day 6:** Populating of the land with animals; creation of humans and gift of plant life for food
2:1–3	**Epilogue: Day 7:** God rests and blesses the seventh day	

The seven-day structure seems to underline that creation was orderly, not chaotic; that there is sanctity to the environment that God created;[53] and that it is the result of work, not war. This stands in contrast to ANE creation accounts, in which conflict between the gods led to the formation of the heavens and the earth, and creation is almost an accidental by-product of the chaos.

3.3.2 Narrative emphases

The opening verse of Genesis, as monumental as it is, serves primarily as a short summary statement of the rest of the chapter (Nilsen, 2013, p. 16). The first *toledot* section will describe the "family story" of the heavens and the earth; here we learn of their birth.

[53] Walton (2006, pp. 197-99) argues that Genesis 1–2 makes use of numerous connections between the building of the cosmos and the building of temples. For example, in the Gudea Cylinders, the temple is described as the place of rest for the god, and dedication ceremonies (sometimes) lasted seven days. Three days established functions for the temple; days 4–6 "supplied functionaries that operate in it". The structure of Genesis 1 seems to follow this pattern, with the "creation of heaven and earth and all their hosts" (Gen 2:1) representing the functions and functionaries, and the section ends with God resting.

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The second verse describes the state of uncreatedness in familiar ANE terms—formlessness, darkness, and the waters of the deep representing chaos.[54] The breath or spirit (נפשׁ) of God is poised over the waters, ready to bring order.[55] Genesis 1 leaves open the possibility of a heavenly court ("Let us make man in our image"), but it is remarkable that this account is devoid of any contest or any other players. God is seemingly alone in his creating. The chaotic, often-personified forces of darkness in ANE stories are impersonal and neutered: the separation of light and darkness assigns darkness a function. "As a tamed chaos-force, it is now, in the thinking of the ancient Near East, created" (Nilsen, 2013, p. 16). Even the suggestion of sea monsters in 1:21—the sort of opponents that featured in ANE creation stories—renders them as benign occupants of the waters, creatures under the command of the creator.

The use of a regular pattern in the main body of the chapter—a formulaic command at the start, a declaration of the goodness of the day's work, and a transition marked by the passing of day and night—makes it easy to observe points of emphasis, because divergences from the regularity of the pattern stand out.

Some of the most important foci are as follows:

- The third day breaks from the pattern by adding an extended movement of creation. The separation of land from water ends with the declaration, "It was good," but the section continues to describe the creation of plants, followed by a *second* declaration of its goodness. This is unlike Days 1, 2, 4, and 5, which all have a single movement of creating, but it has a parallel in Day 6, which also has two movements (land animals and humans) and two declarations of goodness. These serve to close out each parallel panel. The parallels between the texts are overt: the plants made in the second phase of Day 3 are given as food in the second phase of Day 6.

[54] Sarna (1966, pp. 1-23) describes at length the relationship between the biblical creation account and the Babylonian myth Enuma Elish, including a connection of תְּהוֹם ("deep, abyss") and the name of the chaotic deity Tiamat. He offers several instances in which the biblical story seems intentionally to distance itself from the worldview of those myths. For example, there is no suggestion of cosmic battles from which creation was birthed; even the presentation of the seventh day as holy cuts against Mesopotamian thinking, he says, which considered the seventh day to be unlucky.

[55] There is perhaps an intentional paralleling of this in 1:30 in which, at the culmination of God's ordering of creation, the creatures that he has made are called those that have the breath or spirit (נפשׁ) of life in them.

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- The fourth day introduces the concept of rule—the sun and the moon are given the task of ruling the sky. This probably reflects the fact that these entities were commonly regarded as divinities in the ANE. Here again, they are created things, divested of their supernature and made governors on the One God's behalf.
- The fifth day introduces the concept of blessing—the creatures of air and sea are tasked with being fruitful and multiplying across the face of the earth. This blessing is paradigmatic for the rest of the book—it appears sixteen times, with God promising that a character will multiply (רבה) or commanding them to do so twelve times,[56] and a character or the narrator reporting God's words or the result thereof a further four times.[57]
- The sixth day is unique in that it introduces the creation of humans with "Let us make…" (rather than "Let there be…" or a command for creatures to fill a created structure), and humanity is alone in being made in the image of God. While other creatures are described in terms of their relationship to the earth, humanity is described in relationship to God. The concepts of "rule" (Day 4) and "blessing" (Day 5) both appear in connection with humanity.
- The sixth day also alters the declaration of goodness so that what has been made is not just good but *very* good. This may serve to elevate the status of humanity in comparison with the rest of creation, but perhaps it is a reflection of God's satisfaction with the creation week overall. The task is complete.[58]

Genesis 2:1 declares creation complete, and on the seventh day God rests or ceases (שׁבת) his work-week activities. While this would have been significant for an Israelite reader of any generation, not least the post-exilic community, for whom the Sabbath was an important mark of their covenant adherence and their distinction as a people, the seventh day is the final statement of the Exposition stage that lays out the story conditions. As such, it indicates that God's creation has been set up according to God's wishes for it. It is the environment in which he can relate to the

[56] 1:22; 1:28; 8:17; 9:1; 9:7; 16:10; 17:2; 17:20; 22:17; 26:4; 26:24; 35:11.

[57] 21:20; 28:3; 47:27; 48:4. While there is no direct blessing of Jacob's sons using the verb "to multiply", 48:16 uses a cognate of רבה, speaking of Jacob's sons growing into a multitude (רב).

[58] Van Wolde (1998, pp. 22-28) argues against anthropocentric interpretation of Genesis 1, in which the purpose is to place humanity at the centre. Rather, the chapter intends to show how all of God's creating of heaven and earth establishes a *network of relationships* in which each element of creation—including humanity—finds its own place. These relationships, therefore, are a major point at issue for the remainder of the book (the earth is involved *inter alia* in the curse on the ground, in the flood, and in God's covenant with creation in Genesis 9).

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creatures he made, particularly the humans (male and female) to whom he made in his own image. The use of שׁבת terminology neither merely casts the creation as an Israelite work-week nor merely provides aetiology for the Sabbath as a holy day. It also indicates that God's creation has been brought into an ideal state. Shead (2000, p. 746) says:

> "When God 'sanctified' the Seventh Day because on it he ceased creating, he was… declaring his new state of not creating to be blessed and holy. This is suggested by the close link between 'God had completed' and 'he ceased'. The end of God's creative work brought about a new type of time, blessed and set aside, presumably in order that what was created could now be. The Seventh Day was to be a day for fruitfulness, for dominion, for relationship."[59]

Thus, the seventh day represents an ideal—a holy restfulness between God and his creation—of which the Sabbath itself is a picture. The next creation story (Gen 2–3) adds texture to this ideal state, but as Complication narrative, it primarily describes the interruption of stasis: the seventh-day rest is lost, and the remainder of Genesis is at least partly concerned with attempting its recovery.

3.4 THE *TOLEDOT* OF THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH

The first *toledot* unit acts as the primary Complication stage. A plot must contain at least a Complication stage and a Change stage: the former describes at least one predicament that must be resolved; the latter describes its resolution. Thus, although this section is only three chapters long, it is foundational to the plot and requires careful attention.

3.4.1 Structure

Genesis 2 and 3 are clearly connected—both feature interactions between God and humanity and between the man and the woman; chapter 2 starts with the man being put in the garden, and chapter 3 ends with the humans being expelled from it. However, these chapters can be seen as pursuing their own plots too: chapter 2 is driven by the problem of man's aloneness, and the problem is resolved by the creation of the woman; chapter 3 is driven by the doubt cast on God's command, complicated by the disobedience of the humans to the command, and resolved by God's

[59] See also Von Rad (1972, p. 62). He points out that while the LXX more logically ascribes the completion of creation to the sixth day, the Hebrew says it was on the seventh. The Hebrew text shows that rest is not just the cessation of labour, but the crowning state of complete creation—a condition of restfulness between God and his world.

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command for them to leave his garden. Structurally, therefore, it is best to consider these chapters as a single story that has been presented in two parts.

Cotter (2003, p. 27) suggests that the two plots work together to discuss the establishment of communion between man and woman and between them and God, followed by the loss thereof. The first part sets up the ideal; the second part dashes it.

Scenic analysis of the two chapters presents a complementary picture that stresses the larger unity of these two chapters. Wenham (1987, p. 50) offers the following:

Figure 8: Structure of Genesis 2–3

A. Narrative God the sole actor; man present but passive (2:5–17)
B. Narrative God the main actor; man minor role; woman and animals passive (2:18–25)
C. Dialogue Snake and woman (3:1–5)
D. Narrative Man and woman (3:6–8)
C'. Dialogue God, man and woman (3:9–13)
B'. Narrative God the main actor; man minor role; woman and snake passive (3:14–21)
A'. Narrative God the sole actor; man passive (3:22–24)

In addition to the mirroring of the gift of the land and expulsion from it in the A stages, he points out that these scenes also share distinctive vocabulary ("on the east," "tree of life," "garden of Eden," "till," and "guard"). These seven stages tend to be mirrored also in terms of the actors involved; for example, the B stages are alone in sharing the same four actors (with the snake representing the animals in stage B'). Stage B ends with the couple naked and without shame; stage B' ends with the shamed couple having their nakedness covered with clothing (Wenham, 1987, pp. 50, 71).

This structural analysis highlights particularly the movements in location and in the standing of the humans before YHWH. Cotter (2003, p. 29) points out that the story moves from outside the garden to its centre in stage D, and back again. The humans start under God's command, disobey the command in stage D, and bear repercussions under God's judgement thereafter.

Seen together, the plot development and scenic arrangement emphasise the establishment of an ideal of relationship and sacred space. Humanity and God coexist in rest and without shame. This is interrupted by temptation, disobedience, loss of relationship and the loss of land. The pivotal moment is the act of disobedience to God's command, and its result is expulsion from God's presence and return to the dust.

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This *toledot* unit ends with a final episode in chapter 4 that contains several structural similarities to the episodes in chapters 2 and 3. Wenham (1987, pp. 99-100) describes it as follows:

A. **Narrative** Cain, Abel main actors; YHWH passive (4:2b–5)
B. Dialogue YHWH questioning Cain (4:5–7)
C. **Dialogue (narrative)** Cain and Abel alone (4:8)
B'. **Dialogue** YHWH and Cain (4:9–14)
A'. **Narrative** YHWH active; Cain passive (4:15–16)

In demonstration of this analysis, he points out that both the A stages show Cain approaching God, and in both his approach meets with God's disapproval. The B stages are connected by each containing divine questions; also, in B sin is depicted as an animal threatening to devour Cain, and in B' the ground opens its mouth to receive Abel's blood. Again the structure describes a scene of temptation and a pivotal moment in which that temptation is acted upon, followed finally by a divine word of judgement upon the offender.

These two pivot structures, read together, imply a connection between their turning points: the eating of the fruit in Eden and Cain's murder of Abel.

3.4.2 Narrative emphases

The early chapters of Genesis are usually thought of as having an impulse to explain origins: they answer the existential question "Where do humans fit in the overall scheme of the created realm?" (Meyers, 2013, p. 66), and they explain to the reader why things are as they are. That there is aetiological interest is clear (for example, the narrator occasionally pauses to make explanatory connections, e.g., Genesis 2:24; 22:14). However, we have already noted that the idea that Genesis is about origins should not be pressed too far: structurally, these chapters follow the same ancestor-focused pattern as chapters 12–50 and are integrated into the overall plot—there is a shared strategy that pertains to the book as a whole.

Secondly, it is helpful to distinguish between different ways in which aetiology functions: it can give the origins of something that is true to common human experience (what we might call a paradigmatic or archetypical function), or it can give the origins of an inherited state of affairs (a proto-historical function).[60] In viewing Genesis as aetiology, some interpreters seem to me to have over-stressed archetypical interpretation, describing features in the text in terms of what in Israelite

[60] See Wenham (1987, p. 91).

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society they sought to explain, and with too little consideration of these features in terms of what role they play in the trajectory of the story.

Meyers (2013, pp. 66-68), for example, understands Adam and Eve to be mythical representatives of male and female roles in society, and that the stories served to legitimise the readers' social order and to enable them "to accept the conditions of their present". However, the presentation of these stories in the form of myth does not preclude their being representative of Israel's historical self-understanding too. Adam is not merely an "everyman"; he is also the first man, and his actions set the story of Genesis—and thus of Israel—into motion.[61]

These stories may have an aetiological function, but it should not be assumed to be the primary impulse of these texts. It is important to consider their roles both as potential markers of general human experience as well as potential moments in the story of God and humanity.

3.4.2.1 Eden as sacred space (Gen 2:4–17)

The Garden of Eden is pictured as the divine pattern of sacred space given for the benefit of God's people—it has several connections to the temple in its design and imagery, and establishing the humans within it is the equivalent of the state of rest with God that ends the first creation story. In its proto-historical role, Eden represents the start of the paradise-lost-paradise-regained narrative that drives Israel's sacred history.

The word for "garden" comes from the root "to surround", and it connotes a walled space that is secure, unlike the open field (Meyers, 2013, p. 69). According to Walton (2006, pp. 124-25), the Garden of Eden describes a familiar ANE arrangement—"a sacred spot featuring a spring with an adjoining, well-watered park, stocked with specimens of trees and animals". It describes "cosmic geography"—Eden is not primarily for people, but is the garden of God (Isa 51:3; Ezek 28:13, 31:9), and its life-giving rivers water the whole earth. It is a sanctuary, not a farm.[62]

[61] See also Sarna's (1966, pp. 28-29) critique of Genesis 4 as aetiology for the rivalry between nomad and farmer.

[62] Von Rad (1972, pp. 77-78) acknowledges that the garden is regarded as holy space and is synonymous with Paradise, but he demurs from connections to "Garden of God" concepts, arguing that it was not the dwelling place of God, but a place prepared for humankind. However, God's temple was clearly both the dwelling of God and a place prepared for humanity to be in God's presence. The two are not mutually exclusive.

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Meyers (2013, pp. 69-70) points out that while the text seems to imply that life in Eden involved work, the trees in such gardens were never olive (a basic economic crop), but rather tended to be ornamental and for the elite. They are planted, not worked, and the humans are "keepers not cultivators". It is the opposite of Israel's harsh agrarian life, which is associated rather with God's curse upon the ground. Walton (2013, p. 95) argues that the humans' working of the ground uses word pairs that are more commonly associated with priestly service of the tabernacle.[63] Connections between Eden and the tabernacle are many, including a menorah symbolising the tree of life and entrances set on the east (Walton, 2006, pp. 124-25; Wenham, 1987, pp. 62, 74, 86).[64] The work is not mere work and the ground is not mere soil. In continuity with its priestly imagery, Eden offered what the temple would later aim to reinstate: rest with God and pleasure in the goodness of the sacred space that God provided.

The connection of Eden to ANE creation stories and to "Garden of God" concepts offers up a number of points of contrast. In the absence of cosmic battles, Sarna (1966, pp. 23-26) notes that the Eden story seeks to explain the presence of evil in the world as being a human product and not inherent to God's creation. While the imagery used is similar to that in the ANE equivalents, Sarna detects an impulse in the story to divest these stories of much of their magical and mythological elements.[65] Although life-giving plants or trees are familiar in ANE myths, the biblical trees of life and knowledge do not operate independently of God. The Genesis story also largely ignores the tree of life and focuses on the tree of knowledge, which has no parallel in the ANE.

God's creation of humankind in his image and his gift of food for them stand as a polemic against the ANE worldview that thought of kings as image-bearers and humans as servants of the gods, tasked with providing food for them. "Every human being is a king and responsible for managing the world on God's behalf" (Wenham, 2000, p. 25). Rather than serving the gods as slaves in order to provide for their needs, the role of humans in Genesis is to serve as priests in sacred space, with God providing for them. "In Israel, the cosmos functions [not with people as an afterthought, but] for people and in relationship to them" (Walton, 2006, p. 215).

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[63] He adds that Numbers 3:7–8; 8:26; and 18:5–6 use both words ("guard" and "serve") in this connection. Thomas (2011, pp. 108-9) adds that the שהם stone in Genesis 2:12 is the same word for the stone used in the priestly ephod (Exod 28:9–10).

[64] Walton references other biblical texts that connect temple and Eden imagery: Ezekiel 47:1–12; Zechariah 14:8; Psalm 46:4; Revelation 22:1–2.

[65] For example, in the Babylonian myth, the trees produce precious stones, whereas the biblical version has naturalised this mythological element by locating the jewels in the region of Havilah.

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In short, Eden is not merely a prototype of Israel's land or her temple, but also the original lost Paradise that the consecration of land and temple would eventually seek to address. Eden is an ideal state of affairs in terms of divine–human relationship—one for which humanity is depicted as having been created, but which has been lost as a result of human disobedience. While there is not mention of the word "covenant" in these chapters, it is nevertheless legitimate to see this ideal in these terms—a state of divine–human relationship, and its attendant conditions, has been established.[66] In terms of the plot of Genesis, the promises and covenants can be seen as arrangements that aim at Eden's reinstatement. Eden possessed what the blessings eventually aim to secure again: land, blessing in God's presence, and (in the mandate to be fruitful and multiply) the promise of descendants.

3.4.2.2 Place of the woman (Gen 2:18–25)

The main thrust of Genesis 2 has to do with the problem of the first human's aloneness. In contrast to the positive declarations of goodness in chapter 1, chapter 2 declares something in God's creation—the human's aloneness—to be "not good".

This is addressed by God's determination to build a helper who corresponds to him (עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ). The designation of the woman as עֵזֶר (helper) is in no way a diminution of her value in comparison with the man. God himself is regularly called man's עֵזֶר. According to Wenham (2000, pp. 30-31), "A helper is someone who meets someone's need; the relative strength of helped and helper is not at stake, simply that the helped is too weak on his own to achieve something."

Wenham (1987, p. 68) views the word כְּנֶגְדּוֹ as an expression of "complementarity rather than identity", which is taken as evidence of a hierarchical order in their relationship; Meyers (2013, p. 73) reckons that it carries the sense of "corresponding to" or "on a par with", which suggests a non-hierarchical relationship. She suggests as a translation "partner" or "counterpart". In view of the emphases of this chapter, Meyers's rendering better reflects the context, in my opinion. Among all the other creatures, there is no counterpart for the human who is suitable to share in the human's task. The woman is made to address this lack. There is no hint that the sameness or difference of male and female to one another is in view.

[66] Hosea 6:7 ("But like Adam they transgressed the covenant…") implies the presence of covenant-like conditions in Eden.

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On the "rib" or "part" taken from Adam, some argue it should better be understood as referring to a "side", usually of a two-sided thing, such as the two sides of a double door (e.g., 1 Kgs 6:34), and thus indicates that one side of the human is being taken to form the woman.[67] This emphasises that the woman is bone and flesh of the man and that there is importance in their correspondence to one another and their unity (Meyers, 2013, pp. 74-75; Walton, 2013, pp. 96-97). Man's declaration of the woman as his bone and flesh *at last* (הַפַּעַם) intends to establish their unity as distinct from the rest of creation through which he had just searched. Humans having just been differentiated as male and female, the narrator says of them in 2:24 that in marriage the two "sides" are reunited as one flesh. The taking of woman out of man is met with reciprocity when the man is taken from his household to become one flesh with her again.

This chapter is often used as evidence that there is a hierarchical order to the male–female relationship in God's design for the world, but this seems to cut against the main emphases of the text, and marriage hierarchy is not significantly revisited in the rest of Genesis. More discussion of this is available in Appendix B.

In summary, the overriding impression that the text gives of the man and the woman is of equality and partnership: they are of the same substance, they are together in the image of God, they share in priestly guardianship of sacred space, and their relationship is an expression of oneness.

[67] Meyers (2013, pp. 71-73) points out that because Hebrew has no neuter, the fact of the word האדם being in the masculine has led to an assumption that the first human was male. Without this assumption, the fact that male and female are formed from the division of the first human led the ANE to suppose that the first human was an androgynous creature that "is the matrix for the two sexes". The word האדם is not "inherently gendered", but refers to humanity in general. Van Wolde (1998, pp. 31-32) adds that this can be seen as another motion of differentiation evident in the text—humanity is differentiated from the ground, and woman is differentiated from man. This argument is compelling but for some minor complications: the text says that the side was taken from man (האדם) and then woman was brought to man (האדם), so the text uses האדם for the specifically male human even post-differentiation (though perhaps now as a proper name, not a generic designation). Conversely, 2:23 says that woman was taken "out of man" (מאישׁ), not out of the predifferentiation 'human' (האדם), as was actually the case. (On the other hand, the man is giving different names to himself and his newly formed wife, so it would be strange to use האדם.) Either way, the fact that male and female are differentiated out of the body of the first human and that the motion in marriage is to reunite man and woman again as one flesh (2:24) seems to imply that the writer of Genesis is emphasising unity and parity, not hierarchy.

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3.4.2.3 The pivotal moment (Gen 3:1–7)

Structurally, the pivotal moment in the concentric arrangement of these chapters comes when the woman takes the fruit and shares it with the man. This has traditionally been understood as the "fall" of humanity from grace and the first act of sin. More recently, some interpreters have explored how reading this moment as archetype might provide new insight into its function.

The archetypical approach requires that the text be understood as something that always is, rather than as something that once was.[68] This has led to a school of thought that views the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge as a picture of the *maturing* of humanity, rather than their fall. Van Wolde (1998, p. 30), for example, suggests that this story tells how God addresses a deficiency in creation—there was no human to work the ground. Instead of the easy task of caring for Eden, humans are given the greater responsibility of spreading out upon and cultivating the whole of the world. To facilitate this, humans must achieve a maturity that allows them to manage this task. In her reading, eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil represents that moment at which every human gains "awareness, a discriminating power" (1998, p. 32). Van Wolde (1998, pp. 32-35) says that the phrase "knowledge of good and evil" occurs three more times in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 1:39; 2 Sam 19:35; Isa 7:15-16) and once in a Qumran text (*Rule of the Congregation*), all of which make the connection to adult maturity. She argues that this is also what is meant in Genesis 2–3. As a result, humans spread out and fulfil the mandate to till the earth.

The use of the Eden story as an aetiology for growing up—with the man warned about his labours and the woman her pregnancies—is attractive, but it raises a problem: Why does God prohibit eating from the tree if the result of doing so is so important? Van Wolde (1998, p. 36) says that just as man and wife must leave father and mother to become a procreative family unit of their own, so also transgression of the prohibition resulted in humanity leaving God to become independent—

[68] It used to be common for interpreters to view the archetype in this text as ascribing certain general characteristics to women. For example, Von Rad (1972, p. 90) considered this text to characterise Eve as a "temptress", showing that "the woman confronts the obscure allurements and mysteries that beset our limited life more directly than the man does. In the history of Yahweh-religion it has always been the women who have shown an inclination for obscure astrological cults." There seems to be no data provided for this view; it seems merely to be a prejudicial stereotype passing as aetiology.

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"Freedom, like power, is something that cannot be given; it can only be taken. Perhaps one could speak of a 'necessary disobedience' in this context".[69]

Against Van Wolde's interpretation I suggest the following:

- Of the four occurrences of the phrase "knowledge of good and evil/bad", the citation from 2 Samuel is a poor fit with the connection to maturity. In that text, Barzillai is speaking of losing his faculties of discernment to old age, such as the ability to know any longer whether something tastes good or bad. This differs from the focus on (probably sexual) maturity implied by the Qumran text. Since Genesis puts the phrase explicitly in the realm of wisdom, it more naturally reads as knowing what is good or bad in terms of discernment and ethics.
- Her interpretation relies on immature life without labour and without children in the garden, and mature life of labour and multiplication for the benefit of the earth outside the garden (1998, p. 34). However, before their act of disobedience, there is a suggestion of work (2:15) and of their fittingness for procreation (1:28; 2:24). Chapter 3 seems rather to narrate the addition of *hardship* to these roles, not their inception as such.
- "Freedom, like power, is something that cannot be given; it can only be taken" is a pithy line but not a true one, and there is nothing inherent to the notion of freedom or rebellion that rendered the couple captive before the Fall or freer afterwards.

[69] Meyers (2013, pp. 76-77) also takes an aetiological view of these texts. On account of the absence of the word "sin" in Genesis 2–3, and because this episode works in concert with chapter 4, she argues that Adam and Eve's act was not sin; Cain's murder is the first act worthy of the word "sin". Meyers (2013, p. 79) later describes it as an act of *disobedience*, though she does not clarify how this differs from sin.

Niditch (2012, pp. 30-31) similarly believes that the interpretation of the text as indictment upon Eve arises out of patriarchal assumptions and is a misreading. Eve is seen as parallel to women in Mediterranean literature who are figures of curiosity. Dignity is seen in her role as knowledge-bringer, tester of limits, originator of culture—things that are "quintessentially human". While Genesis may cast Eve in a traditional story role for women, it is not clear that Eve's actions gave rise to anything that was not already true of life in Eden, except for the divine knowledge of good and evil. The blessing "Be fruitful and multiply" implies freedom to explore, cultivate, procreate, etc. Adam's naming of the animals and the freedom to "eat from any tree in the garden" in the first wing of this story imply agency, knowledge, and cultural development. In the second wing of this unified story structure, Eve seems rather to represent the given helper becoming unhelpful. Rather than these two counterparts expressing themselves within the blessing of fruitfulness and multiplication, she becomes a "helper" in rebellion, a partner in crime. It may be that the traditional Mediterranean story role implies growth in maturity by means of the woman's curiosity, the Genesis appropriation of this role (if that is what it is) seems not to attribute any positive growth to her actions. It merely releases evil and conflict into the good environment and relationships that they had been given.

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- The eviction from the Garden is put in terms that connect it to exile. Life is something given by God and associated with his presence (symbolised by the tree of life); the expulsion from his presence means the start of death.

In short, there are several hints that the narrator sees the rebellion not as a necessary act of growing up, but as the heart of the problem. But if so, why is there affirmation from the narrator that the fruit was good for attaining wisdom (3:6), and from God that it *did* make the humans godlike, as the snake had promised (3:22)?

These emphases do not validate the humans' decision as wise; rather, this confirms the shrewdness of the snake: the snake sold them the fruit as wisdom, and it did offer more intimate knowledge of good and evil. However, the forked tongue that made this offer concealed[70] more than it made known. Von Rad (1972, p. 89) notes that "knowing" in Hebrew has more to do with "experiencing" and "becoming acquainted with" than with purely intellectual knowing. This knowledge represents independence that enables humankind to decide what is beneficial or detrimental to them. The rebellion was not merely to commit a sin; it was about humans claiming moral autonomy for themselves.[71] That the humans were made "wise" by their actions does not mean that it was a kind of wisdom they needed to possess. What they had previously lacked was something that their relatedness to God supplied. To obey is better than sacrifice. Humanity's "growing up" was wisdom of a sort, but moral autonomy is wisdom that humans are not capable of wielding without mutual destruction, as Genesis 4 details, and it remains the case that Genesis describes the quest to recover the good that was lost and to find a way of overcoming the ever-present potential for evil. Humanity laying claim to self-rule leaves us locked in conflict over attempts to recover lost Eden for ourselves.

Sarna (1966, pp. 26-27) points out that similar stories in the ANE were preoccupied with the question of immortality, whereas Genesis virtually ignores the tree of life. He argues that Genesis is concerned "with issues of living rather than the question of death, with morality rather than

[70] Wenham (1987, p. 72) and others have noted the wordplay involving the snake who is shrewd (עָרוּם) and the couple who are nude (עֵרֹם). This connection seems to track the movement from the openness of the couple who feel no shame, to their duplicity after falling prey to the shrewd snake, and to their eventual covering up of their nudity to hide their shame.

[71] Wenham (1987, pp. 63-64) connects the interpretation of "knowledge of good and evil" as meaning "wisdom" to Ezekiel 28, in which the ruler of Tyre claims to be "wise as a god" and is expelled from "Eden", and to Psalm 19, which compares the law to the tree of knowledge. He agrees that eating from the tree represents the assertion of moral autonomy.

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mortality". It is not the pursuit of eternity that drives the story, but the recovery of relationship between man and God that matters.

In summary, rather than being an archetypical rite of passage, this text is providing an origin story for the otherwise perplexing presence of sin in a world that was created "very good", and the rest of the story of Genesis is one of recovery of a relationship that was traded for the mirage of wisdom.

3.4.2.4 Undoing of the ideal (Gen 3:8–24)

The texts leading up to the pivotal mid-section serve to establish the ideal, namely, rest with God, access to eternal life, peaceful sanctuary-service in Eden, and unity of man and woman over creation. After the pivot, the story narrates the dismantling of this ideal. In its place, God promises enmity with creation, interpersonal conflict, and toil in human labours, and he drives the humans out of his presence. Each of these outcomes has its own connection with death—Genesis features famines, murders, and Rachel's death in childbirth.

God's words to the woman are crucial but also disputed. The ESV reads:

> "To the woman he said, 'I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.'" (Gen 3:16)

Meyers (2013, p. 81) points out that traditional interpretation of verse 16 is that women are cursed with pain and subservience to men.[72] There are, however, other ways in which this passage might be translated. Meyers (2013, pp. 88-91) argues that הֵרוֹן (translated as "childbearing" in the ESV) never refers to childbirth, but always to conception or pregnancy. This is usually viewed as part of a hendiadys with "pain" (i.e., "the pains of your pregnancy")[73] but it is not necessarily so, and pain is not normally associated with pregnancy. She points out that the word for pain used in the first part of this verse (עִצְּבוֹן) is never used of the pain of childbirth, but rather of physical labour or mental anguish. It is also the same word used of man's labour in the fields. For this reason, she claims that the first part of this verse should be understood to refer to women's role in production (toil in daily work) and reproduction (hardship in "many pregnancies").

[72] For example, Von Rad (1972, p. 93) says that the judgements on the woman involve hardships of pregnancy, birth pains, "profound desire for the man in whom she still does not find fulfilment and rest", and "humiliating domination" in its place.

[73] As, for example, in Wenham (1987, p. 81).

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Regarding the parallel line ("In pain [עֶצֶב] you shall bring forth children"), Meyers (2013, pp. 92-93) again argues that the connection to childbirth itself is unlikely to be in view; rather, the verb ילד includes fathering, too, and refers more generally to having children. She argues that this part of the judgement refers to the hardship of being a parent—particularly given high rates of infant mortality and the difficulty of keeping children alive. She seems reticent to allow that this text is aetiology for the pains of childbirth, but sees it rather as a reflection of Israelite concerns for food production and family well-being.

There are other ways to account for the slightly unusual language, however. It has been suggested that pain (עִצָּבוֹן) is meant to be a pun on the word for "tree" (עץ) (Wenham, 1987, p. 81), and while it might not typically be used for labour pain, the narrator might simply prefer to stretch its semantic potential in order to connect the judgements on the man and the woman more directly. The reappearance of the word "to multiply" (רבה)—this time of her pain—might also serve to indicate something of a reversal of the initial blessing upon human progeniture ("be fruitful and multiply"). Though it arrives by a different route, this largely agrees with the conclusion of Meyers: as an undoing of the original blessing, this judgement suggests problems with multiplication—an increased level of threat associated with childbearing—not merely pain while multiplying. So, while I think that it remains possible that labour pain is included within the pain of having children, Meyers is likely correct that mortality rates of infants and/or mothers may be more to the point. There is potentially the pall of death over this judgement—as there is over the man's return to the dust—rather than it merely being an explanation for birth pangs.

In the ancestral narratives, instances of this judgement in the lives of the characters include the account of Rebekah's pregnancy, which is difficult enough to provoke her to seek an oracle (25:22), and the death of Rachel in childbirth (35:18). Besides these, the most consistent problem with pregnancy is the *lack thereof*; barrenness does not involve labour pain in any way, but it implies the death of a family line. The corresponding fulfilment of curse on the ground is barrenness through drought—the opposite of the blessing of fruitfulness—which also features regularly in Genesis, and which also involves mortal threat (most explicitly in 47:18–19) (Gossai, 2008, p. 1). Thus, barrenness of land and womb are key representatives of the curse that replaces blessing.

The second part of the judgement passed on the woman has to do with her relationships. Meyers (2013, pp. 93-95) says that the word rendered "desire" (תְּשׁוּקָה) seems to relate to erotic desire in Song of Songs, and according to the usual interpretation refers to the woman's "unbridled sexual passion". She suggests that it should rather be read as (or synonymous with) תשובה ("turning"), as

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it seems to have been read by Jerome, the LXX, and "virtually all other ancient translations". If "turning" is intended, "the woman would be (re) turning to the man, thereby restoring the primeval condition of bodily unity". Meyers argues that "returning" is preferable because, along with the parallel use of עִצָּבוֹן in the judgement on the man, it parallels his "return" to the soil from whence he was taken. The woman thus returns to the man (procreation), and man returns to the soil (mortality)—a "fascinating echo—even a reversal—of the creation of humans".

Against this emendation, there is the parallel wording of 4:7, in which sin is said to "desire" (תְּשׁוּקָה) Cain, and he is told that he must "rule" (מֹשֵׁל) it. The use of "desire" in 4:7 is clearly not erotic, and so its use in 3:16 need not be understood in a sexual way. It has been suggested rather that it should be seen as an urge for independence or to possess or dominate her husband, much as sin (pictured as a predator) *desires* to claim Cain (Wenham, 1987, p. 81). This suggests that the same autonomy that the couple claimed by eating the fruit will express itself in human relationships too, resulting in the woman using what is at her disposal to gain an upper hand, whereas the man expresses his dominance against her in the exercise of rule.

Perhaps there is intended multivalence in the use of "desire", since in the narratives of Genesis we see examples of both. Leah most pointedly desires love from her husband, and it is never returned to her, whereas Rebekah has competing intentions to those of Isaac and employs deception to see that she gets her way. Leah desires to be her husband's partner and is not allowed; Rebekah should be expressing partnership but does not. Relationships are disrupted.

Meyers (2013, pp. 95-97) points out that 3:16 has often been thought of as "divinely ordained patriarchal control of women in society". She adds that rule is never absolute (such as in Exodus 21:8, where limitations are set on what one's rule of a servant allows), and since, in her opinion, much of the content of 3:16 focuses on procreation, she takes it to mean that this rule is limited to "mastery in marital sex—but not dominance in all aspects of life". The motivation for this "mandate" has to do with infant and maternal mortality—a crucial factor in Israel's life setting.[74]

There is some warrant to see in this line a "mandate"—particularly because the parallel in 4:7 is an *exhortation* to master sin. Nevertheless, the fact of a parallel between these texts is not determinative in their interpretation. The *Yiqtol* form of the verb "to rule" (יִמְשָׁל and תִּמְשָׁל), used

[74] Meyers (2013, pp. 97-101) adds that high rates of infant and maternal mortality would have led to "pregnancy reluctance", and that male rule in sexual matters was necessary in order to overcome this.

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in both passages, can refer to future occurrences or generalisations (so that the husband's rule is something that will pertain as a consequence), and it can also express modalities such as volition (so that it expresses God's will for Cain). Thus, it is possible for the Hebrew to maintain a verbal parallel while shifting the intent. It seems to me that 3:16 is not *exhorting* men to govern women with a firm hand, as God exhorts Cain in 4:7, but *describing* the fact of sin leading to disrupted relationships.

Wenham (1987, p. 81) finds the reference to male rule difficult because, having read Genesis 2 as subordinating wives to husbands, he cannot easily reconcile male domination as an intrusion on their relationship here.[75] However, if we are correct that subordination should not be read into Genesis 2, the difficulty disappears. I think Towner (2001, pp. 47-48) is correct:

> "Overly narrow readings of the statement 'he shall rule over you' have caused women (and men) much grief over the millennia. Remember that this… describes the way things came to be after human relationships with God and each other experienced brokenness and alienation. The life courses of both man and woman are warped by this judgment, for with a stroke the simple and equal relationship of partners is ended."

These are disruptions described in terms of typically male and female roles (pregnancy and hard labour), but death rules equally over both and the pain of these judgements is felt by both. Painful pregnancies—if deaths associated with childbearing are intended—are painful for men too. Adam's "returning to the dust" is the fate of women too. Genesis 4 serves to indicate that the problem of competing desires and attempts to rule are not just a feature of the husband–wife domain, but spills over into conflicts at every level of human interaction—from violence between adults like Cain and Abel, to that of nations (14:1–16), and even to wrestling within the womb (25:22).

The final judgement completes the sense of undoing of the ideal: the humans who were placed in the garden are expelled from it. Before their expulsion is announced, God makes clothing for them from animal skins to replace the inadequate leaf-belts they had crafted for themselves. Towner (2001, p. 48–49) sees in this an act of grace and reconciliation, and he points out that God's judgements on Cain and in the flood are also succeeded by similar marks of God's "continuing care for them". However, the mark on Cain and the rainbow in the sky function both as assurances of protection and as reminders of the sin that necessitated them in the first place. Wenham (1987, pp. 84-85) sees in the provision of clothing this reminding-of-sinfulness function. In the law, Israelites (and the priests especially) were warned not to expose their nakedness before God (Exod 20:26;

[75] On the basis of chapter 2, Wenham says, "Evidently [the narrator] does not regard female subordination to be a judgment on her sin."

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28:42; Deut 23:12–14). So, their clothing is perhaps both a sign of God's gracious provision for the humans entering the harsh reality of a cursed world and a reminder of their departure in shame and their distance from the deity.

The promise of death for those who eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge is not enacted by means of an execution but by means of an exile. Death means denial of access to God and the tree of life. Genesis 3:22 says that God "drove" them out of the garden—terminology that is often associated with the punishment of exile (e.g., Exod 23:28–31) (Wenham, 1987, p. 85). Loss of land, whether for Adam and Eve or later for Israel, was not merely homelessness, but also and most especially spiritual loss—it was the expulsion from God's presence and from the environment given for divine blessing.

That death is experienced in this way (rather than, for example, by immediate execution) is important because it draws attention away from the sentence as a mere judicial procedure and towards the nature of the life that has been lost. The tragedy of this death is not the termination of a person's material being but the severing of being-in-relationship with the Living God.

3.4.2.5 Notes of hope? (Gen 3:15, 20)

Chapter 3 is rightly dominated by a sense of judgement and despair, but there are some elements of the story that have been interpreted as notes of hope, especially:

- the seed of the woman crushing the snake's head; and
- the declaration of Eve as mother of the living.

The statement that this snake will be (seemingly) crushed by the seed of the woman was interpreted messianically by Jews as early as the third century B.C. (Wenham, 1987, p. 80) and since the time of Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 135–202) as a "Protoevangelium"—a promise of Christ's victory over Satan (Towner, 2001, p. 47). It is common in recent interpretation, however, to regard the snake as a representative of the animal kingdom and nothing more. Cotter (2003, p. 35) claims that the interest behind the judgements of God in chapter 3 is aetiological, explaining "why snakes do not have legs, why people fear snakes, why childbirth hurts", and so on. Meyers (2013, p. 79) claims that the serpent is emphatically not the satanic being that it becomes in Jewish and Christian interpretation, but rather reflects human fear of snakes and awe of their seeming ability to rejuvenate by shedding their skin. Towner (2001, p. 43) says similarly that there is no hint "of any of the dark, deep dragon-like dimensions that this creature acquired in subsequent reflection on the origin of evil". The snake is "just one of three poor saps who get it in the end".

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Resistance to later Jewish and Christian interpretations that more or less allegorised the text is understandable, but it smacks of false dichotomy to suggest in its place that the snake is *merely a snake*. Other commentators are not so categorical. Von Rad (1972, pp. 92-93) offers more of a middle way by acknowledging that the narrator "sees in it an evil being that has assumed form" and that is locked in a life-and-death rivalry with humans from which, in his interpretation, there is no victor.

Towner (2001, p. 43), opposed as he is to seeing in this text a snake of ANE myth, nevertheless points out that snakes in mythology held a variety of associations to ancient readers, some of them positive. Sarna (1966, p. 26) suggests that the snake was an attractive choice as antagonist possibly because of its connection to Leviathan, "a representative of chaos and an opponent of gods in cosmic-combat mythology", as well as to the Gilgamesh story in which the snake robs Gilgamesh of the plant that would give him eternal life (Wenham, 1987, pp. 52, 72-73). Snakes also had pervasive roles in divination texts in the ANE. Smith (2015, p. 36) says, "Over forty extant omens from *Šumma Ālu* involve a man, a woman, and one or more snakes". This is not to say that there is a direct parallel between any one of those texts and this text in Genesis; rather, it is the "thematic breadth" of snake omens and "a pervasive belief in the ominous powers of snakes within a shared culture" that suggests a probable association between them (Smith, 2015, pp. 34-35, 44).

Smith (2015, pp. 45-46) points out that there is regular wordplay using polysemous and homonymic terms in Genesis 2–3 (such as "nude" and "shrewd"), and so although it is not clear whether there is a *linguistic* connection between נָחָשׁ ("snake") and נַחַשׁ ("divination"), the offer of divine wisdom that the snake makes would surely call this connection to the reader's mind.[76] Such a connection to divination would underline that the humans' temptation is rightly seen as the attempt to gain wisdom that should properly have been left to God. This illegitimates not only divination itself but also all moral autonomy and rebellious acts of self-determination. The snake need not be the manifestation of an evil entity for it to represent more than just a snake. Its connections to myths

[76] Divination appears in connection with Laban (Gen 30:27) and in the presentation of Joseph (twice) as one who "surely practices divination" (נַחֵשׁ יְנַחֵשׁ) (Gen 44:5, 15).

Smith (2015, p. 42) develops his conclusions in a very linear way, suggesting that this connection means for the reader to view the snake and the knowledge of good and evil within the realm of divination itself. In this way, the snake reveals the true mind of God, revealing something that God wanted concealed, and knowledge of good and evil refers to knowing the results of divination. The way in which knowledge of good and evil is expressed in the book—seemingly in Cain's murder of Abel, for example—suggests that the implications are broader than knowing the good and evil of one's fortune.

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and omens suggest that it occupies a deeper role in the story as a representative of chaos, enmity, and/or illicit knowledge.

There is evidence in the book that the reference to a "seed of the woman" is significant to its hopes. There is any number of candidates for a *significant seed* that would have been apparent to the implied reader—including Abel, Seth, any of the patriarchs, or Joseph.[77] Furthermore, the view of procreation in the ancient world was that male sperm is the seed and the woman's womb is the ground that holds and forms the seed into a human being (Budin, 2015, pp. 31, 34-37; Walton, 2001, p. 454). To ascribe the seed to the *woman* would have seemed counterfactual. This is a phrase that is calculated to attract the reader's curiosity.

Towner (2001, p. 47) claims that to see significance in this promise is mistaken, because it:

> "exceeds the plain meaning of the text on two counts… First, the word 'seed' or 'offspring' is collective in meaning; it means 'humankind.'[78] Second, the genre of verses 14–19 is a judgment, a sentence, even a curse, but not a promise or a prophecy."

Towner's criticisms unfortunately also fall short on two counts. Firstly, while seed is most commonly to be regarded as a collective idea, *Eve herself* uses it in the singular in 4:25 in reference to her son Seth, saying, "God has appointed for me *another seed instead of Abel*, for Cain killed him." So not only *can* 3:15 be understood to refer to a single descendant, but the direct reference to the seed of this woman in the next chapter is a strong argument that 3:15 *should* be understood in this way. Secondly, Towner complains that this text is a judgement, not a promise or a prophecy. However, such terms are not mutually exclusive. There are several examples in Genesis of judgements that are prophetic, such as those given to Cain and Canaan. Furthermore, this is a judgement *on the snake*. It is not strange that judgement on the enemy should be seen as a word of hope for the humans; it would be so virtually by default.

This, however, is not the end of the difficulty with this verse. The verb used of the snake's attack upon the seed of Eve and of the seed's attack upon the snake is the same (שׁוּף), so it is not the nature of the blow that distinguishes the two (contra the NIV's *crushing* of head and *striking* of heel).

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[77] Given its role in the Pentateuch, it is possible that Genesis is preparing for Moses as the significant seed; or given hints of the importance of Judah and Joseph, it might have in mind a Davidic figure, perhaps in parallel to messianic hopes in the post-exilic prophets.

[78] This is also the criticism levelled by Von Rad (1972, p. 93), who said, "The word 'seed' may not be construed personally but only quite generally with the meaning 'posterity'".

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Wenham (1987, p. 80) argues also that the *Yiqtol* form of these verbs should be understood as iterative, describing ongoing conflict, and the fact that the snake's assault on humanity is given second (i.e., after the human's attack) seems not to imply definitive victory for humans.[79] Wenham mitigates these problems by pointing out that, since this is a curse on the snake, "something less than a draw would be expected". He therefore interprets this text as a representation of a long struggle of good and evil with some expectation of eventual triumph for humanity. This is given further credence in 4:7 where, although Cain eventually fails, God tells him that he is able to overcome sin if he resists.

In summary, one does not need to choose between reading this text as a battle between Satan and the Messiah or as a "Just So" story explaining the snake's leglessness or human fear of them. Reading contextually raises the possibility that the snake is a representative of chaos and/or rebellion, and its role is likely abstracted in 4:7 as the lurking of sin. The first example of the conflict between seeds occurs between Cain and Abel, where the woman's seed does eventually triumph over violence and chaos by means of the birth of Seth to replace the stricken Abel in 4:25. This raises the expectation that the battle will be taken forward through this line—the line of those who "call on the name of YHWH". There is every reason to expect that God's words at this crucial point of the story are central to the programme of the rest of the book, and it does seem that the author of Genesis is identifying Eve's descendant(s) as the locus of hope for the undoing of the chaos and ruin introduced by the snake. The complication has been identified, and its solution, in veiled form, is announced from the start.

There is a second note of hope in Genesis 3 in the naming of Eve. The fact that Adam calls his wife "the mother of all living" *before* she had given birth suggests that God's speech had given him some reason for such a hope in her.[80] Hamilton (2007, p. 257) points out that there is corresponding terminology in what is promised of Eve in 3:16 (regarding "pregnancy" [הֵרוֹן] and her "childbearing"

[79] The solution here might merely be that God's heightened prose often comes in chiastic parallelisms, and so the snake's assault upon the seed's heel is second because it reverses the first line ("enmity… between your offspring and her offspring"). There the snake is possibly pictured first because it is the aggressor.

[80] Brenner (2010b, p. 40) argues for a connection between the woman and the Tree of Life, based on the regular conjunction of women and tree symbolism in the archaeological record of the ANE. If this is so, this declaration that is made concerning Eve may signal a shift in God's plan for ongoing life in his presence. Whereas life was previously maintained by eating from the tree, after the Fall, hope resides in pregnancies and the maintenance of a line of progeny that continues before God. Being barred from the Tree of Life signifies death's interruption of every human life, but the promise of a new generation offers hope (whether simply in the persistence of one's name, or in a more direct intervention to reverse the Fall in a later generation).

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[ילד]) and what happens to Eve in 4:1 (she "conceived" [הרה] and "gave birth" [ילד]). He concludes that Eve's declaration in 4:1 ("I have gotten a man with YHWH") is an early indication that she is looking for that "seed" that opposes the snake. If Hamilton is correct that there is an intended connection between these texts, it would again seem that in the judgement there is nevertheless a counterpoint of hope. Just as cursing the snake implied victory for the woman's seed, so also the toil of childbearing nevertheless implies a conduit for life to continue. The blessing, "Be fruitful and multiply", has been complicated but not fully revoked.

3.4.2.6 Cain's violence (Gen 4)

The final chapter of this first *toledot* unit describes Cain's murder of Abel, and through the outbreak and spread of violence, this story serves to connect Adam and Eve's sin to the violence that provokes the flood (6:11).

The chapter begins and ends with the birth of Eve's children. This, as we have already said, seems to be directly connected to the significance of her "seed" implied by 3:15–16. Eve giving birth to a man "with YHWH" (4:1), perhaps in continuity with the barrenness motif in the book, puts emphasis on divine agency in opening and closing wombs, and thus in giving life and a name or taking them away. Cain killing Abel is a step deeper into the corruption of sin, and it cuts off any growing hope that mastery of sin might be found in either seed of Eve. The birth of Seth at the end of the chapter, who is explicitly identified as a seed to replace Abel, reignites hope that there is a line of descent that might overcome sin. This is bolstered by the closing words of this chapter, in which this line is associated with the start of formal worship of YHWH (4:26).

We have considered plot and structure connections that link chapters 3 and 4, but Wenham (1987, pp. 99-100) adds further possible connections in the content of these episodes:

- Both stories contain similar divine questions ("Where are you?" and "Where is Abel your brother?"), and both involve a curse on the ground.
- In response to their sin, God clothed Adam and Eve and gave Cain a mark.
- The threat sin poses for Cain is phrased in the same terms as the judgement on the woman.
- There is repetition of "hearing the voice" (of God and of Abel's blood respectively) and of being "driven" from the land, to the east of Eden and out of God's presence.

These similarities are most likely intended to show that the sin in Eden is at the heart of Cain's sin and at the heart of all sin. However, there is not merely reiteration of the Eden story here. Firstly,

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while Eve is tempted by the snake to disobey God, Cain is appealed to *by God* to disobey temptation. He does not succumb to a deceitful appeal; he doubles down on moral rebellion. Secondly, while Adam and Eve receive their judgement without protest, Cain claims that his punishment is too harsh. This shows that sin and alienation from God are amplified in Cain.

The genealogy of Cain and that of Adam and Seth (Gen 5) establish parallel lines of descent that contrast Cain and his sons with those who "call on the name of the Lord". There are several close connections between the two genealogies, with several members of each having similar names and occupying parallel positions. The Hebrew penchant for significant numbers led to the seventh person in genealogies often being given emphasis, as they are here (Wenham, 1987, p. 96). Bailey (2013, p. 78) points out that the seventh in Cain's genealogy is Lamech, who repeats and amplifies Cain's violence. The seventh in Seth's genealogy is Enoch, who walks with God. This, for him, indicates that the two represent the choice of good and evil. Whether or not this point holds, it does seem to be the case that the author of Genesis is interested in drawing distinctions between lines of descent, and that Cain and Seth are representatives of violence and worship respectively.

3.4.3 Conclusion

The first *toledot* unit of Genesis is responsible for laying out the complication that drives the plot of the book forward. Genesis 2 adds texture to the creation story of Genesis 1 by introducing an immediate problem with God's "very good" creation: it is *not good* that the human is alone. This is immediately resolved by the creation of differentiated male and female—a woman is taken from the flesh of the human so that man and woman in relationship can be one flesh again, together in the image of God and together exercising priestly guardianship of the sacred space that God had prepared for their dwelling with him.

After setting up the ideal state of rest between God, humanity, and creation, the primary complication—an act of disobedience in which humanity laid claim to autonomous moral determination and self-directedness—intrudes upon the "very good" creation and disrupts divine–human relationship. The pronouncements of judgement upon each offending character narrate the intrusion of conflict and death into primary relationships and human roles (marriage and family, child-rearing and work). Intermingled with these judgements are notes of hope, associated primarily with Eve and her children—the snake as representative of sin and death and chaos will be locked in a losing battle with the seed of Eve, and she will become the mother of all living.

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Whereas the first sin in chapter 3 is couched in mythological terminology, chapter 4 demonstrates its outworking in more concrete terms. Rather than a snake, sin itself crouches at the door, and rather than the eating of a fruit, there is an act of fratricide motivated by envy. Cain then gives birth to a line that culminates in Lamech's amplification of his violence and hubris. Parallel to this, Eve gives birth to a "seed to replace Abel", and his line begin to "call on the name of the Lord". This line eventually takes us to Noah, a man righteous in the midst of a violent and corrupt generation.

3.5 THE *TOLEDOT* OF NOAH

In terms of our analysis of the structure of the book as a whole, the second *toledot* unit follows the vertical genealogy of Adam, which at least serves to bridge the passing of several centuries, but also seems to be the divider between covenantal movements. The Noah story deals primarily with God's act of uncreation—and his rescue of humanity through it—and it culminates with the reinstatement of a relationship with "every living creature".

The role of this *toledot* section in the plot of the book is that of an initial Change narrative (or quest); it is the first attempt to resolve the complication that the humans' sin introduced—specifically, it expands upon the implied contrast between Cain's line of descent, culminating in Lamech's violence, and Seth's line of descent, culminating in Noah, a man righteous in his generation. The story seems to ask whether the blunt eradication of the violent and the preservation of the righteous are able to resolve the problem of the wicked and the spread of their sin.

3.5.1 Structure

The flood story is often cited as clear evidence of complex composition history,[81] because of the number of apparent duplications and discrepancies. However, as Fox (1974, p. 571) observes, "The priestly writer hardly has an aversion to repetitions, but on the contrary, uses them frequently and skilfully." Repetition is an important structuring method, and this story shows a fairly tight concentric structure that accounts for much of the apparent duplication.

Anderson (1978, p. 38) offers the following structural analysis:

[81] See, for example, Emerton (1989, pp. 114-15).

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Figure 9: Anderson's structure of the *toledot* of Noah

Transitional introduction (6:9–10)
A. Violence in creation (6:11–12)
B. First divine speech: resolve to destroy (6:13–22)
C. Second divine speech: "enter ark" (7:1–10)
D. Beginning of flood (7:11–16)
E. The rising flood (7:17–24)
F. God remembers Noah (8:1a)[82]
E'. The receding flood (8:1b–5)
D'. Drying of the earth (8:6–14)
C'. Third divine speech: "leave ark" (8:15–19)
B'. God's resolve to preserve order (8:20–22)
A'. Fourth divine speech: covenant (9:1–17)
Transitional conclusion (9:18–19)

To this it should be added that Genesis 6:1–8 forms a prologue that introduces key players and ideas, and, similarly to the story of Cain and Abel, Genesis 9:20–10:31 (or possibly Genesis 9:20–11:9) forms an extended epilogue after the main narrative structure, also providing narrative and genealogical information concerning the main protagonist's sons and the effects of sin. Carr (2011, p. 318) adds that the epilogue of the first *toledot* pronounces a curse on Cain, and the second on Canaan.

The structure emphasises God's remembering of Noah as the pivotal moment; it is this that triggers the shift from uncreation to re-creation and from destruction to deliverance. The invocation of the relationship between God and Noah is the turning point at which the story moves from God's resolve to judge human wickedness and turns towards the promise to preserve his relationship with humanity in spite of it.

3.5.2 Narrative emphases

Noah's story is linked to the previous by the concern with the pervasiveness of human wickedness, particularly expressed in violence.

[82] This stage is given by Anderson without a verse reference. Since it needs to be represented in the text for it to be structural, I have supplied the reference for the clause in which it appears.

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3.5.2.1 Violence and uncreation

The problem statements with which this unit begins indicate that the flood is sent because of human wickedness. In 6:4, the result of the intermarriage of the sons of God and the daughters of men is the rise of "mighty men"—usually a reference to men of war—and the appositional phrase "men of name". While no clear connection is drawn with the following verse, it is likely that the juxtaposition of these warriors in 6:4 and the wickedness of human hearts and inclinations in 6:5 would suggest that these men of name are chief among the provocations that bring about God's judgement. In the story proper, the flood is specifically linked to corruption and violence (6:11). The escalation of violence has already been raised in connection with Cain and the boasts of Lamech. The spread of the spirit of Lamech across the face of the world is seemingly what now provokes the destruction of Cain's line entirely.

In terms of the connections of this story to ANE parallels, Sarna (1966, pp. 43-46) notes that the fragments of the Sumerian flood story indicate that the hero was the tenth king in the royal line (just as Noah was tenth from Adam), which suggests that this story was also part of a larger Sumerian account of world history. Connections to ANE background also are likely in the use of unusual terminology such as the word for "pitch" with which the vessels are sealed, which he argues derives from the Akkadian.

Sarna (1966, pp. 50-51) notes that some scholars suggest that the "clamour" that prevents the sleep of the gods in the Gilgamesh story is possibly better understood as an "outcry", similar to that against Sodom in Genesis 18. This would suggest that the ANE stories also understood there to be a moral reason for the destruction of humanity in the flood. Against this, however, Sarna points out that Ea accuses Enlil of bringing the flood senselessly. Perhaps, then, as a *contrast* with the ANE, the biblical story identifies human culpability for the flood in the socio-moral sphere; the word used for human injustice here appears elsewhere in connection with the sins of Sodom (Ezek 16:49) and Jonah's Nineveh (Sarna, 1966, pp. 52-53).

The Genesis flood story makes several connections back to the account of creation, which is intended to depict the flood not just as a judgement but as an act of *uncreation*. Carr (2011, pp. 317-18), for example, points out that the opening of the gates of heaven undoes the separation of sea and firmament; more importantly, he argues that Noah is presented as a new Adam. This is underlined by the timeline implied by the ages given in the genealogy of Genesis 5.

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Table 4: Timeline of Genesis 5

Year	Patriarch's birth	Patriarch's death
0	Adam	
130	Seth	
235	Enosh	
325	Kenan	
395	Mahalalel	
460	Jared	
622	Enoch	
687	Methuselah	
874	Lamech	
930		Adam
987		Enoch
1042		Seth
1056	Noah	
1140		Enosh
1235		Kenan
1290		Mahalalel
1422		Jared
1556	Shem, Ham, Japheth	
1651		Lamech
1656[83]		Methuselah

This timeline makes it clear that Noah is not only the tenth in Adam's line, but that he is also the first one born after the death of Adam (Sarna, 1966, p. 56). His father's declaration of hope at his birth—that Noah would bring relief from the curse on the ground—directly addresses the curse that resulted from Adam's sin. This second epoch of human history is given a second Adam, just as the third epoch will see the birth of a new nation *ex nihilo*, as it were, from its barren father, Abraham.

Assuming that Methuselah dies peacefully in the year of the flood, the timeline also indicates that each member of the preceding ten generations of Seth's line (those who call on "the name of the Lord") passed away by means other than God's judgement on the wicked.

[83] We're told that Noah was 600 at time of the flood, which puts it 1656 years after Adam's creation.

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3.5.2.2 Noah's righteousness

Noah's narrative *toledot* begins with a statement of his righteousness. Von Rad (1972, pp. 118, 126) insists that Noah's righteousness should not be seen as the ground of God's choice of him, wanting to preserve grace and God's freedom as the basis of election. However, the fact that this story is about the eradication of the wicked would seem to require that God preserves the most righteous family as the starting point for a new humanity.

Several small details in the text underline the faithfulness of Noah to God and his commands. Unlike that of Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh story, says Sarna (1966, p. 49), Noah's ark is without rudder or navigator, but rather drifts under the direction and mercy of God; its very construction implies a demand of faith.[84] Von Rad (1972, p. 120) argues that the plan to deluge the earth is told to Noah only after he has entered the ark, which means that he constructed the ark seemingly without knowing God's intentions. Wenham (2000, p. 34) notes that his obedience to God's instructions is total, he builds an altar and offers sacrifice, and he apparently even observes the Sabbath.

The righteousness of Noah and his trust in God's command would have been significant to communities affected by the exile, where the image of a remnant of the righteous delivered by grace while the land was destroyed would have been both a comfort and a challenge to greater faithfulness.[85]

3.5.2.3 The wickedness of human hearts

A significant repetition in this text occurs in God's verdicts concerning the wickedness of human hearts. Genesis 6:5 motivates the flood with the description of humanity that is echoed in 8:21:

- "And every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Gen 6:5) (וְכָל־יֵצֶר מַחְשְׁבֹת לִבּוֹ רַק רַע כָּל־הַיּוֹם׃)

[84] The vessel in which Moses is set adrift as a baby is also described as an ark, and it certainly emphasises divine guidance in bringing him to the royal court of Egypt.

[85] Sailhamer (1992, pp. 40-41) argues that there are several parallels between the presentation of the flood story and the priestly instructions in the Pentateuch, particularly in Leviticus 14. He sees this as indicating that sin is a contamination and that the flood and Noah's subsequent sacrifice should be seen as acts of purification of the world. We have already observed parallels to priestly roles in the first *toledot*, and so it is possible that they emerge here too.

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- "… for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth." (Gen 8:21)
  (כִּי יֵצֶר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְּעֻרָיו)

This is significant because, while in the first instance the repetition of the heart's evil intentions, plus some marker of perpetuity, was given as the reason for the flood, at the end of the flood it occurs as the basis for God *never to curse the ground in this way again*.

Wenham (2000, p. 34) understands Noah's sacrifice upon leaving the ark to indicate that his behaviour "profoundly alters God's attitude to the human race", as the sacrifice does in the Gilgamesh story—the gods see his offering and remember why they made the humans in the first place. But the contrast between Noah's sacrifice and the one in Gilgamesh seems more significant. In Gilgamesh, the gods intended to wipe out humanity, but the sacrifice persuaded them that the humans' survival was for the best. In Genesis, God planned both the judgement and the salvation, and Noah's sacrifice has no effect on the problem or its solution; it is a relational act. God makes the commitment not to curse the ground again not because of the sacrifice but because *nothing in the heart of humankind has changed*. In other words, the death of the wicked does not address the true problem, and so it is senseless to repeat it. Some other approach is necessary.

3.5.2.4 Covenant and sign

In the Atrahasis Epic, barrenness is one of the compromise curses inflicted on humanity after the flood to prevent a repeat of their overpopulation (Mark, 2011). In the Genesis story, barrenness (of ground and womb) is part of the judgement upon human sin *in the garden*, and it implies the threat of being cut off from God's presence (Gossai, 2008, p. 1). By contrast, after the flood, God does not introduce barrenness; he renews the same blessing of fruitfulness for the second Adam that he gave to the first (Gen 9:1–7). This suggests that a similar relationship is being set up, and it perhaps explains why God promises to *establish* a covenant with Noah and his seed (rather than to "make" or "cut" a covenant)—language that suggests one already exists.

This covenant is accompanied by a physical sign, the rainbow. It functions as a reminder of God's commitment to allow life—even of the wicked—to persist on the earth. It is appropriately chosen as a sign obviously because of its association with the end of storms, but perhaps also because of a possible connection to cosmic warfare. Von Rad (1972, pp. 98, 134) claims that the flaming sword outside Eden is a mythological representation of lightning (also a storm symbol), and that the word translated "rainbow" usually refers to the bow as a weapon. In the case of Eden, the divine weapon indicates a barrier between sacred space and the cursed ground to which the humans were

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banished. In the case of the flood, it indicates that the weapon will no longer be wielded as a curse on the ground.

Finally, the fact that Noah is introduced as someone who perhaps would bring rest from the cursed ground and the fact that God promises here no longer to curse the ground prompt us to ask whether the Edenic curse is revoked in Genesis 9. Von Rad (1972, pp. 122-23) sees God's covenant with the earth as an annulment of the curse on the ground, but this is unlikely given how often Genesis returns to stories of famine in which the ground does not yield its crops. Thus, Clines (1997, pp. 77-78) argues that the curse is not *fully* revoked, but in the cultivation of vineyards there is limited respite from the toil of labour. This may serve as a muted expression of future hope in the full reversal of the curse, but it is noteworthy that even the limited gain represented by winemaking is offset by a further note of pessimism—Noah's relief from his labours leads to drunkenness, and this becomes the catalyst for sin to reassert itself.

3.5.2.5 Curse on Canaan

The *toledot* of the heavens and the earth ended with an epilogue that detailed the effects and spread of sin through Cain's descendants; the Noah story similarly ends with an epilogue, which mitigates the hopefulness of the covenant just enacted.

Wenham (2000, p. 35) points out that this epilogue invokes Adam's story by again depicting the patriarch eating a fruit that has an adverse effect.[86] In Adam's case, he realises his nakedness and tries to hide; in Noah's case, he exposes his own nakedness in his tent. The focus in both stories shifts to the sons, and in each case there is an example of heinous behaviour that causes a rift in the family and leads to curse. Carr (2011, p. 318) observes that God's involvement in this new Cain-and-Abel-like story is much reduced. Noah, rather than God, plants the garden, and upon discovery of the sin, Noah pronounces the judgement and curse. Carr's explanation for this is that God limits himself post-flood and "the orders of the cosmos and civilization are allowed to run their course." This is possible, but it is also the case that God himself is the "wronged patriarch" in the first story, and Noah in the second, and this is perhaps sufficient to explain their respective roles.

[86] The degree to which Noah's behaviour is to be condemned is unclear. Wenham frames Noah's drunkenness as another "fall", but Von Rad (1972, p. 136), for example, argues that Noah was likely unaware of the properties of alcohol (however, the text does not indicate that this was his *first experience* of wine, only that he had now overindulged). Noah does not break a clear command as Adam did, and the text does not dwell on Noah's actions in any way, only on Ham's. So it may not mean to indicate that Noah is guilty, as Adam was.

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The nature of Ham's crime is a cause of regular discussion. It is clear that whatever he did was considered a serious violation. While "uncovering the nakedness" of someone is a euphemism for sex (e.g., Lev 18), it is not said that Ham uncovered his father's nakedness, only that he saw it. Von Rad (1972, p. 137) says that the presentation of the crime is likely to be euphemistic, and the traditional Israelite association of the Canaanites with cultic prostitution might have prompted readers to fill in the gaps here. Given that the Canaanites in Sodom in Genesis 19 were associated with homosexual offences, and given that Lot's flight from Sodom leads to a parallel story in which his daughters get him drunk in order to impregnate themselves with him, this is not unlikely. One way or another, Noah blesses Shem and Japheth with the implication that their households will be enlarged, but he curses the progeny of Ham to servitude.

Noah's story concludes with the so-called "Table of Nations"—genealogies of his sons that serve to confirm the blessing to be fruitful and multiply, while also forming a bridge into the story of the Tower of Babel, which describes the scattering of a united people into their various people groups and languages. It is perhaps significant that the Table of Nations dwells at length on the descendants of Ham—including Canaan's recently cursed line—from whom most or all of Israel's enemies arose. Egypt, Babel, Assyria, various Canaanite tribes, and the Philistines are all listed. The list pauses upon Nimrod, father of Assyria, to identify him as the first of the "mighty men" (presumably not counting those that died in the flood), indicating a reboot of the spread of sin that plagued the earth before Noah's time.

3.5.2.6 Babel and a great name

Between the Table of Nations and the vertical *toledot* of Shem that introduces the family of Abraham, there is the bridging episode concerning the Tower of Babel. It explains how Noah's one family and language became scattered into many divided nations, and this is the curse that the promised blessing of all nations addresses in Abraham's story.

Perhaps because Adam's sin is an attempt to become like God, and because the humans' plan at Babel aims to make a name for themselves, the tower has often been interpreted as an attempt to elevate themselves to the heavens as an assault on the divine realm. However, Walton (2006, p. 25) argues that the structure in view here is a ziggurat, and in the ANE these functioned not as a means by which people could ascend to the gods, but as portals by which the deity could descend.

Ziggurats (according to some ancient texts) had a small room at the top with a bed and a table set for the deity. The function of the ziggurat seems to have been as a gate and stairway by which the

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gods or their messengers were able to travel between heaven, earth and underworld, and to be refreshed along the way. They were not places of worship; rather, there was a temple built near the base where the god might come to receive gifts and worship and continue to bless the people. Temple complexes sometimes featured paradise gardens. These contained pools, animals, and produce grown for the provision of the gods. Temple association with water and water sources symbolised a connection to the primeval waters of creation. In Mesopotamian thought, the temple represented the centre of the cosmos and the building seems to have been thought of as a mountain that rose up to heaven, with its roots founded in the underworld. In Syro-Palestinian thought, it was "the architectural embodiment of the cosmic mountain" (Walton, 2006, pp. 119-27).

Whether or not there is an aetiological impulse behind it, city-building in Genesis seems to be associated with human self-sufficiency and hubris; Cain builds a city before this, the violent warrior Nimrod builds the imperial capital Nineveh in Genesis 10, and significant attention is given to the unrighteous city of Sodom in Genesis 19. The patriarchs, by contrast, are nomadic and landless, which seems to represent, like the rudderless ark, reliance on the providence and mercy of God. Sarna (1966, p. 77) says, "The emergence of idolatry is… made coeval with the generation of city-and-tower builders. The urbanization of society, the growth of material civilization and the rise of monumental architecture may all, from the Bible's point of view, involve a retrograde step in man's spiritual progress."

The building of this city and ziggurat, then, seems to have as its goal the centralisation of human power, with the attendant ability to call gods down into their system of worship. Through the structures of the temple compound (ziggurat, garden, shrine, etc.), deities could be provided for and thus give their favour to the efforts of the city-dwellers. This is a reversal of the pattern of divine presence represented by Eden: in God's garden, he provided for the humans, not they for him, and his presence was not invoked by mountain or temple; he walked freely with them. Although Sarna identifies idolatry as a problem here, other gods play a very muted role in Genesis; critique of idolatry is present (Rachel steals the household gods of Laban, and false gods are destroyed in Genesis 35) but not prevalent (Abraham offers tithes to the priest-king of Salem without any question being raised concerning the identity of El Elyon with YHWH; Abraham fears Philistia because there is no fear of God, not, as one might expect, because they feared false gods). Idolatry might be implied here, but it seems that false means of approaching God and gaining blessing—or, in parallel to Eden, the attempt to wrest control out of God's hands and into our own—is more to the point. As it is, their tower has the desired effect; God *does* come down to see it, but he rejects the attempt at co-opting him into their system of power and sets about redistributing it.

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An unusual feature of this episode is that God's response to the tower-builders—to scatter them—is anticipated in the reasons the people gave for their plan in the first place ("Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower… *lest we be dispersed* over the face of the whole earth", Gen 11:4). For this reason, Van Wolde (1998, pp. 44-45) interprets the scattering not as a punishment but as a mechanism by which God's mandate to fill the earth is fulfilled (cf. Sarna, 1966, p. 67). So, this is an action on behalf of the earth's interests. However, an Israelite reader would be familiar with warnings of scattering and exile as a severe act of rejection on God's part, most especially if Genesis in its final form is a post-exilic document. It is a paradigmatic form of divine judgement. Exile-like punishments have been meted out twice already in Genesis (3:24; 4:11–12).[87] It seems unlikely that we are intended to see this as neutral. Even if God does scatter them to promote the filling of the earth, there is an element of curse entailed in this too.

Sarna (1966, pp. 73-74) reckons that the desire to make a great name for themselves at Babel is parenthetical in the text and not problematic in itself—building projects were often used to secure fame for their patrons. He seems to imply that it was not a central motivation for them or the main issue in the text. The concern with having a name, however, has already appeared in connection with the mighty men of Genesis 6:4 as part of the provocation of the flood, and it will appear also in the blessings to Abraham in Genesis 12:2, which suggests that it might have more importance. Having a name certainly occurs often in a way that is synonymous with achieving fame (e.g., 1 Chron 12:30; 22:5), but it is used in other significant ways too. Consider the following examples:

> "Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth… He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.'" (2 Sam 7:8–9, 13)
>
> "His memory perishes from the earth, and he has no name in the street." (Job 18:17)
>
> "The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot." (Prov 10:7)

In each of the above cases, the possession of a name is *related* to the concept of fame or renown, but the emphasis is on being remembered beyond one's earthly life. In the following examples, the idea is extended even further:

[87] Three times if one considers the ark to represent an exiled remnant.

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> "The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth." (Gen 48:16)
>
> "And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel." (Deut 25:6)
>
> "For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it and will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what will you do for your great name?" (Josh 7:9)
>
> "Swear to me therefore by the LORD that you will not cut off my offspring after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house." (1 Sam 24:21)

In each of these, the possession of a name indicates not so much their fame as it does their perpetuity in the family—having descendants and a legacy. Of course, there are similarities here to fame, but in this case the hope is to have offspring that keep one alive in a sense. It is the opposite of being cut off or having one's line of descent permanently halted. In this regard, Isaiah 14:22 ("'I will rise up against them,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'and will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, descendants and posterity,' declares the LORD") might be significant, because it lists "name" along with three other words that have to do with one's stake in the future (cf. Jer 13:11).

The idea of building a city in order to "make a name" for themselves (especially following 6:4, in which it clearly relates to "renown") seems most likely to refer to fame. However, given that the Cain's line (and all lines besides that of Noah) has been decisively cut off in the flood, given that their tower-building seems to have been an attempt to secure divine blessing for themselves, and given that Abraham's blessings in the next chapter are concerned with both descendants and name, it is possible that this language means to draw in connotations of security of their posterity too.

Either way, God's concern is that the unification of humanity and their centralisation are depicted as means of maximising their power—God's complaint is that nothing will be impossible for them—and the building that they make seems to be an attempt at co-opting God into their system of control. God rejects their human-centred means of securing the persistence of their name. Scattering and division are the chosen punishment, because it once again thrusts humans into that rudderless position in which faith is able to thrive.

3.5.3 Conclusion

The Noah story is unusual in Genesis because it does not feature many of the characteristic relational motifs of the other *toledot* stories, such as barrenness or intra-family relationships. There

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is no role for Noah's wife, and the motif of conflict between brothers is the most muted in the book. That this story precedes the divine promises of land and progeny in Genesis 12:1–3 clearly has something to do with it, but it is also fair to say that Noah's *toledot* is more directly focused on land than are the others. Noah is named in hope that he might bring relief from the curse on the ground, and the emergence of viticulture at the end of his story is perhaps a wry nod to the limited fulfilment of that hope. More to the point, the curse on the ground that God does address is the curse of violence, and he does so by cursing the ground with a flood. At the end, God promises not to curse the ground in this way again. Finally, as an epilogue, the Tower of Babel story seems to be an illegitimate human attempt to secure blessing by creating their own environment of control and perhaps by reinstating an Eden-like sacred space of their own making—an attempt that meets with the humans being scattered into divided nations. Immediately thereafter, God addresses the need for sacred space and blessing by the promise of land for a people that he plans to create *ex nihilo*.

The means by which the problem of violence is addressed seems to represent one that humans through history have commonly advocated[88]—utopia is possible if only God would remove the wicked and leave behind the good. Genesis, however, demonstrates that this is to treat only the symptom, not the problem of inner corruption, and so this initial Change narrative introduces further complications: Ham's line represents a new Cain-like line of city-builders and warmongering mighty men, and Babel sees a new Eden-like rebellion and another exilic scattering of humanity.

Noah is the next born after the death of Adam and represents a new head of humanity through whom posterity and potential relief from curse might come. In contrast with related ANE flood stories, God's regret at the creation of humankind was not out of annoyance at their noisiness, but because of their violent injustice. Similarly, the rescue of a remnant did not come about in defiance of the other gods, but by God's own initiative, protection, and plan. Finally, humans are not given a second chance because they remind the gods of their worth, but because God renews his plan to establish relationship with humans *in spite of* their unworthiness; the cleansing of the earth in judgement on the wicked does not yield a change in the underlying problem, that of the human heart being fallen (Gen 8:21). Therefore, the covenant with creation establishes God's commitment

[88] Bailey (2013, pp. 90-94), arguing that Genesis 6–9 intentionally addresses the *Watchers* myth of 1 Enoch, points out that the Enochic version sees avenging angels destroying the wicked, which in turn procures a time of righteousness for the earth. In the Genesis account, the destruction of the wicked pointedly has no effect. Another (covenantal) approach must be taken.

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not to curse the ground in this way again, and so he ensures a stable environment for relationship between God and humanity into the future.

Similarly to Cain's story in the previous section, Noah's story again presents violence as the thing that provokes God's judgement, and there is again an "exile" from the land. In this case, however, the exile makes possible the rescue of a remnant. If the implied reader of Genesis lies sometime beyond Israel's exile, then Noah's story, and particularly God's covenant with him, implies a promise of restoration. Judgement on the wicked both explains their punishment and promises that justice will be done to their violent punishers. Noah's story does not follow ANE parallels, which introduce barrenness at the end of the flood; rather, God reasserts his blessing on his people to be fruitful and multiply. This stands as a reassurance to those who have been exiled that a blessed end to their troubles is ahead.

The interconnection of Noah's flood, barrenness, and exile are all raised in Isaiah 54:1–17. This text promises that the barren woman will give birth (54:1) and that her seed will possess the nations and repopulate desolate cities (54:2–3), and just as the covenant with Noah ensured that the world would never again be deluged, so God promises never to withdraw his love and his covenant of peace from his people (54:9–10).

So, Genesis 1–11 ends with unanswered questions. At each stage of sin and judgement, God had intervened to preserve a means of survival and preservation, but after Babel there is no word of grace to promise restoration (Von Rad, 1972, pp. 152-54). This thrusts us forward into the ancestral narratives in which the promises to Abraham provide a new line of hope.

3.6 THE *TOLEDOT* OF TERAH

Genesis 11 sets up a predicament that sees humankind evicted from sacred space and rest with God, and thrust into a world of curse. In Genesis 12, the focus of the narrative turns to another family head through whom hope for change might arise: that of Terah's son Abraham.

Although the vertical *toledot* of Shem has several generations elapse between Babel and the migration of Terah, the way that Abraham is introduced would seem to make him an exemplar of the cursed state of humanity that Genesis 1–11 has described. Like the scattered people of Babel, he is a migrant who comes from Ur (a city of Shinar); he is landless. His wife is barren—she exemplifies the judgement that Genesis 3 passed upon the pregnancies of women. In his natural condition,

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Abraham is a man without "name" and without hope. It is through this family that God intends to bring change to the problem of curse.

3.6.1 Structure

The structure of the Abraham cycle seems to be a carefully chosen rhetorical device. This section contains a number of repetitions, including the repetition of whole scenes—notably the so-called wife-sister episodes in which Abraham attempts to pass off his wife as his sister, and the two covenant-making episodes in which God fixes his promises regarding progeny into a covenant.

It has been common to attribute these repeated scenes to different sources underlying the final form. For example, Speiser (1964, pp. xxxi-xxxii) proposes that one source might have contained the wife-sister stories that we find in Genesis 12 and Genesis 26—one each for both Abraham and Isaac—and a second source might have contained a single story (now in Genesis 20) that was a composite of both (featuring the protagonist from Genesis 12 and the setting of Genesis 26). Others argue that the three episodes are retellings of the one story, with Genesis 12 being the earliest of the three and Genesis 20 serving as a reflection on Genesis 12 (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 127; Westermann, 1995, pp. 161 , 318-19).

Alexander (1992, pp. 148-53) argues that the latter solution is unlikely, since a separate literary variant is a poor means of addressing the questions raised by Genesis 12, and it was surely within the author's powers simply to add commentary to the original story, or to leave problematic elements out altogether. Secondly, Genesis 20 might address some of the theological and ethical problems with the first story, but it also introduces a problem of at least equal severity—incest. Alexander prefers the view that the three similar accounts developed over a long period of oral transmission, collecting enough changes over time that the one story was mistaken for three entirely different episodes. At the time of their incorporation into the book of Genesis, "the three accounts may have been modified in the light of each other".

An alternative to the source theory has been provided by Alter's (1981, pp. 55-78) classic work on biblical narrative. He has popularised the idea that the repetition of major story patterns—what he called "type-scenes"—is a purposeful device employed for the purposes of comparison and contrast. Formulaic patterns such as type-scenes use repetitions and similarities to establish a connection between stories, but the artful use of *divergences* from the pattern serve to highlight points of emphasis—the unique contribution of the episode under consideration. If the wife-sister stories are type-scenes, their repetitions are not accidental duplications of a single historical event; rather, they

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should be seen as a storytelling device that paints a familiar backdrop against which to chart a character's growth or lack thereof.

The type-scene explanation accords best with the structural data too, because it seems that these "duplications" have again been deployed within a concentric pivot structure—an arrangement that involves conscious repetition of episodes, and one that we have already argued is the primary structural device employed in each of the previous two *toledot* units.

That there is such a structure in this unit is largely agreed upon by narrative scholars, though there is some variation in how they demarcate the text units. A structural analysis that has wide support has been proposed by Rendsburg (1986, pp. 28-29). His analysis is as follows:

Figure 10: Rendsburg's structural analysis of the *toledot* of Terah

A. Genealogy of Terah (11:27–32)
- **B.** Start of Abraham's spiritual odyssey (12:1–9)
  - **C.** Sarai in foreign palace; ordeal ends in success; Abraham and Lot part (12:10–13:18)
    - **D.** Abraham comes to the rescue of Sodom and Lot (14:1–24)
      - **E.** Covenant with Abraham; annunciation of Ishmael (15:1–16:16)
      - **E'.** Covenant with Abraham; annunciation of Isaac (17:1–18:15)
    - **D'.** Abraham comes to the rescue of Sodom and Lot (18:16–19:38)
  - **C'.** Sarah in foreign palace; ordeal ends in success; Abraham and Ishmael part (20:1–21:34)
- **B'.** Climax of Abraham's spiritual odyssey (22:1–19)

A'. Genealogy of Nahor (22:20–24)

Carr (2011, p. 191) is an exemplar of the other major school of thought concerning the concentric arrangement of this text, namely the identification of the Hagar–Ishmael story in Genesis 16 as a standalone pivot point at its centre, rather than grouping it with the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15.[89]

Critics of these concentric structures tend to focus on weaknesses in the analysis rather than arguing against them entirely. Ronning (1991, p. 26) criticises Rendsburg's analysis on the grounds that the interest in finding parallels tends to lead to the neglect of differences, and that thematic elements that do not appear in reverse order in the second wing of the structure are merely grouped into one

[89] Carr's analysis is problematic for similar reasons to that of Rendsburg. He tends to group together episodes that have a dubious relationship (for example, he includes Genesis 14, the rescue of Lot from the Mesopotamian kings, under the title "Covenant of pieces with Abraham (14–15)"), and he does not attempt to account for every text within his analysis (for example, he leaves out Genesis 21 entirely).

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heading, irrespective of whether they genuinely belong together (such as the joining of wife-sister stories with the departure of a candidate who might have been heir—stage C above). Williamson (2000, pp. 18-20) complains that most such analyses struggle to incorporate all the material (especially 22:20–25:28), and those of Carr's type that identify Genesis 16 as a "watershed" point seem to him to elevate Hagar's and Ishmael's importance too much.

Pace Ronning and Williamson, I think that the concentricity in the Abrahamic cycle is consistent and detailed and that there are good reasons for the apparent anomalies. Furthermore, I think it is preferable to agree, with Carr's school of thought, that the Hagar episode (Gen 16) is central to this *toledot* section. Further evidence for these claims and for the structural divisions that I advocate below will be given in the "Narrative emphases" section to follow.

I offer the following structural outline. It is largely in agreement with Rendsburg, except in connection with the extent of the stages that he marks E, E', and D':

Figure 11: Suggested structural analysis of the *toledot* of Terah

Prologue: Abraham's family and land (11:27–32)
- **A.** Blessings and faithfulness 1 (12:1–9)
  - **B.** Wife-sister cluster 1 (12:10–13:18)
    - **C.** Sodom and Gomorrah cluster A (14:1–24)
      - **D.** Covenant 1 (15:1–21)
        - **E.** Hagar & Sarah (16:1–16)
      - **D'.** Covenant 2 (17:1–27)
    - **C'.** Sodom and Gomorrah cluster B (18:1–19:38)
  - **B'.** Wife-sister cluster 2 (20:1–21:34)
- **A'.** Faithfulness and blessings 2 (22:1–19)

Epilogue: Abraham's family and land (22:20–25:11)

These structural divisions reflect the cleanest division of materials into sections that reflect episodic divisions and interconnections that the author seems to have intended. It is possible to expand on these divisions to reflect even greater detail in the concentricity, and I have provided such a diagram in Appendix C. The weightiest objection to the concentric arrangement of the Abrahamic cycle is that some sections seem to bundle unrelated stories together (e.g., in the epilogue) or to group several sections that are *not* concentrically arranged in order to preserve the structure (both wife-sister stories). Understanding the wife-sister stories as type-scenes provides a clear solution to this problem—there is a conventional order to these stories: it begins with the attempt to secure a good outcome by means of the wife-sister deceit (12:10–20; 20:1–18), and it ends with a conflict between herdsmen in which the patriarch better expresses the mandate to be a blessing to the nations and

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makes a treaty (13:1–18; 21:22–34). This is confirmed by the third wife-sister story (Gen 26) *also* featuring the quarrelling of herdsmen and a treaty. This provides sufficient rationale that these elements should not be inverted.[90]

Once this is accepted, there is very little else that does not have a convincing parallel in the other half of the unit. We must allow that the long epilogue to the saga of Sodom and Lot (Gen 19) has no parallel in the first half, and we must allow that the short prologue to the Abraham cycle (11:27–32) and its lengthy and variegated epilogue (22:20–25:11) can be considered parallel because they both concern Abraham's family and homeland (Haran at the start and a small patch of Canaan at the end). Ultimately, these represent minor challenges to what is otherwise a remarkably tight and detailed concentric arrangement.

The *strategy* behind this arrangement is less clear. There is a major difference of opinion concerning whether or not Genesis 16 is a pivot point or an addendum to Genesis 15; it is not a simple matter to decide whether there is an emphatic central element, what that element might be, and why it has been emphasised. We will discuss this further below. It is comparatively safe to say that the first half of the story is driven along by the problem of Sarah's barrenness and the lack of an heir; it focuses on Abraham's successes and failures in his pursuit of the blessings that God promised. The birth of Ishmael at the transition point introduces a source of conflict that distinguishes the first half from the second; where the first concerned the lack of an heir, the second concerns the presence of an heir favoured by Abraham but not by God, and a second heir favoured by God and Sarah but perhaps not by Abraham. The question of whether Abraham will be faithful to God's design or to his own is brought to the fore.

3.6.2 Narrative emphases

Abraham's story begins and ends with divine promises of blessing, and at its centre stand two chapters that are host to the only other occurrences of covenant language in the book. The question of divine–human relationship is a dominant part of this story.

[90] In the "narrative emphases" section we will discuss the insertion of Hagar's expulsion into the second story. There is the possibility of a fourth confirmation of this sequence that will be discussed later.

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3.6.2.1 Abraham and Adam

As with the previous *toledot* story, in which Noah was presented as a reboot of his predecessor Adam, Abraham is also represented in the pattern of Adam and Noah. This is achieved in a few ways:

- Adam and Noah were both heads of all humanity, and while Abraham does not father all of humankind, he is the father of a nation that God promises to create *ex nihilo* (Carr, 1996, pp. 318-19)—the people through whom God promises to bring blessing to all humanity.
- There are ten generations listed between Adam and Noah, and ten again between Noah's son and Abraham, which is likely intended to connect them as key figures of blessing and curse (Hamilton, 2007, p. 255).
- Abraham's role as an agent of blessing addresses the curses scattered through the first eleven chapters. "The promises first made to Abraham in 12:1–3 begin to repair that hopeless situation. The fivefold blessing here counteracts the five curses that have been pronounced earlier" (Wenham, 1987, p. li).
- The blessing on Adam to be fruitful and multiply corresponds to God's promise to Abraham of descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. Adam was given Eden, and Abraham was given Canaan.[91] God walked with the human couple in Eden, and here he commands Abraham to walk before God (Wenham, 2000, p. 37).
- Abraham "calls on the name of YHWH" (Gen 12:8; 13:4) and builds altars (Gen 12:7, 8; 13:18; 22:9), behaviour that connects him to Seth (Gen 4:26) and Noah (Gen 8:20).[92]

Presenting Abraham as a new Adam/Seth or a new Noah marks him as a representative head of the next phase of covenantal humanity. It also establishes a pattern of interconnection of each key generation that will continue through subsequent *toledot* sections, communicating the continuity of the human predicament and God's plan to resolve it.[93]

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[91] The land that Lot chooses in Genesis 13:10 is described as being "like the garden of YHWH", which is an early connection of the Promised Land to Edenic sacred space.

[92] Altar-building connects Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—these are the only characters who do so in Genesis. The absence of any continuity of this behaviour into the Joseph story probably reiterates the separation of his story from that of the three main patriarchs.

[93] Each of these representative heads of covenantal humanity possesses a name that connects him to a core feature of his story. Adam's name sounds like the Hebrew for "ground", connecting him to his creation from dust and the return to dust that the intrusion of death brings. Noah's name is reminiscent of "rest",

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3.6.2.2 Blessing and faithfulness (Gen 12:1–9)

Terah's mission to move to Canaan is cut short by his decision rather to settle in what seems to have been a community of fellow Arameans in Haran. Whether this is meant to hint at the possibility that Terah might himself have become a new Noah, we cannot know for sure. Certainly, his story ends abruptly, and it is Abraham who is greeted at the start of Genesis 12 with a call to wager his future on the promises that God gives him—promises that hinge on departure from the network of relationships that seem to have persuaded Terah to settle.

The Hebrew construction with which God begins, לְךָ־לְךָ,[94] offers some possibilities for interpretation. While it could be taken as an "emphatic imperatival subject" (Athas & Young, 2013, p. 223), "*You* go", or "Go for yourself", I agree with Wenham (1987, p. 266) that it seems to intend some contrast with the subsequent instructions to leave his extended family behind, and thus means something like "Go *by yourself*".

Sarna (1989, p. 89) notes that these instructions move through a threefold network of relationships from which Abraham must extract himself: his land (the broadest sphere of self-identification), his relatives, and his father's house (the narrowest). Walton (2001, p. 399) identifies "father's household" with inheritance, particularly the passing down of household gods and the ancestral blessings that the family had accrued. This supplies a plausible rationale for God's request—it demands that Abraham dissociate himself from other potential sources of blessing and from other divinities.[95] In summary, God's blessings are predicated upon Abraham departing from the social support structures that people in the ancient world would typically have relied upon.

Many scholars, such as Mathews (2005, p. 106), argue that the promises given to Abraham are unconditional—that is, they are not dependent upon the fulfilment of any obligations besides the demand for loyalty. However, the level of trust in God that this request makes on Abraham should not be underestimated. He is being asked to set aside the security, blessing, and inheritance of his family in exchange for the security, blessing, and inheritance that God describes—all of which must

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particularly rest from the hard labour that the curse brought. Abraham's name is connected to fatherhood, particularly of the kings and nations that God will create from him via a promised son. Isaac's name connects him to the motif of laughter in his story, and Jacob's is a commentary on his role as usurper.

[94] The imperative "go" followed by the preposition "to, for" and the 2 masc. sg. pronominal suffix.

[95] It also makes a connection with the episode in which Jacob's wives complain about their lack of inheritance and Rachel then steals Laban's household gods.

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have seemed strongly counterfactual given Sarah's barrenness (Walton, 2001, p. 392).[96] These are certainly promises given and received by grace—God is faithful to them even when Abraham is not—but the obligations of obedience and faith seem to be essential to their activation.[97]

The content of the blessings themselves—at least initially—centres on nationhood. The omission of an overt promise of the land in 12:1–3 is superficially surprising. Of the forty-seven references to the promises in Genesis, only seven do not mention the land, and twenty-nine refer exclusively to it (Wright, 2004, p. 78). However, the promise to make Abraham into a great nation (גּוֹי) is a political concept that implies the possession of both a people and a place (Speiser, 1964, p. 86). Upon arrival in Canaan (Gen 12:7), God makes the promise of land explicit. The focus on nationhood is also contextually appropriate, given that these promises immediately follow the Table of Nations (Gen 10) and the scattering of the people of Babel into divided nations (Gen 11), and should be seen as a response to the problems with which the Noah story ends.

Interpreting the promises of blessing is complicated because they are given in a chain of volitional verbs, and scholars disagree on how these should be understood. Baden (2010, pp. 228-33) points out that verbs describing God's commitments are all cohortative (expressing intention), whereas 12:2 ends with an imperative addressed to Abraham ("be a blessing"). It can be seen as retaining the sense of command, indicating a responsibility that Abraham must fulfil, but because the imperative follows a list of intentions, some scholars think that it intends to communicate the *purpose* of those intentions ("*so that* you will be a blessing").

The final verb in 12:3 is the *Niphal* of "to bless" (וְנִבְרְכוּ), which also allows some possibilities for translation. Chiefly, it could be passive, "they will be blessed", or reflexive, "they will bless themselves" (Skinner, 1930, pp. 244-45; Wenham, 1987, p. 266). Walton (2001, pp. 393-94) argues that the choice of stem is not arbitrary but is context-dependent; when such blessing formulae occur in the *Hithpael* stem, he argues that they should be rendered as reflexive, whereas the *Niphal* uses are passive. Sarna (1989, p. 89) also suggests that the passive sense is likely because the narrowing of scope of Abraham's family associations is mirrored in the expansion of scope in those whom God will bless because of their association with him—it moves from a blessing on Abraham, to those with whom he interacts, and finally to blessing on all nations. Wenham (1987, p. 276) points out that

[96] Von Rad (1972, p. 161) says that "one must always remember that to leave home and to break ancestral bonds was to expect of ancient men almost the impossible."

[97] It would be hard to see how the promises could have come about if, like Terah, he had not left his home city.

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Zechariah 8:13 ("As you have been a byword for cursing among the nations… so I will save you and you will be a blessing") simultaneously calls Israel to be a blessing (supporting the passive) while suggesting that they had previously been a name used in curses (supporting the reflexive). Perhaps both are meant in Genesis 12 too, and the middle voice should be used, as Wenham (1987, pp. 255-56) does: "[they] will find blessing in you".

In view of these arguments, I suggest that we should understand the imperative in 12:2 in its ordinary volitive sense, and the *Niphal* in 12:3 as a middle/passive. I suggest that these blessings should be seen as two panels of four clauses, each headed by an imperative:

Go…
And I will make of you a great nation
and I will bless you
and make your name great

And be a blessing
And I will bless those who bless you
and him who dishonours[98] you I will curse
and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

The first panel speaks of personal benefit to Abraham if he goes; the second speaks of the spread of blessing to those in association with him if he lives a life of blessing. It seems that the implied curse upon the nations in the Babel story immediately before and the regular focus on Abraham's relationship with the nations—particularly his immediate failure to be a blessing to Pharaoh and his more commendable intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah—imply that an obligation to the nations is in view. Thus, the imperatives seem to represent obligations, and the blessings themselves seem to be the strategy for the undoing of curse.

It goes without saying that blessing is a crucial motif in Genesis, and it features from start (the blessing of the creatures in Genesis 1) to finish (the blessing of Jacob's sons in Genesis 49). However, there are only a few occasions in which God verbally blesses characters in the story (a full list of these texts has been provided in Appendix D). The recipients of these blessings are as follows:

[98] I have followed the ESV in translating קלל with "dishonour"; Mitchell (1987, p. 93) points out that "קלל… has the broadest range of meaning of all the curse words, and its meaning completely overlaps the meanings of the other words", and while "dishonour" does not have this same semantic range, it does provide a lower limit; i.e., God will bring retribution even upon those who dishonour Abraham.

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- all creatures (1:22), and specifically humans (1:28);
- Noah and sons, and all flesh (9:1–7);
- Abraham (12:2–3; 22:17–18);
- (via Abraham) Sarah (17:16) and Ishmael (17:20);
- Isaac (26:3–5; 24); and
- Jacob (28:13–15; 35:9–12).

This demonstrates that the blessings correspond to the three covenant movements (creation, Noah, and Abraham) and to the three patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Each patriarch receives direct blessing somewhere near the beginning of his story and again near the end. These acts of blessing connect the patriarchs to the blessings given to Abraham—in Genesis 28:4, Isaac specifically refers to "the blessing of Abraham" as something that is passed down as if it were an inheritance—and since no more covenants are made, they serve to indicate continuity of the covenant made with Abraham through their line.

God promises Abraham that he will bless Sarah, and Ishmael's blessing is even more diluted—he is blessed because Abraham requests it. Three other characters are described as blessed by God; in each case again it is because of their association with a patriarch, namely, Abraham's servant (24:31); Laban on account of Jacob (30:27, 30); and Potiphar's house on account of Joseph (39:5).

In summary, Genesis 12–50 is the outworking of a coherent plot, and the question of the inheritance of Abraham's blessing, what that means, and on what basis that blessing is received is clearly a very prominent thematic concern.

* * * * *

Following God's promises in Genesis 12, the narrator gives Abraham's response—and it is immediately promising. Verse 4 mirrors the initial command to "go" (לֶךְ־לְךָ) with "and he went" (וַיֵּלֶךְ). Furthermore, it adds the verification "just as he had commanded" (כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר), suggesting Abraham's compliance with 12:1. However, the depth of his compliance is called somewhat into question by the notice that Abraham brought Lot with him. Does Abraham consider him to be a potential heir—a means by which he could help God's promises to come to fruition? Cotter (2003, pp. 90-91) considers this to be evidence of disobedience on Abraham's part, whereas Arnold (2009, p. 133) sees Lot's presence as virtuous because Abraham was "fulfilling his patriarchal duty to his deceased brother by providing for the orphaned nephew". Lot's presence is probably an intentional ambiguity, leaving the degree of Abraham's compliance open to debate. As we will discuss below, a

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significant part of the conflict in Abraham's story has to do with his own misdirected efforts to fulfil God's plan—the first clear case being his attempt in this chapter to pass Sarah off as his sister—and so Lot might represent some bet-hedging on Abraham's part.

Upon Abraham arriving in the land, the narrator notes that the Canaanites dwelt in the land at that time. References to sacred sites, such as Shechem and the terebinth,[99] indicate that the land is not only occupied, but also likely devoted to deities other than YHWH. In spite of these challenges, Abraham erects an altar to YHWH in this place, and his itinerary depicts him doing likewise in another site of cultic importance—Bethel. Abraham's response to God's call is courageous. In spite of his wife's barrenness, he has trusted in the promise of descendants. In spite of the occupation of the land, Abraham has planted YHWH's name there. Gossai (2008, p. 5) argues that even the obstacle of an inhabited land can be seen as a kind of barrenness—full of difficulty and barren of opportunity, perhaps.[100] One way or another, in 12:10 the land that Abraham surely expected to be a place of blessing quite literally undergoes a period of barrenness: there is a famine, and Abraham decides to leave the land for Egypt.

3.6.2.3 Wife-sister cluster A: Abraham, Sarah, and Pharaoh (Gen 12:10–13:18)

The announcement of a famine in verse 10 is a surprise, particularly since Abraham had seemingly complied with his end of the deal and behaved courageously in response to God's command; one would expect that God would be bound to honour his promise to bless. On the contrary, Abraham is immediately confronted with a challenge to his trust in God. This triggers the first in a series of so-called wife-sister stories in the ancestral narratives.

Many scholars have noted a resemblance to the folk-tale pattern that they call "The ancestral mother in danger" (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 126; Westermann, 1995, pp. 159-61). The threat to Sarah is an important feature of the story—particularly to readers who are familiar with her role later in the story—and it may have a relationship to this story type. However, its primary significance seems

[99] Sarna (1989, p. 91) suggests that this same terebinth might be in view in Genesis 35:4; Joshua 24:26; and Judges 9:6, 37. If nothing else, it is clearly likely that reference to a famous terebinth in Genesis 12 intends a site of cultic significance to the Canaanites.

[100] Shectman (2009a, p. 62) argues that barrenness is raised at the very start of the ancestral stories—before even the promises—because it is an interpretive key underlying the subsequent narratives of promise and sojourn. Various kinds of barrenness are likely intended by these stories.

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to lie more in evaluating Abraham's response to the test, which ultimately stands in contrast to his earlier acts of faithfulness.

That the famine represents a testing of faith is strongly suggested by the arrangement of the scenes in chapter 12. There is a *prima facie* case for the unity of this chapter in the observation that the commands in the mouths of God (12:1) and Pharaoh (12:19) for Abraham to go to Canaan indicates at least an *inclusio*. The internal structure of this chapter seems to consist of a series of five sections, each (with the exception of the central one) coming in the form of a speech and an active response (Pickering, 2014, pp. 3-4).[101] Their arrangement seems to be as follows:

A. 'Go!' (12:1–6)
  B. Entering Canaan (12:7–9)
    C. Famine (12:10)
  B'. Entering Egypt (12:11–17)
A'. 'Go!' (12:18–20)

The announcement of famine in 12:10 does not obviously conform to the speech–response pattern, but the omission of any speech from God seems to me to be the point. God has been guiding Abraham thus far, and the barrenness of the land does demand some sort of explanation, or God should at least offer a plan for Abraham's survival. Given that each section in this chapter features a speech by one of the characters, the fact that neither Abraham nor anyone else speaks about the famine serves only to highlight where God's speech ought to have been (Pickering, 2014, p. 9).[102]

The barrenness of the Promised Land and the divine silence that accompanies it function as a test, and they underline that faith and trust are not only essential qualities in this new relationship of promise, but that these must also pass examination (Gossai, 2008, p. 4). There is *faith of a certain kind* at the heart of the relationship that God is establishing in this new covenantal phase.

[101] The fact that there is speech but not *dialogue* is an important answer to the common observation that characters in this chapter do not argue or protest or attempt to explain themselves (Von Rad, 1972, pp. 168-69). De Groot (2002, p. 10) goes as far as to say that Sarah is being treated as property and has no say in these arrangements. If my observation about this structuring device is correct, it means that we can make no concrete inference from Abraham's lack of protest about the famine, or his silence in the face of Pharaoh's accusations, or Sarah's lack of verbal response to Abraham's plan—we simply are not permitted any insight into the respondents' states of mind besides what their activities indicate.

[102] In Isaac's wife-sister story in Genesis 26, the narrator calls to mind this famine in Genesis 12 and then tells of God's intervention to provide guidance, specifically that Isaac should *not* go down to Egypt. Thus the narrator acknowledges that this is the kind of event that warrants an explanation (Pickering, 2014, p. 9).

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As a solution to the problem of the famine, Abraham leaves the land that he has just been promised and descends into Egypt. This prompts anxiety on his part, particularly because his wife is so attractive that he feels he will be in danger, and so he proposes the wife-sister plan to Sarah.

Scholars have wrestled with several elements of the wife-sister plan, not least that Genesis 20 reveals that Sarah was in fact a half-sister. Williams (1980, pp. 111-12) describes the reception to a theory originally proposed by Speiser (1964) that there is Hurrian cultural background to this story, in which special dignity was given to a marriage with one's sister—it was a means of elevating her status. This has been shown, however, to be based on a misreading of the source texts.[103]

Wenham (1987, p. 288) offers as an alternative that the ruse involves Abraham removing himself from the role of husband altogether so that he would not stand as an obstacle to marriage with Sarah, but rather would be in the position of brother with whom potential suitors would need to bargain for her hand—much as Laban was for Rebekah. Wenham recognises that stern attitudes against adultery in such cultures make it unlikely that Abraham meant for Sarah actually to marry someone else; he presumably meant to delay long enough to take advantage where possible and to escape where necessary.[104] The fact that the potential suitor was the pharaoh would have radically reduced Abraham's bargaining power.

Schneider (2004, p. 32) finds this plan strange because there is no evidence that a husband would have been particularly in danger of being killed, even by a king who wanted his wife. Hamilton (1990, p. 380) finds it strange that Abraham felt vulnerable in Egypt but not in Canaan, since Sarah's beauty would have been no less evident to the Canaanites. He supposes that there was some tendency that was particular to the Egyptians that made their journey there risky. These problems are less acute if we recognise that Abraham had presumably been convinced of God's protection inherent to the promises until the famine arose as a test of those convictions. He might have been sure of God's ability to keep him safe within the Promised Land before, but now, outside of the land and robbed of

[103] Williams's solution is that, even though readers of Genesis would recognise this marriage as incestuous, Genesis is mimicking early stories of the marriages of gods and royals in which marriages between siblings were an indication of their status beyond that of ordinary mortals. Abraham and Sarah are thus a "royal" or "godly" couple. I find it unlikely, however, that a redactor would adopt a strategy in which he hopes to communicate godlikeness by describing a practice his readers would regard as taboo. It seems rather that the redactor has no interest in preserving the dignity and uprightness of his protagonists.

[104] Frymer-Kensky (2001, p. 150) adds that this plan might have been attractive also to Sarah, because if Abraham was correct, she as a widow would have had no protection at all; whatever made it advantageous to have a Abraham appear to be her brother would also have lent her a greater chance of protection.

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his certainty that YHWH's blessing was trustworthy, he feels the lack of social support that the promises were meant to secure.

Walton (2001, p. 396) rejects both the Hurrian "elevation of status" argument and the idea that Abraham intends to put himself in the position to bargain (since in the story he seems to capitulate *without* attempting any bargaining). He argues that there is insufficient evidence to be able to form an opinion on this issue. While he might be right, if I am correct that this story consciously presents each scene as a one-sided speech followed by an active response, this accounts for the absence of any bargaining or protesting on Abraham's part. Furthermore, we do have apparent parallels in both encounters in Genesis with Laban—there is an attempt to delay the marriage of Rebekah, and he successfully delays the marriage of Rachel and uses it to his maximum advantage. So, it seems reasonably safe to infer that Abraham has a similar strategy in mind.

Abraham presents his plan as a means to ensure that he might live and that it might go well (יִיטַב) with him. While it presumably was not Abraham's intention to lose Sarah, the narrator, perhaps with some irony, confirms that Abraham's plan was a success: Pharaoh did indeed cause it to go well (הֵיטִיב) with him for Sarah's sake. Schneider (2004, p. 33) suggests that the loss of Sarah might in fact be a sad but *convenient* outcome for Abraham, since it would make it possible for him to have children with another wife.

Whatever plans Abraham might have been hatching after the loss of Sarah, God intervenes to restore her to her husband, and he does so by bringing a curse upon the pharaoh. In this way, God demonstrates his intention to be faithful to the promises that he made at the start of the chapter—in spite of Pharaoh's innocence in this matter, God curses him for dishonouring Abraham's family (Mathews, 2005, p. 122). Brueggemann (1982, p. 129) argues that the cursing of an innocent party is not of interest to the narrator; "it is enough that they are hidden in the inscrutable workings of God". I think, however, that there are several clues in the presentation of this episode that allow us to gauge the narrator's judgements concerning the behaviour of the characters, and that there is indeed compassion for the representative of the nations who ought to be blessed on account of Abraham rather than cursed.[105]

[105] The next wife-sister story in Genesis 20 takes a particular interest in Abimelech's innocence, and so it is clearly a matter about which the narrator is concerned more generally, even if it is not directly raised here.

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The main means by which the relative guilt of the characters is established is an ironic comparison of this descent and escape from Egypt with that of the exodus. Besides the links made by means of parallel characters and setting, in cursing Pharaoh, God is said to plague (וַיְנַגַּע) Pharaoh with plagues (נְגָעִים).[106] The noun form, though common in Scripture, is used only once each in Genesis and Exodus: here and in Exodus 11:1. The Exodus story in question is the final fearsome plague by which God frees his people: the killing of the firstborn. In both stories, there is a captivity involving a pharaoh, and God intervenes to provide rescue by means of a plague that inflicts barrenness of a sort on the royal family. In Exodus, Pharaoh is robbed of his firstborn; in Genesis—if the plague is similar to that of Genesis 20—it involves the infertility of the whole household. In both cases, the stricken pharaoh commands God's people to leave, and they exit with wealth that they acquired in Egypt.

The differences between the stories, however, are telling. While the pharaoh in Exodus is culpable for forgetting YHWH and Joseph, for mistreating God's people, and for arrogantly setting himself up in competition to YHWH for their service, no such guilt accrues to the pharaoh in Genesis. In fact, he treats Abraham well, and it is *Abraham* who is guilty of the deceit that caused the "enslavement" and guilty of not believing the promises of God. Whereas Abraham should have been behaving in a way that brought *blessing* on the nations, the narrator appears to be underlining that his pursuit of his own blessing by means of this deceitful plan brought about the opposite for the Egyptians.

The expulsion of Abraham from Egypt has echoes of patterns and attitudes encountered so far in Genesis. Although it is a move in the right direction—that is, back to the Promised Land—the act of expulsion is nevertheless a connection point with the primary mode of judgement employed repeatedly in the book so far: ejections from a place have occurred in the Fall, in Cain's punishment, in the flood story, and in Babel. Exile—the archetypical judgement in the Hebrew Bible—is presented as a reversal of the exodus. So, while this is in one sense the opposite of an exile—by thrusting Abraham back into Canaan, God is *averting* Abraham's self-imposed exile—nevertheless, the ironic inverting of exodus patterns here would invoke thoughts of exile for later readers too.

Gunn and Fewell (1993, p. 110) identify in the wife-sister stories another link to the earlier *toledot* cycles: Abraham's commitment to self-preservation at the expense of his wife may invoke a pattern

[106] Sarna (1989, p. 97) notes a potential play on words in the use of "afflict, plague", because it can also mean "come into physical contact with, to harass sexually", as it does in the parallel episode in Genesis 20:6. Weinfeld (1991, p. 348) identifies more phraseology in the LXX version of Genesis 12:12–20 that also seems calculated to make an intertextual connection to the Exodus plagues.

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begun in Genesis 3. Both Adam and Noah experience positive beginnings as righteous heads of humanity but undergo a fall in which wickedness asserts itself. Gunn and Fewell suggest that Abraham's deceitful behaviour in Egypt represents just such a disappointment in the hopes raised by 12:1–9. In general, the wife-sister stories seem to represent the patriarchs' failure to exhibit true righteousness and to *be* the blessing that would lead to blessing for the nations (Patterson, 2018, p. 211).[107]

Finally, there is a likely connection to Babel in the strategy that Abraham adopts. The error at Babel seems to have been the humans' attempt to secure blessing for themselves—the ziggurat and associated temple precinct that are likely in view in that story were an invitation for the gods to descend and to bring greatness to the name of man. This was in contrast to Eden, in which God built the sacred space and invited human participation in his greatness. Here again, Abraham distrusts the means of blessing established by God and makes his own—ultimately destructive—plans by which he hopes to secure what God had already promised.

As a companion to each of the wife-sister stories, there is an episode concerning the quarrelling of herdsmen about which some sort of land-sharing treaty must be made. In Genesis 13, it is the households of Lot and Abraham who engage in such quarrels. Several scholars have acknowledged that this episode contrasts with 12:10–20 and that the function it performs is primarily to show growth in Abraham, at least in terms of his trust in God: by allowing Lot to have first choice of the best of the land, Abraham endangers his own inheritance but acts as a blessing to Lot and trusts God to preserve what he promised (Brueggemann, 1982, pp. 130-32; Von Rad, 1972, pp. 170-74). Furthermore, by allowing Lot to depart in peace, Abraham also lets go of a potential heir. Shectman (2011, p. 212) claims that this is an example of a formal agreement (similar to the treaties in the other wife-sister stories) by which Abraham relinquishes his claim as *paterfamilias* and Lot is given headship of his own family line. If it was the case that Abraham brought Lot in order to hedge his bets, he seems now to trust God to control how he will bring about his promises. This is far from the

[107] Our discussion so far allows us to explain three of the major "confusing features for which we have no satisfying answers" that Arnold (2009, p. 137) identifies in his commentary. The first is that Sarah participates in Abraham's plan without objection—this is answered by the observation that the structure of this passage employs a device that does not allow for dialogue. Her agreement or otherwise is necessarily omitted. Arnold objects, secondly, that "righteous" Abraham uses his wife to save himself and, thirdly, that the narrator does not condemn Abraham's deceitful acquisition of wealth. The connections to the exodus and fall narratives do in fact serve to condemn Abraham, veiled though the narrator's judgements may be.

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last word on this matter, but it is an early sign of the struggle within Abraham being resolved in favour of faithfulness to God.[108]

3.6.2.4 Covenant (Gen 15:1–21; 17:1–27)

Genesis 15 and 17[109] are in parallel and seem so closely related that source-critical scholars such as Speiser (1964, p. 126) have supposed that they are in fact representative of a single event that had gathered two sets of traditions over time and came to be regarded as separate events. Williamson (2000, pp. 20-21) notes two other popular solutions to this apparent duplication, namely, (a) Genesis 16 puts the covenant into jeopardy, and so Genesis 17 represents the renewal of the one covenant; and (b) Genesis 15 and 17 represent two distinct stages in God's dealings with Abraham.

We have already pointed out that Genesis 15 and 17 represent the longest covenant-making passages in Genesis and they are the last. From this point on, the passing down of Abraham's blessing to Isaac and Jacob will represent their covenant membership. (Texts such as Exodus 2:24 make it clear that both the promises *and covenant* were with the fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.) Perhaps even more significantly, the Mosaic covenant is also depicted as being in continuity with the relationship established with the patriarchs (Deut 29:9-15; 1 Chron 29:18-19), which means that these two chapters of Genesis are foundational to the Pentateuch as a whole.

While Williamson (2000, pp. 126-33) acknowledges that there is much disagreement over whether Genesis 15 can be considered a unified text, he nevertheless supplies a cohesive structure for it. The discourse is arranged around two disputations: Abraham questions God's promises of progeny and land, and these two discussions follow the same basic arrangement:[110]

[108] Schneider (2004, p. 37) argues that Abraham's generosity towards Lot stands in contrast to what she regards as his selfishness towards his wife. He extends generosity frequently, but never to Sarah.

[109] Since Genesis 17 is the focus of the next chapter of this study, the majority of covenantal discussion will be postponed until then.

[110] Figure adapted from Williamson (2000, p. 114).

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Figure 12: Williamson's structure of Genesis 15

		Promise of Progeny (1–6)		Promise of Land (7–18)	
A	**YHWH's word**	1	Promise (reward)	7	Promise (land)
B	**Abraham's response**	2–3	Reassurance sought	8	Reassurance sought
C	**YHWH's reassurance in word and by sign**	4–5	Amplification (own body / stars)	9–17	Amplification (seed and land / fire pot and torch)
D	**Narrator's comment**	6	Abraham's faith	18–21	God's covenant

If this analysis is correct, the thing that is most striking is the parallel of 15:6 and 15:18–21, because, while commentators make much of the unilateral nature of God's covenant in 15:18–21—since only God passes ceremonially through the pieces (Williamson, 2000, pp. 135-40)[111]—structurally, the narrator mirrors God's self-commitment with that of Abraham in 16:6. In other words, each disputation concludes with one party making a response appropriate to his place in the relationship—Abraham commits himself in faith and trust, and God affirms his promise regarding the land. Genesis 17 emphasises covenantal commitments in a similar way—Abraham must walk before God and be blameless, and God commits to bringing about his promises.

The covenant commitments in Genesis 15 seem to be occasioned by Abraham's insistence in Genesis 14:22–24 that he would not (as he was in 12:10–20) be prospered by human kings; rather, it implies that he trusts his future to God's promises of blessing. Thus, in Genesis 15 God promises to be his shield and reward—a promise that is appropriate considering the war in which Abraham has just experienced God's protection and refused plunder. The promise of reward, however, provokes Abraham's challenge because it rings hollow when Abraham has no hope of descendants to carry on his name.

In response, this chapter gives no concrete assurance concerning the first question; God merely reiterates his commitment to Abraham, and Abraham believes God (15:6). The narrator pauses at this point to underline the importance of this act of faith—Abraham taking God at his word is considered to be righteousness.

[111] Walton (2001, p. 423), for example, points out that certain ANE treaties were enacted by means of a ritual similar to that of Genesis 15, and the implication seems to be that by passing through the pieces, as only God does here, a party would invoke a curse upon himself should he violate the agreement. Walton is unsure how this would apply to God, but these familiar symbols would at least ceremonially ratify the promises and bolster the sense of self-commitment.

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Because this text describes a time prior to the giving of covenant laws, and because there is so little explanation offered, it is hard to know what is meant by "believing" and "righteousness". Walton (2001, pp. 401, 420-21) argues that the covenant solves the problem of "deity falsely construed" at Babel—that is, whereas at Babel the humans invited the deity to bless their system, the covenant intends to define the relationship on God's terms. Walton's study of similar phrases suggests that 15:6 should not be translated as "believe in", as if Abraham had adopted a belief system, but simply means to take God at his word.

Von Rad (1972, p. 185) argues that "righteousness" has to do with fulfilment of relational terms, rather than with an objective standard of moral excellence. Wenham (1987, p. 330) points out that *doing* righteousness generally involves right moral behaviour, and might be thought of as God-like or at least God-pleasing action. In this context, it seems to be Abraham's faith that is God-pleasing. Childs (1993, p. 597) suggests that righteousness here refers to being "in a right relationship with God". It does seem at minimum to mean that, by believing God, Abraham is doing the right thing in terms of the relationship that God is establishing. In other words, Abraham's covenant responsibility at least requires trust and faith. The second disputation in this chapter serves to underline the nature of this demand most strongly.

The vision that Abraham receives concerning the land in 15:7–21 begins with Abraham falling into a "deep sleep"; Davis (2016, p. 627) points out that this word appears only twice in the Pentateuch: here and in Eden when God creates the woman. Its first appearance brought about the possibility of human relationship and progeny—issues that drive the majority of the content of the book. This connection serves to heighten the sense that the vision in Genesis 15 is revealing something crucial: God claims that the promises concerning the inheritance of the land will be significantly delayed. Not only will Abraham not see them, but several lifetimes will elapse while his descendants find themselves enslaved and landless. At the heart of the covenant in Genesis 15 is the idea that God's promises of blessing—and thus for the overturning of the problems of sin, curse, and death—operate on a timescale that transcends the individual recipient. A crucial element of "believing God", therefore, is to accept that God's promises are future-oriented, and that the individual might receive only tokens of their fulfilment in their lifetime. Abraham will be the father of an uncountable multitude, but he himself will see the births of a few sons and daughters in his old age; Abraham is

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promised the full extent of the land of Canaan, but he himself will possess only a field and a cave as a burial ground—Abraham must be content with tokens of fulfilment.[112]

Again, in such an important chapter in Old Testament theology—one that begins the covenantal formalisation of the promises made to Abraham—it should not be missed that there is a strong focus on Abraham's right response of faith, and that this faith is being called upon in the context of meagre evidence in the life of the individual and of the expectation of long delay. Abraham is credited with righteousness because he takes God at his word and commits to an unseen and uncertain future lived under the plan of God. The message to later readers—particularly if there is a post-exilic context to its final composition—is evident: faith in God demands hope and trust in God to bring that future about, irrespective of whether that hope is realised within an individual believer's lifetime.

The designation of Abraham's descendants as *sojourners* in a foreign land (15:13) is especially significant. It is characteristic of the patriarchs in Genesis (none is depicted as having a permanent home) and symbolic of covenantal promises that look to future hope of life with God, even if present circumstances scream their denial. Abraham enters this chapter with an absence of evidence that God's promises are genuine, and he leaves the chapter only with more promises. He will have to wait for at least thirteen more years to see even God's intervention to give Sarah children. What Genesis 15 offers is a new perspective that is well encapsulated in the metaphor of the sojourner: "In the text of these stories of the promise the references to sojourning imply a being on the way to somewhere. The promise is not yet fulfilled but a journey toward it is underway" (Birch, 1991, p. 110).

3.6.2.5 Hagar's flight and Ishmael's birth (Gen 16:1–16)

Much of the reticence about identifying Genesis 16 as the structural centre of the book, rather than as an epilogue to Genesis 15, is that it is a very strange choice for the emphatic episode within this cycle. It does not feature any of the patriarchs in a primary role, it most prominently features a runaway Egyptian servant girl, and the "seed of Abraham" born in this chapter is the wrong one. Nevertheless, its centrality, if that is what it is, might be explained by reasons other than its main characters, and so its role in the thematic development of the book and as a possible turning point in the story must be carefully considered.

[112] Material wealth seems to be one such token (Blomberg, 1999, p. 36), but not something that is generally cited as an expected blessing for the Old Testament Israelite.

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Von Rad (1972, p. 196) and Wenham (1994b, p. 6) see reference to "Sarai, Abram's wife" in 16:1 as evidence that Abraham would have assumed that Sarah was to be the mother of promise. In the sense that a man's wife is usually the one through whom children are added, and that Abraham has not actively sought her replacement, this is surely so. However, Abraham is not explicitly told until Genesis 17 that Sarah is part of the plan—an ambiguity that allows him to imagine other ways in which God might bring about a fertile family line for him, such as through Lot, or by being freed up to marry again through the unfortunate loss of his barren wife to the claim of a king. This verse is surely here to underline the fact of her childlessness and the need (from a human perspective) of a solution to this problem if blessing is to result. Because a decade has elapsed since God promised children for Abraham (16:3), and perhaps because Abraham has given her away before (Frymer-Kensky, 2001, p. 151), Sarah seems to feel her growing irrelevance and exclusion, and so she devises a plan to ensure that she retains her place—even if the surrogacy of her child renders her only a surrogate participant in the covenant line (Neufeld, 2006, p. 137).

Nuzi and Old Assyrian legal documents describe similar scenarios in which a wife who was childless could provide a servant-wife for her husband in order to bear surrogate children for her. While it was seemingly Sarah's intention to secure her standing in the family by having a child through Hagar, once Hagar discovers that she has become pregnant, Sarah's status is challenged: Hagar looks upon Sarah with contempt. In response, Sarah mistreats her, so that eventually she flees. While Sarah's harsh behaviour hardly seems befitting of the mother of promise, the cultural conventions around surrogate motherhood go some way to explaining Sarah's defence of her own honour.[113] These legal texts include various means of protecting the wife's status—for example, the primary wife retained authority over the child in the Nuzi text, and in the Assyrian she was free even to sell the mother once the child was born (Schneider, 2004, pp. 51-53; Walton, 2001, pp. 445-46). Schneider adds that Proverbs 30:21–23 seems to reflect these conventions, condemning a wife's loss of status to a slave girl as a thing that makes the "earth shudder".

It seems as though none of the characters in this episode is intended to come out of it with his or her reputation unscathed.[114] Firstly, Hagar is to blame for failing to recognise Sarah's primacy as

[113] Wenham (1994b, pp. 8-9) points out that Sarah depicts the "wrong" done to her as "violence", the crime that provoked also the flood in Genesis 6. At least in her own mind, she feels justified in expecting an intervention on her behalf.

[114] Masenya (1998, pp. 272-77) points out that the interpretation of this chapter, particularly in a colonial setting, has tended to view those in powerful positions—Abraham and Sarah—in a favourable light, whereas Hagar has been viewed negatively.

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surrogate mother and as primary wife. Furthermore, the narrator's presentation raises deeper questions about the seriousness of her offense. Wenham (1994b, p. 8) points out that the root used for Hagar looking down on Sarah (קלל) is the same root describing behaviour deserving of God's curse in 12:3,[115] although it is likely that there is some distinction intended between the *Qal* form used here and the *Piel* used in Genesis 12:3. While Wenham does not think that this use of the word necessarily constitutes the kind of dishonour that would invite God's curse, the use of this root may flag her behaviour as potentially serious. Since a runaway servant also commits an offence, there is double reason to see wrong in Hagar's actions.

Abraham is not an innocent party either. Walton (2001, p. 447) suggests that Sarah's accusation against Abraham is that he had failed to take proper steps to ensure that her status in the household would be retained. Sarah's loss of status ought to have been Abraham's responsibility, since Hagar had been given to him. Abraham fails to intervene on behalf of his wife and leaves it to Sarah—the scorned party—to deal with Hagar (Schneider, 2004, p. 50). This amplifies the family conflict, rather than resolving it.

Several clearer intertextual connections with Genesis 12 emerge in the wording of Sarah's plan. The simple fact that she aims to solve the problem of barrenness by her own initiative already provides a resemblance to Abraham's pragmatism in solving the barrenness of the land in 12:10–20. Schneider (2004, p. 47) adds that Sarah's presentation of her plan uses the same double entreaty that featured in Abraham's appeal in Genesis 12:11–13:

Table 5: Comparison of Genesis 12 and Genesis 16

Genesis 12:11, 13	Genesis 16:2
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ הִנֵּה-נָא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אִשָּׁה יְפַת-מַרְאֶה אָתְּ	וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם הִנֵּה-נָא עֲצָרַנִי יְהוָה מִלֶּדֶת
And he said to Sarai his wife, "*Behold now*, I know that you are a woman of beautiful appearance."	Then Sarai said to Abraham, "*Behold now*, YHWH has kept me from bearing."
אִמְרִי-נָא אֲחֹתִי אָתְּ	בֹּא-נָא אֶל-שִׁפְחָתִי
"*Say, please*, you are my sister."	"*Go, please*, to my maidservant."

[115] Schneider (2004, pp. 49-50) also raises this point, underlining that to קלל one's parents was punishable by death (Exod 21:17); however, she does not observe Wenham's distinction between the *Qal* form used here and the *Piel* used in Genesis 12:3 and Exodus 21:17.

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In both Genesis 12 and 16, the plans are attempted solutions to prototypical divine judgements on male and female labours. In Genesis 12, Abraham attempts to secure prosperity in spite of barrenness of the land. In Genesis 16, Sarah attempts to gain descendants in spite of the barrenness of her womb. We learn that ten years had elapsed since they had first entered Canaan trusting in God's promise of a great future, and, much like the famine had challenged trust in the promises of blessing, ten years of the ticking of her biological clock must have presented a great challenge to Sarah's trust in the promises of progeny. The proposed solutions in each case take the couple outside of the promises for blessing that God had in mind and leave chaos in their wake.

Intertextual connections are also made to the exodus: the verbs for Sarah's harsh dealing with Hagar and Hagar's subsequent flight are used of Egyptian oppression of slaves (Exod 1:12) and the Israelites' escape from Egypt (Exod 14:5) respectively (Schneider, 2004, p. 50). However, the connections to the exodus here reverse the familiar roles, making the Israelite ancestor the aggressor against the Egyptian slave, with God intervening to assist the Egyptian. The inversion of the exodus pattern is, therefore, again a connection to *Genesis 12*, where this was also a key feature.

Wenham (1994b, pp. 7-8) describes a noteworthy intertextual connection to another chapter in Genesis, namely Genesis 3. In view of God's promise of an heir in Genesis 15, Sarah's attempt to remain relevant to this process is presented in a similar way to the eating of forbidden fruit. The sequence of key nouns in 16:3 follows exactly those in Genesis 3:6—the account in which the woman offers the forbidden fruit to her husband—and the phrase "[he] listened to the voice of [his] wife" appears only in Genesis 16:2 and 3:17.

In summary, Sarah's solution to her barrenness was reasonable enough, as was Abraham's solution to the famine; nevertheless, it is presented as a "fall" narrative. While the comparison might be as simple as both episodes featuring a wife offering something to her husband that appears wise but provokes devastating conflict, there may be a deeper connection of Sarah's well-meaning solution and the Garden of Eden: perhaps both stories are meant to portray the attempt to wrest control and self-direction from God's hands. In other words, this may demonstrate that while faith means taking God at his word (Gen 15:6)—that is, trusting that God is in control—its opposite is to assert one's own control over things that are rightly God's domain.

Thus far in Genesis, all the attempts of characters to claim control of the divine domain have yielded serious conflict:

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- Adam and Eve's claim of moral self-direction is manifest in Cain's murder of Abel and ultimately in the violence that provokes the flood.
- United humanity's attempt to control their environment and God's blessing at Babel leads to scattering and the division of people into nations.
- Abraham's attempt to gain blessing in the face of famine brings curse upon Pharaoh's household and leads to their subsequent banishment from Egypt.

Here again, Sarah attempts to secure progeny in the face of her own barrenness, which leads to Hagar scorning her and Sarah's violent response. If in Genesis 12 Abraham was meant to be a blessing to the nations but only brought curse to innocent Egypt, here in Genesis 16 another Egyptian experiences curse because of this family.

Wenham (1994b, p. 10) points out that the question "Where have you come from?" (16:8) is another of those divine questions to which God already knows the answer, linking this story back to Adam and Cain—both of whom tried to hide their guilt with a lie. Hagar's straight answer perhaps implies her relative innocence in this affair. The angel commands her to return and "submit" (16:9), the *Hithpael* of the same verb used of Sarah's oppression of her. The angel's words in 16:10–12 reassure Hagar, not that she will not have to endure suffering, but that God *sees her oppression*; this is a reassurance that God also offers Leah (Gen 29:32), the enslaved Israelites (Exod 3:7; 4:31), and barren Hannah (1 Sam 1:11). This implies hope in her vindication. And so, similarly again to Genesis 12, the episode ends with a flight to Egypt averted and the protagonist returning to Canaan.

To return now to the question of whether Genesis 16 stands alone or as an epilogue to Genesis 15, it remains possible that it should be seen as an epilogue: both chapters make reference to slavery in Egypt, and Genesis 16 is a faithless response to the promises made in Genesis 15. However, in favour of it being the discrete centre of the Abraham cycle, it seems to allude most strongly to the wife-sister stories, and it shares thematic commonalities with them, as follows:

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Figure 13: Thematic relationships within the structure of the *toledot* of Terah

A. Blessings and faithfulness 1 (faith)
  B. Wife-sister cluster 1 (failure to be a blessing)
    C. Sodom and Gomorrah cluster A (intervention on behalf of the nations)
      D. Covenant 1 (God commits to his blessings)
        E. Hagar and Sarah (failure to be a blessing)
      D'. Covenant 2 (God commits to his blessings)
    C'. Sodom and Gomorrah cluster 2 (intervention on behalf of the nations)
  B'. Wife-sister cluster 2 (failure to be a blessing)
A'. Faithfulness and blessings 2 (faith)

According to this analysis, the three major story sections that involve Sarah and problems with barrenness (B, E, and B') are united by featuring Sarah's loss of status and an attempt to secure blessing by pragmatic means, which instead brings conflict and curse upon the nations. These interconnections also serve to explain why B' is able to be a fusion of sections B and E—it contains the wife-sister and treaty-with-the-herdsmen episodes, as well as incorporating the second departure-of-Hagar narrative, in which she is again met by a divine figure at a well in the wilderness. These three Sarah stories are of a piece.

Why is this unit central?

We have said that some scholars are reticent to see Genesis 16 as the structural centre of the *toledot* of Terah because it is difficult to account for its apparent lack of importance to the story overall—Hagar and Ishmael are not important enough figures. Given that it likely *is* the structural centre, what thematic observations might account for its centrality? It seems to me that there are several possibilities and some or all of them might simultaneously be at play.

The first possibility is that this narrative is central because it is a hinge moment that establishes this as a story of two halves, the first of which is dominated by the lack of an heir, and the second of which must solve the problem of an heir-apparent who is in competition with the heir that God provides. So, it might be the pivot merely because the birth of Ishmael is a turning point in the story.

Secondly, Cotter (2003, p. 106) suggests that the significance of Hagar is her outsider status: her story explicitly offers God's comfort to the oppressed, and it demonstrates that God is the God of justice for the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan. Such an attitude is carried through in a number of other episodes in the book, not least in God's concern for other barren and neglected women—for Sarah, for Leah, and for Tamar. Love for the outsider also stands at the heart of definitions of true faith regularly in Scripture, and indeed, we have already argued that the promises of blessing

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have the ultimate goal of bringing blessing to the nations. A narrator might well have interrupted the account of God's covenant-making with Abraham—which becomes the defining mark of insider status—to tell a story that models God's love for the unloved Egyptian slave. It is an appropriate centre point of Abraham's story, focused as it is on the contest between barrenness and blessing.[116]

Thirdly, Carr (2011, pp. 319-22) sees the allusion to the exodus as paramount, suggesting that Genesis 16—and indeed all of Genesis—is pointing beyond itself and foreshadowing that definitive moment of rescue and divine self-revelation. This may be so, but it does not account for the repeated *reversal* of typical exodus roles in the Abraham story.[117] So, to this observation I would reply that it is not the exodus itself that is in view (the mention of it in Genesis 15 notwithstanding) but rather *anti*-exoduses. An anti-exodus may merely mean to play with the contrast between God's plan to release humanity from slavery and make for himself a people, and human plans that only deepen bondage and separation. However, it is also the case that the reversal of the exodus tends to be representative of exile (e.g., Deut 28:68), so inverting exodus patterns may serve to call to mind the *antitheses of faith* and associations of exile with such behaviour.

The anti-exoduses in both Genesis 12 and 16 use inversions to emphasise the innocence of the traditional villain (the Egyptian) and the guilt of the traditional victim (the Israelite ancestor). Central to each of these episodes is the observation that, in contrast to the real exodus in which God single-handedly defeated Egypt, reversed the barrenness of his people's slavery, and began fulfilling his promises to them, the human attempts to control the flow of blessing in Genesis only provoked conflict and curse. At the centre of this cycle, therefore, there is an observation about the nature of faith and blessing: In Genesis 15, belief in God's promises of blessing is credited as righteousness, and mention of the exodus encourages patience in God's plan to bring the promises fully to pass. In Genesis 16, the human attempt to engineer the fulfilment of God's promises according to (in this case) Sarah's own timetable leads to violence and curse, rather than the blessing that they were called to be. So, on the one hand it presents an image of unbelief and the threat of a reversal of the exodus.

The positive side of exodus imagery in Genesis 16 is focused much more on God's response to Abraham's and Sarah's failure and to Hagar's self-imposed exile, which is to be faithful to his

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[116] If Genesis was finally formed for a post-exilic audience, the dialogue between this story and the exclusivist reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah could have been additionally significant.

[117] Niditch (2012, p. 35) suggests that this chapter employs a story pattern in which a future hero experiences exposure and threat in his youth—a pattern also seen in the case of Moses. If this link is intentional, it further connects God's interventions in Exodus to these unlikely characters in Genesis.

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promises anyway. Whereas in Genesis 12 his fulfilment of promise means curse on those who dishonour Abraham, in Genesis 16 he fulfils the promise to bless those who are associated with Abraham by extending blessings to Hagar and her son Ishmael. He provides exodus-like hope to all those who bring themselves into connection with the blessings of Abraham, regardless of their birth or status. If Abraham's blessings in 12:1–3 have as their goal the reversal of the Fall by means of the blessing of all nations in him, then this episode is an entirely fitting emphatic centre, demonstrating as it does the extension of exodus-like compassion even to the Egyptian slave.

3.6.2.6 The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:1–19:38)

The next group of episodes have primarily to do with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In terms of the structure of the Abraham cycle, these episodes are parallel to Abraham's deliverance of Lot and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah from the alliance of Mesopotamian kings, which ends with the priest of Salem, Melchizedek, offering hospitality to Abraham. In this second group of Sodom and Gomorrah stories, the motif of hospitality helps to unify each of the story elements. Abraham offers hospitality to the divine messengers beyond what duty required (Von Rad, 1972, p. 206), but when the messengers journey on to Sodom, all the people of Sodom (but for the foreigner Lot) neglect the most basic demand of hospitality. On the contrary, that night the men swarm the house demanding that Lot hand over the guests, prompting Lot to make the perverse offer of his daughters so that the mob can rather lie with them. This offer of "hospitality" to the mob is reversed again when Lot's daughters, isolated from the hope of husbands and children, get him drunk and lie with him instead.

The opening episode of this section is best known for Sarah's laughter upon hearing that she is still to bear a child of her own, and the immediate reprimand that she receives for it. However, there are some details in this episode that are ambiguous and that perhaps reveal some underlying tensions in the relationships in this family, particularly since the involvement of Hagar.

Once the messengers have received their meal, they begin to pursue the matter that seems to have occasioned their visit: they ask where Sarah is, and Abraham responds that she is in the tent behind them. Schneider (2004, pp. 68, 71-72) argues that finding out that she is within earshot is what prompts them to speak—Sarah is not eavesdropping; it is their purpose to inform her of plans that seem remarkably like what Abraham was already told in the previous chapter. Did Abraham not tell Sarah himself? While it might seem inconceivable that Abraham should withhold such hope and joy from his wife, this news in Genesis 18 does seem genuinely to surprise her. This might indicate a

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note of contrast between Abraham's laughter in Genesis 17 and Sarah's here, though the content of their protest is similar.[118] Abraham's laughter expresses disbelief, which he follows with the suggestion of *his* preference—that God should adopt Ishmael. Ishmael came about because of Sarah's attempt to be included in God's (and Abraham's) future, but Abraham's offer of Ishmael in Genesis 17 strongly underlines that Sarah is not a significant part of Abraham's plan. For him to suggest a way forward that continues to exclude her shows remarkably little empathy for her plight. Sarah's laughter, on the other hand, is disbelief that springs from the fact that she has been offered no lifelines whatsoever in the story so far, and at least thirteen more years have elapsed since her failed attempt at inserting herself into the covenant promises. Her disbelief is especially understandable if God's announcement in Genesis 17 was kept from her. If there is doubt in her laughter, it surely has to do with a body and hopes that are long dead to the dream of children.

When Sarah is finally vindicated in Genesis 21, she laughs again. There is clearly a positive association with her laughter here.[119] While there is surely some contrast between her initial laughter, shot through with doubt, and her final laughter that expresses her joy, they are nevertheless motivated by the same thing: the end of her barrenness ("shall I have pleasure?"[120]). In this sense there is a clear difference between her laughter and Abraham's.

Schneider (2004, pp. 69-73) argues that there are clues throughout the Abraham cycle that his best moments—his acts of faith or generosity, or his intercession for others—are in contrast to the attitudes that he displays towards Sarah. Wenham (1994b, p. 11) makes a comment concerning the narrator's word choice in Genesis 16 that implies a rift between Abraham and Sarah: he points out that Hagar—who was supposed to bear a son *for Sarah*—is repeatedly said to have borne a son *for Abraham*. Among other things, this might indicate that Hagar's status has increased, that Sarah's

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[118] Brueggemann (1982, p. 158) suggests that Abraham and Sarah are both "models of disbelief" in these texts, viewing their laughter as essentially the same.

[119] Brueggemann (1982, p. 182) connects her laughter at the reversal of her fortunes to Israel's laughter in Psalm 126. He points out that "restoring fortunes" is a key phrase used in reference to the end of exile (Jer 29:14; 30:3; 33:7, 11, 26). Whether or not this is an association intended by the redactor, later readers would recognise the healing of barrenness as an image of restoration from the wilderness.

[120] Schneider (2004, p. 71) says that a potential double entendre has long been recognised in this phrase, but the thing that ultimately brings her pleasure is her vindication and her full inclusion ("Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?" Genesis 21:7). Davis (2016, pp. 617-19) points out that the root of עֶדְנָה ("pleasure") is a cognate of "Eden" and that it can mean "rich abundance"; in the *Genesis Apocryphon* it refers particularly to a *pregnancy*. YHWH's restatement of Sarah's words (18:13) suggests that childbearing was in mind. The use of this unusual root, appearing only four times in the canon, most likely serves to connect God's plans to the re-establishment of Eden (Davis, 2016, p. 627).

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plan did not have the desired change in her status, and/or that Hagar is particularly under Abraham's protection. Schneider argues that this rift is more pervasive in the story. A crucial moment in the text is the discovery of Sarah's laughter, which meets with a rebuke and a denial on Sarah's part. Schneider (2004, pp. 70-73) points out that the identity of the accuser is left ambiguous. Grammatically, the most natural way to read it is that YHWH rebukes her, since YHWH was the previous speaker and there is no reactivation of any other character.[121] However, God has not spoken to her directly before and never does so hereafter; God typically speaks to her through Abraham. The messengers have visited seemingly to convey a message for Sarah's benefit, but they do so by speaking *to Abraham* within her earshot. So, it would arguably be unexpected for them to alter that pattern in order to discharge a rebuke at the very moment that they reveal amazing and joyful news. Furthermore, Abraham, whose laughter in the previous chapter was at least as faithless as Sarah's or more so, escaped any rebuke from God; why then would Sarah be singled out now? So, Schneider argues that the rebuke comes from Abraham, for whom insensitivity towards Sarah is not particularly out of character.

This is an interesting suggestion, because for Abraham to criticise her for laughing—whether it was delivered immediately to save face in front of the messengers or only later after their departure—would be a substantial hypocrisy given that his own laughter showed greater lack of faith than hers. While this is necessarily speculative, Schneider (2004, pp. 74-79) points out that there are episodes that depict Abraham intervening on behalf of Lot and—for the rest of this chapter—the people of Sodom, but there is no such intercession for Sarah in her plight. Gossai (2008, p. 9) says that the solution to *Rebekah's* barrenness was that both Isaac and Rebekah prayed to God, but Abraham is seemingly silent regarding Sarah's barrenness. It is certainly strange that at points at which empathy with Sarah would seem appropriate—such as the good news of her vindication in Genesis 17—Abraham displays none, and there are no scenes in which Abraham is proactive in promoting her needs.

The respective characterisations of both YHWH and Abraham provide a compelling argument that the one most likely to be aiming a rebuke at Sarah and provoking her fear is Abraham. Nevertheless,

[121] Hebrew narrative rarely conceives of scenes involving three points of view; i.e., there may be more than two characters involved in a scene, but typically multiple characters in a single scene will be represented as a group that share a single perspective (such as the messengers in this scene—the three men speak as a unit). A third point of view will usually necessitate a change in scene. So, by either reckoning, this scene is fairly anomalous: either Sarah is a third party in this conversation, in which case the rebuker is most likely the Lord, or her involvements require us to cut away from the main dialogue to hear her perspective, and in this second cut-away the rebuker is most likely Abraham, since Sarah is otherwise not in conversation with the men before they leave.

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it is possible that the rebuke might come from YHWH, if only to underline his intention to bring life out of death, and the absence of any grammatical clue that Abraham is the speaker remains a significant obstacle to Schneider's view. At best we can suggest that its ambiguity might be intended to cause us to wonder whether it is the Lord or Abraham who is most offended at her disbelief.

The next scene presents us with Abraham's intercession for Sodom. Von Rad (1972, pp. 213-14) points out that Abraham pleads not for the salvation of the righteous, but for the preservation of the *whole city* for the sake of any righteous who live there. Elements of this story are reminiscent of the pattern of the flood: the wickedness of humanity provokes God, and he responds by bringing destruction on all but the one family of the righteous. Sarna (1966, pp. 144-49) notes that the sin of Sodom involves an "outcry", which is consistently associated with injustice against the vulnerable; it is the "negation of justice and righteousness" (cf. Isa 5:7; Ezek 16:49–50). In contrast to Sodom's wickedness, Genesis 18:19 underlines the nature of the relationship that God is seeking to establish with his people: he calls them to "keep the way of YHWH" as the pattern of righteousness.

Abraham's appeal for Sodom goes beyond the point of embarrassment, but it is ultimately successful only in establishing that righteousness is completely absent from that place. As with the flood, however, in the midst of total destruction, God rescues Lot's family. Yet, in contrast with Noah, it is not because of Lot's righteousness that he is rescued, but on Abraham's account (Gen 19:29).

The final episode concerning Lot in Genesis 19:30–38 makes the link to Noah far more vivid. Out of fear of Zoar, Lot has taken to living in a remote place with his daughters, and because they are unable to marry and to "preserve seed", they decide to get him drunk and preserve seed *from their father*. The involvement of wine and some form of impropriety towards a father are both points of contact with Noah and Ham.

Von Rad (1972, pp. 223-24) regards the episode concerning Lot's daughters to have once functioned as a piece of "political wit" intended to repay her enemies—the Moabites and the Ammonites—for their crimes with a propaganda piece about their disgraceful origins. While this may be true in part, one needs to take into account the role of incest throughout the book. If Lot's incest in Genesis 19 is mockery of the origins of the surrounding nations, then surely Genesis is mocking Israel's origins too? Genesis toys with incestuous in-group relationships regularly, especially with Abraham's marriage to his sister, his insistence that Isaac also marry within the family, and so too with Jacob, Reuben, and Judah. If anything, the *whole concept* of "in-group purity" is being lampooned.

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Gossai (2008, p. 14) takes a different approach. He reckons that Lot's daughters are not images of depravity as such, though their behaviour is obviously taboo; they are to be viewed within the motif of barrenness. They are not literally barren, but their future is, and so they are sacrificing their present for the hope of a future.

The connection of Genesis 19 to Noah's story allows us to make some comparisons and contrasts. Firstly, God's treatment of Sodom—destroying the valley with rain (מטר), this time of fire—indicates that while God has a covenant with the earth not to eradicate all life, this is not to say that wickedness will be allowed to persist unchecked. Perhaps its local scope intends to say something about the land: God's chosen place is holy, and persistent evil will eventually exhaust God's patience.

Secondly, much as Ham's offence represented a relapse of the new world into the corruption of the old, Lot's sequestration of his daughters and their Ham-like response to Lot's denial of a future for them repeat the fall pattern that has pervaded the book so far: whatever hopes might have been for God's intervention to produce righteousness, sin reasserts itself. Where evil is pushed back in one place, misguided human plans for their own preservation and blessing cause shame and wickedness to break out again.

Thirdly, whereas the story of Noah's sons is followed by the so-called Table of Nations (in Ham's case a catalogue of Israel's opponents), the story of Lot's daughters yields a "table" of two trans-Jordanian nations who become Israel's opponents. Rather than mockery, this seems to stand as a warning of a pattern that recurs in history: self-direction and short-term thinking are in contrast with walking before (and trusting) God, and heap immorality upon immorality. Such behaviour may have repercussions well into the future, and it inevitably leads to violence and curse. God might have destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, but because of Lot, a *little* (צער) wickedness was allowed to remain when Zoar (צער) was spared, and Lot's fear of Zoar and his flight to the hills led to a *little* wickedness on the part of his daughters, and this by degree sees Sodom and Gomorrah respawned in the form of Israel's foes Moab and Ammon.[122]

3.6.2.7 Wife-sister cluster B: Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech (Gen 20:1–21:34)

Genesis 20 presents us with a second wife-sister story in the life of Abraham. Brueggemann (1982, p. 177) offers a common explanation of this duplication as an overtly theological retelling of the story,

[122] See Zephaniah 2:9 for another connection of Moab and Ammon to Sodom and Gomorrah.

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primarily in an attempt to reduce the damage to Abraham's reputation by providing some explanatory comments for his behaviour in Genesis 12. Even this century, scholars have argued that this chapter came about because a later editor seems not to have understood the wife-sister story any longer and so added details such as Sarah's half-sister status in order to address the disquiet over the "matter-of-fact" presentation of Genesis 12 (Frymer-Kensky, 2001, pp. 150-51).

Narrative critics see this duplication as a type-scene—a conventional story pattern—particularly because there are further repetitions of the pattern in the *toledot* of Isaac, and we have already encountered several instances in which Genesis deploys echoes of earlier episodes in order to add rhetorical texture—such as invoking fallenness at key moments. Especially in circumstances where the repetitions are overt, the use of patterns and divergences appear to be purposeful.

Similarities between the two episodes include that both involve threats to God's promises that are brought on by Abraham's fear of the nations, which leads to him being a source of curse upon them instead of the blessing that he was meant to be. It requires God's intervention in order to ensure that Sarah's status is restored. Secondly, even though Abraham behaves faithlessly, God is faithful and brings about his promised curses and blessings nevertheless.

The differences between the two stories emphasise what is important to each. In the first story, Abraham's appeal to Sarah and the account of the resultant benefits that he receives are given most attention—it emphasises his fear and his plan to secure the good that God had promised him by his own means. In the second, the details that set this up as a wife-sister story are heavily abbreviated: in two short verses they arrive in Philistia and Sarah is taken by the king. Yet details that were entirely omitted from the first story—such as how the king discovered the problem or its cause, or Abraham's defence of his behaviour—are given far greater prominence.

Key differences highlight the following points of emphasis in Genesis 20:

- In Genesis 12, Sarah was barren, but Genesis 20 follows the declarations in Genesis 17 and 18 that she will soon conceive—she is likely fertile.[123] Whereas the first wife-sister story centred on a threat to the covenant posed by loss of the land, this one threatens to raise questions over the paternity of the covenant child (Walton, 2001, pp. 498-99). God's intervention focuses on Sarah's honour being spared, and even the account of Abraham's ill-

[123] See Appendix E for a brief discussion of the problem of Sarah's ongoing attractiveness and the suggestion of miraculous rejuvenation.

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gotten gain is framed in this way: Abimelech's payment is described as a sign of Sarah's innocence and public vindication (20:16).

- God's long speech to Abimelech in a dream puts the focus on Abraham as a prophet. His intercessory role is probably based on his mediation on behalf of the innocent of Sodom in the previous chapter, which was a sign of his fulfilment of his role as blessing to the nations (Cotter, 2003, p. 134; Speiser, 1964, p. 149). Gordis (1985, p. 354) points out an irony in Abimelech's protestation to God of his own innocence ("Lord, will you kill an innocent people?" Genesis 20:4)—it is reminiscent of Abraham's own protest when in negotiation with God over Sodom ("Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked…" Genesis 18:25). The man who contended with God for justice on behalf of the innocent is now the cause of judgement, and the innocent one must contend for his own life because of what Abraham has done.[124]
- Abraham defends his own behaviour, claiming that he made this plan because there was "no fear of God" in that place and because Sarah was indeed his half-sister. Brueggemann (1982, p. 178) considers it ironic that Abraham is concerned with the lack of fear of God in that place, but it is Abraham who acts faithlessly and Abimelech who responds well to God's word. Walton (2001, p. 499) concurs that Abraham should have been an agent of blessing to the nations but here nearly brings destruction on the innocent. Nevertheless, through this

[124] Jacobs (2007, pp. 81-102) argues that Abraham regularly abuses the power that he has over his wife because he views himself as essential to God's plan, and he is unconcerned about the collateral damage that his conformity to that plan might cause to his wife and to others. Jacobs (2007, pp. 90-91) also suggests that God is complicit in allowing Abraham to draw others into adversity while he himself escapes punishment; this is because God's purpose is what matters, and Abraham is under his favour. Even when Abraham's distrust and deception cause harm to the righteous Abimelech in Gen 20, Jacobs (2007, p. 98) claims that it does nothing to alter God's regard for Abraham. On the contrary, God puts the healing of Abimelech in Abraham's power. This leads Jacobs (2007, pp. 101-102) to conclude that God is biased in favour of the one who is essential to his plan, but he "does not regard all persons as equal agents within the domain". Sarah is "intermittently useful but clearly dispensable". This analysis seems to me to neglect several notes in the text that indicate criticism of Abraham, and God's behaviour is easily explained not as bias but in keeping with his commitment to fulfil his promises. Identifying Abraham as "prophet" in this text and requiring Abimelech to seek healing through Abraham's intercession does not indicate God's approval of Abraham or his behaviour. On the contrary, his prophetic role ought to have been as an agent of blessing (as he attempted to be in Genesis 18) rather than the agent of curse that he became to Abimelech. God's action here confronts Abraham with his hypocrisy in bringing unjust judgement upon the righteous, having stood up for the righteous in Genesis 18, and it forces him back into the correct prophetic role. This surely must have served as an indictment, not a validation. After all, it is to Abimelech that God speaks, and it is his innocence and the vindication of Sarah that receive affirmation in this passage. Contra Jacobs, it is not God's blind favour for Abraham that we witness in this text, but his faithfulness to his promises and his insistence on forging the kind of relationship that will bring about the blessing of the nations—the final goal of those promises.

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God makes himself known to Abimelech's people, and Abraham is forced back into the role of prophet to reverse the curse that he brought.

- Finally, we also learn from this story that the curse that God brought was *barrenness*—it was manifest in the "closing of wombs" (Gen 20:18).[125] The judgement of barrenness upon the king who took Abraham's newly fertile wife continues to underline the thematic centrality of this concept in the book as a whole.

The episode ends with Abimelech's household healed. As we have already pointed out, wife-sister stories typically lead into a conflict between herdsmen for fertile, well-watered territory, followed by a treaty to secure the relationship. These episodes seem to have in common that they contrast the false dealings with the nations and lack of trust in God evident in the wife-sister stories with peaceable relationships and reliance on God to provide in the treaty stories. In the case of the treaty with Abimelech, the relationship is predicated on the king's request: "swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity" (Gen 21:23), and the net result is that Abraham discovers Beersheba and establishes a place of worship.

However, this wife-sister story is interrupted by the intercalation of episodes that bring Hagar's story to a conclusion. Genesis 21 begins with the announcement of Isaac's birth, followed by a second conflict between Sarah and Hagar that this time leads to Hagar's expulsion.

Intercalation inserts one episode into the middle of another, and this juxtaposition brings the two episodes into an interpretive relationship (Powell, 1995, p. 33). Allusions in Genesis 16 to the wife-sister story of Genesis 12 already served to establish a connection between these stories, but the conjunction of the two patterns here invites closer investigation of their relationship.

Since the wife-sister story largely consists in the failure on the part of the patriarch to trust God's promises and to be a blessing to the nations, followed by moderate success in the treaty episode in correcting that error, it should at least compel us to ask to what degree the expulsion of Hagar represents this kind of failure or success.

The first episode in Genesis 21 announces Isaac's birth and Sarah's joyful laughter at God's fulfilment of his promise. This birth announcement shares with the preceding wife-sister story an emphasis

[125] It is possible that the reproductive problem also or entirely involves some more immediate, observable issue with the male—impotence perhaps—since it also says that God healed *Abimelech* (Gen 20:17). Closing wombs might be idiomatic; it does not necessarily mean that the problem is with the female.

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upon God's faithfulness to his promises and perhaps also hints at a double vindication for Sarah: Abimelech corrects any dishonour that might have fallen on her as a result of their marriage (Gen 20:16), and God releases her from the dishonour of her barrenness. The conflict with Hagar is more ambiguous. Superficially, the offence that Ishmael commits—a teenager "laughing", possibly at his newly weaned half-brother[126]—seems innocent, and Sarah seems jealous and scornful (Von Rad, 1972, p. 232). This may well be a contrast between God's faithfulness to Sarah and Sarah's failure to be the blessing that God's promises called her to be.

On the other hand, while Sarah is partly to blame for the complications within her family, this situation bears some resemblance to the intra-family conflict promised in Genesis 3 and expressed in the violent conflict between Cain and Abel in Genesis 4—a conflict that also resulted in the expulsion of the aggressor. If Ishmael is being cast in the role of the aggressor—Cain's role—does it mean that his offence is more serious than mere laughter and that Sarah is right to expel him? Or does the apparent lightness of the offence mean that for Sarah to treat Ishmael as God treated Cain is a jealous overreaction?

Cain's violence against his brother was motivated by jealousy because God favoured Abel's sacrifice rather than his. While God's attitude to Cain is based on a true appraisal of the heart, the damage that favouritism does to families is a point that Genesis explicitly returns to again in the fatherhood of both Isaac and Jacob. It may be that the narrator intends for the reader to see favouritism in Abraham's treatment of Ishmael and Isaac.[127] There is certainly the obvious favour of the mother for her own son, and Schneider (2004, pp. 96-103) argues that Abraham is unable to let go of his preference for Ishmael, even though Isaac is to be the heir of God's covenant. In this vein, it might be that the intercalation means to tie together various vindications, particularly of Sarah, and in this central episode, therefore, to emphasise one vindication that remains outstanding: Abraham's failure to affirm his wife's status and fully commit himself to God's choice of Sarah's son.

Schneider (2004, pp. 96-99) argues that Sarah's insistence that Hagar be dismissed is the result of ambiguity in terms of Abraham's intentions for Ishmael—certain laws in the ANE show that there

[126] Towner (2001, p. 178) points out that the Hebrew does not say what Ishmael was doing *or to whom*. The LXX (and Gal 4:29) supplies Isaac as the object of his laughter. In Genesis 27, Isaac is also "laughing" with Rebekah in such a way that their marital status is discovered—and this may imply that Ishmael engages in some kind of sexual abuse—but since this terminology involves punning on Isaac's name, there is no necessary connection of the content of each instance.

[127] Compare Genesis 17:18.

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were issues concerning the inheritances of sons of the primary wife and other wives. Ishmael's dishonour of Isaac, whether it was particularly cruel or merely boyish play, reminds Sarah that Isaac's status is insecure. When Sarah raises this with Abraham, Genesis 21:11 again deploys an ambiguity over the identity of a referent: it says, "The thing was very bad in the eyes of Abraham about the situation concerning his son", leaving it unclear what exactly perturbed him and about which son. This ambiguity is perhaps meant to reflect the uncertainty within Abraham himself.

It seems highly likely to me that this passage does not mean simplistically to represent a right side and a wrong one. The conflict represented in this family is a result of sin and poor judgement, and the narrator is not in a hurry to excuse any of the characters from blame. The connections to Cain and Abel, for example, do not imply that one is a villain and the other a victim, but seem only to stand as reminders of the chaos that sin admits. Thus, even though God intervenes again to remind Abraham of his promises, both concerning Isaac and Ishmael, and so as to validate Sarah's request, it does not necessarily exonerate her or the motivations behind her request. It merely means that there is potential for a broken situation to get worse if Abraham does not deal decisively with the ambiguous status of Sarah and Isaac.[128]

Schneider (2004, p. 101) points out that there is a difference in the terminology used of Sarah's demand, which is to *cast Hagar out* (גרשׁ)—the word used of the expulsions of Adam and Eve and Cain—and Abraham's response, which is to *send Hagar away* (שׁלח). The fact that Hagar remains in the area that Abraham has been given to settle in Beersheba might mean that Abraham is attempting to keep them close. The narrator mentions that Hagar "errs" (תעה), which perhaps means that she became lost; it was presumably not Abraham's intention that she should be endangered. Nevertheless, she is again thrust into the barren wilderness, and she gives Ishmael up as good as dead. As before, God intervenes to rescue her, and the "God who sees" opens her eyes so that she can see: before even Abraham finds a well to sustain him in Beersheba, God shows Hagar a well and saves her life and that of her child. God brings life out of barrenness and death.

Whether this episode is meant to show Abraham's reluctance to sever ties with Ishmael and to commit to God's plan (Schneider, 2004, p. 102), or merely to divest Abraham of any other heir, it sets up the final test of Abraham's faith. By Genesis 22, God acknowledges Isaac as Abraham's "only

[128] Niditch (2012, p. 35) points out that this is another occasion on which God aligns himself with the voice of Sarah, which perhaps provides some measure of vindication for her. However, it is unclear to what extent the focus is on affirming Sarah or exposing Abraham's mixed motives.

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son, whom you love"; any equivocation concerning Isaac is past. Now, after a long struggle to secure an heir of his own, he is forced to decide finally whether he trusts God to do as he promised or not.

3.6.2.8 Climax: Faithfulness and blessing (Gen 22:1–24)

Genesis 22 represents the final chapter in the main story of Abraham's life. Although several chapters remain in his *toledot* unit, they should be regarded as an epilogue to the climactic events told here. That this is the final main chapter is evident in the parallels that are drawn with Genesis 12—the first chapter after Terah's death announcement. We have pointed out in the structure section that both chapters share a focus on the promise of blessing—offered in Genesis 12 and finally confirmed in Genesis 22. Towner (2001, p. 185) adds that both chapters begin with similar divine commands to "go", both using the phrase לֶךְ־לְךָ:[129]

- "Go by yourself… to the land that I will show you." (Gen 12:1)
  (לֶךְ־לְךָ … אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ)
- "Go by yourself to the land of Moriah… [to the mountain] that I will tell to you." (Gen 22:2)
  (וְלֶךְ־לְךָ אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה)

I have suggested that this phrase should be translated "by yourself" in Genesis 12 in order to emphasise that Abraham is meant to cut ties with his old support structures—something that he does, albeit reported with a measure of ambiguity. While translating it the same way here is not as obviously appropriate, I think it should be retained because Abraham *does* leave the other men behind, and the intention might be to emphasise (unambiguously this time) that it is just Abraham; there is no hedging of bets and no plan B. There is a final and unequivocal stripping away of anything but the man and the test.[130]

[129] Towner (2001, p. 185) points out that these two occurrences are the only ones in the Hebrew Bible that take this form. The only other occurrence of this phrase in any form is וְלֵךְ לָךְ in 2 Kgs 3:13.

[130] I think that this also provides a better rationale for the request that the other servants remain behind than the two that are typically offered, i.e., that the mountain to which they are going is too holy for those not summoned, or that Abraham does not want their involvement in what he is about to do (Towner, 2001, p. 187). Cotter (2003, p. 154) points out that one of the descriptions of Isaac is factually incorrect: Isaac is not Abraham's only son. Cotter does not clearly offer a reason for this description, though it presumably underlines that Ishmael's departure was a disinheritance and that there is no recourse to the revival of hopes in Ishmael or in an as yet unseen third way.

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Wenham (1994b, p. 113) says that the name of the place to which Abraham is sent, Moriah, means "The Lord will provide/appear". It is unclear how much reassurance Abraham reads into this ascription; it certainly offers further ambiguity for him. Should he expect God to *appear* to him once he fulfils this command, or should he expect God to *provide the solution* to the obvious conundrum that this command has raised? This initial hint at God's provision of a solution might be what is behind Abraham's confident assertion that he and Isaac would return to the servants that they had left behind. Towner (2001, p. 185) points out that "Moriah" certainly draws attention to the problem of faithfulness, both of God and Abraham—does Abraham trust God to provide the resolution to this threat that he has raised to his own promises?

Once atop the mountain, Abraham makes preparations for the sacrifice and binds Isaac, laying him on top of the wood. Many of Abraham's actions in this chapter are perhaps intended to reflect those of the previous. Abraham lays (שָׂם) the wood upon his son Isaac as he laid a skin of water upon Hagar and sent her away; he puts his son upon the wood in preparation to kill him as Hagar cast his other son into a bush so that she did not have to watch him die; the angel of the Lord calls to Abraham from heaven to identify a substitute for Isaac's life, just as the angel called to Hagar from heaven and showed her a well that spared Ishmael's life. There is perhaps meant to be some parallel of the trial that God puts Abraham through and the one that Abraham put Hagar through in the previous chapter (Cotter, 2003, pp. 148-51). This seems to sketch parallel fates for both of Abraham's sons, just as both will receive similar blessings on Abraham's account. But it also possibly means to emphasise Abraham's agency in nearly bringing the promises to an untimely end—God must yet again intervene to provide life in the place of death. In the first instance, the fractious household relationships caused by Abraham's self-made pathways to blessing culminated in him having to choose between his wife and his firstborn, and God must reverse the barrenness into which Hagar was cast. In this instance, God himself becomes the threat to the fulfilment of promise, and he intervenes to bring life to a situation barren of human solutions to the problem of death.

Towner (2001, p. 185) points out that this episode is concentric and that there is strong emphasis upon the climactic moment at which the angel intervenes:

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Figure 14: Towner's structure of Genesis 22

A. The test: sacrifice son (1–2)
  B. Rising action (3–6)
    C. "God will provide" (7–8)
      D. Preparations (9–10)
        E. Theophany and new orders (11–12)
      D'. New preparations: the ram (13)
    C'. "The Lord will provide" (14)
  B'. Falling action (15–18)
A'. Test completed (19)

That the attention is drawn to the content of 22:11–12 is significant, because the angel's focus might have rested on several elements from this story, such as the presence of the ram, or the sparing of Isaac's life, or the reiteration of the promises. The thing that does attract emphasis, however, is the line, "for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son". This supports the suggestion of Schneider (2004, pp. 104-5) that this episode is framed as God needing to discover something about Abraham that is not yet clear, since it seems all along as though Abraham does not fully fear God. Abraham protested when God planned to sideline Ishmael; he protested on behalf of Sodom; and he showed anguish at the banishment of Ishmael. Here he is alone, silent, and trusting God to bring about his promise though every inch of the command is its seeming antithesis.

And so the climax of this episode—and in many ways of the Abraham narrative in its entirety—rests on this observation about Abraham's faith. After a sequence of courageous victories and cowardly equivocations, Abraham is left a final test from which God establishes that he fully grasps the demand that the relationship with God places upon him. The moral of the story is *not* that obedience to command needs to be unquestioning, such that even the unthinkable should be carried out if God commands it. The circumstances underlying God's request are unique. Abraham's story has been driven along from its start to its end by the question of progeny—life must spring somehow from the barrenness of Abraham's situation for God's promises to be fulfilled. Abraham's struggles under testing have always been to find reasonable ways in which success could be achieved—ways that resemble the Fall more than they resemble faith. God's repeated plan, however, is to do the impossible: to bring life from the dead. This test on Moriah sets out to strip away any semblance of the possible—any appeal to sensible human means of success. Abraham now knows that God's plan rests exclusively in Isaac, and he knows that the same God has called for the flicker of life in Isaac to be buried once more in death. God's call is not simply for obedience to command. God's call is for complete *trust in what has been promised* even though (or perhaps *because*) its fulfilment is beyond the realm of human capacity. The writer to the Hebrews speculates

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with good reason that Abraham's trust allowed that "God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (Heb 11:19). God's plan to make life from the dead in Isaac met with Abraham's laughter in Genesis 17. The test here requires Abraham to trust that Isaac's life would spring again from the dead if God so required. So, this story is not a model of irrational obedience, but rather of radical trust in the promises that have been established.

3.6.2.9 Epilogue (Gen 23:1–25:18)

The final chapters of Abraham's story serve to resolve some loose ends, as well as setting up story elements that are necessary background to the *toledot* of Isaac to follow.

Genesis 23 tells of Sarah's death, though most of its extent is given over to Abraham's negotiations over a burial place for her. The offer is made that Sarah be buried in one of the tombs of the Hittites, which would perhaps imply his honorary membership as one of their people. He resists this offer and rather negotiates for the *purchase* of land from them, which reasserts his independence. The chapter ends with confirmation that property within the land had been made over to Abraham (Gen 23:20)—significant, most likely, because it represents an incipient fulfilment of God's promise to make Abraham a nation and to make this land his inheritance.

The dominant story in terms of length in this section is that of Genesis 24, in which Abraham's servant is sent to find a wife for Isaac. This episode is united to the preceding chapter of the epilogue by its final line, in which Isaac is said to be comforted by his new wife after the death of his mother, and it is especially important because it introduces Bethuel's family and establishes a typical pattern that is repeated for Jacob within the next *toledot* section.

Much has been made by some scholars about the possible importance of this section to post-exilic concerns about endogamy,[131] but in terms of its thematic contribution, the following are some key points of emphasis that the chapter raises:

- In continuity with Abraham's resistance to assimilation into Canaan evident in him purchasing land from them rather than using their burial lands, he requires that Isaac not

[131] Bailey (2013, p. 113), for example, claims that this text answers "an important question within the social and ethnic conflicts of Persian Yehud: where do appropriate wives come from?" But Von Rad (1972, p. 255) is probably correct that this issue is not blood purity but the threat to genuine faith that assimilation poses—both in Canaan *and* in Haran.

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marry one of the Canaanites "among whom I dwell" (24:3). He recognises that to become a nation, he must remain distinct from the nations that already live there.

- Abraham repeats that Isaac is not to go back to his former homeland (24:6, 8). The threat of assimilation endangers nationhood in Canaan, but return to Aram would present a danger that is also evident in the prologue—Terah had in mind to journey to Canaan, but settled instead with his people in Haran. Now that God has promised Canaan to Abraham's son (24:7), it is all the more important that Isaac not endanger his inheritance of the land by leaving it and being assimilated back into the people of Aram. This would be to reverse the route on which Abraham's troubled walk with YHWH has taken him so far (Von Rad, 1972, p. 255). The danger is underlined in this chapter by the attempts to delay the servant and the departure of Rebekah.

- The motif of blessing is strongly represented in this chapter, occurring six times (1, 27, 31, 35, 48, 60). Two acknowledge the blessing "in all things" that Abraham had received (1, 35). Two more are acknowledgements on the part of the servant that God is to be blessed (i.e., praised) for prospering his mission (27, 48). The other two seem particularly significant. Firstly, Laban is said to take particular note of the valuable gift given to his sister, and so he intercepts the servant with the greeting, "Come in, O blessed of the Lord!" (24:31). Laban's recognition of the potential for personal gain for the one who possesses God's blessing both provides a rationale for the attempts to delay this marriage and for his exploitation of Jacob in the next section. Secondly, once Rebekah is allowed to leave, she is sent off with a blessing that echoes the strong focus on progeny in Abraham's story—that she would become "thousands of ten thousands" (24:60). Furthermore, there is an interesting focus on a singular seed of the woman: "May your seed possess the gate of those who hate him!" While this may be a conventional blessing of some kind or a reflection of God's promise to curse those who curse the possessor of the blessing, this does highlight the passing down of blessing to a particular seed, foreshadowing Jacob, and it ironically also will be the household of the speaker, Laban, who proves to be one of those enemies whose possessions pass over to that seed.

- Finally, there is unusual repetition in 24:67, the final verse, of reference to Sarah. The scene of the consummation of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage is "the tent of Sarah his mother", and Isaac's love for Rebekah comforts him "after the death of his mother." This helps to link this episode to the larger concerns of the epilogue—the deaths of Sarah and Abraham—as well as to indicate continuity between Sarah and Rebekah. Walton (2001, p. 532) claims that this

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> act demonstrates that Rebekah is now the mistress of the household after Sarah's death, but it perhaps also signals her rightness—there are to be no questions over her inclusion in God's blessings. This epilogue brings closure to the stories of the chosen couple (Sarah and Abraham), and it introduces their rightful successors.

The final episode of Abraham's life describes his remarriage to Keturah, who bears him six more children, underlining at very least his fatherhood of nations. The final point of emphasis, however, is not upon competition for Isaac's inheritance, but the exclusivity of it. Abraham gives *gifts* to his offspring, but ultimately they are sent away from Isaac, who is affirmed as his sole heir (25:5).[132]

3.6.3 Conclusion

Carr (2011, p. 322) believes that a major factor in the storyline of Genesis, with its intertextual references to the deliverance from Egypt, is to point "beyond itself to narratives found in the book of Exodus." Genesis begins with promises of blessing and fertility, these are emphasised in Abraham's story, and they are finally fulfilled in the multiplication of the Israelites in Exodus 1:7. While this is superficially true, Genesis is not merely plotting the fulfilment of promises; there are deeper discussions *about* the promises and their appropriation woven into the ancestral narratives. The exodus connections in the Abraham story do not merely foreshadow; they invert and twist the exodus story as well. In so doing they reveal a concern not merely to show *that* the promises are fulfilled, but also to discuss the nature of promise, what responsibilities are implied therein, and what divine–human relationship really means.

Abraham's story is framed as the establishment of a new Eden in the land that God shows Abraham, the intention of which is to forge divine–human relationship despite the persistence of human waywardness described by the first two *toledot* sections. Promises of blessing imply the establishment of a relationship of favour before God, and the attendant responsibility of Abraham to be a blessing suggests mutuality. The immediate intrusion of barrenness of both wife (Gen 11:30) and land (Gen 12:10) reasserts the problems of curse introduced in Genesis 3, and these form the

[132] Although some analyses give significant weight to the *toledot* of Ishmael and Esau, I am following Thomas (2011, p. 93) in regarding these horizontal *toledot* as acknowledgements of God's blessing upon these sons in spite of their exclusion from the chosen line. As my structural analysis in chapter 2 makes clear, these *toledot* also serve as part of a formulaic conclusion to each main *toledot* section, not as sections in their own right. While there may be value in deeper discussion of these chapters, they do not seem to have much thematic function beyond that, and so I have chosen not to afford them further attention.

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principal tests that Abraham faces and around which the shaping a certain *kind* of divine–human relationship takes place.

The primary theophanies in which promises of blessing are made and formalised occur in the first and last moments of the Abraham narrative proper and in the two covenant-making scenes that stand (almost) at the centre. Genesis 15 offers two major contributions to the concept of faith. It emphasises (a) that righteousness consists in (*inter alia*) taking God at his word, and (b) it confirms that the receipt of the promises may involve long periods devoid of blessing—God declares four hundred years of enslavement before the promise concerning land will be activated. Believing God involves trust in his promises through dry periods of absence and through timescales that may transcend the lives of the faithful.

Occupying the central spot in this *toledot* section—interrupting the two covenant episodes—is a story that is a connecting hub of the major intertextual references in this section. Firstly, Hagar's story invokes similar themes and patterns to those employed in the wife-sister stories, all of which foreshadow the exodus. These three episodes invert the pattern of enslavement and deception, making the Egyptian the victim and acting as an indictment on the patriarch, both for failure to be a blessing to the nations and for attempting to be the engineer of blessings and deliverances that properly belong to God's domain.

Secondly, the central episode invokes Genesis 3, particularly to connect Sarah and Eve. This probably intends to call to mind the problem with barrenness involved in the judgement on Eve, and especially the birth of the "seed of the *wrong* woman". While the "seed of the woman" is not explicit here, this episode is Sarah's failed attempt to make seed for herself, and it immediately precedes God's covenant-making theophany in which Sarah is finally identified as the mother of the promised seed. The more explicit connection is to the eating of forbidden fruit—Sarah's plan here is presented as a fall. The eating of forbidden fruit was an attempt to assert human control over things properly belonging to God's domain; Sarah's actions are likewise an attempt to control her place in the promises given to Abraham, but instead she endangers them further.

The second covenant chapter, therefore, seemingly serves to address Abraham and Sarah's "fall" with a promise—after thirteen more years in the wilderness, as it were—to bring life out of her barrenness and to make her the woman from whom his significant seed will be born. For God to use Sarah in her old age is a small demonstration of the kind of faith that Genesis 15 envisaged: believing God to do what he promised, and trusting him even when from a human perspective hope is dead.

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Abraham's story sees him vacillating between courageous faith and faithless attempts at control. By contrast, it demonstrates that God's plan for relationship with humanity is a plan to bring about life from death,[133] and though it initially seems counter-intuitive that there should be, for example, famine in the land that promised blessing, it is fitting that the relationship should be forged within cosmic timescales and situations that are beyond human powers to resolve. It is only in the death of human control that full dependence upon God can truly be known.

The climax of the story, therefore, reveals what crucial aspect of growth was required from Abraham for God to know that he feared him truly. It demonstrates the necessity of radical trust in God's promises in the face of the impossible. The son born out of barrenness and bodies-all-but-dead is now seemingly to be surrendered to death and to the death of hope. Through this trial, Abraham is required to walk in the hard-fought lesson that God has caused him thus far to learn: Isaac will nevertheless be the seed from which God will rebuild all hope. Believing God in the midst of a plan that is impossible and a future that is opaque—trusting God without recourse to man-made solutions or bets that can be hedged—this is what calls an end to his long sojourn and defines what kind of "Adam" will stand at the head of a renewed humanity.

In the next chapter, we will continue our discussion of theme, focussing on how the covenant relationship established with Abraham is negotiated in subsequent generations.

[133] Note that the concept of "life from death" should not be confused with "life *after* death". Life from death encapsulates the reversal of the sentence of death in Genesis 3 (represented by barrenness of field and womb). See the exilic metaphor of the resurrection of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37.

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4. THEME IN GENESIS: ISAAC TO ISRAEL

Having seen how God's covenantal relationships were established in the first three *toledot* sections, attention shifts from how the covenant began to how the covenant is inherited by Abraham's descendants.

4.1 THE *TOLEDOT* OF ISAAC

The *toledot* of Isaac (25:19–35:29) is a partner narrative of the previous *toledot* section, with both sharing much in common and both involving the main protagonist in climactic moments of change. At several points in the story, the intention seems to be to reiterate the patterns of the Abrahamic narrative, a feature that is most apparent in Isaac's wife-sister episode. Much of the story is given over to Jacob's time in Haran, in which a number of story elements converge, including the meeting-at-the-well scene, the wife-sister story, and the conflict between wives.

4.1.1 Structure

The structure of the *toledot* of Isaac is commonly regarded as being concentric, as the previous Change narratives have been, though the pattern seems to me to be harder to discern than that of the other sections so far. This is partly because it is more complicated, featuring more characters in main roles than did the previous ones—with all of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Simeon, and Levi prominently involved—and it lacks as many obvious markers of symmetry as were found in Abraham's story.

Various structures have been suggested. Brueggemann (1982, p. 213) offers the following:[134]

[134] It is substantially similar to the structure suggested by Carr (2011, p. 321). They differ primarily over the birth of Jacob's flocks; Carr considers them to be a D' stage.

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Figure 15: Brueggemann's structure of the *toledot* of Isaac

A. Conflict with Esau (25:19–34; 27:1–45; 27:46–28:9)
B. Meeting at Bethel (28:10–22)
C. Conflict with Laban (29:1–30)
D. Births (29:31–30:24)
C'. Conflict and Covenant (30:25–31:55)
B'. Meeting at Penuel (32:22–32)
A'. Reconciliation with Esau (33:1–17)
Epilogue: Closure and transition (33:18–36:43)

The weakness of this structure is primarily that Isaac's wife-sister story (Gen 26) and the first half of the reunion with Esau (Gen 32:1–21) have been elided altogether.

Wenham (1994b, p. 169) accounts for all the material as part of a comprehensive pivot structure centred on the births of Jacob's children. His analysis is as follows:

Figure 16: Wenham's structure of the *toledot* of Isaac

A. First encounters of Jacob and Esau (25:19–34)
B. Isaac and the Philistines (26:1–33)
C. Jacob cheats Esau of his blessing (26:34–28:9)
D. Jacob meets God at Bethel (28:10–22)
E. Jacob arrives at Laban's house (29:1–14)
F. Jacob marries Leah and Rachel (29:15–30)
G. Birth of Jacob's sons (29:31–30:24)
F'. Jacob outwits Laban (30:25–31:1)
E'. Jacob leaves Laban (31:2–55)
D'. Jacob meets the angels of God and Mahanaim (32:1–2)
C'. Jacob returns Esau's blessing (32:3–33:20)
B'. Dinah and the Hivites (34:1–31)
A'. Journey's end for Jacob and Isaac (35:1–29)

My main criticisms of this analysis have to do with the C and D stages. Wenham's D stages do share parallel elements—both feature angels and the naming of the places "God's house/camp"—but there are also connections between the Bethel vision and the wrestling scene (Gen 32:22–32). Fokkelman (1991, pp. 49-50) points out that both these divine encounters involve visions at night, only in these texts in Jacob's story is the sun mentioned, and both stories repeat the word פגע ("to meet, encounter"). These repetitions seem to intend a connection too. This means that one either ignores these connections, as Wenham has, or one includes all of Genesis 32 in the D' section, which divides the reunion with Esau in half.

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Wenham's analysis can be improved if we note two major structural phenomena. Firstly, the major shifts in this story are movements in location, yielding a basic structure as follows:

Figure 17: Basic structure of the *toledot* of Isaac

A. Canaan: Family conflict (25:19–28:9)
  B. Exiting: Theophany (28:10–22)
    C. Haran: Jacob's wife-sister cluster (29:1–31:55)
  B'. Re-entering: Theophany (32:1–33:11)[135]
A'. Canaan: Conflict and blessing (33:12–36:43)

Secondly, I believe that Jacob's entire sojourn in Haran is presented in the form of an adapted wife-sister story (as Abraham's foreign sojourns were too) and is therefore governed by their conventional order. In this case, the order is borrowed from Genesis 20, namely: the deception, conflict between wives, and conflict between herdsmen. Consequently, I suggest an adaptation of Wenham's structure as follows:

Figure 18: Detailed structure of the *toledot* of Isaac

Prologue: Rebekah's difficult pregnancy; promises; and contests over inheritance (25:19–34)[136]
  A. Isaac's wife-sister cluster and conflict with the Philistine people (26:1–33)
    B. Jacob cheats Esau of his blessing (26:34–28:9)

      C. Exiting: Jacob meets God at Bethel (28:10–22)

        D. Laban deceives Jacob into marrying Leah before her sister (29:1–30)
          E. Contest between wives concerning the births of sons (29:31–30:34)
        D'. Jacob deceives Laban; herdsmen quarrel and they make a treaty (30:25–31:55)

      C'. Re-entering: Jacob meets God at the Jabbok and reconciles with Esau (32:1–33:11)

    B'. Jacob deceives Esau and they separate (33:12–33:20)
  A'. The attempted marriage of a sister and conflict with the Hivite people (34:1–31)
Epilogue: Rachel's fatal pregnancy; promises; and the gift of the inheritance (35:1–29)

Many of the changes that I have made to Wenham's analysis are to relabel certain sections to more clearly identify the parallels that exist between them. I have also understood the C stages (exiting

[135] The extent could be taken as far as 33:17, though the deception of Esau in 33:12-17, while not dwelt upon by the narrator, could potentially provide an alternative to Wenham's problematic C' stage.

[136] The prologue and epilogue that I have identified could arguably be divided into two, separating the difficult pregnancies and the contest for or gift of inheritance. I have kept them together because these chapters contain other miscellaneous elements too, much as Abraham's epilogue did.

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and re-entering) to be single units dominated by the theophanies, so that Jacob perceiving God's camp and wrestling with God are both part of the same episode and parallel to the Bethel scene. Lastly, I have tentatively separated Jacob's final deceit of Esau (B') from the narration of their reunion (C'), understanding that the B stages are connected by the motif of deception.[137]

The central unit involving conflict between the wives is important. Wenham (1994b, p. 170) observes that the line "God remembered" Noah (Gen 8:1) is the central moment of that concentric structure, a statement that is repeated for Rachel in Genesis 30:22. But a second key statement also connects the centre of Jacob's cycle to the centre of *Abraham's* cycle: in each story it says that YHWH attended to the woman's "affliction" (עֳנִי), that of Hagar and of Leah (16:11 and 29:32 respectively). This suggests that each of the three Change narratives (the *toledot* of Noah, Terah, and Isaac) have similar concentric structures, and that there is a connection of the central units of both previous *toledot* to this one. They share the motif of God's remembrance of the outsider (Noah and Rachel, who epitomise barrenness of land and womb, and Hagar and Leah, who are outcasts, one hated by her mistress, the other unloved by her husband). This all but confirms that the three Change narratives are pivot structures and that their pivot points are correctly identified as being centred on God's care for the outcast.

4.1.2 Narrative emphases

Jacob's story tells of the birth of Israel, both the name and the nation's twelve tribes, and it builds to the climax of the book of Genesis as a whole.

4.1.2.1 Family conflict in Canaan (Gen 25:19–28:9)

The first stage of the *toledot* of Isaac takes place in Canaan, and it seems to have two major functions: firstly, it establishes continuity between the three major fathers of Genesis—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Secondly, it sets up the reasons why Jacob, rather than Esau, is the story's hero and the reasons that provoke his departure from Canaan to Haran.

[137] This is a slight violation of the location-based divisions that I have suggested—this scene takes place in the transitional space and only *ends* in Canaan, and so it is dubiously part of the Canaan-based episodes. Nevertheless, it does explicitly announce Jacob's arrival in Canaan (32:18), including the purchase of territory there. It underlines both Jacob's commitment to the Promised Land and the underlying threat that will never really depart from Edom.

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Continuity of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

Isaac and Rebekah's story is conveyed largely with the goal of showing connections to Abraham and Sarah, and these connections are made as economically as possible.

Firstly, like Sarah, Rebekah is barren, but the solution to her barrenness is provided without drama and without fanfare: Isaac prays for her and God heals her. Her two sons are immediately presented as being in conflict—both *in utero* and in the first episode that involves the sons as actors.

Although links are muted, the early struggle between Jacob and Esau does recall the competition between Ishmael and Isaac. The implied favouritism of Abraham for the elder son and of Sarah for the younger in the previous *toledot* becomes explicit here: Isaac favours the "skilful hunter",[138] Esau, whereas God identifies Rebekah's choice, Jacob, as the one who will be given mastery. Furthermore, the scene of "brotherly conflict" that prompts Ishmael's expulsion—his "laughter" for Isaac—is put in the context of inheritance (21:10); here again the bowl of stew is traded for inheritance rights. Furthermore, just as Sarah insisted that Ishmael should not be allowed to inherit with her son Isaac, so Rebekah also is spurred into action on Jacob's behalf to prevent Esau from becoming the heir of the Abrahamic blessing (Gen 27).

Isaac's wife-sister story is much more clearly calculated to show history repeating itself. The story opens with a famine that provokes Isaac to look for refuge, and Genesis 26:1 introduces the famine with a very unnecessary point of clarification: it says, "besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham." This seems to have no function other than to call to mind the wife-sister story in Genesis 12. The Philistine king and commander characters are identified as Abimelech and Phicol, as they are in the *second* wife-sister story (Gen 20).[139] Similarly to Abraham's story, this one also concludes with a treaty over the well that Isaac also names Beersheba.

The attempt to connect the lives of Abraham's and Isaac's family—connections that will also be made in the life of Jacob—seems to be in order to show continuity of curse (conflict, famine, and

[138] It is uncertain whether or how much this recalls the "mighty hunter" Nimrod from Genesis 10, who was one of the men of war from Ham's line—a line populated with enemy nations.

[139] The parallel between the two stories is established whether these are the same people or merely people who have the same titles. Even though it is approximately seventy-five years later, it is possible that Abimelech and Phicol could be the same people as in Genesis 20. The story does not proceed in the same way as the others: Abimelech makes no attempt to *marry* Rebekah; he is merely concerned that someone might try. Even if Sarah were age-appropriate for Abimelech in Genesis 20 (i.e., if he were 90-ish), he need only be as long-lived as Abraham to be involved as he is in Isaac's story.

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barrenness) as well as the passage of blessing via the chosen line of descent. As Gunn and Fewell (1993, p. 109) observe, the reliving of the plot of a predecessor shows continuity and difference; continuity shows that each generation provides the same "stuff" from which God builds his great nation, and the differences illustrate that there are always opportunities for change and movement into a new story. In Genesis, we are being driven closer to the character or event that will fulfil God's plan to bring blessing instead of curse. This means that the differences that emerge in this telling of the story are worth special attention.

The intrusion of Isaac's wife-sister story into the middle of Jacob's deceptions of Esau is on the one hand strange, because Jacob and Esau seem to disappear from the story. However, its major purpose here seems to be to reinforce our own appreciation of the Abrahamic blessings in the face of Esau's undervaluing of them. This emerges from an evaluation of the points at which Isaac's wife-sister story differs from that of Abraham. The following are noteworthy:

- The famine is brought directly into comparison with that of Abraham's first wife-sister story in Egypt, but unlike in Abraham's story, God intervenes to prevent Isaac from going to Egypt, and promises him blessing *in that land*. It emphasises that the land that Jacob is soon to flee is crucial to the fulfilment of promise.
- Walton (2001, p. 553) notes decreasing danger in the wife-sister accounts. Pharaoh took Sarah as his wife, which probably implies that the marriage was consummated; Abimelech sent for Sarah but did not consummate the marriage; and he did not send for Rebekah at all. Similarly, God touched Pharaoh's household with plagues; God did not allow Abimelech to touch Sarah; and here Abimelech does not allow anyone to touch Rebekah. Finally, Pharaoh sends Abraham away; Abimelech allows Abraham to stay and gives him gifts; and here Abimelech offers Isaac and his family protection. The threat to the family is downplayed and the goodness of God is amplified.
- Unlike Abraham's stories, the accumulation of wealth is not directly at the expense of the host nation but because of God's blessing of Isaac's labour (Gen 26:12). His success attracts the *jealousy* of the other herdsmen, provoking conflict. Thus, although Abimelech underlines that Isaac risked bringing curse upon the nation (in continuity with the Abrahamic parallels), there is contrasting emphasis on God's blessing even in the midst of barrenness. Cotter (2003, p. 192) argues that the motif of "curse upon the nations" is downplayed because the point is rather to implicate Isaac in the kinds of misbehaviour of which he is the victim in the following chapter—he models the use of an advantageous lie. This wife-sister episode is the

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start of a sequence of reversals: Isaac's deception is turned back on him by Jacob; Jacob's deception is turned back on him by Laban; and eventually Jacob gains his revenge on Laban by manipulating the births of his livestock to his own advantage. Deceit begets deceit.

- In the final confrontation between Isaac and Abimelech, the king acknowledges that YHWH has been with Isaac, and he declares, "You are now the blessed of YHWH" (Gen 26:28–29). This suggests that Abraham's blessing has passed down to Isaac—the *inheritance* of blessing is in view, which connects the wife-sister story to the episodes at either side of it in which Jacob completes the theft of Esau's inheritance.

In summary, the wife-sister story interrupts the conflict-between-brothers stories because, before explaining why Jacob must flee to Haran, the narrator establishes the importance of the land as the environment of God's blessing and the place in which the Abrahamic covenant will be established. God tells the possessor of his promises not to leave Canaan but rather to trust him to provide blessing in the midst of the famine—only for the next heir of those promises to have to flee. This wife-sister story therefore serves to amplify the tension underlying the rest of the Jacob narrative.

The reasons for Jacob's flight

The motif of deception is important to Jacob's story and begins with the circumstances of his birth. Rebekah has a difficult pregnancy, perhaps recalling Genesis 3:16, and she receives an oracle that introduces preference for the younger son. Sarna (1966, p. 183) argues that the divine election of Jacob *in utero* dissociates his election from any of the deceitful means by which Jacob attempted to fulfil those promises. He is born grasping the older's heel (עָקֵב) and is named Jacob (יַעֲקֹב), which is representative of his attempt to usurp his brother's position.[140] Carr (2011, p. 318) says that it is common for folk tales from oral cultures to feature "wily tricksters" like Jacob. Tricksters can take the role of hero in such stories, and we may well derive enjoyment from his eventual besting of Laban, for example; however, in Genesis, Jacob epitomises blessing *wrongfully pursued*, and his emergence as a (somewhat) virtuous character coincides with the *shedding* of his birth name.

[140] The reference to "heel" may also intend to recall the deceitful, heel-bruising serpent in Genesis 3:15. Although it is not common to see the role of the serpent as important in Genesis, it is fitting here for several reasons. Firstly, Rebekah's difficult pregnancy already references the same text. Secondly, the serpent is a deceiver, and so it introduces Jacob's deception particularly as a quality that identifies him with the problem, not the solution. Thirdly, and in contrast, if there is any significance to Genesis 3:16 beyond the human distrust of snakes, then it is to imply that the line of descent with which Genesis is so concerned is the conduit of hope that the curse might be reversed. So even though Jacob's name identifies him with the serpent, it may also draw focus onto the possibility of that seed of the woman emerging in this story.

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Immediately after the birth story, Jacob's role as usurper is strongly underlined. The trade of lentil stew for Esau's birthright is perhaps not *trickery*, but it is certainly opportunistic, and it establishes Jacob as covetous of blessing and Esau as a despiser of it. Walton (2001, pp. 550-51) raises the possibility that Esau's hunger may have been life-threatening, though he concludes that the bluntness of the presentation offers no mitigation of Esau's disdain towards his birthright. Esau does not fully apprehend the worth of the Abrahamic blessings.

The episode that finally provokes Jacob's flight is prefaced by comments concerning Esau's marriage to Hittite women who are an affront to Rebekah in particular. The question of appropriate wives is a unifying thread in this episode, because Esau's change in marital status seems at least partly to be what prompts Isaac's thoughts of succession, and Esau's choice of wives underlines for Rebekah that he should not be allowed to inherit Isaac's blessing; finally, once it is clear that Jacob's life is in danger, Rebekah uses the issue of appropriate wives as a pretence for Jacob's escape.

The deception of Isaac is especially important, because the blessing that it steals seems to be the *legal inheritance* (not merely, for example, a powerful word that brings good fortune).[141] Sarna (1966, p. 187) notes that the deathbed blessing occupies the place of legally binding last will and testament. The declaration that one is old and nearing death has background in Nuzi documents in which this also stands as a legal statement of inheritance.

The deception of Isaac at Rebekah's instigation again features the eating of a meal. In the first episode of this stage, Esau gives away his birthright to Jacob in exchange for a meal, and in this episode, Jacob again barters what should be Esau's for a bowl of food (Bokovoy, 2009, pp. 44-45). Bokovoy (2009, p. 50) argues that Jacob's deception of Isaac is essentially couched as a parody of ritual acts that a later reader would have recognised. Rituals commonly included elements such as the presentation of a meal, the exchange of clothing, and ritual hand-placement, all of which Jacob performs in more prosaic settings and in service of his deception. The imitation venison stew, the stolen clothing, and the touching of a disguised arm are all comedic versions of the august ritual elements that would usually accompany a ceremony such as this.

The tension in this episode is built around Isaac's attempts to verify the identity of his son. In one of these verifications in which Jacob must lie to his father, Isaac asks how his son hunted his game so

[141] Towner (2001, p. 206), for example, acknowledges that a magical, dynamistic view of blessing has been assumed in much scholarship, but he claims that Genesis 27 should rather be seen as an oath-making ceremony than a magical one.

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quickly, and Jacob's answer is significant. He says, "Because YHWH your God brought it to me" (Gen 27:20). This is important both because Jacob's story is largely about the attempt to secure deceitfully what YHWH must bring, and because Jacob uses distancing language—"YHWH *your* God"—this helps the attentive reader to recognise that Jacob desires the blessing without yet knowing or desiring the God who blesses. Thus, even though his deception is successful and the oath that secures the blessing is given to him, the story that tells of Jacob's passage away from and back to the Promised Land is also the story of his movement from ignorance to knowledge of God.

And so Isaac blesses Jacob with the fatness of the land and with other characteristic Abrahamic blessings (Gen 27:29; 28:3). Before Jacob departs for Haran, ostensibly to find a wife but actually to flee the wrath of Esau, Isaac sends him off with an additional word. He says, "May [YHWH] give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!" (Gen 28:4). This underlines again the idea that the blessing that is in view in Genesis is not merely a general state of favour before God, and the inheritance that Jacob stole was not merely a double portion of the family's wealth. The concern is with the inheritance of the blessings given to Abraham by covenant, particularly (in view of Jacob's departure) the possession of the land. In other words, in continuity with God's word in Genesis 15 that the fulfilment of the promise concerning the land would be distant and preceded by alienation and suffering, Isaac's wish for his heir is that the blessings of Abraham would continue to be passed down to him and his "seed".

Hope in this particular seed should be relatively low, given the means by which he achieves this primary status. However, the story also underlines the haplessness of Esau. His own "blessing" from Isaac sounds more like the judgement upon Cain—he is to dwell away from the fatness of the land and his life shall be characterised by violence ("the sword"). This provokes Esau to become Cain to his brother—the false Abel who procured the favour of his father not by making a better offering but by taking it deceitfully—and he plots to kill him. Furthermore, the story that started with his bad marriages ends with him attempting to please his parents by marrying within the family. It is unclear whether his parents are pleased by the choice of an Ishmaelite woman, but this is likely to strike a later Israelite reader as another alignment with the wrong line (Shectman, 2011, p. 209).

4.1.2.2 Theophany while exiting the land (Gen 28:10–22)

During Jacob's departure from Canaan, he receives a night-time vision of God. Fokkelman (1991, pp. 49-50) notes that there is a repeat of the word "place" three times in 28:11, and he suggests that it

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emphasises that being in this anonymous place was not accidental; Jacob does not recognise the significance of the place that he is in. The structure of this section emphasises the movement from an unknown place to a known one and an unknown God to a known one—or at least one to whom Jacob makes tentative commitments:

Figure 19: Structure of the Bethel episode (Gen 28)

A. Jacob happens upon an anonymous place (28:10–11a)
B. Jacob takes a stone of the place and goes to sleep (28:11b)
C. God makes a promise to Jacob (28:12–15)
A′. Jacob realises the importance of this place (28:16–17)
B′. Jacob sets up the stone as a monument and names the place (28:18–19)
C′. Jacob makes a promise to God (28:20–22)

In his sleep, Jacob sees a vision of the gate of heaven with a stepped structure on which the angels of God are ascending and descending. Although there is different terminology used for the structures, it is likely that the "ladder" that Jacob sees is a ziggurat, which functioned as a portal by which the gods travelled between realms (Walton, 2001, pp. 570-71). It is possible that it intends to recall Babel's tower, in which the humans built a tower (מִגְדָּל) with "its top in the heavens" (וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַּשָּׁמָיִם). Jacob sees a stepped structure (סֻלָּם), not a tower, but its "top touched the heavens" too (הַשָּׁמָיְמָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מַגִּיעַ). Babel would be a significant connection to the degree that the tower was meant to be a place at which the gods could descend and by which people could secure the gods' blessing upon their own exploits. If Babel is the prototypical example of humans trying to secure blessing in illegitimate ways, Jacob—the usurper of blessing—is a human embodiment of Babel's crime. He will continue to deceive and exploit in order to secure his own prosperity while in Haran. The stairway to the gate of heaven is the true version of what Babel was meant to be, and Jacob's exclamation that YHWH was in that place and he did not know it emphasises the distance from God that has already been suggested by his identification of YHWH as *Isaac's* God, not his own. Furthermore, Jacob is presently *leaving* the land that is the house of God—a problem that the theophany addresses by promising Jacob's return to and inheritance of the land, and offering presence and protection in his sojourn (Brueggemann, 1982, pp. 244-46).

Just as the night-time vision that Abraham received in Genesis 15 strongly emphasised dislocation from the land and the need to express trust in God's promises regardless of the apparent remoteness of their fulfilment, the vision that Jacob receives provides similar reassurance that God will be with him and will fulfil what has been promised.

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Jacob responds by erecting a pillar and promising that if God keeps up his end of the bargain, when he returns to the land he will take YHWH as his God, that he will set up the pillar as a "house of God" at Bethel, and that he will tithe his possessions. The vow seems unnecessary, following as it does the promises that have already guaranteed the things that he asks for. Yet Jacob has little in the way of resources (cf. Gen 32:10) and the vow likely indicates his vulnerability and distress (Wenham, 1994a, p. 80). Much as God's appearances to Hagar addressed her in the midst of trouble and helped her to see the God who sees her, this begins a process by which Isaac's God becomes Jacob's too.

4.1.2.3 Jacob's wife-sister cluster in Haran (Gen 29:1–31:55)

Jacob's sojourn in Haran is not, to my knowledge, ever identified in scholarship as a wife-sister story, and the reason is obvious: it does not depict the patriarch risking his wife by advertising her as his marriageable sister. Nevertheless, I think this *is* Jacob's version of the wife-sister pattern. The reasons why the pattern is not noticed are, firstly, because source-critical studies have tended to see wife-sister stories as duplications that resulted from divergent traditions describing the same event, and this part of Jacob's story is too different to be accounted for as duplication. Therefore, even though literary criticism looks at the wife-sister stories not as accidental duplications but as type-scenes, because Jacob's story has not traditionally featured in the discussion, it has continued to escape notice. Secondly, the pattern has been significantly altered in this case, because at least one other pattern (the meeting of a wife at a well) has been woven into it, and Jacob is initially the *victim* of the deception, not the perpetrator of it. The pattern has been redeployed as a *contest* between the trickster Jacob against his uncle Laban, who proves to be as covetous of blessing and as wily as Jacob.

The meeting-at-the-well scene

Rebekah's barrenness and Isaac's wife-sister scene both seemed at least partly to serve the purpose of showing Abraham's history repeating itself in Isaac's story. In Genesis 29, Jacob finds a beautiful shepherdess from Laban's family at a well and determines to marry her, by which the narrator shows Isaac's history being repeated in Jacob's story.

The use of familiar patterns raises associations with the previous uses. In this case, it prompts us to expect that transactions will also proceed as before (only for the narrator to violate it in several ways), and it invokes the warning with which Abraham prefaced his servant's mission in Genesis 24—Isaac was not permitted to go to Haran, lest he be tempted to settle there and the existence of Abraham's heirs as a distinct people be snuffed out. Walton (2001, p. 569) believes that assimilation

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no longer represents a live threat to Jacob, because the burial places of Abraham and Sarah in Canaan, among other things, mean that Canaan has become *home*. However, even in Isaac's case he had known no other home, and Sarah had only recently been buried; there was just as much tying Isaac to Canaan, and yet he was forbidden to undertake that journey. Jacob's story is also characterised by several repetitions of the need to return to the land (Gen 27:45; 28:4, 15, 21) contrasted with more than one lengthy extension of his stay, which suggests his assimilation remains a genuine threat.[142]

Laban's introduction again seems to be a mechanism that connects Abraham's and Isaac's cycles. Sarna (1966, p. 174) says that Laban's central role in the negotiations for the hand of Rebekah show him acting as a "fratriarch" in spite of his father's presence in the home—a role that has precedent in Hurrian documents. More to the point, however, his reappearance continues the motif of history repeating itself, and it allows for some important character development. In the first well scene, Laban is motivated by the ring and bracelets that his sister was given (24:30); in the second scene, Jacob is the one who notices not only Rachel's beauty but also her sheep, a point emphasised by repetition in Genesis 29:9–10. He and Laban both have an eye for an opportunity to benefit.

Laban's greeting, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" (Gen 29:14) is reminiscent of the man's greeting the woman in Genesis 2:23. This is not without parallel as a greeting of a relative (e.g., 2 Sam 5:1; 19:12–13), but these are the only two occurrences in Genesis, and both uses occur in marriage contexts. If an allusion is intended, it may serve to show Laban inserting himself very centrally into this marriage process. He is familiar with the value of being associated with the "blessed of YHWH", and his overly enthusiastic welcome shows his own eye for benefit and his duplicity as a character. It may also underline the danger of being "wedded" to these relatives outside of the Promised Land.

The wife-sister type-scene

To make the case that Genesis 29–31 forms a complex wife-sister type-scene, it must be demonstrated that there are sufficient similarities to invoke the pattern, and the crucial differences must be accounted for. The wife-sister pattern is less easily detectable in these chapters because it

[142] Fokkelman (1991, p. 128) points out that all four of Rebekah's words in 27:44a ("Stay with him a few days") are repeated in chapter 29—especially important is the statement that the seven years that Jacob served seemed like "a few days". Fokkelman suggests that this raises the expectation that Jacob would now return. Laban's schemes, however, thwart his departure.

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has been reworked in order to bring it into significant relationships with other emphases in the story. Firstly, an important motif in Jacob's story is *striving*. He enters into a contest of wits with his brother and his father, and the wife-sister story is reframed in the form of a back-and-forth contest with his uncle. Secondly, his wife-sister story has been hybridised with the form that his deception of Isaac took (Sarna, 1966, p. 184)—just as Rebekah and Jacob had used Isaac's darkened vision to substitute Jacob for Esau, Laban uses the darkness of night to substitute Leah for Rachel.

There are several similarities between this story and the elements of a typical wife-sister pattern:

Table 6: Conformity of Jacob's story to the wife-sister pattern

Typical Pattern	Jacob's Story
Reason for refuge: Circumstances drive the family to seek refuge outside the Promised Land.	Jacob flees because of Esau's plan to take his life (27:41–45).
The deceitful plan: The beauty of the patriarch's wife poses a threat, so he says she is his sister.	Rachel is beautiful but Leah is not, so instead of presenting Rachel as wife to Jacob, Laban substitutes her sister, Leah (29:16–23).
The woman attracts attention: The wife is noticed by the ruler of that place.	Jacob had taken special notice of Rachel (29:10).
The illegitimate marriage: The ruler takes the "sister" to be his wife.	Jacob marries the sister instead (29:23).
Discovery and accusation: The ruse is discovered and the patriarch is accused of deceit.	Jacob discovers the deceit and accuses Laban (29:25).
Profit for deceiver at the expense of the deceived: The ruler is cursed and the patriarch gains wealth.	Jacob gives seven years of labour to Laban (29:20).
Return of the wife: The wife is presented back to him.	Jacob is given Rachel too (29:30).
Departure with wealth: The king announces a resolution to the benefit of the deceiver.	Laban adds seven years of labour for Rachel (29:30) and becomes wealthy (30:27) / Jacob uses trickery to carry off Laban's flocks and becomes wealthy (30:43).
Quarrel with herdsmen: Sharing of resources proves difficult and the patriarch is viewed as a threat. The patriarch behaves honourably.	Jacob is prompted to leave when the other herdsmen grumble about the flocks that he has accrued (31:1); he claims to have behaved honourably (30:33; 31:9).
The patriarch agrees to a treaty: The patriarch and the ruler come to a peaceable agreement.	Laban and Jacob agree to a peace (31:43–55).

One further detail that strengthens the connection of this story to the wife-sister stories of Abraham and Isaac is that they characteristically feature the accusation formula, "What is this you have done?" (מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ). In Genesis, accusation formulae appear in the following passages:

- Genesis 3:13 "What is this you have done?" (מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂית)
- Genesis 4:10 "What have you done?" (מֶה עָשִׂיתָ)

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- Genesis 12:18 "What is this you have done to me?" (מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי)
- Genesis 20:9 "What have you done to us?" (מֶה־עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ)
- Genesis 26:10 "What is this you have done to us?" (מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ)
- Genesis 29:25 "What is this you have done to me?" (מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי)
- Genesis 31:26 "What have you done?" (מֶה עָשִׂיתָ)
- Genesis 42:28 "What is this God has done to us?" (מַה־זֹּאת עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לָּנוּ)

In the first two, the speaker is God; the first is directed at Eve, who was deceived by the snake, whereas the second is directed at Cain, who similarly was warned that sin desired to have him, and he too succumbed to temptation. The next five all belong to the wife-sister stories (including Jacob's), and each accusation formula includes the same elements: the Edenic formula (מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ) plus the indirect object.[143] The remaining two come from Joseph's story—the Unravelling plot stage—and have formal differences that dilute the repetitiveness. Nevertheless, in the stories of the three main patriarchs, the accusations are exclusive to the wife-sister pattern.

If Jacob's sojourn in Haran does represent a reworked wife-sister story, its main function besides connecting Jacob to his predecessors[144] is to bring to a climax the motif of fraudulent pursuit of blessing. Abraham and Isaac both deployed this deception in order to secure blessing by deceitful means when faced with threats to their wellbeing. Jacob participated in Isaac's deception in order to defraud his brother of the blessing, and his wife-sister episode becomes a contest between tricksters over the benefits of being "the blessed of YHWH". Unfortunately for him, Jacob's opportunism meets its match in his uncle—Laban seems to covet the blessing in the same mercenary way that Jacob himself does—and this chapter encompasses fourteen years in which Laban has the upper hand and Jacob is pressed into servitude. Fokkelman (1991, p. 130) points out that in Genesis 25, the oracle at Jacob's birth featured the terms "rule" and "serve", whereas in Genesis 29, "serve" is repeated seven times. This emphasises Jacob's distance from the blessing he worked to gain.

[143] The fifth of these is in the mouth of Laban, directed at Jacob as he attempted to flee home with his wealth. Jacob's wife-sister story features a second reversal, in which the trickster becomes the tricked: Laban becomes the victim of deception (special emphasis is put on Jacob's trickery in Genesis 31:20, 26). The second accusation scene is an appropriate way of marking Jacob's victory over his uncle in the contest for blessing.

[144] This includes again implicating the patriarch in a prohibited marriage: Sarna (1966, pp. 87, 195) points out that the priestly code prohibits the marriage, successively or simultaneously, of one man to two living sisters.

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The births of Jacob's children as the pivot of the *toledot* of Isaac

Similarly to Genesis 16—the heart of Abraham's story—the central unit of this *toledot* section is again occupied by birth, a contest between wives, and God's intervention to bring life out of death. The most obvious reason for locating these births at the centre of Jacob's story is that these are the tribal heads of Israel, and their introduction, the inheritance of the promises, and their eventual enslavement in Egypt are all essential background to the book of Exodus. Nevertheless, while Genesis does serve to provide the theological and historical background to Exodus, the manner of presentation of these events in Genesis suggests that its ultimate point runs deeper. This chapter-and-a-half is largely taken up with formulaic and repetitive birth notices, and as is common in Genesis, the story offers an etymological explanation for each son's name; if the narrator's purpose were merely to register the nation's origin here, nothing further would be required. Indeed, Von Rad (1972, p. 297) sees no theological comment or allusion to a tribal situation behind these passages, arguing that they merely concern the mothers' personal situations and relationships to Jacob. However, besides the birth notices, there are short framing narratives that serve to divide the births into five sections, and together with the declarations made at the children's births, they offer significant clues as to the communication attempt—the theological comment—that is being made.

The five groups of births are further divisible into two groups: Leah's story and Rachel's story. The first group (29:31–35) does not feature Rachel except to mention her barrenness, and the second (30:1–24) concerns a contest between Rachel and Leah. The births are divided as follows:

Table 7: Narrative framing of the births of Jacob's children

Verse	Mother	Child	Declaration
1. YHWH sees that Leah is hated and opens her womb (29:31).			
29:32	Leah	Reuben	"Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me."
29:33	Leah	Simeon	"Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also."
29:34	Leah	Levi	"Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons."
29:35	Leah	Judah	"This time I will praise the LORD."
2a. Bilhah is given to Jacob in order to bear children for Rachel (30:1–3).			
30:5-6	Bilhah (Rachel)	Dan	"God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son."
30:8	Bilhah (Rachel)	Naphtali	"With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed."

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2b. Zilpah is given to Jacob in order to bear children for Leah (30:9).			
30:11	Zilpah (Leah)	Gad	"Good fortune has come!"
30:13	Zilpah (Leah)	Asher	"Happy am I! For women have called me happy."
2c. Rachel trades Jacob to Leah in exchange for Leah's mandrakes (30:14–16).			
30:18	Leah	Issachar	"God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband."
30:20	Leah	Zebulun	"God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons."
30:21	Leah	Dinah	
2d. God remembers Rachel, listens to her, and opens her womb (30:22).			
30:23–24	Rachel	Joseph	"God has taken away my reproach." "May the LORD add to me another son!"

The wives exhibit vulnerability in different ways. Leah is unloved by her husband; Rachel is barren—unremembered by God. Both of these motifs have significant interconnections within the book.

Leah is a character who evokes much sympathy. She is given away to Jacob seemingly without concern for her own wishes and is scorned by everyone (Fokkelman, 1991, p. 127). Her childbearing in Genesis 29 begins with a declaration of the end of affliction—another connection to the central unit of Abraham's cycle ("YHWH has listened to your affliction", Genesis 16:11)—and another signal of concern in the book for vulnerable female outsiders and the unloved. The initial three births are driven by her wish that she should win the love of Jacob, and the final birth in this section (Judah) seems in one sense to be a resignation—she acknowledges that Jacob will not love her. However, it is marked with the declaration that her attentions have now been directed Godward. As with the other vulnerable women in Genesis, God sees her, and—at risk of making too much of a subtle point—her transformative realisation is that the good that she seeks is to be found ultimately in God's domain.

Genesis 30 switches attention to Rachel. Her story begins with her complaint about childlessness—"Give me children, or I shall die!"—to which Jacob responds angrily that he is not in the place of God, and her story is resolved with the birth of Joseph in 30:23, which is announced as God's removal of her reproach. This bookends her story with the idea that only God can bring life.

Her first attempt to solve her childlessness is a repeat of Sarah's solution from the central unit of Abraham's story—she gives her servant to Jacob as a surrogate mother. Although there is no attempt here on the part of the servant-wives to usurp the positions of the true wives, the

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connection likely reactivates Sarah's involvement in Genesis 16, which seemed there to imply that this was a human-centred and ultimately damaging solution to the problem of barrenness.

Rachel claims a victory in the birth of Bilhah's firstborn—a victory that is reminiscent of the battle that Jacob will eventually wage at the Jabbok. She names her son with the declaration, "Wrestlings of Elohim I have wrestled" (נַפְתּוּלֵי אֱלֹהִים נִפְתַּלְתִּי), a declaration that Fokkelman (1991, pp. 135-36) suggests should be understood as indicating a struggle with her sister for God's favour, seeing as he closed her womb but not Leah's. The ambiguity of the genitive relationship might also allow us to wonder whether this victory does indeed admit the work of the divine, as she claims.

In the central section, Rachel's claims of vindication seem to be depicted as premature. Leah gives her own servant to Jacob, and Zilpah matches the two births that Bilhah managed. The names of these sons seem to underline Leah's blessedness, especially in the eyes of other women. (Is this a veiled jibe at her sister?)

The third series of births—those of Leah—is prefaced by a narrative in which Rachel asks that Leah would give her some of her son's mandrakes. Because of the belief that the mandrake plant had powers to increase fertility (Wright, 1996, p. 714), this might raise a reader's hopes that Rachel has found a solution to her barrenness. However, given that Jacob had previously leveraged Esau's request for lentil stew to his own advantage, another case of siblings bartering for food might signal that it is an ill-conceived plan. Indeed, the mandrakes have no effect on Rachel, and similarly to Esau's story, it is the sibling who benefits from the transaction: Leah bears two more sons instead.[145] If this is meant as a touch of irony, it underlines that in the face of human solutions to problems that lie in the divine realm—even quasi-magical solutions—it is only God who can bring life from the dead.

The birth of Leah's final son is met with a double declaration. The first—"God has endowed me with a good endowment"—is not related to the naming of Zebulun (he is named because of her second declaration: "now my husband will honour / dwell with me"), but seems to be her overall assessment of the contest in which she has been engaged: God has gifted her.

Finally, Rachel's vindication comes and her womb is opened. The climactic birth of a son from her own body also comes with a double declaration: Rachel declares her vindication, saying, "God has

[145] Fokkelman (1991, p. 138) points out that Issachar's name is a subtle criticism of Jacob, because it underlines that he has become a "man of wages". Leah hires him, and she receives this son as her wages in return.

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taken away my reproach." She names her son Joseph in anticipation of one more son, Benjamin, who eventually becomes the only Canaan-born son of Jacob. Fokkelman (1991, pp. 139-41) reckons that God opens Rachel's womb now because by giving Leah access to Jacob—in the trade for mandrakes—she lets go of her part in Jacob's oppression of Leah, which had "condemned her to sterility". This seems unlikely, given that there is no direct or implied connection of this birth to the mandrakes, they are framed by separate narrative introductions, and there is no suggestion that her barrenness has this cause. Leah's fertility is identified as being the Lord's kindness to her because she was hated. *Perhaps* the connection to Hagar's story puts Rachel in the position of Sarah—the oppressor of Hagar—but here it is Jacob who seems to be the subject of this hatred, and the narrator does not take the opportunity to implicate Rachel in Leah's pain or blame her for her own barrenness. The change in Rachel's status comes about without any obvious change of behaviour. The narrative frame merely says that God *remembers her and listens to her*—God brings life out of death because it is in his hands to do so.

This, then, seems to me to be the theological emphasis of this central section of the *toledot* of Isaac: Leah had God's acknowledgement of her plight from the start, but longed for the love of her husband. The birth of Judah, the primary ancestor of the Southern Kingdom, is marked by her recognition of YHWH instead. Rachel had the love of her husband but was "forgotten" by God. The birth of Joseph, the primary ancestor of the Northern Kingdom, happens after other solutions (a Sarah-like surrogacy and the purchase of mandrakes for fertility) have been exhausted. Joseph's birth is marked by the declaration that *God* has ended her reproach (Towner, 2001, p. 225). Leah's story reiterates the love of God for the outsider; Rachel's story reiterates that the contest for blessing is a misdirected attempt to claim what ultimately resides in God.

Conflict over flocks and a treaty with Laban

The final phase of the typical wife-sister story is the conflict for prosperity between the patriarch's people and the herdsmen of the host family; this is signalled in Jacob's story in Genesis 31:1–2.

In the first wife-sister story, Abraham is expelled from Egypt and the treaty governing the sharing of the land is not with the king but with Lot, whom Abraham generously allows to choose the best land for himself. The next two stories feature Abimelech and the disputes concern the control of wells of water; in each case, the patriarch is innocent and Abimelech's herdsmen are hostile. In this story, Jacob eagerly plays the role of innocent victim, but he is engaged in a battle of wits with his uncle in which neither is innocent.

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In the typical wife-sister story, the patriarch behaves fraudulently but leaves with increased prosperity. Mathews (2005, p. 122) argues that this demonstrates that God brings about blessing *in spite of* the patriarch's actions. While this may be so, I think it is more accurate to see in these stories a form of success achieved apart from faith, which in turn leads to the disruption of other promises. In Jacob's story, the deceiver is initially Laban, and key framing statements underline the fact that he benefits by claiming fourteen years of labour during which YHWH's blessing of Jacob accrues prosperity only for Laban (Gen 30:27, 30). However, instead of Jacob leaving empty-handed and returning to his homeland, he remains there for several more years enacting a plan to gain plunder for himself, thus fulfilling the usual role of the patriarch in these stories: through quasi-magical means, he engineers the births of Laban's flocks in order to claim the best animals for himself and to leave the weak animals to Laban.

Just as both parties accrue unjust benefit at the other's expense, the fraudulent pursuit of blessing also results in relational disarray for both of them. For Laban, his trade of his daughters for Jacob's labour eventually yields their own declaration that they have no portion or inheritance left with him. Sarna (1966, p. 200) believes that Rachel's and Leah's concern for their inheritance has to do with the practice of the bride price being kept on deposit for the bride herself. Laban seemingly has not made any provision for their compensation for Jacob's service. Shectman (2011, pp. 216-19) believes that there is insufficient evidence in parallel texts to allow us to make conclusions about bride-price practices and argues rather that similar statements in 2 Samuel 20:1 and 1 Kings 12:16—"We have no portion in David"—are more relevant. She interprets the words of Rachel and Leah not as a claim about inheritance rights, but as a "rebel chant" by which they reject Laban's household and express solidarity with Jacob; their subversive behaviour is given as the reason for Laban's pursuit of them. On the balance, the sisters' additional statement, "For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money" (Gen 31:15) and Rachel's subsequent theft of Laban's household gods—clearly items valuable to Laban and something that Rachel saw as compensation—suggest that Sarna's view is more likely. Either way, Laban's behaviour destroys his relationship with his daughters.

For Jacob, his deceitful dealings—both in engineering the births and thus disinheriting Laban's sons, and in stealing away without telling Laban[146]—likewise lead to anger and threat. This precipitates the confrontation on the border of the land in which the two parties agree to separate, not amicably as Lot and Abraham did, but with mutual suspicion and a treaty to prevent them from crossing over to

[146] This is described as a "trick" in Genesis 31:20, 27.

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do one another harm. Throughout this section of the story, but most especially at the confrontation with Laban, Jacob protests his honesty and innocence. Towner (2001, p. 226) considers this a "barefaced lie", though perhaps we can be generous and call it ambiguous. Certainly, the majority of evidence that God has been aiding him comes from the mouth of Jacob himself, and he is far from being a reliable witness. The narrator tells us only of God's interventions to instruct Jacob to go home and to instruct Laban not to harm him. The net result in any case is that the relationship with the Mesopotamian branch of the family is severed (Sarna, 1966, p. 202).[147]

And so the sojourn in Haran that began with Jacob defrauding his brother of blessing and fleeing for his life ends with Jacob defrauding his uncle of blessing and fleeing for his life again. The tension now, at the point of re-entry into the land, is that Jacob has nowhere left to go. He has to face Esau.

4.1.2.4 Theophany while re-entering the land (Gen 32:1–33:11)

Jacob's re-entry into the land mirrors his exit in that it again features the entry into an anonymous place, the vision of angels, and the naming of the place as a residence of God. There is also a night-time encounter with the divine, this time a "man" with whom Jacob wrestles and petitions for blessing. This episode is structured as an interchange[148] between the encounters with God and with Esau:

Figure 20: Structure of Genesis 32:1–33:17

A. Jacob enters God's camp (32:1–2)
  B. Jacob divides into two camps in anticipation of meeting Esau (32:3–8)
A'. Jacob prays for deliverance now that he has been blessed to become two camps (32:9–12)
  B'. Jacob sends the flocks and herds from his camp as a present for Esau (32:13–21)
A". Jacob wrestles a man at the Jabbok (32:22–32)
  B". Jacob meets Esau and gives him a blessing (33:1–17)

The interchange structure seems to be employed as a device to build suspense; it allows that neither the confrontation with God nor with Esau is resolved quickly (Davidson, 2011, p. 153). As Wenham (1994b, p. 290) points out, the narration provides no relief either: Jacob sends messengers, but they bring no reply from Esau—only the report that he has mobilised an army and is on the move. At the

[147] This seems to be a major reason why the question of appropriate wives disappears from the narrative and the next wives identified by nationality in the book come from Canaan and Egypt (Shectman, 2011, p. 220).

[148] Interchange structure "involves an alternation of elements in an 'a, b, a, b' pattern" (Powell, 1991, p. 33).

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climactic moment of Jacob's story, it is fitting that the intertwined questions of Jacob's relationships with the divine and with his competitor for blessing should be brought to a head in this way.

The meeting of angels in a camp that is then named Mahanaim is an immediate link to the Bethel revelation, and it alerts the reader that there are deeper things afoot in this scene (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 261). Mahanaim is a dual noun ("two camps"), which prompts us to wonder whose camps are meant. Cotter (2003, p. 240) offers several possibilities; he claims that some geographical designations are dual by convention, such as "Jerusalem", though this does not preclude the influence on the name of some doubled feature. The immediate connection in the text is to the camp of God, which would suggest that the camps belong to God or that Jacob realises that his camp has arrived at God's camp. However, Jacob complicates matters by dividing his own camp into two and declaring, "Now I have become two camps" (Gen 32:10). Perhaps the ambiguity is important, since this text jumps between the dualities of God's protection (via angelic presence) (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 262) and Jacob's preparations (dividing his camp into two), and it eventually culminates in Jacob alone and locked in combat with a mysterious figure for ascendancy and ultimately for God's blessing.

Word that Esau is on the way prompts Jacob to divide his camp in two and make preparations to ensure that the rest of his household are safe. That his first thoughts turn to his family and to prayer perhaps shows some growth in the man who left Canaan ignorant of God and concerned for his own security and blessing above seemingly all else (Cotter, 2003, pp. 242-43).

The substance of his prayer is important:

- It emphasises that YHWH had been the God of his fathers Abraham and Isaac. This sounds like the distancing language that he used when speaking to Isaac ("your God," Genesis 27:20), but this time the focus is on his own unworthily held place within that line of favour. This is rather a sign of the appropriation of God as his own God (Wenham, 1994b, p. 291).
- It is book-ended with reiterations of the promises that God made to him. In 32:9 he reminds God that he had said, "I will do you good," and this is restated in 32:12, but with the addition of the infinitive absolute for emphasis: "I will *surely* do you good" (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 265). Although it takes the form of a petition, in holding God to his promises, Jacob is expressing similar dependence and trust in God's word to that which Abraham expressed at the high points of his story (Gen 15:6; 22:12).

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- While Jacob the heel-grasper was eager to prevail over others and to make himself great, his prayer indicates an apprehension of his genuine status. He left Canaan with only his staff and he returns now as two camps, and yet he confesses his unworthiness of God's חסד and אמת. He has gained wealth, which is often expressed by the phrase "to become great" (e.g., Gen 26:13), but his confession is "I am not worthy" (lit. "I am too small"). Jacob at last recognises his lack (Cotter, 2003, p. 242; Fokkelman, 1991, p. 203). This is re-emphasised as his family and wealth cross over without him and he is left on his own.

The act of sending everyone away is another point of connection with Abraham and his final test. Abraham left his camp and servants behind and ascended the mountain with only Isaac. Again there is a stripping away of everything but the man and the test. Jacob's people depart from him, and he faces God alone.

At some point in the night, at the ford called Jabbok, Jacob is assailed by a mysterious figure. This episode is host to repetition and wordplay that help to establish points of focus; particularly pertinent are the connections of "Jacob" (יַעֲקֹב) with the act of wrestling (וַיֵּאָבֵק), and of both with the "Jabbok" (יַבֹּק) (Cotter, 2003, p. 244).[149] Sarna (1966, p. 204) and others have noted the possible folk-story background to this episode; there are ANE stories about conflicts with river spirits[150] and others about wrestlings with demons in which it is possible to hold on long enough to bend the spirit to one's will (this explains, for Sarna, the figure's wish to be released before daybreak). A majority of scholars, while acknowledging this, are unconvinced that this helps to explain the form that the Genesis version now takes, even if this were originally part of its background. Perhaps, coming as it does on the border between a hostile uncle and a potentially hostile brother—with Jacob on the knife's edge of finding a home or meeting his doom—it is more significant that the Jabbok likely gets its name from the word בקק, which ambiguously refers either to "growing abundantly, spreading out" or to "ruin, destruction, being laid waste" (Kohlenberger & Mounce, 2012). The wordplay may highlight that Jacob's wrestling portends either his deliverance or his ruin.

There is no mention of what or who instigated the fight, or as to the identity of the assailant. In the shroud of darkness there is only a "man". There are various possibilities for the identity of this

[149] Other plays on words that appear in wider connection across this unit include the word "face"—especially Peniel and the "face of God" that Jacob later sees in Esau—and the word "present" (מנחה), which is an anagram of "camp/group" (מחנה). "Grace" and "favour" also are repeated often (Wenham, 1994b, pp. 288-89).

[150] The connection between wrestling and the river would supply a reason for יַעֲקֹב to אבק at the יַבֹּק.

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adversary with whom Jacob fights, including midrashic suggestions that it was the spirit of Esau, or an embodied representation of his outward and inner strivings, or God himself (Cotter, 2003, p. 245). In a way, all of these are correct; the man stands largely as a cipher, a blank onto which Jacob's strivings can be projected: "In its portrayal of the figure, the narrative does not want us to know too much. It is part of the power of the wrestling that we do not know the name or see the face of the antagonist" (Brueggemann, 1982, p. 267). Ultimately, Jacob interprets his adversary as divine and names the place Peniel in wonder that he has seen God and lived. Just as God's command became the ultimate obstacle to Abraham's trust in God's promises in Genesis 22, so here God becomes the ultimate opponent to the man who strove with everyone.

The mysterious battle ends with even more mystery. Jacob will not be defeated, and so his opponent resorts to an exhibition of clearly superior power and dislocates his hip. The opponent then insists on withdrawing before the sunrise, but Jacob refuses to yield without a blessing. As Brueggemann (1982, p. 267) observes, the battle ends (nearly) in a draw: "Neither can quite have his way". Walton (2001, pp. 605-6) sees the battle as a contest that takes place on a spiritual level too. That Jacob's persistence is a deeper turning point in the story is acknowledged by the gift of new identity.

On the one hand, Jacob is clearly outmatched and defeated—it is a contest that he cannot win in his own power. On the other hand, he prevails not by winning but by *recognising where blessing comes from* and clinging to him until God grants it. In this battle there is a duality of persistence and yielding, of prevailing by losing. Unlike ANE stories in which the hero defeats the spirit and extorts a prize out of him, Jacob exerts no power that compels a blessing and he is not even granted the honour of his assailant's name. Rather, the blessing and honour that he is given are couched in a new name and a new identity (Von Rad, 1972, pp. 322-23). Jacob's victory is in defeat (Brueggemann, 1982, pp. 268-70).

The mystery of this episode extends also to the nature of the transformation that it puts into effect. The name changes of Israel and Peniel are placed emphatically at the centre of the scene (Wenham, 1994b, p. 294). Jacob is stripped of homeland, family, and possessions, engaged in struggle with man and God, and now stripped even of his old identity, and all that remains is an opponent to whom he clings and from whom he pleads for blessing. Far from the Jacob who deceives and supplants and steals blessing where it can be had, we now have Israel, who apprehends the true nature of his striving and the true source of blessing and, as a result, emerges with the victory that matters. We might expect with Sarna (1966, p. 206) that he thence purges himself of those unsavoury associations with his past. For Cotter (2003, p. 248), however, the transformation of Jacob is more a

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commentator's convention than clearly apparent in the story. Jacob continues to be contentious, to show favouritism, and to cause and be subjected to suffering. He is given a new name, Israel, but he continues to be "Jacob with a limp". Stubborn Jacob is only partly transformed into new Israel. The best view, I think, is to see that Jacob is not fully reformed, but transformed in at least one crucial way. The transformation is not from imperfection to perfection, but rather from misapprehension of God and blessing to recognition of faith and the source of life.

The change that this realisation produces (and does not produce) is evident in his reunion with Esau. At their meeting, Jacob uses terms that seem to have the effect of undoing the heel-grabbing prediction at his birth—by addressing Esau as "lord" and calling himself "servant" (33:5)—and he returns the blessings that he once stole from Esau (33:10) (Cotter, 2003, p. 241; Wenham, 1994b, pp. 288-90). Jacob achieves reconciliation with Esau by repentance and by being a blessing. The terminology employed in this chapter continues to underline that the transformation is deep and genuine. The repetition of "face" in this passage[151] culminates in Jacob saying to Esau, "For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God" (33:10); in Jacob's case he has seen the face of God and Esau, and perhaps the point is that he has found acceptance with both. Wenham (1994b, p. 292) points out that the terminology that Jacob uses—for "gift" (מנחה), "to atone" (כפר), and "to be accepted" (רצה)—is common in sacrificial contexts. This language too may intend us to see a deeper repentance and change in Jacob than merely reconciliation with his brother. "Clearly, for Jacob to make peace with his brother is to make peace with God" (Wenham, 1994b, p. 292).

We have already observed that this high point of Jacob's moral and spiritual transformation is immediately tempered with another act of deception of his brother. Whereas Abraham and Lot had peacefully agreed to share the land, Jacob agrees to follow his brother at a slower pace to Seir, only to head away to Canaan. We are left to wonder at the full import of this. Clearly Jacob's newness is not total, and the reconciliation with Esau seems not to have brought about a relationship of complete trust;[152] perhaps Jacob did not want to risk leaving the Promised Land again but did not want to risk entering such discussion with Esau. Whatever the reason for the deceit, he has learned what it means to be Israel, but some of the old Jacob still remains.

[151] Fokkelman (1991, p. 206) points out that the Hebrew of 32:20 literally reads, "Let me cover up his face with the present before my face; afterwards I shall see his face: perhaps he will lift up my face."

[152] After all, Genesis 50 brings the book to a close with Joseph's brothers having to be reassured that Joseph would not finally get revenge, and Esau has not said that he *would not* kill Jacob.

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4.1.2.5 Conflict and blessing in Canaan (Gen 33:12–36:43)

The final stage of Jacob's story seems to serve as an epilogue. Genesis 33 ends with Jacob back in Canaan, and it is immediately hopeful: as Abraham had also done, Jacob purchases a permanent plot of land in incipient fulfilment of its full possession in the future. However, the previous owner of the land is the father of Shechem, the young man who in the next episode finds Dinah to his liking and rapes her (Gen 34:2).

Structurally, this story stands in parallel to Isaac's wife-sister story, and while it does not share the wife-sister pattern, it does have several elements in common. It involves a sister and a potential marriage; in continuity with the behaviour characterising the patriarchs so far, Dinah's brothers use deception to leverage the potential marriage to their advantage (34:12, 21–24); their actions are a curse on the inhabitants of the land; and they leave the scene with great plunder. There is no accusation formula from the wronged parties, their deaths presumably playing a role in this, but Jacob rebukes them for threatening their future in the land.

Wenham (2000, p. 110) notes that readers have trouble deciding whether the narrator blames Jacob, or his sons (as Josephus does), or the people of Shechem (as Jubilees does, in which their deaths are seen as divine judgement and Simeon and Levi are rewarded by God). Fewell and Gunn (1991, pp. 205-8) argue that Simeon and Levi make a "grossly disproportionate" response to the abuse of their sister, and that their indignation is for their own honour, not really that of their sister.[153] They gave no concern to consequences and usurped their father's position in the process.

Wenham (2000, pp. 115-19) argues that the seriousness of the crime required more of a response than Jacob's "apparent unconcern", but acknowledges that this does not imply approval of Simeon and Levi's violence either. "The author prevents moral closure and leaves the reader to ponder what should be done in a situation of competing moral imperatives: is the pursuit of peace or the vindication of a sister more important?" Cohen (2005, p. 14) claims that Jacob's "sole concern is that his reputation may suffer; he seems oblivious to the evil that they committed". Similarly, Bailey (2013, pp. 121-24) views the mildness of Jacob's rebuke as problematic but believes that it should be understood in terms of God's blessing that is given in the chapter following. He argues that Simeon and Levi are seen as heroic characters in this story, because their intervention—however brutal it

[153] Alter (2004, p. xxxv) points out that the narrator eventually in Genesis 34:19 identifies Shechem as a "lad" (נַעַר) in parallel with Dinah's description as a youth (נַעֲרָה). He says, "This sexually impulsive man is only a lad—probably an adolescent like Dinah—a discovery that is bound to complicate our task of moral judgment."

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might appear to us—was a demonstration of the importance of marriage purity, particularly for the benefit of post-exilic readers. God's blessing in the next chapter is therefore understood as a validation of this event.

While this is possible, it seems to me that the parallel with Isaac's wife-sister deception would imply a negative evaluation of the deceivers in this text too. Genesis has almost universally portrayed acts of violence as the epitome of curse.[154] Furthermore, Jacob's initial passivity may be a failure,[155] but his rebuke of his sons is addressing a very serious concern. In Isaac's parallel wife-sister story, God intervenes to prevent Isaac from returning to Egypt and emphasises the importance of the Promised Land. By this time, Jacob has had to form unsteady truces that keep him out of Haran and Edom—he has nowhere left to go. Jacob's concern about being made a "stench" to the Canaanites is not a small problem—it is a far more pressing threat to the survival of the family than an agreement with Shechem would have been. The question of where "pure" marriages should now be found is not resolved by the murder of Hamor's people in any case; on the contrary, the sons of Israel take the wives of these murdered Canaanites as plunder.

Furthermore, God's reiteration of blessings in the following episode need not imply any cause-and-effect relationship with this chapter, especially if the concentric structure is correct and driving the arrangement of episodes. It seems to me that the blessings are reiterated because the behaviour of Jacob's sons has directly threatened their fulfilment, or because of Jacob's obedience in purging his household of idols (35:1–4).

What this episode does seem to do is to paint Simeon and Levi in a bad light, at least in Jacob's eyes, much as the brief comment about Reuben's affair with Bilhah in Genesis 35:22 does. This corresponds to the very mixed blessings that the three eldest sons of Jacob are given in Genesis 49:3–7, and further explains the prominence given to Judah, the fourth-born.

> "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it—he went up to my couch!

[154] There is a further irony in the sons of Israel snatching the wives and children of the murdered men as plunder—surely a violation of wronged women at least as severe as the crime they were avenging. This bears several strong similarities to the irony of the Benjaminites in Judges 21 being advised to take the wives of the murdered men of Jabesh Gilead and to snatch the virgins of Shiloh near Shechem.

[155] It is strongly reminiscent of King David's own silence after Amnon's rape of Tamar, which also provokes an act of violent revenge on the part of her brother Absalom.

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> "Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel."

Far from God blessing the violence of Simeon and Levi, he must once again intervene (as he did to prevent Laban from taking revenge) to keep the family safe—he addresses Jacob's worry by setting a fear of Israel on the inhabitants of the land so that they are not pursued (Gen 35:5).

Genesis 35 involves Jacob's return to Bethel, where he makes good on his vow from Genesis 27. He compels his people to put away foreign gods and purify themselves (thereby signalling exclusive service of YHWH), and he builds an altar. God appears to him again and reiterates his name change to Israel—presumably invoking the wrestling episode as the basis for his gift of the Abrahamic blessings to Jacob. Brett (2012, p. 57) points out that God's promises in 35:11 again involve priestly terminology, specifically the intention to make from Jacob's seed a "sacral assembly" of nations (קהל גוים). This fits well with the emphasis on purification in 35:2, and with the all-nations goal of the promises in Genesis 12:2–3.

The final episodes involve significant deaths, including that of Rachel, which also fulfils her wish when she named Joseph—namely that another son would be added to her.[156] Her fatal pregnancy mirrors Rebekah's troubled pregnancy that gave rise to Jacob and Esau at the start of the *toledot* of Isaac, and her death sees Jacob setting up one more memorial stone at her tomb near Bethlehem. Jacob returns to his father Isaac, and just as Isaac and Ishmael were united again in burying their father, Esau and Jacob reunite to bury him. This brings the *toledot* to a close.

4.1.3 Conclusion

Each *toledot* section in Genesis features an element that recalls the conflict-between-brothers motif begun with Cain and Abel. The original is the most extreme, culminating as it does in fratricide, and the second is the most muted, but the severity increases again as the book progresses. In Noah's story, Ham commits an offence against his drunken father and his descendants are cursed with servitude of his brothers. In Abraham's, Ishmael commits an offence against Isaac his brother and is expelled because of it; this is not *meant* to result in his death, but God must intervene to save him.

[156] Olojede (2019, pp. 46-48) points out that there is a potential connection between these deaths and the dangers of migration, especially given that Jacob himself mentions the potential dangers in Genesis 33:13. Olojede suggests that Jacob is to be criticised for putting vulnerable members of his family at risk.

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Jacob's story is motivated by his deception of Isaac, which robs his brother of his inheritance of the blessing and provokes Esau's plot to take his life. A large part of Jacob's story leaves the Cain-and-Abel pattern to the side to focus on a contest between tricksters and another between wives, but the conflict between brothers remains the driving force of the story, and it is central to the climactic resolution at the Jabbok, in which Jacob's life hangs in the balance.

Jacob's time in Haran provides the most detailed instance of the deceptive pursuit of blessing that is typified by the wife-sister stories. This time it features *two* deceivers locked in a contest for ascendency. At the centre, similarly to in Abraham's story, is a conflict between wives, where the focus is again on women seeking love and vindication and finding them only in God's intervention on their behalf. The Haran phase of the story demonstrates the relational chaos that is caused by blessing pursued apart from God, and which lays the seedbed of injustice and violence. It eventually leaves Jacob and his wives alienated from their relatives and thrust back into harm's way with Esau.

The tense resolution of this primary Cain-and-Abel-like conflict builds to a climax at the Jabbok, where Jacob engages in hand-to-hand combat with the adversary he has been unwilling to face—God himself. An argument can be made that if Genesis has a single climactic moment that brings its story to a point of resolution, this strange and unlikely scene is it. The main reasons are as follows:

- The climax of a story occurs at the end of the Change stage, providing a resolution to the main complication of the story. Jacob's story seems to be the final movement of the Change narratives (given that there is a connecting thread of repetitions and motifs that link Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but which do not extend as clearly into Joseph's story), and Joseph's seems to serve as the Unravelling stage.
- The book as a whole regularly raises expectation of future seed in whom the promises would come to fruition. Jacob may not be the *final* fulfilment, but the inclusion of all of his descendants, rather than the election of one line, signals a definitive change in the pattern, and the change of his name to Israel signals that the birth of the nation is the destination that Genesis was heading for (even if the journey continues upon reaching it).
- The wrestling scene takes place at Jacob's re-entry into the Promised Land and allows comparison and contrast with the man who had left the land in flight from Esau years before. It represents Jacob's "dark night of the soul" and the key moment in his awakening and transformation—the main realisation seeming to be that victory may be won over men, but blessing cannot be wrested from God by force. Jacob was promised pre-eminence *in utero*, he was given God's promises while *leaving* the land, and God intervened to undo the

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> harms caused by his strivings—at every stage the favour of an unknown God was offered as a gift. Here, on the eve of facing a human adversary he cannot defeat, he is confronted by the God he has failed fully to apprehend. He sees this adversary face to face, and he "prevails" by recognising his powerlessness to do anything but cling to God for blessing.

The Jacob story is climactic not in the sense that it finally resolves the problem of curse and expulsion from God's presence—a new and infallible Eden is not created by the end—but because, in concert with the climactic faith-lesson of Abraham's story, it portrays the emergence of Israel out of a moment that models the faith by which genuine blessing is inherited.

It is surely not accidental that the book begins with a comment about a heel-grabbing serpent locked in conflict with Eve's seed (Gen 3:15), and its climax involves a heel-grabbing ancestor shedding the name that recalls "deceiver/heel" in favour of a new identity as one who has overcome a life-and-death conflict and discovered God.

The rebellion in the Garden of Eden was a declaration of human autonomy and independence. The climactic point in the book—featuring the deceiver stripped of all but himself, alone and with nowhere to turn—points to a rediscovery of total human dependence on God.

> "There is an emphatic indication that the content of the covenant cannot be actualised except by the complete self-commitment of Man to God in personal trust." (Eichrodt, 1967, p. 288)

4.2 THE *TOLEDOT* OF JACOB

The *toledot* of Jacob (37:2–50:26) has long been considered separate from the rest of the ancestral narratives on account of a noticeable shift in the patterns established so far. It is the only section that does not make use of a concentric structural arrangement,[157] and in terms of content, Carr (2011, p. 321) observes that the Joseph story[158] backgrounds the theme of promise, so crucial to the other ancestral narratives, and focuses instead on brotherly rivalry. Such differences are in keeping with our suggestion that Joseph's story should likely be seen as the Unravelling stage of the plot of Genesis, which accounts for some shift in its foci. The differences between this *toledot* and those

[157] Cotter (2003, pp. 267-68) suggests Dorsey's interchange structure as a possibility and adds a simplified interchange of his own.

[158] I will refer to it as Joseph's story since he is its focus, though it is to a lesser extent Judah's story too.

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prior can also be overplayed; there remain several points of continuity. We will let it suffice for this *toledot* section to discuss some of the key points of narrative emphasis in Joseph's story.

4.2.1 Narrative emphases

Clines (1997, p. 91) relates Dahlberg's idea that Joseph is a foil to the primeval narratives, an antitype of Adam, and so on, and that this forms an *inclusio* for the book as a whole. Clines responds that even if we grant that all of the parallels are convincing, the Joseph story does not solve any of the problems raised by the Prologue. It is a "low-key riposte" and certainly must be regarded at least as a bridge into the rest of the Pentateuch, even if it is also an *inclusio*. I am able only partly to agree with Clines. The role of an Unravelling stage in the plot of the book is to indicate how the resolution addresses the problems raised in the Complication stage and to bring the story to as much a conclusion as this resolution allows. Thus, he is certainly correct that it forms a bridge into the book of Exodus; Genesis is the start of a much larger story—the resolution of the whole predicament raised by human rebellion against God awaits far in the future. However, it is not the case that the Joseph story does not solve any of the problems of the Prologue or that its riposte is necessarily low-key for not being final.

4.2.1.1 Conflict between brothers

We have noted that each *toledot* section has developed the conflict-between-brothers motif begun with Cain and Abel. Joseph's story, as Unravelling narrative, serves as a mirror of the Complication stage and thus is the culmination of this conflict motif. While Jacob provoked Esau's hatred, Joseph is (largely) innocent of his brothers' envy; while Jacob must flee the land for his own safety, Joseph comes closest to suffering Abel's fate and is carried from the land by foreign traders. However, the final outcome is a deeper reconciliation than that of Jacob too (Carr, 2011, p. 322). Seeing Cain and Abel's story as background to this one—coming closest as it does to replicating the jealous murder of the innocent brother—allows us to compare outcomes and consider the role that the intervening lessons of the book play in writing a different ending to Abel's story.

4.2.1.2 Blessing in spite of alienation from the land

Often employing the motif of garments given and taken away, Joseph's story takes several turns. He begins as a favoured son with a special garment from his father that provokes his brothers' envy. Instead of being murdered, he is sold as a slave, but the brothers deceive their father Jacob by

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offering the bloodied garment as proof of Joseph's death. While in slavery in Potiphar's house, Genesis 39:2–3 is emphatic that Joseph's success is a result of YHWH's help and favour; he prospers and is given charge of the household. Genesis 39:5 underlines even further that the house of Potiphar is blessed because of its association with the one on whom God's blessing rests (a clear point of continuity with the Abrahamic promises). However, Joseph is stripped of his rank and his freedom—and his clothing—by a false accusation of rape from Potiphar's wife, and he is imprisoned. Yet he prospers even there. In Genesis 39:20–23, Joseph is put in charge of the prison and succeeds in all that he does. Eventually he becomes one who is known to have divine insight into dreams, he interprets Pharaoh's dream, and he is given new clothes (41:14) and promoted to Pharaoh's right hand, enabling him to make preparations for the coming period of drought and barrenness.

These struggles of Joseph seem intended to portray him as exemplary and as an antithesis of the deceitful sojourners that his forefathers had been.[159] Rather than being selfish and an agent of curse, Joseph is righteous and becomes an agent of blessing. For example, in Genesis 12, Abraham receives prosperity *from Pharaoh*, but the result is the captivity of his wife and curse from YHWH on those around him. Abraham is accused and expelled from Egypt. By contrast, Joseph's prospering comes from YHWH, and the accusation, when it comes, is false. Joseph suffers the loss as a result, spending years in prison, but Genesis 39:21 affirms YHWH's "steadfast love" in the midst of his captivity. In this way, Joseph becomes the culmination of the motif of life out of death, and the pinnacle of fulfilment of the goal of the promises that "all the families of the earth find blessing" (Gen 12:3). At the start, Joseph typifies barrenness of hope; he is dead to his family, held first in slavery and then in prison, and alienated from his inheritance and God's promises. However, through divinely enabled vision, Joseph is able to see the coming of famine and he makes provision in years of plenty for years of drought, thus inspiring the declaration at the close of his story: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen 50:20) (Kim, 2013, p. 224).

[159] Kim (2013, p. 223) makes some interesting observations about the contrast between the sojourns of Joseph and of his forefathers, particularly that of Abraham in Egypt in Genesis 12. He points out that both stories feature famines described as "severe", both involve situations of sexual impropriety in regard to married women, and both patriarchs face the Pharaoh directly. There is some connection also of the language used of Sarah's problematic beauty (יְפַת־מַרְאֶה [Gen 12:11]) and of Joseph's appearance, which was the cause of the attempted seduction (יְפֵה־תֹאַר וִיפֵה מַרְאֶה [Gen 39:6]), although the phrase used of Joseph is more exactly that used of his mother in Genesis 29:17. The contrasts have to do with the morality of their behaviour and the blessing or curse that accrues as a result.

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In a book in which there is repeated concern about the threat of being assimilated (whether into Egypt, or ancestral homelands, or Canaanite culture in the Promised Land), Joseph's exemplary life charts "a path between resistance and assimilation" (Kim, 2013, p. 220). It also demonstrates that in spite of the importance of the Promised Land—as the environment in which God plans to bless his people—God's blessing is primarily an expression of right relationship with his people. In the midst of trial and alienation, and in the teeth of worldly power, God remains able to prosper Joseph. Note the balance in Genesis 46:1–4 between affirming God's presence outside of the land and affirming the importance of the sacred space that he has established in which to commune with his people:

> Then he said, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes."

Enslaved and exiled people can be blessed and be a blessing even when alienated from YHWH's "territory".

4.2.1.3 Joseph's role in future enslavement

Although Joseph is exemplary in nearly every way, the narrator presents him at the start as a little over-eager in asserting his own primacy over his brothers, and at the end Joseph is again a little over-eager in serving the pharaoh's interests rather than the "many people… kept alive." In Genesis 47:13–26, the land is sold to the pharaoh—besides that which belongs to the priestly caste—and even the people themselves become his. This results in a permanent statute of 20% taxation being rendered to Pharaoh. Sarna (1966, p. 225) argues that this shows the great benefits that Joseph's rule brought to the house of Pharaoh, and thus emphasises the ingratitude of the later pharaoh, who did not know Joseph. This is certainly one implication, but it also suggests that his "blessing to the nations" is a two-edged sword; he saves the lives of many, but there is a level of exploitation involved—the grain surely came from these same farmers in the first place—and it empowers the pharaoh and sets a precedent for Israel's own enslavement to Egypt's king.[160]

[160] Kim (2013, pp. 225-27) adds that Joseph's potential transformation into an overlord is present in the strategy of entrapment that he uses on his brothers—one that undoubtedly leverages additional pain for his father. He argues that this shows that even virtuous Joseph is at risk of corruption.

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4.2.1.4 Judah's transformation

Judah's role in the *toledot* of Jacob is far smaller than that of Joseph, but he is nevertheless a primary character who undergoes a crucial transformation in the story.

The brothers as a group conspire to attack Joseph, but Reuben, who was the eldest and had already earned his father's disfavour (Gen 35:22), prevents the murder and plans to rescue him later. Judah, however, comes up with the plan to profit from the scheme, and they sell Joseph into slavery. Reuben was unaware of the plan and utters a lament at the loss: "The boy is no more, and, as for me, where can I go?" (Gen 37:30).[161]

The next episode, that of Judah and Tamar, is often seen as a digression in the story (Ska, 2016, p. 210), though as Towner (2001, p. 250) notes, it is a story about deception of Judah that follows Judah's deception of his father, and it is a story about sexual impropriety that precedes Joseph's uprightness in response to a temptation to sexual impropriety with Potiphar's wife. Furthermore, these three episodes all feature deceptions and are all connected by the *leitmotif* of garments: Joseph's bloodied robe deceives Jacob; Tamar switches her widow's clothing for a prostitute's veil to deceive Judah, taking his signet, cord, and staff as tokens; Potiphar's wife presents Joseph's clothing as false evidence of her rape. This provides fertile ground for the comparison of Judah and Joseph.

Childs (1979, pp. 155-57) regards Judah's story as an interpretive key for the whole section. Judah and Joseph each represent positive fulfilments and threats to the promises. Joseph becomes the means of Israel's preservation, but also of their slavery. Judah behaves unfaithfully towards Tamar in a way that "threatened to destroy the promise of a posterity", but through "the faithfulness of a Canaanite wife" he also becomes the father of the line of David, through whom redemption is promised.[162] In Childs's view, the interplay between the positive and negative roles of Judah and Joseph involves pictures of slavery and redemption that provide a bridge into Exodus.

[161] This translation is from Kim (2013, p. 232).

[162] It is perhaps preferable to hear in this story resonances of other shameful births in Genesis—particularly those of Lot's daughters. While Lot incestuously fathers the nations of the Moabites and Ammonites, King David's own lineage is similarly presented as taboo. Tamar's faithfulness exceeds that of Judah, but this is not necessarily to endorse her as faithful—as Towner (2001, p. 250) points out, the Torah condemns both parties to death.

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Kim (2013, pp. 230-36) argues that Judah's story is made up of three engagements—with Reuben, Tamar, and Benjamin—which help to plot the course of his personal transformation from selfishness to self-sacrifice:[163]

- Reuben opposes Joseph's murder and utters a lament when he finds that Judah sold him; as a mark of Judah's transformation, we find on his lips echoes of Reuben's lament when Joseph insists on keeping Benjamin in Egypt: "How can I go up to my father if the boy is with me no more?" (Gen 44:13, 34; cf. 37:30).
- Judah's change is sparked after he chooses the safety of his son, Shelah, over the posterity of Tamar, leading her to commit immorality in the pattern of Lot's daughters; when she exposes his hypocrisy, it produces in him the first notes of repentance.
- Judah's transformation is expressed by pledging his own life for the life of Benjamin, first to his father, perhaps motivated by pragmatism (Gen 43:8–10), but again sincerely to Joseph, with full acceptance of the grief that he has caused his father (Gen 44:18–34). His speech, the longest in Genesis, finally provokes Joseph to reveal his identity and reconcile with his brothers (Kim, 2013, p. 234). Judah's movement from jealousy and selfishness to repentance and self-sacrifice prompts Joseph's forgiveness and makes the reconciliation possible.

Thus the brothers reconcile, and through the repentance of one and the genuine forgiveness of the other, Cain and Abel's story is given a new ending, one in which God's plan and his blessing are apprehended, and in which self-seeking and jealousy can be turned into self-giving and peace. Instead of violence, the result is blessing that extends beyond the reunited family.

4.2.1.5 Blessing

It is fitting that, in a book so concerned with the inheritance of blessing, Jacob's last act should be to pronounce blessings on his sons. In Genesis 48, there is a ceremony that recalls Isaac's blessing of Jacob; Joseph brings his two sons to his father, and Jacob passes on the blessing to his favoured son. Perhaps as a means of passing on a double inheritance to Joseph, Jacob adopts Manasseh and

[163] Kim's explanation is particularly interested in Judah's "insider" status in comparison with the "outsiders"—Reuben being the only opponent of Joseph's murder, Tamar being a Canaanite, and Benjamin seeming to be the only remaining son of Rachel. Kim's view is especially motivated by the observation that, for the implied readers, there is political relevance to the relationships in these texts since Judah represents the Southern Kingdom and Joseph the Northern. This does seem to be a factor in Joseph's story, though for our purposes we are more concerned with interconnections within the text.

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Ephraim as heirs—giving the primary place to the younger. Jacob prays blessing upon them and says, "in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac" (48:16). It is not clear how the reader is supposed to think about the re-emergence of the motifs of favouritism and the younger being put before the elder, but perhaps it is meant to be a caution that for all the gains made in Joseph's story in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation, sin itself has not been dealt with, and the story of Genesis risks being repeated in every generation. The vicissitudes of fate, selfish injustice, and conflict within close relationships will always complicate life, and one has to choose one's path—whether it is to walk before God in trust, or to choose to grasp it for oneself through deceit or violence.

Genesis 49 involves all twelve sons, and its purpose is to bless "each with the blessing suitable to him" (49:28). As Wenham (1994b, pp. 468-69) observes, the blessings are well integrated with the rest of the book, reflecting in their emphases the roles played by the sons. The sons who play no role are given comparatively little space, whereas several verses are devoted to the sons who feature prominently. Reuben is acknowledged as firstborn and as pre-eminent in dignity and power (perhaps reflecting his greater virtue in the attack on Joseph), but he is rejected as heir because of his sin with Bilhah. Bokovoy (2009, p. 49) notes that the phrase that Jacob uses of Reuben—"firstfruits of my strength" (49:3)—is found in a law in Deuteronomy 21:15–17 concerning inheritance rights. This law specifically prohibits a man with two wives from making his favourite son the heir instead of the son of the unloved wife. It is possible that this phrase would trigger these associations for readers, again putting the patriarch in an ambiguous position with regard to the law,[164] and perhaps tacitly criticising Jacob for his favouritism.

The prominence of Joseph and Judah in the narrative is reflected in their lengthy blessings. It is not clear whether Judah is given the pre-eminence that Reuben should have enjoyed and that Simeon and Levi might have claimed if they also had not disqualified themselves, but it is said of Judah, "Your father's sons shall bow down before you" (Wenham, 1994b, p. 473).[165]

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[164] Carmichael (2001, pp. 324-25) argues that the law questions Jacob's motives, implying that Jacob might have favoured Joseph even if Reuben had not sinned. However, illegality is hard to determine here because the law does not discuss what might cause a firstborn son to be disqualified from his rights; if Reuben was rightly disqualified, would it be better to give the birthright to the second-born, or to the other wife's first-born?

[165] Carmichael (1969, pp. 435-44) has argued that several of the references in Judah's blessing are allusions to episodes of his story earlier in the book, such as the lion referring to the wild beasts that he claimed devoured Joseph, or his staff being that which he gave to Tamar. Wenham (1994b, p. 475) finds these to be too far-

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Joseph's blessings are acknowledged to be exegetically difficult. Wenham (1994b, p. 484) suggests that it is best to look within the Genesis narrative for the meanings of some of the more puzzling phrases. For example, Wenham notes that arrow imagery is often used for slander, and so the reference to arrows harassing Joseph but his bow remaining steady is likely not referring to a later historical event involving his tribes but is rather a characterisation of the assaults that he had suffered from his brothers, Potiphar's wife, and so on, while remaining virtuous. Similarly, the phrase "the shepherd and stone of Israel" (49:24) is most likely a reference to God, whose titles Jacob derived from his experiences with God, for example, at Bethel.[166]

Wenham (1994b, pp. 491-93) concludes that the intent of these blessings is to emphasise the future fulfilment of the Abrahamic promises of land, covenant, descendants, and blessing to the nations. In Genesis 49:1, Jacob prefaces his blessings with an explanatory comment: he gathers his sons so that he can tell them what shall happen to them "in days to come". Wenham (1994b, p. 471) points out that the phrase בְּאַחֲרִית הַיָּמִים ("in days to come / in the latter days") tends to be used in prophetic texts, either eschatologically or as a general reference to the distant future. In either case, Jacob's words have reference to Israel's settled state in the land, beyond their enslavement in Egypt. Sailhamer (1992, pp. 60-61) believes that this phrase—and similar phrases in speeches at the end of Numbers and Deuteronomy—are eschatological, looking forward to new covenant hope and encouraging "trust in God and an expectation of his work in the future". Given the weight of emphasis on Judah's unending dynasty and on the prominence of Ephraim and Manasseh, it is likely that the book intends to close on a note of hope in the fulfilment of promise, whether it be a pre-exilic hope in the renewal and reconciliation of warring Northern and Southern Kingdoms, or a post-exilic hope in their resurrection.

4.2.2 Conclusion

The first contribution that the Joseph story makes to the book as a whole is that it provides a demonstration of the impact that agents of blessing can have in even a hostile world. Abraham's and Jacob's stories are rightly considered part of the Change narratives, because their role is to engage

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fetched, particularly because the tone of Judah's blessing seems positive. It is not unprecedented, however, for a narrator to encode veiled acknowledgements of the negative in an otherwise positive statement. For example, the glowing praise of Solomon in 1 Kings 10:14–29 includes several elements that Deuteronomy 17:14–20 forbids, such as amassing silver or acquiring horses from Egypt.

[166] Wenham also argues that 49:24 should be repointed to read, "*Thanks to* the shepherd and stone of Israel", rather than "From there is…".

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the characters in contests for the essence of blessing, and the climax of each is reached when they finally apprehend the nature of their relationship to the one who blesses. Joseph, on the other hand, is rightly considered to be the Unravelling stage, because his role is to demonstrate a life of righteousness and blessing lived in spite of the barren circumstances into which he is thrust, and which brings blessing and life into those circumstances. *Pace* Kim (2013, p. 225), Joseph's approach is not an *alternative* to the approach taken by the other patriarchs that merely "fares much better than the others"; it is the model approach in the face of the approaches of his forefathers that were responsible for spreading curse. Through their misdeeds and struggles the other patriarchs learned true faith; in Joseph we see how true faith can write a better story.

Secondly, in this section we see not only a life of blessing to the nations, but in Joseph and Judah we see also a model of repentance and forgiveness that brings the Cain-and-Abel story to a radically different conclusion. The development of the motif of conflict between siblings is brought to a similar result in the reunion of Jacob and Esau. In that story, we occupy the perspective of the wrongdoer Jacob, but their reunion is limited to mutual acceptance (and mutual distrust). In Joseph's story, we occupy the position of the one who was wronged. Although he has the power to take revenge, he perceives God's plan in the midst of his brothers' evil and offers full forgiveness. Central to the thematic contribution of this section is the role of God's blessing in producing full restoration of relationship—in spite of the persistence of evil.[167]

Finally, Joseph's story establishes a crucial link between faith in the Abrahamic promises and the descent into slavery in Exodus. Genesis 15 is critical to this concept, opening up as it does the idea that the fulfilment of the promise of land is subject to a dormant period of 400 years during which his seed will be alienated from the land and held in captivity and servitude. The idea that God's promises are sure but also frequently delayed is evident in microcosm in the sufferings of Joseph. While alienated from his inheritance (in slavery and then prison) and without reason to hope in God's promises, he also experiences God's blessing in the midst of hardship (God prospers him in Potiphar's house, and he becomes *de facto* prison-master). Even when given divine insight into the dreams of his prison-mates, and despite growing expectation of deliverance, he is left to languish for two more years. Nevertheless, the deliverance when it comes is on a scale far beyond what could have been expected, and it leads to the salvation not just of Joseph but also of Egypt and Canaan.

[167] See Kim (2013, p. 238).

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As Kim (2013, p. 237) points out, the book of Genesis begins with God bringing a declaration of "good" out of a world that was void and covered in darkness, and the book ends with a declaration that what the brothers meant for evil, God has transformed into good. This closing note stands as a key contribution to the resolution of the book—human evil has not yet been eradicated and suffering remains, but God's promises are active in the world, and his purpose is to use his agents in such a way that even evil is turned to an opportunity for good to result.

4.3 CONCLUSION: A THEMATIC STATEMENT

As we said at the start of this chapter, the goal of a thematic statement is to capture as succinctly as possible the conceptual foundations of a text—the unifying rationale for its contents. It should not just be summative of what the text contains; it should explain what the contents are intended to communicate to the reader. To say, for example, that Genesis explains the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham of land, progeny, and so on (Wenham, 1994b, p. 169) is insufficient as a theme—at least the kind of theme that we are getting at—because it stops short of answering *what is being said about the fulfilment of promise and why*. There might be several ways of answering such a question—perhaps their fulfilment is God's work in spite of human effort, or in concert with it, or perhaps their fulfilment depends entirely on meritorious feats of bravery or faithfulness. It is the role of a study of theme to establish such things as securely as possible.

Our study of the structure of Genesis established that the book is divided into sections by *toledot* formulae, and that this, in combination with the repeated emphasis on births and family lines within the book, suggests that the structure has interpretive value in itself—it helps to signal the general importance of progeny and lines of descent to the book. Given that the five narrative *toledot* begin with the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth and end with Jacob/Israel, there may be a structural emphasis on the movement towards the creation of the nation of Israel. Given also that the horizontal *toledot* serve to dispense with non-elect lines of the family, this may point to the importance of election, as well as the potential for there being some mechanism for selection of one line over another.

The *toledot* of the heavens and the earth establishes essential relationships; particularly important are the creation of sacred space in Eden as the environment in which relationship with God is focused, and the male-female relationship in which the man and woman correspond to one another and are united in imaging God. The primary complication is introduced in Genesis 3—a declaration of human autonomy—and its consequences, which are expressed in God's judgements, involve:

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- the disruption of the divine–human relationship (expressed in expulsion from God's place, and ultimately in death);
- the disruption of human labours (expressed in the curse on childbearing and work); and
- the disruption of human relationships (expressed in selfishness and archetypically in Cain's murder of Abel).

There are notes of hope in the midst of God's judgements that locate significant importance in the role of women and childbearing. While it is disputed that the judgement on the serpent—that a seed of Eve would crush the serpent's head—is a promise of a restorative figure who would reverse the consequences of the rebellion, it is surely not coincidental that Eve is declared by her husband to be "the mother of all living", and after Cain's act of murder, she is given "a seed to replace Abel". Furthermore, the Unravelling stage of the plot mirrors the Complication stage by describing the seed of the barren but beloved wife—Joseph—*exemplifying the role of a restorative figure*. Through self-sacrifice, faithfulness, and forgiveness he is able to write a different ending to Cain's story.

This lends some credence to the suggestion that there is a *particular seed* in mind—whether it is Jacob, who births Israel, Joseph, who offers a model for restoration, or, if Genesis is indeed of Persian provenance, a figure reflective of the post-exilic, prophetic hope in Israel's restoration under a new messianic figure.

The three disruptions (to divine–human relationship, to blessing, and to human relationships) become key motifs throughout the remainder of the book; Genesis returns regularly to:

- the question of the land as the environment of relationship with God;
- the barrenness of fields and wombs and the need for divine blessing; and
- interpersonal conflicts, particularly those threatening the closest family relationships.

All of the *toledot* sections share these features in some measure, but each seems to have a dominant emphasis of its own:

- Noah's *toledot* focuses on land and nations;
- Terah's *toledot* emphasises barrenness, perpetuity of one's name, and descendants; and
- Isaac's *toledot* emphasises family conflict and the source of blessing.[168]

[168] I agree with Brueggemann (1982, p. 206), who has suggested that the conflict in Abraham's story is concerned with his descendants: the "vertical" movement of promise from father to son—the promise of an

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Noah is introduced as one in whom hope resides for rest from the curse on the ground, and the flood serves to rid the land of the plague of violence because of relentlessly wicked human hearts. God acknowledges that there is no remedy in the destruction of those who are wicked, because sin is carried on even in the most righteous of human hearts. So God promises never again to curse the ground in this manner and he reiterates to Noah the Adamic blessing to be fruitful and multiply. The Tower of Babel story shares a focus on land in the sense that the tower likely has connections to ANE temple precincts and paradise gardens, as Eden does. It seems to represent a human attempt to recreate on their own terms an environment for relationship with God and conditions of blessing. Similarly to the expulsion from Eden, this too is cursed with an exile-like scattering of nations.

Abraham's story signals a new approach to the resolution of the problems begun in Eden. God makes promises that provide an environment for relationship with God and a name in perpetuity (addressing expulsion and death); descendants and a relationship of blessing (addressing the disruption of human labour); and blessing on those associated with the promise-bearer, who would then be a source of blessing to all nations (addressing the disruption of human relationships).

Although the promises aim at re-establishing an environment like Eden and seem to guarantee the blessings of life and perpetuity, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob share conflicts that reassert the curses and ultimately the threat of having one's life and lineage cut off:

- All the primary wives are barren.
- Each experiences famine in the land.
- Each has a wife-sister story in which he is alienated from the land, each practises deception, and each risks bringing curse upon his hosts—specifically barrenness.
- Each story involves conflict between husband and wife or between the wives themselves.[169]
- Each story features conflicts between sons, reasserting Cain and Abel's pattern.

These conflicts repeatedly establish that curse is associated with self-oriented behaviour, such as theft, jealousy, and deception, and Abraham's and Jacob's stories both achieve resolution when the protagonist learns dependence on God instead—that is, the true nature of the relationship of blessing between God and humanity is set in place. The climaxes of both stories have in common

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heir and his trust in the promises. Jacob's story, on the other hand, is concerned with the "horizontal" competition between heirs and with the pursuit of blessing.

[169] The brevity of Isaac's story precludes much development of complex conflicts, but even Rebekah tricks Isaac to secure a good outcome for her favourite son at the expense of his.

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that they follow the patriarchs' failed attempts at securing their own good and they confront the patriarchs with situations in which God himself becomes the obstacle to the fulfilment of his promises, so that procuring a good outcome is impossible:

- Abraham's schemes by which he attempted to provide an heir for himself are miraculously superseded by God's gift of Isaac by Sarah, and yet, at the climax, God commands Abraham to kill the son on whom the promises depend. God's means of fulfilling the promises (Isaac) had been revealed, but the issue of Abraham's trust and dependence on God had to be resolved in this test. God's plan was to bring life out of death; the climax focuses on fully establishing the righteousness of believing God to do what was promised (cf. Gen 15:6).
- Jacob's deceptions attempt to secure blessing no matter what the cost, even though at every stage of his story, God's promises to do this for him precede his efforts to do this for himself. Jacob is successful in his contests against his relatives—he gains wealth and descendants—but his form of success leaves him threatened with retribution on every side. At the climax, God himself becomes the obstacle to blessing by engaging Jacob in combat. Jacob seems to "prevail" not by besting his opponent but by finally apprehending the God whom he had thus far held at arm's length, and by clinging to God for blessing. The emergence of Israel at this moment is significant, and his renaming is confirmed once he returns to Bethel to establish a place of worship. Once again, the test at the climax involves an apprehension of where life, name, and blessing are truly found—in a right relationship of dependence upon, and integrity before, the creator.

Other significant elements that require special attention include the following:

- **Violence:** Human evil and the human role in the spread of curse in Genesis are typified by violence, which is visible in Cain and Lamech and in Noah's generation, and tacitly in the behaviour of Sodom that provokes an "outcry". These stories each feature interventions of God in judgement. This motif is eventually expressed in the conflicts between siblings, who are themselves representative of the violent conflicts between nations—the descendants of Noah feature in their number the heads of several war-mongering empires; Lot's sons, Ishmael, and Esau all become the heads of surrounding nations; and even Joseph's conflict is representative of the warring Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel.
- **Covenant:** The relative infrequency of covenant language in Genesis belies the importance of the concept; the covenants make formal commitments with regard to the promises and the divine–human relationship that God established with Abraham's line. The covenant in

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Genesis 15 follows God's promise to be Abraham's shield and reward, which prompts Abraham to ask about his heir and the land. To the former God responds merely with a reiteration of his intentions, and the focus falls on the rightness of Abraham's faith. To the latter, Abraham is put into a deep and portentous sleep in which it is revealed that the fulfilment of promise lies beyond a long period of hardship and exile. The essence of this response is to emphasise, firstly, that God's plan to bring about blessing in the place of curse and life in the place of death reaches far beyond the scope of a single lifetime, and, secondly, any given generation's experience—including even slavery under a foreign power—is not an indication that God's blessings or promises have failed.

- **The pivotal narratives:** Although they are not the kinds of stories one might have predicted to be pivotal, both Abraham's and Jacob's stories have at their centres conflicts between wives and expressions of God's care for the outsider, the unloved, and the barren. The wives' stories are brief in comparison to the larger conflicts featuring the patriarchs, but they seem to function as interpretive keys. The women and their seed are central, after all. The conflicts between the women emphasise illegitimate means of securing vindication (e.g., Sarah's offer of Hagar as surrogate, or Rachel's purchase of mandrakes) as well as expressions of the genuine—Hagar sees and is seen by God, Leah turns to praise God when her attempts to secure Jacob's affections fail, and Rachel acknowledges God's vindication after her own attempts to secure it prove hollow. This mirrors the trajectory of the book as a whole—it is a contest between human efforts to grasp for what rests in the hand of God and the divine intention to give these things freely in accordance with his purposes for them.
- **Joseph's story:** Having established the nature and purpose of God's promises through the failures and climactic realisations of Abraham and Jacob, the Unravelling stage is a positive presentation of a faithful life in the person of Joseph. He experiences in microcosm the barren sufferings in slavery in Egypt that Genesis 15 warns about, and he provides a model of blessing, reconciliation, and life out of death that can result when one trusts God's purposes and commits to living out a life of blessing. In spite of the persistence of human evil and the curse, Joseph demonstrates how God's project can be their undoing.

These, then, represent the major elements that Genesis seems to be communicating and that need to be represented in its theme.

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4.3.1 The theme of Genesis

I suggest the following thematic statement that encapsulates the general theological purpose:

> ***Active dependence on YHWH to bring life out of death and blessing in place of curse:*** *YHWH's promises aim at shaping a relationship with his people in which their faith and dependence on him reflect his plan to give the nations life in the place of death and blessing in the place of barrenness, thus reversing curse and restoring Eden. Faith in God's promises must be lived out and passed on through generations in hope, until they are given their final fulfilment.*

Given the level of uncertainty about the historical context of the final form of the book, this statement does not attempt to describe the purpose of the book for a specific implied reader. Nevertheless, this statement could be adapted to, for example, the post-exilic context if it were to become clearer that this were its setting.

In the context of foreign occupation—akin to Israel's descent into Egyptian captivity—the book encourages hope in a future restoration of blessing, even if circumstances appear to render such hope impossible. It encourages genuine faith and dependence upon God to bring about change. It encourages its readers to pass on their covenant identity through generations until the time of fulfilment dawns. In the interim, and in view of the precarious situation of those returning from exile, it encourages its reader to cultivate peace by living out the ideal of blessing among the nations.

* * * * *

In the following chapter, we will turn our attention to Genesis 17, examining the exegetical evidence relevant to Sarah's place in the covenant that it describes. We will follow this with an assessment of how the thematic evidence in this chapter might guide our evaluation of this evidence.

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5. GENESIS 17 AND THE PLACE OF SARAH

The text of Genesis 17 has yielded several puzzles that have resisted solution, especially the question of what it means that circumcision is both God's covenant and a *sign* of God's covenant, and the paradoxes of the apparent inclusion and exclusion of both Sarah and Ishmael. The goal of the previous chapters has been to establish with as much certainty as possible the rhetorical purpose of Genesis as a work of communication in the hope that it can supply a rhetorical framework by which to evaluate the puzzles in this text, especially the place of Sarah with respect to the covenant, and the likely meaning of the sign of circumcision.

In this chapter we will consider the text data of Genesis 17 in more detail and evaluate the place of Sarah and her daughters in the covenant. In the following chapter we will give our attention to the questions surrounding the rite of circumcision.

5.1 TRANSLATION

> 1 And it happened that Abram was ninety-nine years old. And YHWH appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai.[170] Walk before me and be blameless, 2 and let me[171] make[172] a covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly."
>
> 3 And Abram fell upon his face.

[170] There is broad agreement that El Shaddai is an early divine name but that its meaning has been lost and its etymology is obscure (Sarna, 1989, p. 123; Speiser, 1964, p. 124; Westermann, 1995, p. 258).

[171] Following the imperative, the cohortative can be seen as expressing consequence ("so that") (Wenham, 1994b, p. 15; Westermann, 1995, p. 253), or intention (Hamilton, 1990, p. 463), or sequential action (Baden, 2010, p. 226), yielding a weaker connection such as "let me" or "then I will". I agree with Towner (2001, pp. 165-66) that it is unlikely that the intention is to make the covenant contingent on Abraham's blamelessness, and so I have preferred a more typical cohortative translation in order to communicate that it is an expectation of appropriate relationship rather than a condition.

[172] Literally "give"; so also in verses 5, 6, and 20.

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And God said to him, 4 "As for me—behold,[173] my covenant (is) with you, and you shall be father to a multitude of nations. 5 And your name will no longer be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, because I shall make[174] you a father of a multitude of nations. 6 And I shall cause you to be exceedingly fruitful. And I shall make you into nations, and kings will go out[175] from you. 7 And I will establish the covenant between me and you and your seed after you for their generations for an eternal covenant in order to be God[176] to you and your seed after you. 8 And I will give to you and to your seed after you the land of your sojournings—all the land of Canaan for an eternal possession. And I will be to them God."

9 And God said to Abraham, "And as for you—you must keep my covenant—you and your seed after you for their generations. 10 This is my covenant that you (pl) shall keep—between me and you and your seed after you—every male among you is to be circumcised. 11 And you (pl) will circumcise[177] the flesh of your foreskin and it will be a sign of a covenant between me and you. 12 And an eight-day-old among you must be[178] circumcised—every male for your generations, house-born or purchased of silver from a son of a foreigner that is not from your seed—13 he must surely[179] be circumcised—house-born or purchased of silver, so that my covenant will be in your flesh for an eternal covenant.

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[173] Wenham (1994b, p. 15) translates this as "*since* my covenant is with you", but also suggests immediacy ("my covenant is *now* with you"). Waltke and O'Connor (1990, pp. 676-77) see it either as a foundational statement or with a causative nuance ("*because* my covenant is with you"); the latter seems unlikely given that the pronoun אֲנִי has a parallel in the fronted וְאַתָּה of v. 9, and so Alter (2004, pp. 72-73) argues that the construction should be understood as indicating mutual commitments and translated "as for me… and as for you". I have retained the archaic "behold" in order to mark the sense of a solemn declaration.

[174] The verb here and in several places in this chapter is *Qatal*, which could perhaps be understood as a performative ("I hereby make") but seems usually to be the so-called prophetic perfect (reflecting a certain future). Where it makes no difference to the English meaning, I have translated the future-focused *Qatals* (and subsequent *Weqatals*) with the word "shall", whereas for those *Yiqtols* that seem to intend a future tense, I have used the word "will".

[175] The verb in v. 6c is *Yiqtol*, but all other verbs in vv. 6–8 are *Weqatal*. According to Van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze (1999, pp. 169-70), the *Weqatal* functions as the "backbone of a prophetic discourse", the sequence of which can be interrupted by other verbs if required by context. There is presumably an intention to indicate that the emergence of kings is somehow separable (presumably in time) from this sequence, since even in the parallel text relating to Sarah it is in the *Yiqtol*.

[176] This is taken to be an infinitive of purpose.

[177] The verb appears to be *Niphal* (passive), but it also takes an object. Bernat (2009, p. 18) says that the *Niphal* should take the form נָמַלְתֶּם, and so this is in fact a *Qal* with an initial נ as part of an alternate spelling. The adoption of an initial נ is a phenomenon observable elsewhere in the Hebrew canon. Wenham (1994b, p. 15) takes it as a passive, arguing that the object can be read as "[You shall be circumcised] *in* flesh". Nothing much is at stake in either case.

[178] The *Yiqtols* here, in v. 13, and the first in v. 15 I have taken in a modal sense.

[179] Bernat (2009, p. 17) takes the infinitive absolute + *Yiqtol* construction in v. 13 as having imperatival force (I have followed the ESV in letting the word "surely" reflect the emphasis); the *Weqatal* thereafter is taken to express "consequent situation".

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14 And an uncircumcised male who will not be circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, his life will be cut off from his people—he will have broken[180] my covenant."

15 And God said to Abraham, "Sarai your wife—you must not call her name Sarai but her name will be Sarah. And I shall bless her and moreover I shall give from her to you a son! 16 And I shall bless her[181] and she shall become nations; kings of peoples will be from her."

17 And Abraham fell upon his face. And he laughed. And he said to his heart, "How shall a hundred-year-old beget? And with Sarah—shall a ninety-year-old give birth?"

18 And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live before your face."[182]

19 And God said, "However, Sarah your wife shall bear to you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. And I shall establish my covenant with him for an eternal covenant—for his seed after him. 20 And for Ishmael—I have heard you; behold, I shall bless him and[183] cause him to be fruitful, and I shall multiply him exceedingly. He will beget twelve princes, and I shall make him into a great nation. 21 But my covenant[184] I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at the appointed time next year."

22 And he finished speaking to him. And God went up from over Abraham.

23 And Abraham took Ishmael his son and all born of his house and all purchased of silver—every male among the men of the house of Abraham—and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin this very day, just as God had commanded him. 24 And Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 25 And Ishmael his thirteen-year-old son was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 26 This very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised, 27 and every man of his house—house-born or purchased with silver from a stranger's house—was circumcised by [or "with"] him.

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[180] The verb is *Qatal*, which I have taken to be a future perfect.

[181] Or "him". The LXX, Syriac and Vulgate all have the masculine pronoun in v. 16b, and some suggest that the MT should be emended so that Sarah's *son* is the recipient of this blessing, not her (Shectman, 2009a, p. 139; Speiser, 1964, p. 125). This is motivated largely by it being the harder reading and the sense that the repetition of blessing upon Sarah is redundant or awkward. Brayford (2007, pp. 308-9) argues that the translator's Hellenistic ideology has a regular influence in his rendering of "gender-related aspects of the ancestral story" and that the connection of kings and nations with a male ancestor may have seemed more appropriate than a female one. This nullifies the "harder reading" argument. In either case, Sarah is still the primary referent in this section, and it is true that both she and Isaac are blessed and the source of kings and nations, and so not much of consequence rests on the decision. I have retained the MT.

[182] Sarna (1989, p. 126) reckons that "by your favour" is a rendering that makes better sense here and in Genesis 10:9, 27:7, and Hosea 6:2. I prefer to retain the connection to 17:1 in which being before God's face has a relational quality. This undoubtedly should be thought of as a relationship of favour, but there seems here to be a more specific implication that God should be covenanting with Abraham's firstborn son Ishmael.

[183] Bernat (2009, p. 19) suggests that this should be read epexegetically, and he translates it as "I will bless him *so as* to make him fruitful". This is probably the implication, though I prefer to preserve the ambiguity.

[184] The object is fronted in this clause, which seems to contrast the blessing of Ishmael and the covenanting with Isaac. The conjunction should therefore be seen as adversative (Bernat, 2009, p. 33).

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5.2 STRUCTURE

It seems to be contested in scholarship that Genesis 17 has a clear structure. Von Rad (1972, p. 197), for example, claims that it "does not have a unified structure and continuity", whereas several others have proposed analyses that suggest that it does. These do, however, admit some disagreement.

Sarna (1989, p. 122) offers a simple interchange structure, followed also by Cotter (2003, p. 107):

Figure 21: Sarna's structure of Genesis 17

A. Abraham to be progenitor of nations and kings; name changed (1–8)
  B. Law of circumcision (9–14)
A'. Sarai to be progenitrix of nations and kings; name changed (15–22)
  B'. Circumcision carried out (23–27)

This functions well, but does not consider much of the detail. Wenham (1994b, pp. 17-18) offers a more detailed alternative:

Figure 22: Wenham's structure of Genesis 17

A. YHWH's intention to make an oath about progeny (1–2)
  B. Abraham falls on his face (3a)
    C. Abraham father of nations (4b–6)
      D. God will carry out His oath forever (7)
        E. The sign of the oath (9–14)
A'. God's intention to bless Sarah with progeny (15–16)
  B'. Abraham falls on his face (17–18)
    C'. Sarah mother of a son, Isaac (19)
      D'. God will carry out His oath forever (19b, 21a)
        E'. The sign of the oath (23–27)

This analysis seems to me to achieve the impression of symmetry by downplaying some parallels in the text. The main problem is that 17:5–6 and 17:15–16 both explicitly involve renaming and the promise of nations and kings, yet they are not given parallel space in Wenham's structure.

Westermann (1995, p. 255) opts for a chiastic arrangement, but in rudimentary detail:

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Figure 23: Westermann's structure of Genesis 17

A. Preamble (1b–3a)
  B. Promise (3b–8)
    C. Command (9–14)
  B'. Promise (15–21)
A'. Epilogue (22–27)

We have identified several concentric structures in Genesis so far, and this can provoke suspicion that they are being forced. Klaus (1999, pp. 18-19), for example, considers them overused, and he suggests very rigid criteria—too rigid—by which they are to be identified. His complaint is that pivots are too often identified by verbal or thematic similarities, rather than by depending upon the literary structure of the text and accounting for all of the material. This is a valid concern; for example, Brayford (2007, p. 306) suggests a concentric structure for God's speech in Genesis 17:2–6b, even though it neglects the literary structure (ignoring Abraham falling on his face in 17:3) and does not account for all the material (neglecting that God's speech continues until the end of 17:8).

Even though this chapter is predominantly speech—and largely a monologue—there is a significant number of *Wayyiqtol* verb forms throughout. These tend to mark narrative progression (Athas & Young, 2013, pp. 112-14) and can serve to indicate structural divisions. An unusual feature of the distributions of *Wayyiqtol* verbs in Genesis 17 is that God's long speech features three of them (at 3b, 9, and 15); in other words, the narrator interrupts the monologue twice even though there is no shift in scene or speaker. The most likely reason for this is that they function structurally—as Westermann has noticed—with each one signalling a shift in the subject matter of God's speech.

The distribution of *Wayyiqtol* verbs does suggest additional detail in the concentricity too. I offer the following structural analysis of Genesis 17:[185]

[185] My analysis is similar to the concentric structure suggested by Wenham (1994b, p. 17).

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Figure 24: Suggested structure of Genesis 17

A. Prologue: Abraham's age (1a)
B. God appears (1b)
C. God announces the covenant (1c–2)
D. Abraham falls on his face (3a)
E. God's promises to Abraham (and renaming) (3b–8)
F. Abraham's part: commands concerning circumcision (9–14)
E'. God's promises about Sarah (and renaming) (15–16)
D'. Abraham falls on his face (17a)
Abraham intercedes for Ishmael (17b–18)
C'. God blesses Ishmael but reiterates that the covenant is with Isaac (19–21)
B'. God finishes talking to him and departs (22)
A'. Epilogue: Abraham obeys (Abraham's age is repeated) (23–27)

Williamson (2000, pp. 146-51) criticises analyses such as this for a few reasons: there is a double *Wayyiqtol* in B' (saying that God finished talking to Abraham) and no corresponding statement in B; the epilogue contains much that is without parallel in the prologue; and there is no place for Abraham's intercession for Ishmael (17b–18). As a result, he argues that we should look for a structure more like Westermann's that is "less complex and more apparent from the present arrangement of the material". Although neat symmetry is satisfying, sometimes patterns are deployed so that divergences from the pattern can be emphasised.

The double *Wayyiqtol* in 17:22 is not a particularly damaging objection; the subject (God) is only specified after *both* verbs have been given, which implies that these actions are of a piece. As for the unparalleled narrative elements in the epilogue, they relate Abraham's compliance with instructions, and it is surely noteworthy that, although there is again a double *Wayyiqtol* describing the initial action ("Abraham took… and he circumcised…"), the rest of the verbs in this section avoid the *Wayyiqtol* form. The connection to the prologue is made by the otherwise redundant repetition of Abraham's age.

The one element that seems particularly out of step with the pivot structure is vv. 17b–18, in which Abraham laughs at the idea of Sarah giving birth and offers Ishmael instead. Rather than this being evidence of the poor fit of this structural analysis, I think this is actually intended to be a significant point of communication.

Firstly, the largely trivial observation that Abraham falls on his face twice without indication that he stood up in the intervening time (Cotter, 2003, pp. 110-11) serves to highlight the narrator's use of a detail for comparison and contrast. In 17:3a, his response indicates reverence and worship, but he is merely responding to the reiteration of *familiar* promises. In 17:17b–18, the repetition of an

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expected response causes the new elements that follow to stand out. Abraham is responding to the first explicit indication that Sarah is also the subject of God's promises, and his response (while still outwardly reverent and worshipful) is now accompanied by lack of faith and protest. He underlines the impossibility of the promises depending on Sarah, and he offers Ishmael—his and Sarah's more reasonable solution to the problem of her childlessness—instead. Abraham's offer implies that the focus ought to be on *his* seed. However, God intends to do the unexpected thing—to give life in the place of death—and so the son of promise must be the seed of *Sarah*. Ishmael has no place in the plan of God, just as Abraham's talking back to God on Ishmael's behalf has no place in the structure.

So, while the pivot point of this structure emphasises the obligatory elements of the covenant (Williamson, 2000, pp. 149-50), the carefully arranged concentric elements serve also to show the role of God's promises and especially the role of *Sarah* in God's carefully arranged plan. While Abraham thought of Sarah as dispensable and had his own plans for Ishmael, God had in mind to do the extraordinary for Sarah and so to demonstrate his intentions to do the extraordinary for his people in history too. There is no place for Abraham's mundane assistance.

So, it seems to me that the asymmetry of Ishmael's insertion into this chapter is not a challenge to its concentricity but a key moment in understanding faith and the relative positions of these characters in God's purposes.

5.3 TEXT

In this section we will examine the text of Genesis 17 in detail, following, for convenience sake, the broad divisions reflected in Westermann's basic structure.

5.3.1 Covenant responsibility and continuity (1–3a)

The first two verses of Genesis 17 are dominated by God's intention to make a covenant with Abraham, and this prompts us to discuss the relationship of this chapter to the promises in Genesis 12 and to the covenant in Genesis 15.

Westermann (1995, pp. 257-59) suggests that these introductory verses are very similar to Genesis 12:1–4a in structure and style, whereas the speech itself (17:4–16) is more formal and repetitive. The speech is unusual in Genesis, with its style seeming to reflect the more contractual nature of its content, but the preamble does serve to connect it to what has come before.

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5.3.1.1 The meaning of ברית ("covenant")

Definitions of ברית tend to emphasise its connection to treaties, whether between equals or with vassals (Fensham, 1996, p. 235), or more generally as the extension of promises or the forming of associations based on common laws or purposes (Stackhouse, 2011, p. 182). Von Rad (1972, p. 133) emphasises that it establishes or clarifies a legal basis for a relationship, and Cohen (2005, p. 9) offers a definition that emphasises the obligation that it places on the covenant partners. Bernat (2009, p. 32) distinguishes between *promissory* and *obligatory* covenants, depending on the terminology with which a covenant is associated. He argues that the verbs הקים and נתן are used when ברית is meant in its promissory sense, and שׁמר is used when an obligatory sense is meant. Bernat acknowledges that both promissory and obligatory elements are present in this text, but for God to "give" a covenant (17:2) directly after the apparent obligation to walk before God and be blameless (17:1) is an indication that the argument from associated terminology is hard to sustain.[186]

Weinfeld (1970, pp. 184-86) also suggests a distinction between obligatory covenants, such as the Sinai covenant, and promissory covenants, such as this one in Genesis 17. He argues that the promissory covenants are based on royal grants in the ANE. Grants are gifts given to loyal servants of their master, and they are usually signalled by the use of language such as "to walk loyally before" the master, or to be wholehearted. Weinfeld (1970, p. 195) argues that certain editors had a hand in adding conditions to these promises (such as to make loyalty a condition of their fulfilment) at a later stage.

Cross (1998, p. 7) argues that covenant ought to be seen within a setting in the ancient world of kinship bond-formation. Covenants between God and humans involve the adoption of a familial relationship such that God becomes a "Divine Kinsman". He says, "The Divine Kinsman, it is assumed, fulfils the mutual obligations and receives the privileges of kinship." The family maintains loyalty and expresses love. Cross (1998, p. 10) points out that kinship language is applied even within international vassal treaties. Social metaphors of adoption occur regularly within God's covenants with Israel (e.g., 2 Sam 7:14; Ezek 16:8), and he says, "It should be stressed that adoptive sonship

[186] Arguments from the associated terminology are problematic, because there tend always to be exceptions to any rule, and it is not always clear whether a covenant is new or implicitly based on an earlier one. For example, if *establishing* a covenant means that there must be an earlier one, then Noah's covenant (Gen 9) and that with Phinehas (Num 25:12) must both be based on unspoken covenants, or else the language is not such an important factor. Indeed, Weinfeld concludes that there is no consistency in the use of terminology for initiating covenants (Williamson, 2000, pp. 190-92, 200-201).

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places obligations of kinship on the father, as is generally recognized, and also on the son, which is often forgotten. Kinship obligations are necessarily mutual" (Cross, 1998, pp. 13-14).[187]

Joosten (2019, pp. 3-6) points out that whatever its lexical meaning might be, contextual factors play a significant role in its associations. He says that it almost always refers to a bilateral agreement involving *specific obligations* and *loyalty* of the partners,[188] and that its purpose is to establish a relationship of shalom between the parties. Besides the parity (1 Kgs 5:12) and vassal (Ezek 17:11–21) treaties already mentioned, covenants appear in Scripture in connection with a variety of relationships, including:

- a pledge between friends (1 Sam 18:3; 20:8, 42; 23:18);
- marriage (Mal 2:14);
- a pledge to carry out a task (2 Kgs 11:4); and
- a constitutional agreement between the king and the people (2 Sam 5:3).[189]

He notes that at some point "covenant" came to describe the relationship between Israel and YHWH in general.

Covenants, therefore, are agreements that establish kinship-like relationships, and these invariably involve some degree of mutuality, particularly of loyalty to the relationship. The use of ברית in Genesis 17, describing a relationship between God and Abraham, certainly indicates a binding commitment between the parties and the obligations that pertain. However, whether ברית is being used of one or more agreements in Genesis 17 is unclear, as is its relationship with the first explicit covenant with Abraham (Gen 15).

[187] Brawley (2014, p. 124) argues similarly that the language of "conditional" and "unconditional" may be misleading—biblical authors tend to synthesise the conditional and unconditional. All of the relational agreements between God and people (whether explicitly covenantal or not) imply mutual responsibilities on which the relationship is predicated.

[188] Brawley (2014, p. 122) also emphasises the notion of a pledge of fidelity.

[189] Joosten (2019, p. 6) adds that in some circumstances, a relationship would be understood to be covenantal without the specific language occurring (compare the absence of ברית in 2 Samuel 7:5–16 with David's reflection in 2 Samuel 23:5). This means that it is possible that promissory passages such as Genesis 12:1–3 may be covenantal though the language is absent.

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5.3.1.2 The relationship between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17

The proximity of two covenant-making scenes in Genesis has prompted various explanations. Source-critical scholarship has tended to regard Genesis 15 and 17 as different presentations of essentially the same event (Speiser, 1964, p. 126; Von Rad, 1972, p. 197). This may be so, but it still requires an explanation for the role of both in Genesis as we have it. Williamson (2000, pp. 20-21) supplies three other common views:

- They represent different stages of covenantal development with different emphases.
- Genesis 17 represents "a separate development in God's dealings with Abraham".
- Genesis 16 introduces a change that requires covenant renewal in Genesis 17.

The first and second views differ over the degree to which new promissory elements and obligations in Genesis 17 are novel enough to constitute a new covenant (Williamson, 2000, pp. 32-36). The third view is based on the idea that the misguided attempt at securing an heir with Hagar makes renewal necessary (Williamson, 2000, pp. 41-47).

We have already discussed the role of Genesis 16 at some length; the marriage to Hagar is certainly presented as a serious error, which makes it likely that at least part of the function of Genesis 17 is to set the covenantal relationship on the right track again. However, it is evident that Genesis 17 is far from being a mere repetition of Genesis 15, and so it remains necessary to consider to what degree Genesis 17 is different from Genesis 15.

Williamson (2000, pp. 102-12) suggests that the covenants exhibit the following important differences in emphasis:

- **Conditionality:** Based on God being the only one to pass between the pieces in Genesis 15, that covenant is seen as unconditional, whereas Genesis 17 is conditional.
- **Focus and scope:** Land shrinks from view in Genesis 17 and is only of secondary importance; the question of progeny is brought to the fore. Genesis 15 is domestic in scope—Abraham's descendants become a great nation—whereas Genesis 17 promises that he and Sarah will become "nations", giving it an international dimension.
- **Duration:** Genesis 17 emphasises that it is a permanent covenant.

I will briefly discuss each of these.

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Conditionality

Those who emphasise discontinuity between the covenants commonly identify the mutual obligations in Genesis 17 as a departure from the commitments that God took upon himself previously. For example, Williamson (2000, p. 203) asks why, if Genesis 17 is not a new covenant, the conditions were not clarified earlier. Cotter (2003, p. 109) and Sarna (1989, p. 123) both see greater continuity between Genesis 15 and 17, but both agree that Genesis 17 represents a new development, calling Abraham to be an "active partner".

In my opinion, the differences in Genesis 17 are only marginal. The original divine self-commitment in Genesis 12 and the first explicit covenant in Genesis 15 both are promissory, but they *also* include some sense of mutuality. The opening verses of Genesis 12 command Abraham to leave past structures of trust and security (12:1), and they give him the responsibility to be a blessing to others (12:2). His "active partnership" is evident in his immediate and faithful response to that call. As we discussed earlier, the structure of Genesis 15 implies that Abraham's faith (15:6) and God's self-commitment (15:18–21) both function as mutual responsibilities in the relationship.

Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that the initial demands upon Abraham in Genesis 17:1–2 are very similar to those in the opening verses of Genesis 12. Both preface the specific commitments of one or both parties with a general call to relational fidelity. The commitment to a covenant with Abraham in 17:2 is presented as an intended consequence of Abraham's adherence to the imperatives in 17:1—Abraham is to "walk before [God], and be blameless".

The command "Walk before me" (הִתְהַלֵּךְ לְפָנַי) is used to refer to loyalty or faithful service to a king (Hamilton, 1990, p. 461; Sarna, 1989, p. 123; Williamson, 2000, p. 175). In Genesis, similar terminology[190] was used previously to refer to Enoch and Noah, who both walked with God (Hamilton, 1990, p. 461). Hamilton sees in the command more of an ethical concern than in God's previous imperatives, though Westermann (1995, p. 259) interprets it to mean that Abraham ought to take every step of his life "with reference to God" and to experience God as close at hand.[191]

[190] Different prepositions are used, but neither Wenham nor Hamilton thinks that this alters the sense.

[191] Cotter (2003, pp. 110-11) interprets God's command to "walk before my face" as a command to *face* God, after which Abraham bows down, thus failing to comply. This is an oddly idiosyncratic interpretation of a common idiom for presence, and so I do not find it persuasive.

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"And be blameless" (וֶֽהְיֵ֥ה תָמִֽים) is again reminiscent of Noah, who was declared "blameless in his generation". The meaning of this term is disputed.

- Von Rad (1972, pp. 198-99) says that this indicates a relational quality, particularly to be "without ulterior motives, unreserved".
- Westermann (1995, p. 259) claims that the meaning of תָמִֽים is secular, rather than moral or religious, and it should be seen as a call for wholehearted and unconditional commitment.
- Hamilton (1990, p. 461) argues that its usage seems to refer at times to ritual compliance (being "unblemished"), whereas its use in Joshua 24:14 ("completeness and truth") suggests that it may have a sense of transparency or candidness.
- Sarna (1989, p. 123) considers "be blameless" to be nearly synonymous with "walk before me", seeing as living in God's presence implies clean living. Wenham (1994b, p. 20) suggests that it entails "moral perfection". Brett (2014, p. 94) describes it is an ethical demand.[192]

The exact intent of this phrase is perhaps elusive, but in continuity with Genesis 12 and 15, living blamelessly in the presence of God seems at very least to require relational fidelity and trust. However, in Genesis 18:19 we learn that God's relationship with Abraham is understood to include the demand "to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice", which implies that there is a socio-ethical demand that goes beyond commitment or ritual compliance.

Even the call to adopt circumcision does not radically change the covenantal demands that have been implied in the story up to this point. The relationship has reached a turning point of sorts by Genesis 17: for the first time, God has fully divulged his intentions to bring about his promises not just through Abraham, but through Sarah and her son Isaac. Marking this commitment with a sign is appropriate, and it is itself not out of step with what has already been seen in Genesis 15. In Genesis 15, God provides signs that emphasise his commitments to Abraham, and in Genesis 17, God imposes a sign that emphasises *human* faith commitments. But in each case there is mutuality in the relational demand underlying these commitments.[193]

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[192] Brayford (2007, pp. 304-5) points out that the LXX translation is unusual; it prefers ἀμεμπτος ("blameless"), which is a *hapax legomenon* in Genesis, to τελειος, used in relation to Noah in 6:9. In her view, this indicates that the translator did not view this as a call to an existential state of completeness or wholeness, but rather to behaviour that is beyond reproach, so that he is without blame.

[193] Hamilton (1990, p. 461) argues that even Genesis 17 emphasises the "unilaterality of God's covenant", not a bilateral agreement with conditions, and that any healthy relationship requires mutual accountability.

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Focus and scope

Williamson (2000, p. 144) argues that Genesis 15 does not develop the promises in general, but rather focuses on the promise of nationhood (land and descendants). Because of this, there is a need for a covenant (Gen 17) that addresses those promises not covered by the first.

This is a good observation, given that Genesis 17 does seem to expand upon the promises of blessing and a great name (in the literal lengthening of Abram to Abraham and all that it signifies). However, the promises of nationhood in Genesis 12 and 15 are strongly evident in Genesis 17 too.[194]

I agree that *developments* are evident in this chapter, particularly in how the promises will come about: in Genesis 12, God tells Abraham that he will have offspring; in Genesis 15, God reiterates that he will give Abraham offspring *from his own body*; and in Genesis 17, he promises offspring from *Sarah's own body*, not through the surrogate Hagar. There may also be an intended expansion of scope from being a "great nation" to being the parents of "nations and kings". Nevertheless, these differences are not incompatible with what has come before.[195]

Duration

Finally, the suggestion that Genesis 17 is a separate covenant because it is *eternal* is also not persuasive. None of the previous commitments have been time-bound, and the implication has always seemed to be that they have in mind the very long-term goal of reversing the intrusion of curse into history. Hamilton (1990, pp. 465-66) finds the threefold repetition of "eternal" to indicate the opposite of Williamson's conclusion. He thinks it is intended to be a reassurance that it remains the *same* covenant. "Rather, the covenant remains a personal commitment by God in which he binds himself to the open-ended promise to Abraham." The full extent of God's plan is perhaps being made more explicit, but this does not indicate a separate agreement.

In conclusion, the covenant that is formalised in Genesis 17 seems to be the culmination of a process of developments and revelations of God's plans for Abraham's family. It seems to expand upon and

[194] There is a stronger focus on progeny than land, but this is to be expected because Abraham has had the land question resolved for him in Genesis 15—it will not be fulfilled in his lifetime.

[195] "The details of circumcision and the references to Abraham living a long life and dying peacefully are new, but the rest of the covenant described here has already been mentioned in one form or another by the Deity" (Schneider, 2004, p. 57).

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formalise the relationship struck in Genesis 12 and covenanted in Genesis 15, but it is not necessary to suppose that this represents a different covenant.

The first part of Genesis 17, like the agreements made previously, implies a relationship between God and his people that (like all relationships) entails a level of mutual commitment and responsibility. In this case, to walk before God and to live blamelessly are demands that are not dissimilar to the calls to leave one's family and form familial bonds with God (12:1) and to be a blessing to the nations (12:2–3). The adoption of the sign of circumcision is the one element that may be understood as a separate agreement and therefore a distinct covenant—it is a new thing that is being required of Abraham and his descendants—but there seems to be no major change in the administration of the relationship and the promises themselves.

5.3.2 God's promises to Abraham (3b–8)

The first three verses outline the intention to establish a covenant relationship; Abraham falling on his face is a posture that indicates humble, worshipful acceptance of this next phase. Verse 4 begins with the pronoun "I" in an emphatic position, followed by the exclamation, "Behold!" Verse 9—the start of the next section—begins with the fronted pronoun "you". Together these indicate mutual responsibilities for the covenant partners.

Cohen (2005, p. 8) views the covenant obligations as being quite strongly in *transactional* terms; that is, he views this text as if it were laying out the legal terms of the agreement. God's obligation (3–8) is to make Abraham the father of many nations and to give him the land of Canaan. Abraham's obligation (9–14), in return for fertility and land, is to circumcise all males. However, there are indications that this covenant is about formalising an existing relationship, the terms of which may be broader than the specific details in this chapter. The struggle in the story so far has been for a quality of relationship: the receipt of promises concerning nationhood and blessing in Genesis 12 was met with obedience from Abraham and an immediate famine from YHWH—there is a test inherent to the first meaningful conflict in the land. Thereafter, Abraham's tithe to Melchizedek in Genesis 14 follows his insistence that no man should be responsible for making him rich (i.e., only God is to be the source of his blessing), and in Genesis 15, it is his trust in God that is credited as righteousness. Genesis 18:19 summarises the way of YHWH as "doing righteousness and justice". These all seem to be signs that the covenant is not transactional, but, in this case, a ceremonial appropriation of a relationship that involves God's commitment to bring about his promises, and the commitment of his followers to express loyalty and to live according to the divine standard.

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In 17:5, Abraham is given a new name. In the theme chapter, we noted that Jacob's renaming took place at the climax of his story and marked a significant moment in his own journey. Abraham's name change involves the addition of a single consonant, but, as Brayford (2007, p. 305) observes, the literal lengthening of Abraham's name seems to symbolise God's promise to make Abraham's name great. In any case, it underlines God's commitment (shared by Genesis 15) to make Abraham a multitude beyond count and, being also the final covenanting scene involving God in the book, it seems to mark this as a crucial point in the development of the divine–human relationship.[196]

The terminology of fruitfulness (פרה) and multiplication (רבה) appears in verses 2 and 6, recalling the blessing on the first humans and the covenant with Noah, as the language of walking before God and being blameless also did (Wenham, 1994b, pp. 21-22). This emphasises that the covenanting here has established Abraham as the head of a new humanity, as Noah was. If previous agreements with Abraham had seemed only to promise him a great lineage, this covenant emphasises the multiplicity of nations and kings who will spring from this new divinely empowered family line.[197]

Previous interactions between God and Abraham have hinted at the relationship involving a lengthy timespan; becoming a nation that fills the land implies as much. However, Genesis 17 does more strongly underline the perpetual nature of this relationship than did previous episodes. Wenham (1994b, p. 22) notes that 17:7 is the first time the common covenant formula '"to be your God" has appeared. There is a formal relationship being set up that establishes YHWH as the God of Abraham's future descendants, and this is an open-ended arrangement. The covenant is described as "eternal" (עוֹלָם),[198] and it is repeated that it is made with "your seed after you" and "throughout their generations".

Weinfeld (1970, pp. 199-200) points out that terms such as "for your descendants forever" and "throughout their generations" appear regularly in legal documents in the ANE that were used for the transfer of property, and the phrase "to be your God" seems to be reminiscent of marriage or

[196] Fleischman (2001, p. 21) claims that a name functioned also as "a cultural and religious marker, creating a link between the bearer of the name and associations linked to that name". Thus, there is a great deal of importance given to the changing of a name and to the connection being drawn between the bearer of the name and the reason implied by the name given. That Abraham and Sarah are given equivalent changes within the same covenant scene unites them in function.

[197] Compare Hamilton (1990, p. 464).

[198] This can refer to an absolute eternity, but often context suggests that it means "an open-ended perpetuity" (Walton, 2001, p. 450), such as Hannah vowing that her son should remain in the house of the Lord forever (1 Sam 1:22).

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adoption documents. This accords with the view of Cross (1998, pp. 13-14) that covenant-making forms kinship bonds; the formality of such passages belies the familial nature of the relationship that they establish.

This would suggest that this covenant is finalising a relationship in which God adopts Abraham's line and secures them an inheritance. This emphasises again that the focus of this covenant is upon the future of the relationship, its perpetuity, and its relationship to inheritance.

Perpetuity is an important element in God's self-commitment to Abraham and his seed, but it is repeatedly emphasised in the commitments required of Abraham too.

5.3.3 Abraham's commitment and circumcision (9–14)

The central pivot point of this chapter provides Abraham's side of the agreement, specifically the commitment to pass on the rite of circumcision.[199]

This passage presents a number of difficulties. Firstly, circumcision is introduced without explanation or clues as to how it should be interpreted. Cohen (2005, p. 7) quips that, in its varieties around the world, "Circumcision has been understood to mean almost anything—and its opposite." We will discuss the possibilities for its biblical interpretation in the next chapter.

Secondly, it is obvious that the central requirement of the chapter is the acceptance of circumcision, although it is not clear what role circumcision plays. This passage ambiguously presents circumcision both as *the covenant* (17:10) and as a *sign* of the covenant (17:11), leading Cohen (2005, p. 10) to the conclusion that keeping the covenant becomes tautologous: "circumcision *is* the covenant, and the covenant *is* circumcision."[200] He adds, "What this might mean, I cannot rightly say."

Fox (1974, pp. 587-88) argues that 17:10 is acting as a "synecdoche for covenant obligation" and should be understood to mean, "This is the aspect of my covenant that *you* shall keep". This would

[199] Westermann (1995, p. 264) suggested that the style is too impersonal for it to be considered part of God's speech, and that it must represent a later insertion. Its current form may be the result of later editing, and yet there are several narratives in Genesis in which something like a legal ceremony is performed (such as the passing of the inheritance to Jacob, or the treaty with Laban), even if the language of the discourse is less formal there than here. It is not inappropriate to have such a scene in which there is a formalisation of a relationship for future generations.

[200] So also Arnold (2009, p. 171). This problem is often ignored entirely, as it is in, for example, Cotter (2003), Towner (2001), Walton (2001), and Wenham (1994b), and circumcision is generally treated as being just a sign.

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mean that Abraham's side of God's covenant is to pass down circumcision, which is also the sign of God's side of the covenant. Cohen (2005, p. 229) suggests that Fox's solution would make circumcision as *the covenant* no different from the *sign* of the covenant in 17:11. However, I think that Fox's suggestion is making an important distinction. In keeping with the possibility that ברית can describe various kinds of agreements, one could think of it as though verses 9–10 and 11 were speaking about separate agreements. It is possible that the ברית in 17:9–10 is an agreement that obligates Abraham to pass on circumcision, whereas in 17:11 ברית refers to the main covenant relationship (of which circumcision is a sign), which largely consists of the obligations to which God has committed himself in the story so far. In other words, as part of the formalisation of their relationship, God is adding an agreement that obligates Abraham to adopt and pass on circumcision as a sign of the covenant proper.

The drawback with the suggestion that *two covenants* are being referred to is that no obvious distinction is being drawn between them; reference is consistently made to "my covenant". Nevertheless, this is a useful way of illustrating Fox's point as I understand it—the covenant includes an agreement that Abraham should pass down a sign of their covenant. This avoids the tautology that Cohen refers to, and it seems to me to make good sense of the evidence. This solution also allows us to draw a distinction between *possession of the sign* of circumcision (which results from a parent's obedience to the terms of the agreement) and covenant *membership* (which depends on the establishment of the kind of relationship that God labours to establish with Israel's ancestors in Genesis)—a distinction that has immediate and obvious value in the question of Ishmael's paradoxical covenant status, to which we will return below.

While the meaning of the sign of circumcision is somewhat mysterious, it is clear that the most important things in this section are that every male of Abraham's household and descendants must be circumcised, and that circumcision must be passed down in perpetuity. The centrality of covenant perpetuity is communicated by the repeated emphasis on Abraham's seed (זרע) and the repetition of the phrase "and to your seed after you" (ולזרעך אחריך) (Williamson, 2000, p. 171). God is committing to pass down the covenant promises of blessing and land to his seed and establishing the same special divine–human relationship with them; Abraham is committing to pass on the mark of these promises to all those in his household. This seems to be a major difference between this covenant-making chapter and the others. God's plans for Abraham have always implied long time frames—nationhood is not something that could be achieved overnight—but chapter 15 made it clearer that the fruition of the promise of land lies beyond several generations of captivity and

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hardship, and now in chapter 17 the perpetuity of the covenant is emphasised and a mechanism for maintaining a relationship based on future hope is put in place.

The importance of maintaining the covenant over time is underscored by the imposition of the first covenant penalty—failure to comply with circumcision will result in being cut off from God's people.

5.3.3.1 Karet

The nature of the *karet* penalty for non-observance of circumcision is not clearly explained in this text. Hamilton (1990, p. 473) suggests that the choice of penalty here may have more to do with wordplay than with a specific type of punishment. Just as entry into the covenant requires a physical act of cutting off, non-compliance will mean the cutting off of the whole person. Nevertheless, there are several suggestions for what it might mean for someone to be "cut off", including:

- the destruction of the person, and thus the death penalty (Brayford, 2007, pp. 307-8);
- excommunication (Von Rad, 1972, p. 201; Westermann, 1995, pp. 266-67);
- premature or mysterious death, carried out by God rather than as a judicial punishment (Hamilton, 1990, p. 474; Sarna, 1989, p. 126; Wenham, 1994b, p. 23);
- childlessness (Sarna, 1989, p. 126); and
- alienation from God and his promises, including loss of one's share in the land (Bernat, 2009, pp. 70-71), in keeping with the hints of exile in the punishments in Genesis.

Bernat (2009, pp. 70-71) argues, correctly I think, that the lack of specificity leaves the punishment open to various forms and occasions. Given the focus on progeny in this chapter and on land more generally, it seems as though any loss of name and inheritance could qualify as a *karet* penalty. Whatever it actually entails, the *karet* penalty communicates the extreme importance of *passing down* the sign of the covenant to the preservation of God's people.

5.3.4 God's promises concerning Sarah (15–16)

The final section of God's speech turns attentions to the role of Sarah. The ESV creates a parallel between the "As for you…" in 17:9 and this section by translating God's opening words, "As for Sarah your wife". As the content itself makes obvious, what follows is not Sarah's covenant obligations in parallel to those just given to Abraham; it describes further self-commitments to which God obligates himself, in parallel to 17:3b–8.

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The parallels between God's commitments to Abraham and Sarah, both in structural position and content, are important because they suggest equality of status for both in God's order. As Abraham was promised to be the head of nations and kings, so also is Sarah. As Abraham's name was lengthened by the addition of ה, so also is Sarah's.

A major aim of this chapter is to reveal, for the first time in Genesis, the explicit intention to give Abraham a child *by Sarah*; this is in many ways the climactic development in the progressive revelation of God's covenant intentions. The surprise of this announcement is reflected in the grammar of verse 16, which reads as follows:

> And I shall bless her
> and moreover I shall give from her to you a son!
> And I shall bless her
> and she shall become nations; kings of peoples will be from her

Although the blessings are focused on Sarah, the adverb גַּם ("also, moreover") temporarily switches focus to Abraham: God will give *him* a son by Sarah. The adverb underlines that the announcement of Isaac is an element that Abraham was not expecting. This clause is then followed by a repetition of the same statement of blessing upon Sarah, which isn't redundant, as is often supposed, but rather serves to resume the blessings that are to be given to her. The resumption isolates the surprise element addressed to Abraham.

As our thematic study made clear, God's promises do not have as their goal the gift of children. Sarah's child is not merely for her sake, but rather a means to the ends that God has in mind: Isaac is the first fulfilment of God's promise to produce out of her hopelessness a family line that will ultimately result in blessing to all nations. This is important, because in this covenant-making chapter, it must be borne in mind that Sarah's relationship to the covenant is not trivial, as though the point were merely to be the womb that hosts the promised child; rather, her role is deeply representative of the covenant plan itself—it is *because of* Sarah's natural deadness that she is the ideal mother of the living. The impossibility of her motherhood is a demonstration of God's intentions to produce blessing and reverse curse as well as the validation of the faithful hopes of those who dare to trust in his promises. The long suspension of her vindication also proves to be significant: it was necessary for her natural hopes to perish so that she could stand as the representative of all whose recourse is to dependence on God.

Williamson (2000, p. 155) points out that the name changes both relate to the extension of the promises to a multitude of kings and nations—the international dimension. He and Brett (2014, pp.

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87-88) agree that this dimension—"the 'multitude of nations' fathered by Abraham (המון גוים in Genesis 17:4) and the 'assembly of nations' descending from Jacob (קהל גוים in 35:11)"—is a later expansion upon the original vision of a "great nation" for Abraham. This expansion, however, has been seen in a variety of texts and in more than just the national vision. The promise of land has progressed from there being no revelation of place (12:1), to the promise of all of Canaan (12:7), and finally to a promise of the territory between Egypt and the Euphrates—an empire (15:18). The promise of progeny has progressed from being broadly under Abraham's name (12:2), to being from Abraham's own organs (מֵעֶה) (15:4), to being from his own wife (17:16). The inclusion of Sarah caps a sequence of progressive revelations in which God's promises have been given fuller expression. None is incompatible with the implications of the original promise—that of a great nation that is a blessing to all nations[201]—but they have served gradually to expand Abraham and Sarah's grasp of it.

The name changes themselves seem to indicate that a definitive point in their journeys with God has been reached. The renaming that was "a divinely guaranteed statement about Abraham's identity and future destiny" (Wenham, 1994b, p. 21) surely makes such a guarantee about her too. Schneider (2004, p. 58) insists that the new name "puts her in the same category as Abraham… There is nothing subtle about the Deity's intentions or stance on the matter. The text has just introduced the novel concept that Sarah's maternity will be as important as Abraham's paternity."

However, there is a major element that is without parallel in the commitments of God to Abraham and Sarah. Bernat (2009, p. 19) points out that Abraham receives God's ברית, but this term is never applied to Sarah. She is merely blessed (ברך) by God, much as Ishmael is. Thus, although the parallelisms put Sarah in an equivalent position to Abraham in this text and she is therefore included with God's purposes, she is not called a recipient of the covenant, and she cannot keep the covenant by being circumcised. This calls her full equality into question.

5.3.5 Ishmael (17–21)

God's promises concerning Sarah provoke Abraham's laughter and his promotion of Ishmael instead of Isaac. Abraham's laughter has been variously understood in scholarship. Speiser (1964, p. 125) reckons that it is "decidedly out of keeping with P's character" to allow that Abraham's laughter

[201] It is generally conceded that this promise of nations must be metaphorical, because the nations of Edom and Israel that come from Sarah hardly constitute a multitude (Williamson, 2000, p. 166). It is likely that some sort of inclusion of nations is intended—in keeping with our suggestion that the original blessing on the nations intended a reversal of the curses of Genesis 1–11, particularly their scattering at Babel.

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could be in any way derisory, so he translates "laugh" as "smile" because it reflects his understanding of the spirit of the text, and the verb that is actually used can be explained as wordplay with Isaac's name. By contrast, Schneider (2004, p. 58) argues that Abraham's response is disrespectful of both God and Sarah, and Cotter (2003, pp. 110-11) claims similarly that Abraham's behaviour indicates further failure to trust God fully.[202]

It is possible that wordplay accounts for the description of him laughing and that a less disrespectful response is implied, especially since there seems to be little in the way of rebuke that comes back at him—but for the exclamation אבל ("however, indeed").[203] Nevertheless, the narrator makes no effort to mitigate the rudeness of his presentation either. Since the narrator is rarely concerned with preserving the honour of his characters, there is no reason for us to soften the presentation on his behalf—it is an apparently faithless response.[204]

Abraham's offer of Ishmael instead is understandable—everything said in 17:1–14 can be taken to confirm Ishmael as heir (Schneider, 2004, p. 57). Abraham had not been awaiting another son; for thirteen years he had presumably invested this child with all of his hopes and plans for the future and with all of his trust in the covenant promises that God had made. This was not a relief for Abraham, nor was it necessarily even welcome news (Walton, 2001, p. 451). Although understandable, it remains a cruelty that Abraham should be so unconcerned about the vindication of his wife, nor does he apparently even tell her about it even after God confirms it. Rather, he circumcises Ishmael and affirms him "in the eyes of his household and Sarah"; it is God who defends Sarah and reminds Abraham of her importance (Schneider, 2004, pp. 59-60).

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[202] Cotter (2003, pp. 110-11) goes on to say that he understands the text to mean that Abraham is "distracted, laughing to himself about the silly things this divinity says to him". He is "not really attending to the God of the covenant" and "can't be bothered to listen". In my opinion, he is making too much of clues in the text that are subtle and at best only support his case by possessing some ambiguity.

[203] Wenham (1994b, p. 26) claims that this is a very *firm* rebuke, but its use tends to be asseverative (e.g., Gen 42:21) or adversative (2 Chron 1:4); it seems not to function as a rebuke anywhere else, and if the rebuke of Sarah in Genesis 18 does indeed come from YHWH, the one that she receives is much firmer.

[204] Ronning (1991, pp. 9-12) argues that Abraham's laughter in Genesis 17 should not be understood as him scoffing at the Lord's promise, but rather that God's promise set him up to laugh due to an ambiguity. Since Ishmael could technically be counted as Sarah's son by ancient convention, Abraham could have understood the grammar to refer to Ishmael (the *Qatal* verb could be taken to mean "I have given you a son by her"). Only upon Abraham's laughing at the thought of Sarah having a son and then verbally affirming what he thought to be the case (that Ishmael was the intended heir) did God specifically rule out Ishmael and confirm that he intended for Sarah herself to give birth to Isaac. This is an interesting suggestion, but Ronning does not adequately explain why Abraham's thoughts turn to Sarah having a child of her own if he is convinced that God means that Ishmael is her son.

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In God's response to Abraham's request for Ishmael, there is a play on Ishmael's name: God says, "And for Ishmael, I have heard you" (וְלִישְׁמָעֵאל שְׁמַעְתִּיךָ) (Wenham, 1994b, p. 27). This is followed by a second occurrence of "behold!" (הִנֵּה), following the one that introduced God's commitments to Abraham (17:4). This exclamation is used to mark the solemnity of a declaration; the first one covered God's declarations about his own commitments to Abraham and Sarah; this second one serves further to highlight that Abraham's introduction of Ishmael is out of step: it necessitates a new declaration. Ishmael is then blessed with an Abrahamic blessing that is similar to that just announced for Sarah, although his fatherhood of nations is limited to the singular.[205]

This raises the problem of Ishmael's status. He is evidently not given the same status as Isaac—he is blessed, as Sarah is, but he is specifically *contrasted* with her son in terms of covenant election—and yet he is marked with the sign of the covenant. Scholars have suggested various ways in which this might be understood, including:

- Ishmael is not covenanted with; he is only blessed with nationhood of his own (Arnold, 2009, p. 174; Cotter, 2003, p. 111; Walton, 2001, p. 451; Wenham, 1994b, p. 27).[206]
- Ishmael is not part of the covenantal line, but his circumcision indicates that he is given a higher status than Sarah (Shectman, 2009b, p. 176), or that he is a participant in the blessings promised to Abraham's seed (Brawley, 2014, p. 125).
- Ishmael's ambiguous status reflects different editorial layers: one in which he is excluded from the covenant and one in which his circumcision draws him into it (Brett, 2014, p. 91).
- Ishmael is covenanted with because of his circumcision, but the idea of *perpetuity* is unique to Isaac (Williamson, 2000, p. 161).

It seems highly unlikely that we should consider Ishmael to be an heir of the *covenant promises* in any way, since this would surely necessitate a commitment to Ishmael's co-inheritance of the land of Canaan. Genesis 25:5–6 is also explicit that none of Abraham's children besides Isaac were considered heirs. That Isaac exclusively inherits God's covenant seems all but certain.

[205] Brayford (2007, p. 310) points out that the LXX prefers nation language, and thus, even in the case of Ishmael, it renders "princes" (נְשִׂיאִם) using ἐθνος. If there is an intended contrast in importance of Ishmael's blessings and those of Sarah, it has been flattened out in the LXX.

[206] Westermann (1995, p. 255) seems to hold approximately this view: he argues that Ishmael is included within the promise of posterity for Abraham's seed, but only Isaac is heir to the promise of divine presence.

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Wenham (1994b, p. 26) points out that God's response to Abraham is given in a chiastic structure and that this further supports the exclusion of Ishmael:

Figure 25: Structure of God's response to Abraham

A. Sarah shall bear a son (19a)
  B. God shall establish his covenant with Isaac and his seed (19b)
    C. Ishmael will be blessed (20)
  B'. God shall establish his covenant with Isaac (21a)
A'. Sarah shall bear a son at the appointed time (21b)

The centrality of Ishmael in this speech indicates that God hears Abraham and honours his request with a blessing for Ishmael for Abraham's sake, but the double repetition of Isaac's status and Sarah's motherhood serves to underline that the plan as God has defined it remains in place. God's order is asserted, Abraham's wish is acknowledged, and the order is asserted again.

Williamson's inclusion of Ishmael in the covenant is largely due to his argument that Genesis 17 represents a separate covenant from that in Genesis 15 and implied by the promises in Genesis 12—an argument that I do not think holds, for the reasons given above. However, there is a sense in which circumcision is a new agreement that is added to the covenant (or that perhaps stands alongside it). As we have argued, it seems likely that the passing down of circumcision to all of Abraham's household is a new covenant commitment imposed on Abraham but distinct in some way from God's covenant plan more generally, of which circumcision itself is the sign. This suggests a solution to the apparent paradox of Ishmael's circumcision: Abraham is to keep his covenantal commitment to circumcise Ishmael as a mark of loyalty and faith (and Ishmael thus possesses a sign of God's plan to bring international blessing through a chosen seed), but Ishmael himself is not to be an instrument of that plan. As we discussed in the thematic study, God rejects Ishmael, the "rational" solution to the problem of Abraham's childlessness, in favour of Isaac—God's solution that demonstrates his intention to bring life out of death. Ishmael is one of the nations invited to find blessing in God's plan, but the covenant is established in Isaac.

5.3.6 Departure and epilogue (22–27)

The main contribution of the concluding narrative is to confirm Abraham's compliance with YHWH's commands. Two statements serve to emphasise this. Firstly, just as Genesis 17 started in a pattern reminiscent of Genesis 12:1–3, it ends with a verification that echoes the one from Genesis 12:4. Abraham carries out his subsequent activities "just as God had commanded him" (17:23)

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(כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אִתּוֹ אֱלֹהִים). Secondly, Wenham (1994b, p. 27) points out that the phrase "that very day" is used elsewhere in connection with major turning points in biblical history. It is used for Noah's entry to the ark (Gen 7:13), and three times to mark the Israelites' departure from Egypt (Exod 12:17, 41, 51). Both of these features confirm that the relationship between God and Abraham (and by extension Israel) has reached a destination of sorts. God's plan for Abraham's family has been fully divulged, and no further divine–human covenanting occurs in the book—it is the *passing down* of the inheritance of the covenant promises that becomes the focus from this point on.

What then does this chapter mean for Sarah, and how does our structural and thematic study of Genesis assist us in evaluating her place in the covenant?

5.4 INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION OF SARAH?

The place of women in the covenant of Genesis 17 is contested because much of the evidence points towards Sarah's exclusion. Scholars identify the following problems:

- ***She is never covenanted with:*** Bernat (2009, pp. 19-20, 34) points out that covenant language is never used in connection with Sarah, and he argues that Genesis 17 should be seen as emphasising the same ברית versus ברך contrast between Abraham and Sarah as there is between Ishmael and Isaac. The same point is made by Shectman (2009b, p. 176), who suggests that her status is akin to that of Ishmael, who is blessed, promised many offspring, and circumcised, but "specifically excluded from the covenant".
- ***She is not given a sign of inclusion:*** Cohen (2005, p. 12) believes that Genesis 17 sends "mixed signals" about her status, but he sees her non-circumcision as seeming to give her an "adjunctive quality among the covenantal people".
- ***Her value is functional—as a reproductive agent:*** Shectman (2009b, pp. 175-77) argues that women (at least in texts thought to come from the P source) are mentioned in relation to their usefulness for procreation. Because the content of the Genesis 17 covenant is focused primarily on progeny and land, Sarah and women in general are necessary for the covenant, but not included within it. Women are important in so far as it is necessary to have the "right mother". Cohen (2005, p. 12) agrees that she seems to be presented as a reproductive agent and "not a covenantal person in her own right".

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- ***She is not addressed:*** The fact that the promise to Sarah is given to Abraham and not directly to her is also taken as evidence that her position is secondary and derivative (Bernat, 2009, p. 34).

Our analysis so far is able to offer several counterarguments to these problems.

5.4.1 Sarah is paralleled with Abraham, not Ishmael

The idea that Sarah should be viewed as having closer parallels to Ishmael than to Abraham is strongly negated by the actual parallelisms in the text, both structurally and in terms of content. In the structure, she is Abraham's parallel, and Ishmael's inclusion is aberrant—he has no partner in the concentric shape of the text; God makes a separate declaration about him for Abraham's sake, but tightly circumscribes it with a double insistence on the intent of the main declaration, namely, that the covenant heir will be a son from Sarah.

In terms of the content, the fact that she is the subject of a parallel name change to that of Abraham establishes a close connection to him and his promises: her name is made great in the same way that his is, and she will bring blessing to a multitude of nations, as he will. She may not have all of the same promises repeated—God's commitments to Abraham (17:4–8) include establishing the covenant with his seed, giving them the land, and being their God—but God clearly is the God of Israelite women, and the land is their land too.[207] In other words, the content of those blessings can be presupposed. None of this is true of Ishmael.

What of the fact that covenant language is not used of her? We have had cause to mention that covenant language is surprisingly rare in Genesis. Even though the classic statement of God's covenant with the patriarchs speaks of one with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God does not covenant directly with either Isaac or Jacob. It is true that in Genesis 17 God covenants with Isaac by name, but he never does so in person, and there is no such connection with Jacob—Isaac merely blesses him with the blessing of Abraham (28:4). Since Sarah is given the same blessing as Abraham here, she could be seen as similarly included.

This also applies to the objection that God speaks *about Sarah* to Abraham, but not directly to her. God speaks about Isaac to Abraham too, and Isaac certainly is a covenant insider. God covenants

[207] On the inheritance of land, a case study exists in Joshua 17:3–6 in which God promises the daughters of Zelophehad the inheritance of their father's land.

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with Abraham's and Sarah's seed, but Esau is seemingly a covenant outsider nevertheless. There are many reasons why God might speak only to Abraham about the covenant: Genesis 18:17–19 implies that God shares his plans with Abraham because he has chosen him to head the covenant line, because this implies blessing to the nations, and because he leads his household in the way of the Lord; any of these might similarly justify God speaking to Abraham about the covenant status of Sarah, rather than addressing her directly.

5.4.2 Circumcision is not coextensive with covenant-insider status

Sarah's apparent exclusion from circumcision is an important factor in the paradox of her status, especially because circumcision is called "the covenant" (17:10). We have argued that this means that the covenant obligates God's people to pass on the sign of all the covenant entails, but possession of the sign of circumcision does not equal covenant-insider status. Ishmael is circumcised even though he is not covenanted with. Perhaps even more obviously, Abraham circumcises his whole household, including slaves, even though they are neither covenanted with nor specifically given a divine blessing.

Secondly, Genesis 18:19 indicates that God's expectations of his covenant people go beyond the mere adoption of the sign. Abraham is committed also to pass on a socio-ethical pattern of life: "For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." In short, while *refusing* circumcision would be to break the covenant (because it would be an act of disloyalty), *accepting* circumcision is not sufficient to keep the covenant (because one does not thereby live before God or do so blamelessly). The covenant obligations involve the commitment to live in conformity with the character and will of God.

Thirdly, while there is no question that God *does* covenant with Abraham's seed and that all males must be circumcised, it is less certain that Abraham's seed should all be thought of as male just because the *sign* is focused on males. It might be banal to point out that "seed" refers to descendants in general and not specifically refer to *male* descendants. Nevertheless, the following two instances are particularly worthy of comment, because they are not just *non-specific* about the gender of the "seed", but they also specifically include both males and females:

> "They also took their livestock and their goods, which they had gained in the land of Canaan, and came into Egypt, Jacob and all his offspring [seed] with him, his sons, and his sons' sons with him, his daughters, and his sons' daughters. All his offspring (seed) he brought with him into Egypt."
> (Gen 46:6–7)

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> "All the holy contributions that the people [sons] of Israel present to the LORD I give to you, and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual due. It is a covenant of salt forever before the LORD for you and for your offspring [seed] with you." (Num 18:19)

In both cases, the "seed" is clearly inclusive of sons *and* daughters. The fact that texts such as these identify "Jacob's seed" as including both male and female children serves as a reminder that it is overly hasty to assume that the covenant with Abraham's seed only has males in view. Niditch (2008, p. 75) is emphatic that the covenant is with "seed", not specifically "males", and so, "The covenant is with Abraham and Sarah's offspring regardless of gender."

Even if we take the covenant of circumcision as separate from the covenant proper, keeping this covenant can be seen as broader than being personally circumcised. Genesis 17:10 says, "This is my covenant that you shall keep—between me and you and your seed after you—*every male among you* is to be circumcised".[208] It allows for a distinction between Abraham's *seed*, who must keep the covenant, and the circumcision of *males* (not "seed") that is performed in the keeping of it. This distinction may simply acknowledge that there are males who are not Abraham's seed and yet must be circumcised (such as his slaves), but it is at least a possible reading of the text that keeping the covenant means *ensuring the circumcision of the household*, something that women can do, and indeed something that Zipporah does (Exod 4:25).

This is very much in keeping with the emphasis in Genesis 17 on the perpetuity of the covenant—being circumcised is seemingly a sign of hope in the future fulfilment of the covenant promises, not an end in itself. Women had a role to play in keeping the faith of the household, even if they themselves were not marked in the flesh.

5.4.3 Thematic guidelines

It is the intention of this study to evaluate to what degree the wider rhetorical aims of the book are able to suggest an interpretive direction for difficult parts of the book, such as Genesis 17. The thematic statement that I suggested in the previous chapter was as follows:

> ***Active dependence on YHWH to bring life out of death and blessing in place of curse:*** *YHWH's promises aim at shaping a relationship with his people in which their faith and dependence on him reflect his plan to give the nations life in the place of death and blessing*

[208] Note that all "you" pronouns in this verse are plural.

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> *in the place of barrenness, thus reversing curse and restoring Eden. Faith in God's promises must be lived out and passed on through generations in hope, until they are given their final fulfilment.*

The thematic study of the book implies the following for Sarah's place in Genesis 17 and the covenant more broadly:

- Genesis 3 implies an interest not only in the seed of prominent men, but also in the seed of the woman; it acknowledges Eve as the mother of all living. There is an interest in significant births as well as an implied emphasis on the *right mother*. However, it is not only a matter of genealogy. Her relationship to the covenant promises matters. Sarah's offer of Hagar to her husband is presented in a way that recalls the Fall—it is her Eve moment. This suggests that the faith and loyalty of Sarah matter too. Being an insider to the covenant line is as much about a rightly ordered walk before God as it is about having the correct genealogy.[209]
- Genesis is tracing a *family line* through which blessing will be returned to the world, and it is into this trajectory that the covenant(s) fit. The argument that Ishmael and Sarah are parallel in status because they are both blessed but not (explicitly) covenanted with obscures the fact that Genesis 17 is describing a fork in the road: Abraham has provided a family line through Ishmael that God has rejected, and God intends to provide one through Sarah that is in line with his own purposes. The relevant factor to Sarah's status is not the language of covenant but the fact that this ages-long trajectory is to be continued through her line, not Ishmael's.
- Genesis includes several type-scenes that emphasise the importance of the woman, such as the wife-sister story, the betrothal scene, and the contest between wives (Williams, 1980, p. 108). Genesis also repeatedly shows concern for the outcast woman (e.g., Hagar, Leah, and Tamar); this does not guarantee that the outcast is made a covenant insider (Hagar remains outside), but it certainly suggests that God does not view women as mere adjuncts or vehicles for reproduction. They are seen in their own right and cared for.
- Genesis repeatedly gives importance to the vindication of the barren (e.g., Sarah, Rachel, and possibly Tamar too). This motif runs parallel to the motif of fruitful work in the midst of drought and famine for the patriarchs. In both cases, God demonstrates his covenant

[209] Esau in particular is an insider to the covenant line, but he despises his birthright and is seemingly excluded. By contrast, Tamar has the "wrong" genealogy, but she is able to be included.

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faithfulness by fulfilling his promise to bring blessing in the place of curse. If for the men this indicates that they are "blessed of YHWH", the reversal of barrenness implies similar covenant-insider status for the wives.

- The reversal of Sarah's barrenness in this chapter is a very significant assault on the curses of Genesis 1–11. Sarah is not a parallel of Ishmael; she is his antithesis. Hagar and Ishmael embody the rational human solution to one family's childlessness; Sarah and Isaac emphatically embody for the first time God's covenant plan to bring life out of death as a solution to the curse on all families of the earth.
- Genesis 15 emphasises that the fulfilment of the covenant promises (particularly the inheritance of the land) will involve many fruitless generations and periods of long hardship. Sarah's story demonstrates this in microcosm. Aware as she must have been of the promises of progeny for Abraham, she is made to wait without reassurances for decades before her vindication is announced and delivered. Her life is an example of the long wait in hardship and barrenness before laughter eventually comes. The fact that she is a living example of the need to hold onto the covenant promises down the generations suggests that she is integral to the covenant.

5.5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, therefore, the lack of covenant language used directly of Sarah is strongly mitigated by a structural arrangement and name-changing scene that puts her in parallel with Abraham, and by a story that makes her a model of covenant blessing and full dependence on God. In contrast, Ishmael is a model of short-sighted and destructive human solutions to the problem of curse. Genesis has signalled an interest in the *woman's* seed, in the outcast, and in the barren woman's vindication, and the new information provided by Genesis 17 is the miraculous inclusion of one who was dead into God's plan to bring life. Sarah is the culmination of several promissory motifs in the preceding chapters of the book and a focal point of this chapter. The lack of covenant language used directly of her is an argument from silence that one could similarly make for Jacob and his sons, but this silence is addressed by thematic threads that loudly acknowledge her insider status. Ishmael, on the other hand, is an intrusion into this chapter, and is blessed only because Abraham requests it.

Secondly, the absence of circumcision for women is a problem because the text pronounces judgement on those who *won't* be circumcised, but the text is silent about the covenant status of those who *cannot* be circumcised. However, it is clear that the possession of the sign is not itself a

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guarantee of possession of the covenant—Ishmael is excluded, and the slaves who are circumcised are neither blessed nor covenanted with. This means that belonging to the covenant involves more than possession of the sign, and so, particularly on the basis of thematic considerations, it is probable that women belong to the covenant without personally possessing the sign.

A major feature of this chapter is that the covenant must be *passed down* through the generations—hence the need for an indelible sign in the flesh to mark its perpetuity. While Abraham and his sons must be marked in the flesh, the covenant of circumcision is presented in a way that puts the focus heavily on seeing to it that one's sons are circumcised, and women are capable of performing this role in the covenant—as Zipporah did.

* * * * *

This chapter introduces Sarah's son and the sign of circumcision in a context that points strongly to the covenant being future oriented and connected to progeny—a line into the future. In the next chapter, we discuss why the sign of circumcision was chosen, and especially why a male-only sign is given in a chapter that seems otherwise to communicate Sarah's full participation in the covenant.

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6. CIRCUMCISION AND THE PLACE OF WOMEN

In the previous chapter, I evaluated the evidence for the place of Sarah and her daughters in the covenant of Genesis 17; in this chapter, the goal is to discuss the rite of circumcision itself.

I will conduct a literature review in order to determine the origin of the rite and the various ways in which it has been understood, and to investigate how it is thought to apply or not apply to women. Finally, I will ask what our study of the structure and theme of Genesis implies about the role of circumcision in the book and its relationship to the women who are unable to participate in it.

6.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

There is uniform agreement among scholars that circumcision is an ancient ritual[210] and that it was practised by several of Israel's neighbours (Cotter, 2003, p. 109; Sarna, 1989, p. 385; Speiser, 1964, pp. 126-27). Mayer (2004, pp. 159-60) claims that the practice in Egypt is "richly documented",[211] and there is some indirect evidence of circumcision as a practice in Edom, Moab and Phoenicia; evidence for it has not been found in Mesopotamia.

The meaning of biblical circumcision is elusive. It is commanded in Genesis 17 as though its meaning is understood, and at no point is it clearly explained. Furthermore, the associations with circumcision even within Scripture are many and various. Levi and Simeon require the people of Shechem to be circumcised so that they may form an alliance and intermarry; Zipporah circumcises Moses' son so that the avenging angel will not kill him; it is a mark of distinction from the uncircumcised Philistines;

[210] Sarna (1989, p. 385) points out that the use of a flint knife in Bronze Age enactments of the ritual suggests that traditions around the practice had solidified early.

[211] Mayer (2004, p. 160) says that an Egyptian stele from the 23rd century B.C. attributes the donor's success to his circumcision. It mentions that the rite was performed on 120 others at the same time. A funerary relief from the 6th dynasty pictures a youth being circumcised. Mayer speculates that this may mean that the rite was connected with manhood in some way.

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and the prophets call on the people to circumcise their lips, ears, and hearts. Circumcision in ancient Jewish sources also reflects a wide variety of explanations for its significance. According to Fox (1974, p. 558), Herodotus, Philo, and Josephus connected circumcision to "hygiene, preparation for sexual life, obviation of peril from sexual relations, test of endurance, tribal mark, sacrifice, sanctification of the generative faculties, social distinction, to increase sexual pleasure, to limit sexual pleasure, to facilitate reincarnation, mark of subjection, initiation."

Livesey's (2010, pp. 9-32) survey of extra-biblical sources yields the following functions and benefits of circumcision:

- to show allegiance to Hasmonean rule (1 Maccabees);
- to show allegiance to the legal code, and to mark a "son of the covenant" (Jubilees) (2010, p. 16);
- as a mark of pious sacrifice—suffering for faithfulness to Judaism (2 Maccabees);
- as a mark of pious reason that overcomes the passions, and that has a virtuous effect upon mind and will (4 Maccabees); and
- it demonstrates the reasonableness of the law, and the superiority of Judaism to other philosophies (4 Maccabees).

Livesey's larger point is that its use in ancient sources shows that the meaning of the rite was malleable and often moulded to suit an author's purpose. There is no received interpretation of the rite that defines it or supplies its original purpose. It accrued multiple associations over time.

Fox (1974, p. 560) points out that each of these various associations most likely emerged out of a particular context in which some aspect of the rite was more strongly emphasised. Even if, for example, circumcision took on greater importance as a marker of ethnic distinction in the post-exilic period, multiple associations with the rite may have coexisted and emphases may have shifted over time. He says that it may not be possible to work backwards to a single original concept that embodies them all, but consideration of the sign itself and the literary context of its uses can possibly suggest associations that are primary.

Nevertheless, scholars attempt to reconstruct its development, whether on logical or source-critical grounds, and so to suggest its original meaning and its meaning in contexts such as that of Genesis 17. One factor that plays a role in how one understands the rite is the question of whom the sign is for—the "reader" of the sign.

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6.1.1 Kinds of signs and their "readers"

Signs may function in various ways. Fox (1974, pp. 562-63) suggests the following classifications for biblical signs:

- proof signs (such as the Exodus plagues), which convince an onlooker of something that may be in doubt;
- symbol signs (such as the enacted prophecies of Ezekiel 4), which "represent something else by virtue of resemblance or convention" and make it "vivid to the consciousness"; and
- cognition signs (such as the rainbow of Genesis 9), which stand as identifiers or reminders.

Signs may also exist for the benefit of the giver of the sign, its recipient, or a third party. In the case of circumcision, it could be for the benefit of Abraham, God, or the uncircumcised nations.

Fox (1974, pp. 594-96) regards circumcision in Genesis 17 to be of the third form—specifically a reminder to God. He argues that both Genesis 9 and 17 involve similar language (e.g., they are signs of *perpetual* covenants) and seem to function the same way. The rainbow is explicitly presented as a reminder to God of his promise (9:15), and Fox argues that circumcision functions similarly as a reminder to God to keep his promise of posterity.[212] He argues that the sign cannot be for Abraham, because there are no obligations other than circumcision of which to be reminded—it cannot be a reminder of itself.

Many scholars agree that it functions as a reminder, but as we said in the previous chapter, even in Genesis 17 there are covenant obligations to walk before YHWH and be blameless, and covenants are relationship-forming events. For these reasons, Wenham (1994b, pp. 23-24) argues that the reminder is most naturally for *people* to remember that relationship (and to respond accordingly). Williamson (2003, p. 123) argues that the *karet* penalty underlines that this is a reminder primarily for people, but that it might also be a reminder to God of his promise of a seed by whom blessing for all nations would come. Hamilton (1990, pp. 470-72) offers arguments substantially the same as

[212] He suggests that there is no parallel with Genesis 9, in which God explained that he would remember his promise, because the author is likely to have found it inappropriate to have God explaining that he would observe the sign during sexual intercourse and remember his promise.

Fleischman (2001, p. 25) argues that the rainbow is unlikely to function as a reminder to God not to bring a flood upon humanity, because "the rainbow does not appear at the beginning of the storm but at its end". Fox (1974, p. 596) anticipates this objection and answers that P is not fully logical in these things and that the appropriation of existing phenomena as signs "cannot result in perfect consistency".

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those of Williamson, but he reasons that it is not a cognition sign (a mnemonic for God's benefit) but what he calls a confirmation sign (one that bears witness to Abraham's belief in God's promises of progeny, etc.). Whatever one thinks of his suggested category, it raises the possibility that the sign is not serving merely as a reminder, but that there is some symbolism to the act itself.

Scholars therefore differ over the degree to which the sign itself (the cutting of the foreskin) and the thing signified (the covenant) are connected. In terms of meaning and purpose, there is disagreement over whether the sign is a ritual mark that is empty of content, or one that has communicative value in regard to the covenant.

6.1.2 Circumcision as an empty sign of external covenant status

Those who argue that the sign is empty tend to emphasise that the practice was reappropriated and given formal significance without connection to its original purpose. Bernat (2009, pp. 50-51), for example, reasons that, as an inherited practice to which P assigns new meaning, the locus of the sign was not chosen, and so its meaning has nothing to do with the penis and its function. Cotter (2003, p. 109) similarly acknowledges earlier connections to marriage and puberty (possibly evident in Genesis 34), but argues that moving it to the eighth day removed such connections and made it a mnemonic for the desire to be related to the covenant.

Those who argue that circumcision lost earlier associations and became merely an external mark of covenant identity emphasise one of three major spheres of identification: ethnic, cultic, or religious.

6.1.2.1 Ethnic identity

Circumcision was invoked as a mark to distinguish Israel from some of her neighbours, particularly the Philistines, and it became one of the principal "boundary markers" towards the end of the first millennium B.C. that made a Jew distinct from the nations. Later still, Jews and Christians treated it as a mark of identity that distinguished the two groups (Cohen, 2005, p. 11; Livesey, 2010, p. 5).

Mayer (2004, pp. 161-62) implies that circumcision's original role in Israel's national life was as an ethnic identity sign (citing Genesis 34),[213] but towards the end of the monarchy, religious

[213] Even Genesis 34 does not secure ethnic identity as a clear association with the rite. It is possible, of course—Levi and Simeon insist on circumcision as a term of alliance, and they say, "we will dwell with you and become one people" (34:16), and so perhaps the goal is to assimilate others into *their* ethnic group. The threat is invoked in Genesis 34:23—Hamor and Shechem say, "Will not their livestock, their property and all their

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reinterpretation became necessary in Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel because there was a mismatch between personal behaviour and the implications of the sign that the people bore. This reinterpretation saw circumcision as a picture of what must happen in the heart. He also offers two other views—from Genesis 17, which sees circumcision as a sign of covenant fidelity, and from the LXX rendering of Deuteronomy 30:6 and Joshua 5:4, which see it as a condition for cultic purity—but without clearly attaching them to his chronology.

Ethnic identity is the easiest to assume, because it clearly did operate as such at points in Israel's history, but it is a problematic view. Faust (2015, pp. 275-87) points out that the designation of other nations as "uncircumcised" in Scripture is actually rare; ethnic distinction was important only when Israel confronted uncircumcised nations, such as the Philistines in the pre-monarchic era. In P, however, ethnic distinction is not an issue. He argues persuasively that even the Philistines are likely to have adopted circumcision from the monarchic era (Iron Age II), and thus that circumcision did not operate as a rite of ethnic distinction again until the Hellenistic era.[214]

Hamilton (1990, pp. 470, 480) also points out that the use of circumcision as a boundary marker in the post-exilic period is not an argument that circumcision originated in this period or always was thought of in this way. Several other nations practised it, which means that it did not function to make Israel distinct, and he adds that it is strange that one should choose to mark one's ethnicity by means of a sign that one may not display publicly. The circumcision of Ishmael in Genesis 17 argues against it being a marker of distinctiveness in the major biblical chapter on the subject. Bernat (2009, p. 34) similarly argues that the problematic circumcision of Ishmael in Genesis 17 makes him the "paradigmatic foreigner"—he is circumcised, but never fully a member of the covenant community—and he thus stands as representative of the other circumcised nations who are nevertheless outsiders.

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beasts be ours?" which perhaps means that this chapter is set up as a contest to see who will be assimilated into whom. On the other hand, Hamor and Shechem clearly do not see adopting circumcision as a threat to their own identity, and Levi and Simeon say that an alliance with uncircumcised people would be a "disgrace", which makes it equally possible that other associations with circumcision might be more relevant or that it is being treated as a mere outward formality irrespective of the associations it ought to have.

[214] While there are many references to the uncircumcised in Jeremiah and especially Ezekiel, this status is not ascribed to a particular nation, but rather seems to represent those who have this status in death—i.e., it seems to represent a religious status that confers an ill-favoured afterlife.

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6.1.2.2 Cultic status

As an alternative to the "ethnic identity" view, Bernat (2009, p. 48) offers the view that circumcision was a *status indicator*, particularly of fitness for the observance of Passover. He (2009, pp. 39-40) argues that circumcision was post-exilic, and the regulations were retrojected back onto the ancestral narratives in order to create "a link between circumcision, God's ברית-promises, and YHWH's commandments".

Brett (2012, p. 57) considers the inclusion of a Canaanite woman in Genesis 38 specifically to be making the point that "Torah observance can override ethnicity". He argues that circumcision—at least in the documentary source under discussion—qualifies one for cultic participation.[215]

6.1.2.3 Religious appropriation

A third option that dissociates the implications of circumcision from the form of the sign is the view that circumcision is a mark of appropriation of the covenant.

Von Rad (1972, p. 201) describes it as the "act of appropriation" and the sign of acceptance of God's salvation. Here "salvation" seems to summarise the whole of the covenant relationship.[216] Westermann (1995, pp. 265-66) views it as an exilic ritual that became "a sign of belonging to the people of Yahweh, a confessional sign".[217] He bases this suggestion on the idea that the covenant in Genesis 17 expresses mutuality (evident in the phrase "between me and you"), and therefore if it implies that God will be God to Abraham and his descendants, the sign must indicate that they will belong to God as his people. Sarna (1989, p. 386) does not see any significance in circumcision beyond it being a "conscious expression of… covenant between God and Abraham". It is the beginning of religious life for Abraham's descendants. "It underscores the singularity of each Jew's

[215] He cites Exodus 12:43–49 and "those who are not of your seed" in Genesis 17:12.

[216] Cohen (2005, pp. 16-17) relates some more specific associations with the salvific nature of circumcision that were developed in later Judaism. Based on the difficult text of Exodus 4:24–26, it was believed that circumcision "wards away death". The connection to Passover, another blood ritual that wards away death, emphasised that the life of the firstborn son was in view. He adds that Ezekiel describes kings and armies in Sheol as *foreskinned*. Uncircumcision and descent into Sheol are connected. Cohen (2005, p. 17) also cites the Midrash on Genesis, which claims that Abraham will not allow any circumcised male to descend into Gehenna. Anyone who has sinned too much has a foreskin (in one formulation, a foreskin taken from an infant who died too young for circumcision) transplanted onto him so that he can be condemned with the uncircumcised.

[217] He does indicate that this sign was especially in contrast to the uncircumcised Babylonians, which perhaps indicates that his view overlaps somewhat with the ethnic identity view.

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relationship to God, his personal dedication and obligation as a member of the covenanted community." The metaphors of circumcised hearts, lips, and ears all indicate that the ritual "betokened dedication and commitment to God". Cotter (2003, p. 109), Hamilton (1990, p. 470), and Wenham (1994b, p. 23) offer substantially similar suggestions. Motyer (1996, pp. 204-5) stresses the connection of circumcision to obedience to God's law, which he argues is implicit in the command to "Walk before me, and be blameless" (Gen 17:1). "Circumcision embodies and applies covenant promises and summons to a life of covenant obedience". Woodbridge (2000, pp. 411-12) explains it as "a physical expression of faith which distinguished those who belonged to the Lord from those who did not"; it represented the essence of the covenant, which for Woodbridge is "the promise that through Abraham God will bless many nations".

Williamson (2003, pp. 123-25) argues that the inclusion under Abraham of a multitude of nations suggests that incorporation of outsiders into the covenant community, rather than ethnic identity, is in view. He regards it as important that the covenant, with its obligations, is transferred to future generations by means of the rite. He considers the various uses of uncircumcision with respect to hearts, lips, ears, and harvests to be united in describing a condition that rendered them unsuitable for their intended function. Conversely, he argues that circumcision presumably rendered someone suitable for participation in God's plan and covenant.

6.1.3 Circumcision as a live sign of internal covenant commitments

While it is possible that biblical circumcision encoded an existing cultural practice with new significance, rendering the form of the ritual arbitrary, it is at least as likely that the sign was adopted *because* its form was appropriate to its meaning. Several scholars do argue in favour of the form of the ritual having communicative value.

6.1.3.1 Procreation and fertility

Outside of Israel, circumcision was not performed on infants, but tended to be a rite of passage into adulthood or marriage (Cotter, 2003, p. 109), and it tended to mark "initiation of the individual into the common life of his group" (Sarna, 1989, p. 386). While Fox (1974, pp. 591-92) acknowledges that the original meaning of circumcision in the ANE might not be recoverable, he suggests that the common association of circumcision with puberty or marriage makes it highly likely that it was originally a fertility rite. The obvious fact that the mark is on the penis is a point in favour of this suggestion and one that is poorly explained by its role as a tribal mark. He adds that the connection

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of circumcision to a "bridegroom" in Exodus 4:21–24 is oblique evidence of the marriage associations it might originally have had even in Israel.[218]

Cohen (2005, p. 11) argues that a cutting ritual was clearly appropriate for a covenantal rite (seeing as Genesis 15 implies that covenants were generally associated with literal cutting), and he is confident that the reason for the marking of the penis is "obvious"—he says that it is about procreation and fertility: "Circumcision has a beneficial effect on Abraham's fecundity".[219] Cohen (2005, p. 12) argues that the choice of this symbolism was important because of its relationship to the covenant promises: "surely the sons need a patrimony to inherit… Circumcision, then, guarantees male fertility and the gift of the land".

Livesey (2010, p. 52) agrees that the sign usually connoted fertility, but she argues that the biblical practice reformulates it as a sign of the covenant promise to create nations and kings from Abraham.

Bernat (2009, pp. 50-51) opposes the connection to fertility on the grounds that:

- The Bible never implies that circumcision has an effect on the utility of the penis.
- The Bible does not employ the sorts of symbolism associated with fertility rites.
- The Torah made every effort to distance Israel from any connections to "Canaanism" and Canaanite sexual practices.
- Although the *karet* penalty may connote infertility, implying that circumcision guarantees fertility, the penalty is threatened on several occasions that are unrelated to fertility.

Bernat's correctives are valuable, and he is surely right that circumcision is not merely another Canaanitic fertility ritual. However, the fact that the sign is a mark on the penis and that it is given in Scripture between the promises to Abraham and to Sarah of numerous descendants makes it highly likely that there is a reworking of a fertility rite implied in the use of this sign.

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[218] See also Fleischman (2001, pp. 24-25). Goldberg (1996, p. 14) says that research into circumcision in Africa has shown that "it frequently constitutes a symbolic representation of male identity, sexuality, and patrilineal kinship". While this is not strictly relevant to the practice in the ANE, it does demonstrate that there are widespread symbolic connections with sexuality and procreation.

[219] He cites Philo, who argued that fertility is promoted by removing obstruction to the path of the semen. Discussing two passages from the Tosefta, Cohen (2005, p. 94) adds: "[Rabbi Yoshi argues that] circumcision is to be performed at the place of the body that produces fruit. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the Torah uses the striking locution *foreskin* to refer to the forbidden fruit of newly planted fruit trees. Just as foreskin-fruit is prohibited in order to prepare the way for fruit, so too human skin is removed to prepare the way for 'fruit'. In other words, circumcision is about procreation."

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Circumcision as polemic

The most distinctive feature of the *Israelite* form of circumcision is that it takes place on the eighth day after birth. This likely serves to break associations with rites of passage into puberty and marriage, and it allows the ritual to be invested with new meaning (Sarna, 1989, p. 386), but the relocation of the rite would not necessarily have severed the original associations entirely—the new meaning may depend on old connotations being retained and possibly challenged.

Archaeological finds in Israel and surrounding nations of terracotta figures—seemingly with fertility connections and for ritual use—suggest that anxieties surrounding fertility and childbearing were significant. Albertz (2012, p. 276) claims that the Atrahasis Epic shows the deep concern in the ANE for divine help in procreation and conception. He argues that it is "highly probable that, in ancient Israel, conception was accompanied by rites and rituals intended to secure the divine presence". Schmitt (2012a, pp. 62-65) notes that a "vast corpus" of female terracotta figurines has been excavated over the last century, and while several suggestions have been made for the identity and purpose of these figurines (such as that they represent Ashtoreth), he argues from the lack of divine symbols on them that they had a ritual function and that they were (generally speaking) "votive objects". The fact that the figures are nude and often holding their breasts or belly or flowers indicates that they probably had a connection to fertility, pregnancy and/or birth. These were not universally present in Israelite homes; of the assemblages of objects that he studied, Schmitt (2012a, pp. 192-93) claims that 14% of Iron Age I assemblages and 21% of Iron Age IIA assemblages contained anthropomorphic objects such as these.

Given that there were very high rates of infant mortality and mothers dying in childbirth, the presence of these female figurines would seem likely to underline the deep concern even in Israel for securing help in fertility issues and protection from birth-related complications. While Schmitt (2012a, pp. 192-93) assumes that these figures were a normal part of Israelite household religion, he also acknowledges that Israelite practices in this regard differed from those of Moab and Ammon in one important respect: the use of divine images and miniature shrines alongside votive figurines was evident in Transjordan, but these were "not found (or were extremely rare) in contemporary Judah". This would seem to me to suggest that there may well have been a marked distinction in religious practice between Israel and the rest, even though material culture across the region is broadly similar.

It may be that circumcision played a part in this distinction between Israelite religious practice and that of the surrounding nations. We have already seen that the Genesis creation and flood accounts can be seen (at least partly) as a polemic against the parallel stories of the ANE from which it

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borrows; perhaps formalised covenant rituals such as circumcision and Passover are intended to be a covenantal response to anxieties regarding procreation.[220]

Male figurines—though rarer than the nude female ones—are also interesting. These were also likely to be votive (or perhaps representations of ancestors), but Schmitt (2012a, p. 65) notes that some naked male figurines feature "exaggerated genitals", which "may best be interpreted in a context of magical assurance of male reproductive powers".

In summary, anxieties about childbearing are evident in the material culture of Israel and are a major motif in the text of Genesis. In a chapter that specifically addresses the covenant relevance of the reversal of Sarah's barrenness, there is a significant likelihood that a mark on the organ of generation is intended to address fertility concerns, perhaps with an element of polemic against the approaches usually adopted in the wider culture.

6.1.3.2 Purity

Woodbridge (2000, pp. 411-12) and Hamilton (1990, pp. 472-73) point to the inclusion of slaves in circumcision as significant evidence that it was neither a mark of *ethnic* purity nor an elitist, hierarchical rite, but applied in an egalitarian way. In contrast to it being an ethnic identifier, several associations with circumcision offer the possibility that it should be viewed as a *purification ritual*—a self-evident rationale for the command to apply it to *all* (male) residents of the community. Sarna (1989, pp. 123, 385) notes a rabbinic tradition that supposed circumcision was a removal-of-blemish ritual, making one whole in his relationship to God, and he mentions Herodotus's testimony that Egyptians used it for the sake of cleanliness.

The performance of the ritual on the eighth day after birth has engendered various explanations—Westermann (1995, p. 266), for example, suggests that eight was considered a lucky number—but more commonly scholars have sought solutions from within the Torah. Bernat (2009, pp. 60-63) sees

[220] Connections between circumcision and Passover appear twice in Exodus. Firstly, circumcision is an explicit prerequisite for enjoying Passover (Exod 12:48). Secondly, Zipporah circumcises Gershom in order to turn aside God's impending punishment, which offers echoes of the effects of the Passover blood that turns aside the enactment of God's vengeance. The apotropaic effects of each of these rituals—and especially the fact that in each case "warding off evil" means turning aside the wrath of YHWH himself—might intend to identify God as the only relevant actor in the unexpected deaths that magical rituals (such as the painting of doorposts or the performance of fertility rites) were used to avoid. Again, the formalised covenantal rituals of circumcision and Passover can be seen as polemics against their idolatrous counterparts—the security of one's progeny depends on the covenant promises, not on the placation of gods.

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parallels in other Israelite ritual laws, and notes the predominance of sevens in typological use of numbers in the Hebrew Bible. Seven represents "a round number or a discrete set". The emphasis on the eighth day indicates the full completion of a set of sevens. For example, the law required contaminated Israelites to wait outside the camp for seven days (with readmission requiring a sacrifice on the eighth day). Priestly ordination ceremonies likewise required seven days of waiting and performance of rituals on the eighth. He adds also the example of Sukkot, which observes a festival on the eighth day, and of animal sacrifices in Leviticus 22:27, which identifies the eighth day after birth as the first viable one for sacrifice: "From the eighth day onward, it shall be acceptable as a gift offering to YHWH." Bernat concludes that the eighth day is the start of "ritual or sacral viability", and thus to circumcise on the eighth day indicates that the child must be circumcised as soon as he is eligible. Cohen (2005, pp. 18-19) notes that Leviticus 12—a text concerning purity—claims that the woman who gives birth is impure for seven days and has diminished impurity for the following thirty-three days, totalling forty days. This suggests at least an implicit connection between circumcision and purification. The assumption is that the mother and child are *both* unclean for the first seven days, and so the child is made pure by the removal of the impure foreskin, and the mother by sacrifice. The idea of circumcision as a purification is also at home within other cultures' use of the rite; for example, Cohen notes that one of the Arabic terms for circumcision (*tuhr*) means "purification". The metaphorical application of circumcision to the heart accords well with purity concepts (Von Rad, 1972, p. 201).

Brawley (2014, p. 127) views circumcision as a rite of identity, but he notes that identity has a strong connection to ethics: it provides "the possibility, source, and motivation for ethics." As examples, he offers views in later Judaism of dietary laws as a means of "consecration of the self to God" and circumcision as an act that "sanctifies the physical body". Fleischman (2001, pp. 25-29) applies this kind of thinking to sexual ethics, arguing that circumcision may have performed a mnemonic function, reminding the circumcised of "the importance of preserving their sexual moral values"; this, he argued, was important to Israel's distinctiveness and continued life in the land. He connects this to avoidance of the sexual immorality of Israel's neighbours, the evidence of which includes "the sins of the Amorites" in Genesis 15 and the presentation of Rebekah and Rachel as virginal and the "Hittite women" of Esau as being abhorrent. Problematic sexual behaviour is an important motif in Genesis, appearing also in the sins of Ham, the Sodomites, Shechem, Judah and Tamar, Potiphar's wife, and so on. Many of these behaviours meet with strong judgements that imply a threat to Israel's life before God if such examples are followed.

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In summary, circumcision was associated with purification, firstly, in the practice of the rite in surrounding cultures, especially Egypt, and, secondly, in the importance of the eighth day to Israel's ritual-cleanliness laws. Thematic considerations also suggest that sexual purity is a strong concern in Genesis, and that purity may be an important part of the symbolism of the rite.

Reminder of spiritual deficiency

As an extension of purity concepts, Goldingay, writing from a feminist perspective, suggests that circumcision had the role of *disciplining procreation*.

Goldingay (2000, pp. 3-4) starts with the problem that circumcision "leaves Jewish womanhood in a systematically ambiguous position" and that it seems to represent male privilege in the covenant, which is conceived of as being between men and a male God. In assessing whether the rite does in fact promote maleness, he (2000, pp. 7-9) notes Philo's suggestions that, besides matters of fertility and purity, circumcision "symbolizes sexual discipline in particular, and cuts back human pride in the capacity to procreate".[221] These were important roles, in Goldingay's view, because it drew under God's sovereignty the desire of men for (particularly male) offspring to grow their status and to contribute to economic production. Circumcision therefore operated as a reminder to men of God's sovereignty over procreation, which in turn may have offered protection both to fertile and infertile women. He regards the story of Shechem to stand as an example of uncircumcised sexuality, hence the appropriateness of the request that all the men of that community be circumcised.

As a cutting of the penis, circumcision served to subordinate masculinity to God, and as a rite that was associated with the circumcision of hearts, it made men the exemplars of those who "embody spiritual and mental unfitness to belong to the people of promise" (Goldingay, 2000, pp. 13-16).

This suggestion leads us to consider the question of how scholars have understood the implications of circumcision for the place of women in the covenant.

[221] Cohen (2005, pp. 64-65) claims that Philo makes an argument much closer to Goldingay's own, namely, that men need to be circumcised and women not because men most especially need to have their lust and pride kept in check, and that circumcision is efficacious for both.

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6.1.4 The place of women

Circumcision as a male-only sign poses a problem for women, because it leaves their covenant status ambiguous. If they are included in the covenant, on what basis are they included?

Ilan (2000, pp. 1-2) offers an assessment of the problem from later Jewish reception. She quotes Ulla in the Babylonian Talmud as saying, "Women are a nation unto themselves". Ilan interprets this to mean that "Jewish women are not full members of the Jewish nation". Secondly, she identifies the formal prayer with which a devout Jewish man is to begin his day, expressing thanks that he was not created a slave, a Gentile, or a woman.[222] This reflects the fact that women were "excluded from participating in the most important commandments of Judaism", and the prayer effectively puts women in a similar category to Gentiles.[223] Bernat (2009, p. 43) says that circumcision implies no hierarchy among males in Israelite society, applying equally to the priestly caste and to slaves; "it is an indicator of the subordinate place of non-Israelites and women in the Priestly system more broadly".

The following represent some of the solutions given in recent scholarship to the problem for women of their exclusion from circumcision.

6.1.4.1 Women are covenant members by birth

A major suggestion for the means by which women were included in the covenant though excluded from circumcision is that inclusion in the covenant promises is determined by birth and not primarily by circumcision, and/or that circumcision is a male-only *part* of the covenant proper—one to which women need not belong to be covenant participants.

Cohen (2005, p. 103) summarises the view of some rabbis early in the Christian era who claimed that Israel is a group based on ethnic descent that one joins at birth: "Jewish women, like Jewish men, are Jewish by virtue of their birth… The non-circumcision of women was a non-issue".[224]

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[222] Some Jewish interpreters argue that this is not a misogynistic statement, but rather an expression of humble thanks at the privilege of being given the greatest responsibility under the Torah (Kohn, 2000; Segal, 1999, p. 10). Even if this prayer is not intentionally sexist, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that women belong to a different category than men and that theirs is in some way a less desirable station.

[223] Writers such as Kahn (2010, pp. 103-4) and Hart (2013) have also understood this prayer to be sexist.

[224] Cohen (2005, p. 105) suggests that the fuller identification of circumcision with Jewishness itself, especially in Christian countries, seemed to imply that women were not fully Jewish, but their status was not typically questioned outside of Christian polemics.

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However, at times in Jewish history, the question of the relationship of women to the covenant of circumcision did arise as an issue. Cohen (2007, pp. 30-32) relates a Talmudic story regarding the benediction said after meals, in which Jews were to thank God *inter alia* for "the covenant sealed in our flesh" (which is taken by most interpreters to mean circumcision). In the story, certain rabbis are discussing this benediction and debating how much of it is appropriate to say. Rabbi Rav is reported as arguing that, since women and slaves are required to say the benediction, several concepts should be excluded from the prayer because they do not apply to women or slaves. The word "covenant" was left out because it refers to circumcision, which excluded women; "Torah" excludes both women and slaves because they are not under the obligation to study Torah; and "kingdom" excludes both because, according to the rabbis, even after the restoration of the Davidic monarchy they will be under the authority of their masters. "The lot of Jewish men will be much altered—improved—by the messianic restoration, but the lot of women and slaves will remain the same, forever servile". While Rabbi Rav's impulse was to make the benediction inclusive, it is clear that strands of the rabbinic tradition saw women as excluded from important parts of Jewish religious life.

However, Cohen (2007, pp. 35-42) distinguishes between the general covenant—that is, the sweep of God's promises from Abraham to Moses—and the covenant of circumcision. He claims that no rabbinic texts implicitly or explicitly exclude women from the former, and several *include* them. The main evidence for their inclusion is that women were "present at the revelation at Mount Sinai and are indeed partners to the covenant between God and Israel". Women are explicitly included in covenant life and in the law, and in some cases are even seemingly included in the designation "sons of the covenant". He claims that circumcision is not coextensive with the general covenant but included within it. He argues that "the covenant sealed in our flesh" refers not to circumcision but to the general covenant, and that women were only excluded from the former.[225]

Against these views, the case of Esau would seem to presuppose that inheritance of the general covenant does not depend on birth alone, and if women are excluded from part of the covenant by their non-circumcision, the problem of the Sarah paradox remains, as does the potential for women

[225] One related explanation that emerged—particularly as "circumcised" and "uncircumcised" became metonyms for Jew and Gentile—was that Jewish women *resemble* the circumcised. Medieval discussion of how it is that a woman resembles the circumcised varied, but the most popular solution was that "both [men and women] are Israel, part of the holy people, sanctified by the Torah and the commandments". She is part of the covenant between God and Israel, even if she is not part of the sign. Apparently, the means by which a Jewish woman entered the covenant, according to medieval rabbis, was by being immersed in a conversion ritual, which served a similar function to circumcision. This admittedly has no basis in Scripture (Cohen, 2005, pp. 99-101).

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to be consigned to a secondary status, which several thematic elements would seem to suggest should not be the case.

6.1.4.2 Included under male headship

A second popular solution is to view women as included in the covenant by virtue of their association with circumcised males. Cohen (2005, p. 94) presents the argument that there is a focus on maleness in the rite, and that it is performed "at the place of the body where the distinction between male and female is evident… [because] circumcision is about maleness". Hamilton (1990, pp. 469-70) identifies the "heavily patriarchal structure of OT society" as one of the most likely reasons for the male-only sign. Motyer (1996, p. 204) claims that the covenant of circumcision operates on the principle that the whole household is spiritually united to the head of the household, and deSilva (2011, p. 139) suggests that a woman's inclusion was likely by virtue of her relationship to her father or husband.

Bernat (2009, pp. 48-49) refers to several texts that exhibit the patriarchal elements. For example, in Exodus 20 and 21, wives seem to be coveted alongside property, and female slaves are not granted the same manumission rights; in Leviticus 22, a woman may eat sacred food if the male to whose household she belongs qualifies to do so; and in Numbers 30, men can annul the vows of their wives and daughters under certain conditions. From this sort of evidence, he concludes that male-only circumcision in Genesis 17 accords with P's view that the status of a woman depends on their connection to the male head of the household.

Some mitigation of the force of the patriarchal argument is found in the promise of the "seed of the woman" in Genesis 3. As we said in our discussion of theme, the ancient world viewed male sperm as the seed and the woman's womb as the ground (Budin, 2015, pp. 31, 34-37). The priority of the male in the generation of new life itself provides a rationale for male focus in the rite that has little to do with patriarchy and headship. But for Genesis to ascribe the significant seed to the *woman* is strongly counter to the usual understanding of procreation and may be an attempt to counterbalance the male priority evident, for example, in circumcision.

Secondly, Meyers (2014) strongly contests the designation of ancient Israel as patriarchal, both because this terminology carries with it some key assumptions that have largely been overturned (2014, p. 16), and because social hierarchies in the ancient world seem to have been more complicated than the term "patriarchy" allows; she says that women "were hardly oppressed and powerless. Nor were they subordinate to male control in all aspects of household life" (2014, pp. 20-

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21). She does not mean to imply that women were treated equally, but merely that patriarchy is unsuitable as a concept, and that gender relationships were more complicated.[226]

In summary, it is arguable that women were merely covenant members by proxy, but this should not be assumed, and certainly not to the exclusion of other possible reasons for apparent male priority.

6.1.4.3 Corporate personality

Corporate personality is a view popularised in the mid-twentieth century by Robinson. He argues that ancient Israelites would have been more conscious of group identity than of individual identity (Robinson, 1980, p. 45). The tenets of this view include that the group could be seen as a unity, "as one living whole", even including ancestors (1980, p. 28); that it is not a "literary personification nor an ideal" but a real conception that blood ties lent the group a common consciousness (1980, pp. 29-30); that the lines between individual and group were fluid, so that the Israelite was at the same time group and individual (1980, pp. 30-31); and that outstanding individuals were still conceived of corporately as worthy representatives of the group (1980, pp. 33-34).

As examples, he offers Achan, whose transgression leads to national defeat and to the eventual punishment of his entire family; Saul, whose descendants are killed "to expiate the Gibeonite blood shed by Saul"; Levirate marriage; the responsibility of entire towns for the acts committed by individual members; the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children; and the practice of blood-feuds (1980, pp. 25-26).

While this is not explicitly applied to circumcision and the role of women, it does provide a potential means by which women would have been included in the covenant of circumcision—their individual status is not an issue because their corporate status includes them. A solution of this type might be implied in Von Rad's (1972, p. 201) claim that circumcision could not have had an initiatory role in Israel at first, because ancient rituals tended to be collective, and participants considered themselves to be group members rather than individuals. He thinks that initiation would have

[226] Meyers (2014, p. 27) suggests the term "heterarchy", because "it acknowledges that different power structures can exist simultaneously in any given society, with each structure having its own hierarchical arrangements that may cross-cut each other laterally… [It] can better accommodate, at least for now, the complexity of gender dynamics and thereby acknowledge that Israelite women were not dominated in all aspects of Israelite society but rather were autonomous actors in multiple aspects of household and community life."

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emerged as necessary only in the Babylonian exile, when there was greater impetus to self-identify as part of the faith community.

Several scholars have criticised the idea of corporate personality. Porter (1965, p. 365) observes that group punishments were reserved for extraordinary crimes that fell "outside the regular operation of the law". Conversely, several of the laws in the Book of the Covenant in Exodus—by his reckoning the earliest Israelite law code—pass judgement on the individual without reference to the family or community. Rogerson (1970, pp. 3-9) strongly criticises Robinson's methodology, especially that it depends heavily on Lévy-Bruhl's anthropological work, which was flawed and quickly superseded. Rogerson (1978, pp. 55-59) also complains that Robinson conflates two things: corporate *responsibility*, which had valid explanatory power in cases such as that of Achan, and corporate *representation*. The latter "owed much to Lévy-Bruhl's law of mystical participation", which he describes as "unacceptable, anthropologically speaking". Rogerson insists that the onus lies on the one who invokes such anthropological explanations to show that they are necessary and that they have detected a mentality in Hebrew thinking that is genuinely different from our own.[227]

For these reasons, corporate personality has not persisted as an explanation of ancient thinking, and it seems not to offer an avenue by which Israelite women were considered circumcised.

6.1.4.4 Marriage, motherhood, and family

Because circumcision is often associated with rites of passage into sexual maturity and marriage, the biblical rite may be inclusive of women by connections with marriage, birth, and/or motherhood.

Marriage and family

Cohen (2005, pp. 11-12) notes the connection of circumcision and marriage that is implied by the story of Shechem and Dinah (Gen 34), and particularly by Zipporah's circumcision of Gershom and her declaration of a "bridegroom of blood" in Exodus 4.

Exodus 4:24–26 is an enigmatic and heavily contested text. Zipporah's circumcision of Gershom is immediately preceded by an appearance of the Lord to Moses in which he announces that Israel is

[227] Rogerson (1970, p. 13) offers the example of the 1966 World Cup football final between England and West Germany, of which he says, "a considerable number of Englishmen found themselves desperately involved in the fortunes of their team which stood for England in a very real sense."

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his firstborn son, and if Pharaoh will not let Israel go, it will be at the cost of Pharaoh's firstborn son (Exod 4:22–23). Shectman (2009a, pp. 111-12) reckons that the most natural object of the "put to death" construction is Moses, because in 4:20 and 4:24 he seems to be the "immediately preceding referent". It is unclear whose leg is touched with the severed foreskin, or what "bridegroom of blood" means.[228] Shectman suggests that Zipporah might have been conducting a circumcision of a non-Israelite kind—there is no indication of Gershom's age—and that Zipporah "may have been performing a family or household religious rite of which she, probably like other women, was a practitioner". The point, according to Shectman, is that Zipporah was the only actor, and once again Moses the deliverer is depicted as being saved by a woman. We cannot know how this circumcision relates to that commanded in Genesis 17, but it certainly satisfies God and wards off his anger, and it is a precedent for the participation of mothers in the passing on of the sign.

Bendor (1996, p. 202) says that it was highly likely throughout biblical history that a range of religious rites were carried out by families at their homes. Assuming that circumcision was practised from Israel's early days, it was almost certainly one of these. Women were exclusively involved in some household aspects, particularly to do with pregnancies and midwifery/childbirth (McNutt, 1999, p. 96; Meyers, 1997, pp. 38-39). Schmitt (2012b, pp. 390-91) claims that it was customary for pregnant women to be *confined* for the period of childbirth—either in a private room at home or somewhere outside the village—and that only women were permitted access to the mother in the final stages of pregnancy. This would include seven days of isolation after birth for the male child and fourteen days for the female. Following this period, there would be a feast in which the family was reunited and the child was named, and male children would have been circumcised. While there is no mention of circumcision as a ritual that was associated specifically with childbirth or women's roles, circumcision would typically have occurred at an event in which both mother and child were together restored to the family, and there is reason to think that the rite was family oriented, that women were integral as mothers, and like Zipporah, could even have played an active role in the performance of the rite.

Birth and motherhood

Whatever its original associations, circumcision in Genesis 17 moves it out of adult contexts and applies it on the eighth day after birth. Furthermore, it is given in a chapter that prominently

[228] Cohen (2005, pp. 11-12) notes that medieval Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra noted that women call *the child* a bridegroom (*hatan*) when he is circumcised, which implies that they saw Gershom, not Moses, as the referent.

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features promises about Sarah giving birth to Isaac. This suggests that the inclusion of women may be via birth and motherhood. According to Cohen (2005, p. 13), "various scholars have argued that circumcision in Genesis 17 functions as a counterbalance to maternity… Abraham is circumcised; Sarah gives birth". The strength of this position lies in the fact that Sarah's motherhood is the factor that differentiates Isaac and Ishmael. Both boys descend from Abraham and both boys are circumcised, but Ishmael is nevertheless excluded. God's covenant promises were given to the father and sealed on the flesh of the males, but the *mother* of promise was nevertheless integral. This problematises the idea that circumcision is a reflection of sole concern for male involvement.[229]

Albertz (2012, p. 275), in his study of biblical and epigraphic naming conventions, shows how Israelite names attributed several elements of the birthing process to divine intervention. He claims that "in the Hebrew Bible, every conception and pregnancy is viewed as the work of God… Thus, during the night of conception, God draws very near the couple and is especially engaged with the female partner by healing her infertility… and opening her womb". As such, many Israelite names reflected YHWH's role in:

- opening the womb or giving healing in procreation or conception (2012, p. 276);
- creating the child or weaving him or her together in the womb (cf. Ps 139:13; Job 10:10–11) (2012, pp. 277-78);
- bringing the child to life (2012, p. 285); and
- circumcising the child (2012, pp. 291-93).[230]

Given that God's perceived role in pregnancy and birth was so important to ancient Israel, the application of circumcision to a newborn is highly likely to associate it with this process. This is not to say that circumcision invokes motherhood in any direct way, but it is possible that the sign has to do with births in some way and that women are included in this way.

[229] Cohen adds, "While it is correct to say that in Genesis 17 circumcision is a celebration of maleness and fatherhood, it is certainly incorrect to say that in Genesis 17 circumcision is *only* or even *primarily* a celebration of maleness and fatherhood."

[230] Additionally, there are circumstances in which God is ascribed motherly characteristics. Perdue (1997, p. 229) claims that God "conceives, carries to term, and gives birth to Israel" (Num 11:12; Deut 32:18) and that the word for divine compassion (*rachamim*) is the plural of "womb" (*rechem*), which suggests that God's mercy and tenderness "is akin to that of the mother for the child that develops within her womb". Albertz (2012, p. 281) also identifies Isaiah 66:9; Jeremiah 2:27; Psalm 22:10; and Psalm 71:6 as texts in which God performs the role of midwife.

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6.2 DISCUSSION

The aim of this dissertation has in many ways been to set up a new framework in which discussion of the sign of circumcision—at least in its presentation in Genesis—can be undertaken. The thematic study of the book as a whole establishes some parameters for its interpretation, and these suggest which interpretations of circumcision are contextually valid and which are not. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that circumcision had meanings that pre-date its inclusion in the book, or that its inclusion in Genesis post-dated the majority of the book's composition and the redactor(s) had no interest in harmonising it with the "grain" of the rest of the book. Nevertheless, to the degree that circumcision is at home in its literary context, thematic study provides us with an interpretive framework by which to understand it.

We will begin with a point that seems strongly against the grain—the idea that circumcision represents a boundary marker of Israelite identity.

6.2.1 Circumcision as a boundary marker?

Some of the dispute in scholarship concerns whether circumcision is primarily an external mark of identity or a signifier of internal fidelity. Faust (2015, pp. 277-79) argues that one's position is largely determined by which texts one is working on: students of the Pentateuch will be confronted with internal factors, whereas the historical books focus on external identity. In his view, the two are actually complementary: a boundary marker still requires a reason for its practice beyond that it makes a people different from its adversaries, and a practice tends not to originate as a boundary marker (but rather from internal factors), but gains importance upon interactions with groups that do not practise it.

As a broad generalisation, circumcision is a *mark of belonging*—to a covenant and by extension to a people group united by that covenant (DeSilva, 2011, p. 139)—but circumcision was useful as a boundary marker only in those periods in which the people who were the main threat to the health of the nation were uncircumcised. In other periods, it signified the covenant, and this requires us to consider what made it a suitable sign thereof.

At least in Genesis, ethical considerations were strongly associated with the covenant and circumcision (17:1; 18:19), and it lent itself in later periods to metaphorical associations, particularly the internalising of the covenant (or aspects thereof) by means of circumcised hearts, ears, lips, and

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so on (DeSilva, 2011, p. 139). There is no indication in Genesis 17 that the purpose of circumcision is to be a boundary, and the circumcision of a representative outsider (Ishmael) militates against it.

6.2.2 Is the sign empty or communicative?

The assumption that circumcision primarily operates as a boundary marker tends to motivate the belief that it is a dead sign. Without that assumption, there are several reasons to see its form as communicative of its significance.

Firstly, thematic study has shown the importance to the book of fruitfulness and multiplication, barrenness, name, and the passing down of covenant blessing to an heir. Structural study of Genesis 17 shows that the command to circumcise interrupts God's commitments to give a multitude of descendants and a new name to Abraham and also to Sarah. It is extremely unlikely that a sign on the organ of generation should be accidental in this context.

Secondly, the other covenant signs in the Pentateuch, the rainbow (Gen 9) and the Sabbath (Exod 31:12-18), are arguably also visual representations of a key part of their stage of covenant history. As we argued in the chapter on theme, the rainbow recalls divine weaponry and (more obviously) the passing of the storm, which invokes the cessation of God's violent judgement on the earth and secures the commitment that all storms will pass in (relative) peace.

Exodus narrates the start of God's fulfilment of his promise to give his people the land of Canaan. While circumcision is connected to the enactment of his promise to provide progeny, Sabbath is connected to the enactment of his promise to give the land.[231] He alone strives against their captors for their release, he constitutes them as his people, and he provides an Eden-like land in which they can find rest. Sabbath is given an overt connection to creation rest, and the enactment of the sign is for a stated purpose: that Israel might know that it is God who sanctifies them. The symbolism of rest, therefore, is *communicative*—it speaks to the restoration of the original stasis, it reminds God's people of his salvific striving on their behalf, and it enacts dependence upon God for all things. If rest were substituted by some other sign, something essential would be lost.

[231] That Exodus 31:12–17 represents the second phase of the fulfilment of God's promises is supported by the many similarities in phraseology to the first phase of fulfilment in Genesis 17. The following terminology from Exodus 31 is common: the penalty for non-observance is *karet* (31:14); they are "to keep" and "to observe" the sign (31:16); it is a "covenant forever" (31:16); and it is a "sign… forever" (31:17).

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It is probable, therefore, that the sign of circumcision is also related to its meaning; it is likely that it is a mark of sanctification (in further continuity with Sabbath) on the organ of generation, which signals God's commitment to the promise of progeny and all that it represents.

Niditch (2008, p. 75) makes one further connection: the keeping of Sabbath explicitly applies to all members of the community equally; surely, she argues, circumcision also covers the whole community though it is applied only to males. We will consider possible rationales for this below.

6.2.3 "Sign of the covenant" and kinship bonds

Genesis 17 is explicit that circumcision is a sign of the covenant, and as we have said, what is signified is almost certainly related to progeny and (probably) cleansing. In the previous chapter, we noted the argument of Cross (1998, p. 7) that covenants were frequently associated with the forming of kinship bonds such that covenants between God and humans involve the adoption of a familial relationship; God becomes a "Divine Kinsman".

Bendor (1996, p. 125) argues that naming and renaming (such as we see in Genesis 17) are significant acts in themselves and are connected to the motif in Genesis of making a name for oneself or preserving one's name. Preservation of name is related to concepts of the kinship unit, inheritance, and progeny.[232] God's acts of renaming in Genesis 17, in conjunction with the covenant promise to give a great name, perhaps serve to deepen kinship connections inherent in the covenant-making process. Williamson (2000, p. 144) suggests that Genesis 34 (the circumcision of the Shechemites) is a further connection of the rite to the formation of kinship bonds.

Exodus 12:48 adds another connection of circumcision to kinship formation. It allows a foreigner to participate in the Passover provided that he and his household are circumcised. It achieves a change in status that renders the foreigner "as a native of the land"; that is, the foreigner becomes like one born into Israel.

In summary, if the covenant is involved in the making of kinship bonds, circumcision may be especially significant in linking the literal making of human families (through procreation) with being

[232] He says that texts such as Genesis 48:16, 1 Samuel 24:21–22, Isaiah 14:22, Nahum 1:14, and Numbers 32:41 "indicate the semantic relationships, name/memory/seed/progeny on the one hand, and name/inheritance/ ownership on the other, combined to provide the comprehensive juridical-social import of 'name' in connection with a kinship unit, property and inheritance (or part of it)".

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sanctified for participation in the divine family. This speaks also to the mutual obligations involved in the relationship: circumcision signifies children and inheritance rights (the covenant promises), but the "cleansing" of the penis is a reminder of the obligations to blamelessness, righteousness, and justice that go with it.

6.2.4 A sign of fertility?

Given that circumcision around the world is commonly connected to puberty/marriage, and seeing as it is a mark on the penis, we can agree with Cohen (2005, p. 11) that the sign is related to procreation and fertility. However, the way in which it is related to these things is not quite so obvious. The problem with the argument that circumcision benefits Abraham's fertility (Cohen, 2005, pp. 11-12) is that the birth of Ishmael has demonstrated what the text has repeatedly said: it is *Sarah* who is infertile, not Abraham. Given that he is not the problem, increasing his virility would make no difference. In Genesis, it is always the *woman's* fertility that is in question. It is peculiar, to say the least, that Genesis applies the sign to the men but ascribes the barrenness to the women.

So, while I agree that the symbolism surely has to do with fertility and procreation, it is *not* a rite that achieves fertility; the mark is given to the one whose fertility is already certain.

6.2.5 Reclaiming procreation

If the sign is pointedly given to Abraham, the one who is fertile, in what way is it a rite about fertility? It is here that structural and thematic observations are particularly important.

Genesis 17 is structurally in parallel to a chapter in which Abraham expresses his anxiety about his lack of an heir, and it immediately follows the chapter in which Sarah's own anxieties about her irrelevance to the covenant promises prompt her to suggest that Abraham sire an heir through Hagar. In Genesis 17, then, God addresses both of these anxieties by promising a natural heir through Sarah herself.

Thematically, we determined that there is a strong tendency to put human attempts to secure blessing in contrast with God's true intentions for the bestowal of blessing. "Reasonable" human efforts tend to result in conflict and curse, whereas God's intention is to work the miraculous instead, and so to bring life from death. The perception that God was directly involved in every aspect of conception, pregnancy, and birth is important, because circumcision is given at a point in the Genesis story at which the protagonists appear beyond even God's help in having children. The

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command to circumcise is located, structurally, at the pivot point, directly between God's dual promise to provide "kings and nations" from the all-but-dead bodies of Abraham and also of Sarah. Circumcision is connected directly to God's overcoming of Sarah's barrenness and old age, and miraculously giving a family line to this couple. God's miraculous, creative role in pregnancy and birth is also a recurring motif in the book more generally. This supports the idea that circumcision is a picture of God's covenant promises of progeny.

The role that circumcision plays perhaps emphasises it as a *polemic* against the approaches to secure fertility adopted in surrounding cultures. Abraham's circumcision takes place after he fathers a child, but before Sarah conceives. God intervenes not to make him fertile but to *lay claim to that process*. Much as Rachel's purchase of the mandrakes does nothing to her fertility but rather sends Jacob into Leah's bed, circumcision intervenes after a misguided attempt at achieving parenthood in order to reassert that the reversal of barrenness is God's intention and his domain.

This loads the reversal of Sarah's barrenness with covenantal significance that far outstrips the happy news of a woman blessed with a child. It is representative of the hopes of humanity for the undoing of curse and the blessing of all nations.

The ritual of circumcision, therefore, addresses fertility not by securing greater virility for the circumcised but rather by standing as a sign—visible to the parents while the bearer is a child and to his wife when an adult—that God claims sovereignty over the whole of procreation. In this way, circumcision is about the procreative act in general and about the bringing of life out of death—by making Sarah another mother of the living. Circumcision represents Abraham's covenant because it recalls his and Sarah's attempts to control a domain that belongs to God, and God's counter-promise to bring about his purposes via Abraham's family in the world-changing way that he has in mind.

The *mutuality* of covenant obligations is also evident in the sign of circumcision. Associations with purification, both via greater physical cleanliness[233] and via the location of the ritual on the first day of ritual viability, imply a responsibility for the bearer to live cleanly too. Fleischman (2001, pp. 25-29) argues that sexual purity is particularly in view, and while this is true, it probably stands for a commitment to the more general covenant requirements of blamelessness, trust, and fidelity.

[233] This was the association that Herodotus made with the Egyptian practice of the rite, and it is perhaps evident in Joshua 5:8–9, which involves the circumcision of the whole nation and is followed by God's declaration, "Today I have rolled away the reproach [or 'disgrace'] of Egypt from you". "Disgrace" appears also in connection with uncircumcision in Genesis 34:14.

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Moving the sign to the eighth day after birth and applying it to every male inhabitant of the land are clearly intended to ensure that there is no male participant in Israel's national life who is uncircumcised. This makes still more sense if circumcision is meant to signify purification or sanctification, because holiness is *communally* focused in Israel. This may explain why Ishmael is circumcised though he is specifically not part of the covenant—circumcision is not about individual covenant *membership* as much as it is a sign of communal covenant *hope and responsibility*, and even temporary residents of the community (such as Ishmael and foreign slaves) are expected to take on the obligations of the community—whether or not they are heirs of the covenant itself.

6.2.6 Perpetuity and future hope

The final point of discussion of the sign itself is the relationship between the sign and the notion of perpetuity. In Genesis 17, there is a strong emphasis on the covenant being eternal and being with Abraham and his seed after him. Circumcision mirrors this focus by explicitly being an indelible mark in the flesh (17:13) and by being a sign that one passes on to one's descendants from their birth.

In terms of theme and structure, we noted that the training of faith and dependence upon God is the backbone of the book as a whole—especially when the fulfilment of God's promises seems most remote—whether in famines, barrenness in old age, or Joseph being forgotten in prison. The reassurances that Abraham is given in Genesis 15 are in parallel with the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17. An important feature of the reassurances in Genesis 15 is their future orientation—they are not experienced within Abraham's lifetime. The promise of land in particular is located beyond centuries of slavery in Egypt. This makes the future focus of the covenant of circumcision all the more significant—it is to be passed down as an eternal covenant, because the fulfilment of the covenant to which it bears witness lies in the distance too.

Bernat (2009, pp. 40-41) makes a similar point. He views circumcision as a sign of the covenant *law* and promises, but these will only be put into effect later, when his "seed" becomes a nation. Abraham thus embodies Israel *in potentia*. While I think this is generally correct, I do not think that circumcision necessarily pre-figures the law. In terms of the shape of Genesis as a whole, it seems as though circumcision is a sign that points ultimately to the blessing of all nations in Abraham that will mean the undoing of the curse of the Fall.

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Circumcision is, therefore, about ensuring that Israel's faith[234]—embodied in the gift of a new generation—is preserved for successive generations. Goldberg (1996, pp. 30-31), discussing the role of circumcision in "cultural reproduction", points out that both men and women were involved in educating the children about the covenant, and that circumcision played a role in "transmitting religiously structured collective memory and commitments".

The move of circumcision from adulthood to the eighth day after birth perhaps communicates that circumcision is not necessarily focused on the male recipient of the sign as much as it is focused on the involvement of the parents both in procreation and in the perpetuity of the covenant promises through that next generation. Applying the sign to one's child emphasises the progeny rather than the act of procreation, and it signifies that the birth of children is leading to the fruition of the distant promises to reinstate Eden.

6.2.7 Summary

In summary, circumcision represents God's claim on the procreative process—the making of family, the making of a next generation, the passing down of the covenant—and it places the mutual demand of purity upon the circumcised. It is of paramount importance to the sign that it is passed down, because the covenant fulfilment is in the future, and so covenant hopes must be geared towards the preservation of Israel's faith in the promises.

If Israel's faith is for both Abraham and Sarah and for all their seed, both sons and daughters, it remains for us to consider why it is that this sign should be applied to males only.

6.2.8 The place of women in a male-only sign

There is no doubt that women *are* included in the covenant in spite of their non-circumcision, because they belong to the seed with whom God covenants. The place of women with respect to circumcision is less clear. The following is a discussion of some possible reasons why men might be given primacy and some ways in which women might be seen as full participants in the sign, not all of which are mutually exclusive.

[234] Bernat's (2009, p. 132) summary of Eilberg-Schwartz's view is relevant here: "The dynamics of circumcision in the Priestly literature are exclusively internal, and its ramifications are solely upon the relationship between Israel and her deity."

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6.2.8.1 Patriarchy?

The most common solution to the problem of the exclusion of women from circumcision is to invoke representative headship—that is, women were not included within the covenant sign because they were culturally included by virtue of their association with men. While this is entirely possible, it is questionable whether it goes very far in addressing the problem of Sarah's paradoxical status. Patriarchal social structure gives us terminology with which to locate women in the covenant, but it fails to explain the very positive representation of women elsewhere in Genesis, and it remains callous that a sign that excludes Sarah is found in the very chapter that first includes her in the covenant plan.

Patriarchy also makes poor sense of the application of the sign to infants: if covenant membership were a matter of patriarchal headship, we would expect its sign to be applied to betrothed adults, not to infants, who are themselves under patriarchal authority, not exercising it.[235] Furthermore, the covenant sign is applied to other members of the patriarch's household, including adult slaves (who as 'possessions' are arguably more likely than a wife to be incorporated under a patriarch's representation by default).

6.2.8.2 Male inheritance?

A slightly more nuanced appeal to social order can be inferred from Cohen (2005, p. 12), who suggests that the male focus inherent to circumcision reflects the fact that it was by default the sons who were the heirs of the patrimony. Since inheritance is both important to the storyline of Genesis and broadly in line with the view of circumcision that I have proposed—that is, that it is about the passing down of the covenant in perpetuity—this is a strong reason why males would be the bearers of the covenant sign.

The exceptional case of Zelophehad's daughters (Num 27, 36) demonstrates that women were capable of being included as heirs in their own right. Thus, although they are the exception that

[235] "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24) would establish a perfectly coherent foundation for circumcision of a man shortly before his wedding. This would establish a link between his patriarchal headship and his circumcision, and it would incorporate the wife as being "one flesh" with him. His children would be included until such time as they "leave father and mother"—exactly as representative headship proponents argue: unmarried daughters are still under their fathers' representation. The circumcision of *infants* communicates covenant membership *from birth* and is a much weaker picture of patriarchal representation. If it is the intent of the sign, it is poorly chosen.

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proves the rule, their example suggests that the non-circumcision of women may be akin to their non-inheritance: it is reflective of a cultural convention of covenant inheritance via patrilineality, rather than evidence of the *exclusion* of women from covenant inheritance.[236]

While this is a strong possibility, in my opinion, it is rendered slightly problematic by the observation that Ishmael was circumcised although he was specifically barred from inheriting alongside Isaac. If circumcision reflects the inheritance of a patrimony, it is strange that Ishmael, who inherits neither Abraham's promises nor a share in the land, should be included in the sign.

6.2.8.3 Chastising of the male?

Goldingay (2000, pp. 13-16) attempts to reverse the patriarchal argument by suggesting that circumcision is an anti-masculinity sign. It is about the disciplining of masculinity because of the innate unfitness of men for their task. I agree that Genesis implies criticism of abusive masculinity at several points, and men undoubtedly could benefit from a permanent, physical reminder of their shortcomings. It is arguable that the associations of circumcision with purification would tangentially serve this function for men (and more persistently than for women), but I do not find that this accords well with the primary functions that circumcision seems to perform. So, I do not think the solution is that women are being excluded from special *criticism*.

6.2.8.4 Anticipation of a particular male seed?

While we have not dwelt on it in any detail, it is possible that Genesis intends to encourage hopes in the coming of a *particular* seed who will reverse curse and bring blessing. This view is associated usually with an (overly strong) emphasis on the serpent-crushing "seed of the woman" reference in Genesis 3, but there are other suggestions in the book that this might be appropriate. For example, Eve emphasises that Seth is a "seed to replace Abel"; hopes are expressed in Noah that he might reverse curse; Noah and Abraham are both presented as Adamic; distinctions are made between seeds of Abraham, so that only Isaac and Jacob are chosen; and Jacob's final blessings (and various other hints)[237] imply hopes in Davidic kingship. It is possible that Genesis anticipates the election of a

[236] One might object that no one ever circumcised daughters in the absence of any male children, but perhaps this is to press the analogy too far.

[237] Several scholars have commented on echoes of David's story in parts of Genesis. Brueggemann (2011, pp. 2-4), for example, has argued for several parallels in the Prologue (see Appendix A), and there are similarities between Dinah and Shechem's story and that of Amnon and Tamar.

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certain “seed”, whether it is Jacob as the major fulfilment of this role in the book, or preparation for the role of Moses in the Pentateuch, or David himself. If the book is post-exilic and all these figures are distant memories, there is all the more need for faith in the fulfilment of covenant hope in the midst of an impossible present, and all the more likelihood of the anticipation of a New Israel, or a New Moses, or a New David—who will be responsible for the final reversal of curse.

If any of this is the case, then there is all the more reason to signify covenant hope embodied in a new messianic figure by marking males only. Women can be seen as fully included because the mark is made on the male as the focus of the hope in a male messiah, but the hopes themselves are shared equally by both husband and wife.

6.2.8.5 Female participation in sex, birth, family, and transmission of the sign

It is arguable that the marking of the organ of generation intends for the sign to function primarily within the sphere of sexual union. Circumcision has to do with hope in the covenant future expressed in the birth of the next generation, and so it is fitting that the sign of the covenant should be most prominent—for both male and female—when they are involved in the conception of the next generation. Genesis introduces male and female with a very early reference to their one-fleshedness expressed in sexual union, and we have noted often that barrenness is a key villain in the Genesis story. Husband and wife are both equally part of the perpetuation of the covenant line; the sign is applied only to the male simply because he bears the most obvious candidate for a marker of God’s claim to the reproductive process. Women, for their part, are sexual partners and mothers. They are teachers of the covenant, and they participate in circumcision by ensuring that the sign is passed on to the next generation, as Zipporah did.

The major objection to this view is that circumcision is typically a ritual associated with sexual maturity, and so if it were a sign for sexual partners, why move it to the eighth day after birth? This would seem to distance the rite from its role in marriage and fertility. Nevertheless, moving it to infancy perhaps served to take the focus off the fertility of the male and to place it upon the promise of a future for his people and covenant.

6.2.8.6 The male sign represents hope, but birth represents the reality

It seems as though circumcision is a reworked fertility ritual, and as such we have noted that it is strange that Abraham is circumcised seemingly to improve his fertility when Genesis invariably

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ascribes the barrenness to the women. My own view of the reason for circumcision being applied exclusively to the male provides an explanation for this peculiarity.

We have noted that some scholars have explained *birth* as the woman's equivalent of circumcision. While birth and circumcision are never explicitly made counterparts in Scripture and birth is not a sign of the covenant, I think that the two are nevertheless connected in an important way.

The importance of motherhood is anticipated in the naming of Eve—Adam declares her the mother of all the living. In terms of the theme of the book, the future orientation of the covenant promises and the centrality of progeny to their fulfilment imply that births are small instances of God's enactment of his covenant promises, just as barrenness in Scripture represents a threat to them. In other words, it may be that each individual birth—each victory won against barrenness—should be seen as a real fulfilment of God's covenant (albeit an incipient one). This means that males are given the *sign* of the covenant—men plant the seed in the hope that the family line will continue before God, and then have no further role in the process. But by God's help it is the women who are receptive, who carry the child, and who ultimately bear the reality.

This neatly expresses what we see also in the example of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham *is* fertile before the sign is given—the potential for seed exists. The sign does not alter his fertility; what is lacking is God's empowerment of the process to bring about the reality, and this is what the sign confesses. In contrast to the "reasonable" faithlessness of Hagar's surrogacy, circumcision calls for faith in God's promises, God's ways, and God's timing. The sign represents the demand for faith and dependence on God from both Abraham and Sarah to bring about the reality of what he promised.

Thus it is not strange that Sarah should be excluded from circumcision precisely at the moment that God promises her inclusion in the birth of the son of promise. The *sign* is put on the male—normally at birth, in distant anticipation of the next generation—but the production of a "seed of the woman" at the time of maturity is its *fulfilment*. The male bears the sign in hope. The woman brings the promise to fruition in vindication.

6.3 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, circumcision is the sign of the covenant seemingly because it represents the importance of progeny to the future hopes of blessing on Israel and all nations. It is a perpetual sign marked on the organ of generation in hope that God will grant the production of new life. It is marked on the organ of a *child* because it is a sign for the whole family that the covenant is to be

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passed on in perpetuity—that is, it is a reflection of the hope that the next generation will have a next generation too. Women are participants in that hope in the same way that they are participants in the process of childbearing: they observe the sign in the act of procreation, they are bearers of the fruition of hope in the act of childbirth, and they are participants as parents in the circumcision of the next generation on the eighth day.

* * * * *

In the final chapter, I will summarise the findings and contribution of this study and make some suggestions as to how it might prompt further research.

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7. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I will summarise what has been found in this study, describe how I think it contributes to the field, and suggest avenues for future research.

7.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

We began with some working hypotheses, the first one being that Genesis is coherent enough to be studied as a unified whole. While it is likely that Genesis has been composed from texts and traditions that had their own structures, plots, and thematic aims, their incorporation into the final form of the book has created new literary relationships in service of the aims of the redactor(s) of Genesis (Patterson, 2018, p. 8). The study of its synchronic features—such as the nesting of detailed pivot structures within an overarching formulaic structure based on types of *toledot*—shows that there is indeed a high degree of coherence in the book.

The goal of synchronic studies is to gain a perception of the whole in order to provide a mechanism that clarifies the roles of its parts. The synchronic elements—structure, plot, and theme for the purposes of this study—should produce a comprehensive and cohesive picture of the purpose of the book, and this should enable us to evaluate suggested interpretations of difficult sections of the book—such as the Sarah Paradox. Our second working hypothesis (that the pursuit of these elements would uncover sufficient evidence to help us to understand Sarah's place) was also successful, because although the evidence that we uncovered does not necessarily *resolve* difficulties, it does enable us to see which interpretations are "with the grain" of the book and which cut against it. Such interpretive controls provide us with a more objective mechanism by which to choose between suggested interpretations.

The third working hypothesis was that Sarah's status with respect to the covenant and circumcision is paradigmatic for the place of women in the covenant(s) more generally. To the degree that my methodology has rendered my findings probable, I suggest that Sarah's place is unique in the sense

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that her line is special in redemptive history in a way that yours and mine are not, but it is also representative of all women because circumcision was tied to hope in covenant fulfilment in Israel's apparently desolate future—hope that involved all women in the covenant, and hope that was supremely activated in the birth of a new generation of covenant people.

The following summaries of our findings provide answers to the key questions with which we began.

7.1.1 Structure, plot, and theme

The first key question was: "What does the narrative-critical study of structure, plot, and theme suggest are the storyline, purpose, and conceptual centre of the book of Genesis?"

The three modes of analysis that comprised the bulk of our study—structure, plot, and theme—work together to illuminate the implied author's purpose for writing. Structure supplies the division and arrangement of the text into sections and (as in the case of Genesis) may mark certain concepts or sections for emphasis. Plot examines how the story has been arranged logically, particularly in terms of the development from conflict to resolution; the correct identification of the central complication or predicament also assists in highlighting key concepts in the discussion. Finally, both of these provide guidance to the discussion of theme, which is the "conceptualisation of the plot", or what I have often called the *communicative purpose* underlying the selection and arrangement of the elements of the story.

Regarding the structure of Genesis, we found that the *toledot* formulae have been employed in a fairly consistent pattern, with five formulae introducing major narrative sections—each of which is named for a patriarch—and each section is drawn to a close by the death notice of the patriarch and a horizontal *toledot* that dismisses certain lineages from the story.

The major conclusions to be drawn from this study of structure are:

- The organising motif of the book—the *toledot* formula—focuses attention broadly on generations (including the associations with childbearing and the preservation of a lineage through history).
- The use of horizontal *toledot* to exit non-elect lineages from the story implies a concern for acceptance and rejection; there is an effort to trace a *particular line*.
- The vertical *toledot* seem to connect covenant movements in the book, focusing particularly on expanses of time between them.

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My study of plot focused only on how events have been arranged according to the logic of conflict and resolution. The Complication that provides the primary conflict is the rebellion in the Garden of Eden in which the humans claim autonomy and as a result are cast from the garden and into barrenness. Early hints at a resolution are immediately connected to childbirth: there is conflict between the seed of Eve and the seed of the serpent, Eve is called "mother of the living", and at the birth of Seth she celebrates the gift of a seed to replace Abel. Similarly, the archetypical interpersonal conflict is expressed as enmity between her children: Cain murders Abel. For these sorts of reasons, Patterson (2018) concludes that the plot of Genesis is constructed around the concern for the righteousness and survival of the woman's seed. While Patterson's project was to derive from the data of the book an underlying rationale for the selection of events (i.e., the plot), we sought to do the same in terms of its theme—the "why?" of the plot.

My approach to the discovery of theme was to identify and explain points of emphasis in the narrative as highlighted by structural focus, key moments of exposition (especially from omniscient and trustworthy perspectives in the text, namely, those of God and the narrator), and intertextual connections such as repetition and allusion. These elements reveal what the implied author considers to be important and what represent the moments of discovery and change.

The following is a summary of the most important conclusions:

- The issue underlying the Fall and the entry into the world of curse and violence (Gen 2–4) is the humans' declaration of independence from God and their assertion of autonomy.
- The result is disruption of relationships—with God and within the deepest human bonds (in marriage and with blood relatives).
- God embarks on a restorative plan for blessing in the place of curse and the establishment of a new Eden; this is focused on the descent of a certain family line (the "seed of the woman"), which likely culminates in a restorative figure, a new Adam.
- The act in which God represents his covenant is his gift of a son via Sarah, by which he enacts the giving of life in the midst of death. Her role is crucial, because as one whose natural hopes in motherhood have died, she stands as a demonstration of God's covenant plan and as representative of the radical dependence on God and trust in his apparently remote promises that the covenant demands.
- There is an emphasis on long periods of alienation that may precede the fulfilment of the promises (explicitly in Genesis 15 in connection with the land, but also implicitly in the long

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ages between covenants implied by the vertical *toledot*, Sarah's long wait for vindication, Jacob's long exile, and Joseph's extended imprisonment). Because of this, faith in the promises and blessings must be passed on in perpetuity.

- God shows care for the outcast and alien in the midst of their oppression.
- There is a responsibility to be a blessing, to live righteously and justly, and so to participate in God's project to return blessing to the nations.

From these emphases, we suggested the following summary statement in answer to the key question with which we began. The conceptual centre and purpose of the book is:

> ***Active dependence on YHWH to bring life out of death and blessing in place of curse:*** *YHWH's promises aim at shaping a relationship with his people in which their faith and dependence on him reflect his plan to give the nations life in the place of death and blessing in the place of barrenness, thus reversing curse and restoring Eden. Faith in God's promises must be lived out and passed on through generations in hope, until they are given their final fulfilment.*

This rigorous evaluation of the structure, plot, and theme provides a baseline by which we can evaluate conclusions about the overall purpose of the book. For example, Shectman (2009b, p. 183) says, "Genesis is the story of the birth of Israel as a nation; even Genesis 1–11, which deals with all peoples, is part of this Israelite pre-history, explaining the early roots of the nation". Arnold (2009, p. 7) says, "The book of Genesis is about beginnings." Both of these views describe things that the book of Genesis *does*—it does provide origin stories, particularly for the nation of Israel—but neither is sufficient as a summary of what the book is *about*. The movement from complication (involving expulsion from God's presence and fratricide) to denouement (involving blessing from God and reconciliation of brothers) is evidence enough that Genesis is involved in the discussion of something deeper than the nation's prehistory. Genesis is about *new* beginnings.

7.1.2 Genesis 17 and Sarah's role in the covenant

The second key question that we set out to answer was: "What do conclusions about the book as a whole suggest about the literary context and function of Genesis 17 within the book, and what does this imply about the place of Sarah and her female descendants in the Genesis covenant(s)?"

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We found that Sarah's place in the chapter is directly parallel to that of Abraham, both structurally and in the nature of the promises she is given. Thematic study is able to add that the tracing of an elect and faithful *lineage* is a dominant feature of the book, and the fact that God's covenant plan in Genesis 17 is inclusive of Isaac and exclusive of Ishmael is an affirmation of *Sarah's line* (and what she represents) and the rejection of Hagar's. Furthermore, women occupy an important position in the structure of the book and in several key episodes, and silence regarding her covenant participation is not unusual. Only two people in the book are directly covenanted with (Noah and Abraham), but the implications of those covenants extend wider to include others, particularly their seed. We found that women are included within the designation "seed", and women are clearly addressed as covenant participants at Sinai. This means that although women are not explicitly included within the sign of circumcision, they are nevertheless included within the covenant.

We raised the possibility that Genesis 17 uses the phrase "my covenant" in two distinct ways:[238] it refers to Abraham's side of the agreement, that is, to pass down circumcision to his household, and circumcision is the sign of the God's side of the agreement—promised blessings and his plan to overcome curse. This explains how circumcision can be described at the same time as *the* covenant (that Abraham must keep) and the *sign* of the covenant (through which God will undo curse), and it explains how Ishmael can be circumcised even though he is excluded from the covenant proper: Abraham must issue the sign of the promises irrespective of who God ultimately includes in his plan. Circumcision is a mark of hope in the covenant future, not of insider status.

7.1.3 Circumcision and the place of women

The third key question was: "Do the conclusions concerning structure, plot, and theme suggest a reason for the selection of circumcision as the sign of the covenant?"

Thematic study highlights the importance to the book of progeny and the perpetuity of name in one's generations. This makes it highly likely that circumcision (related as it is to procreation and the purification of the organ of generation) is a communicative sign—that is, it matters to the meaning of the sign that it is a mark on the penis.

[238] There are either two separate covenant agreements, or, as is more likely, two parts to the one covenant, though in each case the conclusion is similar: there seems to be a distinction between the "covenant" that requires Israel to circumcise and the larger covenant agreement, focused on God's obligations, of which circumcision is the sign.

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Thematic study also helps to suggest *why* this mark might be appropriate as a sign of the covenant promises. In view of the "sensible" attempt to solve the problem of childlessness through Hagar's surrogacy in Genesis 16, circumcision seems to represent God's reclamation of procreation and thus of his sovereignty over the fulfilment of the promises of blessing via Abraham's seed. For this reason, it is appropriate that the sign invokes the connections to the practice of circumcision in surrounding cultures, that is, purification and sexual maturity. In so doing, God inserts a reminder of the covenant demand of righteousness into the whole procreative process—from birth to death.

The sign is relocated from adulthood to infancy most likely because this dissociates the rite from fertility—even Abraham is fertile when he is marked with it—and rather associates it with the fulfilment of promise in the birth of the next generation. This emphasises what is an explicit repetition in Genesis 17 too—the sign is perpetual and to be passed on to the next generation because the covenant is eternal and oriented towards future hope.

A solution to the apparent exclusion of women from the covenant sign is also suggested by thematic study. While there is an obvious predominance of attention given to male stories and the birth of sons, we noted that a high degree of equality of the sexes is implied in the creation story, that there is an unusual locus of hope in the "seed of the *woman*" and Eve as "mother of the living", and that God's expression of care for barren and outcast women features heavily at the apexes of both Abraham's and Jacob's stories. This suggests that Sarah and her daughters are not unimportant to God or forgotten in his plan.[239] The maleness of the sign is likely prominent because circumcision is the *sign* of God's promise being passed on to the next generation, whereas childbirth is an incipient *fulfilment* of that promise. The sign is inclusive of the whole family because the process is dynamic—circumcision signifies hope in the fruition of the covenant in the future, the sign is visible to both parents in the act of procreation, the woman is the active party in bearing the *fulfilled* promise of a new generation, and both parents transfer the sign and teach its promises to the child.[240]

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[239] Patterson (2018, p. 212) highlights the importance of women in the story as a potential area of future study. He says, "There are still other features I have not explored where plot-structure could influence our interpretation. For example, we can use plot-structure to examine the role of women in the Genesis narrative. Female characters in Genesis often take initiative that determines the next development in the narrative (e.g. Eve, Sarah, Tamar). This seems to be an important theme that has not received adequate attention even from feminist scholars and yet the plot-structure provides fertile ground for new explorations." Our examination of theme has perhaps gone some way to address this.

[240] This is mirrored in the shape of Genesis 17 too—Abraham receives the promises; he is circumcised to mark the promises and the responsibilities of the relationship; and Sarah is finally included to demonstrate the fulfilment of the promises.

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7.2 CONTRIBUTION

In the introduction we mentioned the importance of the concept of a hermeneutical circle or spiral to the development of knowledge: "The foundational law of all understanding and knowledge is to find the spirit of the whole through the individual, and through the whole to grasp the individual".[241] This encapsulates the importance of broad-brush studies such as the one I have attempted. Advancement in our study of the *parts* of Genesis depends on the development and exercise of critical methods that can advance our study of the book as a whole.

It is not uncommon for scholars to specify what they consider to be the theme of the book—on the basis of an impression derived from the method of study that they have employed—but none approach the question with the rigour that it demands. This yields the identification of several important elements of the book as "the theme", but no means by which to evaluate any given suggestion. More importantly, as Ast's quote implies, faulty evaluations of the overall shape of the book—whether in terms of its structure, plot, or theme—lead to faulty interpretations of its parts.

For example, the common view that Genesis is a book about the birth of Israel is unable to account for various passages in the book except as digressions. But adopting this as its thematic centre prompts one to overemphasise circumcision as a mark of in-group identity, which might lead one to think of covenant identity as reckoned through the male, thus making women little more than wombs that may produce sons.

The thematic study of Genesis has shown that it strongly *problematises* this sort of view: apparent insiders are regularly associated with taboo marriages and questionable births, and they engage in behaviour that brings curse on innocent outsiders. This is in contrast to the blessing on the nations that they are meant to be. Furthermore, while women are minor players in the story and often mistreated by male characters, God's care for such women occupies structurally pivotal moments in the book.

The study of structure, plot, and theme provides the "grain" according to which one reads, and this highlights that certain interpretations are "against the grain", and, despite their popularity, should be considered unlikely.

[241] Ast, quoted by Mantzavinos (2016).

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The present study has shown that there is a high degree of unity to the final form of Genesis that makes it appropriate to conduct a study of its overarching logical and rhetorical construction. This study is the only one of which I am aware that has attempted a rigorous, critical engagement with the theme of Genesis. The tools by which thematic elements have been identified have enabled me to make several incremental interpretive gains along the way, for example:

- I have proposed a new structural analysis of the book, with unique solutions to the problems of the vertical *toledot* and the reason for Terah's heading and untimely death notice.
- I have proposed new structural analyses for the *toledot* of Terah and Isaac, with unique solutions to the problems of episode clustering that seem to violate concentricity (such as the conjunction of wife-sister stories with herdsmen-treaty stories). The inter-relationship of the pivot points of the three Change narratives (Noah, Terah, and Isaac) demonstrates to a degree of certainty that they have been correctly identified as pivots and that they are rightly seen as centred on the oppressed and the outcast—particularly vulnerable women.
- This study is unique in recognising that Jacob's time in Haran is a version of the wife-sister story—an observation that helps to resolve structural difficulties in that text, as well as to provide very strong evidence that the repetition of wife-sister stories is not accidental or the result of a redactor's slavishness to sources, but an artful literary device that intends to connect and compare the lives of the three patriarchs.
- My analysis of the structure and theological importance of the central section of Jacob's story—the births of his sons—is a new contribution.

The main methodological goal of this study—namely, to produce a thematic statement that can operate as a framework for the evaluation of text evidence—has also produced a thematic statement that is unique and based on a comprehensive study of patterns and points of narrative emphasis in the book that is (as far as I know) unprecedented. The components of my thematic statement (such as "dependence on God" or "reversal of curse") are not new—it would be very worrying if my conclusion about the meaning of Genesis were entirely novel—but their inclusion in the statement that I have offered and the rigour of argument underlying it are new contributions.

The evaluative framework that the thematic statement provides did successfully yield new solutions to the ambiguity of Sarah's status that prompted this study, and to the problem of her relationship to circumcision. As far as I am aware, my solution to the paradox of her presentation (that the book has been tracing a covenant *line*, to which Sarah is crucial, not identifying covenant participants) is new

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to scholarship. Similarly, she is paradoxically excluded from circumcision again because the sign is about the tracing of the lines—a *trajectory through time* from promise, via trial, to fulfilment. While it has been suggested before that circumcision may be the male equivalent (in terms of the covenant) of childbirth, my study uniquely connects the two on the basis of thematic evidence, namely:

- The sign is linked to God's intervention in barrenness as central to the covenant "message".
- As a perpetual mark that is passed down, circumcision connects hope and fulfilment. It looks forward to the fruition of the promises in a future seed, which will accomplish the reversal of barrenness at a cosmic level. The bringing forth of seed by the woman is the incipient *fulfilment* of the promises. Men bear the sign and are indirect participants in the fulfilment. Women are indirect participants in the sign and the bearers of the reality.

I am hopeful that my work on theme can make an important contribution to fields that apply texts in theological and ethical ways, particularly systematic and biblical theology, and homiletics.

7.3 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The limited scope of this study has precluded the exploration of several important avenues of investigation, and even within its scope, there are several areas that would benefit from further research. These include the following:

- This study has hopefully illustrated the effectiveness of critical use of the whole in order to better frame the study of the parts. Patterson's (2018) work takes a similar approach to the discovery of plot in Genesis as I have taken to the discovery of theme, but unfortunately his study arrived too late in the process for me to attempt a synthesis of his work and mine. Future research on Genesis may be able to do this in a way that improves upon both.
- Broad-brush studies such as the one I have attempted are often avoided because either the scope (and workload) is too great or the results are too descriptive and shallow, but it is also clear that good hermeneutics requires the attempt. I would like to see the methodology that I (and Patterson, it would seem) have employed applied to other biblical books.
- Such studies presuppose the unity of a narrative text, but there are still many biblical scholars, such as Baden (2016), who insist that there is sufficient disunity in the plot of the Pentateuch to render it "unreadable". I can see the potential for an interdisciplinary study that establishes the levels of coherence in known single-author texts (whether biblical,

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ancient, or modern) to provide a baseline by which to judge the relative coherence of books such as Genesis.

- In terms of the structure of Genesis, I have suggested that asyndeton in the *toledot* formulae does not have a significant role in the structural weighting of the formulae that feature it, and I have suggested that the vertical *toledot* possibly stand as section dividers between covenantal movements in the book. I offer both of these points tentatively and suggest that further research could illuminate the structure of Genesis even further.
- Genesis 15 identifies two primary covenantal promises: progeny and land. The former is enacted in Genesis 17 and is accompanied by circumcision; the latter is enacted in the exodus and is accompanied by the Sabbath. Further research might investigate the relationship between the signs.
- This study has focused on textual meaning and largely ignored the implications of its findings to modern interpretive communities. The motivation for embarking on this study was largely to address to what degree Genesis should be used to support the subordination of women within God's order. While it remains the case that men are the dominant actors in Genesis, and while it still can't be ruled out that the creation narratives may imply male primacy at creation, I have demonstrated that significant structural and narrative emphases in the text promote female equality at creation and God's care for women unloved by the men who claim power over them. Furthermore, based on robust literary context, this study has offered a reconstruction of the evidence around Sarah's place in Genesis 17 and the covenant sign that further underlines the equality of women in the covenant and the importance of their shared participation in Israel's faith. This work could have important ramifications for how conservative Judeo-Christian traditions frame their faithfulness to Scripture when it comes to the social and religious roles that women occupy, and the status that they are afforded relative to men.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: THE PROLOGUE AND DAVID

Brueggemann (2011, pp. 20-21) identifies four parallel narratives from Genesis and Samuel-Kings:[242]

Table 8: Brueggemann's parallels between Genesis and the succession narrative

Adam and Eve (Gen 3:1–24) Adam takes forbidden fruit Adam is aware of his nakedness and is afraid Adam is under a death sentence, but is not executed Adam and his seed are cursed Adam is expelled from the garden A son is born to the cursed couple	**David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11–12)** David covets the wife of another David is made aware of his sin and confesses The death sentence is pronounced but not executed The curse of sword is pronounced Loss of dynasty is suggested A son is born to the cursed couple
Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1–16) Cain kills Abel in the field Cain is very angry at his brother Cain violates Torah: murder Cain fears for his life Cain is granted life by YHWH Cain must be a wanderer apart from YHWH Cain is father of arts and crafts	**Amnon and Absalom (2 Sam 13–14)** A man kills his brother in the field Absalom hates his brother Absalom violates Torah: murder A woman fears for the life of Absalom Absalom is granted life by David Absalom must dwell apart from David Absalom is restored to the presence of the king
Noah and the Flood (Gen 6–9)[243] Noah's generation is evil Noah finds favor with YHWH YHWH intervenes for Noah YHWH resolves to blot out the corrupt Ham sees Noah's nakedness YHWH promises a new beginning Noah gives blessings and curses	**Absalom and David (2 Sam 15–20)** Absalom brings evil on the dynasty David hopes to find favor with YHWH YHWH intervenes for David Absalom is blotted out without an heir Absalom seizes David's concubines David makes a new beginning David deals with enemies and friends

[242] I have reversed the column order but the words are Brueggemann's.

[243] This range represents a simplification of several subunits that Brueggemann considers to be J texts.

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The Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9)	**Solomon and David (1 Kgs 1–2)**
The people want a name	Solomon achieves the name wanted by the dynasty
The people propose to build a city	Solomon is the great builder of Jerusalem
The people are able to do all they devise	Solomon prospers in all he does
The guilty are scattered	Later the dynasty and realm are scattered

While it is *plausible* that Genesis 1–11 represents a casting of origins stories according to a Davidic pattern, the suggested parallels between the two sets of stories seem to me to require substantial massaging for the similarities to become apparent. Even once pointed out, the echoes in Genesis 1–11 (the flood story in particular) are too muted to convincingly register as an allusion.

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APPENDIX B: MALE–FEMALE HIERARCHY IN CREATION?

Both Wenham (1987, p. 69) and Mathews (1996, p. 215) agree that the account of the creation of the woman intends to present her as the man's equal. However, there are strong strands of interpretation, of which they are a part, that attempt to balance this equality with other elements in the text that imply *hierarchy* in the husband–wife relationship. Mathews (1996, p. 221) puts the contribution of Genesis 1–3 to family and sexual roles more bluntly: "Eden's narrative elucidates and amplifies on their relationship: the man has a leadership role while the woman has a followship position."[244]

The main arguments that are put forward in support of the woman's subordination are:

- Adam's naming of Eve is an authoritative act and implies that she has a subordinate relationship to him (Wenham, 1987, p. 70; 2000, p. 31).[245]
- Genesis 2 establishes a "hierarchy of authority" (i.e., God—man—woman—animals) that is soon reversed in chapter 3, when the snake (an animal) asserts influence over the woman, who influences her husband, and God's rule is rejected. "The order of creation is totally inverted" (Wenham, 1987, p. 51).[246]
- Based on 1 Corinthians 11:8, Mathews (1996, p. 221) argues that the woman's source in the man suggests that the man is the leader.

Let us briefly discuss each of these in turn.

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[244] Mathews claims that even 1:1–2:3 "implies a succession in creation of lesser to greater", though he does not comment on the fact that one either takes it that male and female were created together (in which case it implies nothing about marital hierarchy) or that woman was created last and thus should be seen as the greater. He also, strangely, cites male "rule" over women from 3:16b positively in spite of that belonging to the same list of judgements and cursed consequences as the cursed ground and dangerous pregnancies.

[245] Cotter (2003, p. 35) makes a similar point (though with disapproval) when commenting on male dominance in 3:16b. He says, "Why are there such improbable and undesirable realities as one gender dominating the other? ... A sign of this dominance is the Man giving a name to the Woman, as he had earlier to the animals." He makes the assumption that naming is an assertion of dominance, but he does not consider the fact that the man names the woman twice—once before the fall. The impulse to name her cannot be attributed to sinful domination as an effect of their rebellion.

[246] Mathews (1996, pp. 220-21) also appeals to creation order and its reversal in chapters 2–3 as a sign of leader–follower roles. He adds, "The woman is designated a 'helper' in 2:18, which affirms her subordination", because the role is not reversible (man is not created as a helper for woman). This is a very strange argument to make, because God is typically called a helper, and this is clearly not an indicator of God's subordination to man—a point that Mathews (1996, p. 214) himself makes.

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The naming of Eve

The fact that the man gives the name "woman" to his "helper" and the name "Eve" to her after the Fall is taken as an expression of male leadership because, as Mathews (1996, pp. 215, 221) says, "naming indicates authority in the Old Testament".

While naming clearly does represent an act of dominion in parts of the Old Testament—especially the renaming of vassals in Kings—it is too blunt to say the Old Testament has a singular view on the subject. Tracking the word "name" (שֵׁם) in Genesis shows no correlation to any discernible authority structure. Genesis includes a variety of namers and named, including:

- Man naming animals (2:19–20), woman (2:23),[247] and Eve (3:20)
- Eve naming Seth (4:25) and Adam naming Seth (5:3)
- God naming humankind (5:2)
- God naming Ishmael (16:11), Abraham (17:5), Sarah (17:15), Isaac (17:19), and Israel (32:28; 35:10)
- Hagar naming God (16:13)
- Leah and Rachel naming their eleven sons (Gen 29–30)
- Rachel naming Ben-Oni; Jacob naming him Benjamin (35:18)

In none of these cases is there a suggestion that the act of naming is an expression of dominion (as there was when a suzerain installed and renamed a vassal king). God's renaming of Abraham, Sarah, and Israel serves in each case to underscore his promises to them, not to assert his authority. One can argue that it is the *right* to name someone that indicates authority, but what then does one make of Hagar *naming God*, rather than asking his name?

Meyers (2013, p. 83) agrees that it is not a sign of dominion, preferring to see naming rather as a human activity;[248] Adam names his wife, since he is the only other human. It seems to me that in Genesis there is nothing implied in the act of naming that has to do with relative authority; rather, naming seems to mark a significant moment, transition, or realisation. For example, the name Eve is not given to assert Adam's authority but to acknowledge that she bears the promise of continuity of name—she is the mother of future life in the place of death. Because neither Cain nor Abel is

[247] This does not specifically use the word "name", preferring the verb "to call", which was used of God's naming activity in chapter 1.

[248] I suggest "relational activity", given that it is something that Genesis depicts humans sharing with God.

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described as *named*, the next occasion is Eve's naming of Seth because she has been granted a son in the place of Abel, followed quickly by Seth's naming of his own son Enosh—and he begins to call on the name of the Lord. In other words, Abel's favourable relationship to God is snuffed out by the violent Cain, but the naming of Seth and Enosh mark the fulfilment of Eve's motherhood of the living—she has a living line who are joined in worship to the living God. The naming of Benjamin reflects the difference in the way that his parents wished to mark his birth—Rachel succumbing to her labour (perhaps underlining Genesis 3:16), and Jacob, never one to shy away from favouritism, insisting rather on an honoured place at his right hand for the second-born of his favoured wife.

So, Adam's naming of his wife does not represent authority over her, but rather relational activity that monumentalises a significant moment.

Inversion of hierarchy

There is no question that there is an inversion of order in the literary arrangement of Genesis 2 and 3, but it is questionable to what degree this arrangement represents a "hierarchy of *authority*". The organisation of relationships is already established in chapter 2: the humans have dominion over the animals, there is an emphasis on the uniqueness of man and woman in their priestly partnership, and God exercises relational rule overall.

It is an open question whether or not the text means us to understand that the woman was consciously present as part of the original human[249] when God issued his command not to eat from the tree, or whether she was reliant on the report from her husband. I favour the latter view. If this is the case, it means that the woman did not have first-hand knowledge of the command of God and should have listened to her husband, not to the animal. Likewise, Adam, who did have first-hand knowledge of the command, should have listened to God, not to his wife (cf. 3:17). It is likely that the inversion has to do with failure to listen to God's command and with the attempt of both man and woman together to usurp a domain that God had reserved for himself. It need not imply anything about hierarchy of authority of man over wife. After all, she does not command him or exercise any form of authority over him; she wordlessly gives him some of the fruit. She is a bad "helper", to be sure, but it is hard to see how this act could be seen even as her taking the lead, let alone being domineering or insubordinate. They are acting together.

[249] This might be the case if the original human is meant to be understood as androgynous.

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The idea that there is a creation order in which the husband is tasked with holding a degree of leadership or authority over his wife—notwithstanding their equality before God—remains possible, but it is undoubtedly very muted in the text, if it exists at all.

Woman's source is the man

The third argument is strong only because it appears to be Pauline.[250] There is nothing in the fact of the woman having been taken out of the man that implies authority and subordination. In Genesis, her creation from him emphasises that they are of the same substance and distinct from the other creatures. The narrator introduces reciprocity by pointing out that the husband must leave his family home to be re-one-fleshed with his wife, and again by giving Eve primacy in the "getting" (קנה) of Cain and the births of Abel and Seth. In other words, the woman is taken from man, but the second man is taken, with the help of YHWH, from the woman—the point that Paul also makes in 1 Corinthians 11:12.

Furthermore, those who argue that Paul is appealing to "creation order" as an eternal ideal of God's design rarely acknowledge that the eternal ideal of new creation observes no male–female hierarchy at all (Matt 22:30; Gal 3:28).

In summary, there are hints that the woman may occupy a role that is distinct from that of the man—she is taken from the man, designated "helper", and given names by the man, and problems arise out of an inversion of order—but in view of the emphases upon their unity and correspondence to one another, it is unclear that any hierarchy is intended.

[250] Paul seems to be using Genesis illustratively, not exegetically, in my opinion, but what Paul is actually doing in using this text is outside of the scope of this study to discuss. Suffice it to say that Genesis should be read in its own terms; what it originally meant and how the New Testament writers used it are distinct issues.

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APPENDIX C: STRUCTURE OF THE *TOLEDOT* OF TERAH

The following is an expansion of the suggested structural analysis of the *toledot* of Terah. This diagram supplies greater detail in the concentricity that has seemingly been employed in this *toledot* section, as well as highlighting those areas that seem anomalous (marked in bold):

Figure 26: Detailed structure of the *toledot* of Terah

Prologue: Abraham's family and land (11:27–32)
- Aa. God blesses Abraham (12:1–3)
  - Ab. Abraham acts in faithfulness (12:4–9)
    - **Ba. Abraham presents his wife as his sister (12:10–20)**
    - **Bb. Herdsmen quarrel and the patriarch makes a treaty (13:1–18)**
      - Ca. Abraham rescues Lot and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (14:1–16)
        - Cb. Melchizedek shows hospitality and blesses Abraham (14:17–24)
          - D. God covenants with Abraham (15:1–21)
            - E. Hagar bears a son and God appears to her (16:1–16)
          - D'. God covenants with Abraham (17:1–27)
        - C'a. Abraham shows hospitality and the promise is confirmed (18:1–15)
      - **C'b. Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16–33)**
      - **C'c. The fate of Sodom and Lot (19:1–38)**
    - **B'a. Abraham presents his wife as his sister (20:1–18)**
    - **B'b. Isaac is born and Hagar is sent away (21:1–21)**
    - **B'c. Herdsmen quarrel and the patriarch makes a treaty (21:22–34)**
  - A'a. Abraham's unequivocal faithfulness (22:1–14)
- A'b. God blesses Abraham (22:15–19)

Epilogue: Abraham's family and land (22:20–25:11)

Rendering this extra detail in concentricity is helpful in so far as it highlights a rhetorical purpose to the arrangement of episodes. For example, putting the blessings first in Genesis 12 communicates that they are given by grace, and it illustrates the initial eager (untested) response of Abraham to their announcement. However, many intervening years of equivocation on Abraham's part provoke his final test (22:1–14), and after he finally responds unequivocally, the blessings are given their final confirmation ("Now I know that you fear God", 22:12; "because you have done this… because you have obeyed me", 22:16, 18). There is careful symmetry to its opening and closing scenes.

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APPENDIX D: GOD'S VERBAL BLESSINGS

The following is a list of the verses in which God verbally blesses a character in Genesis:

Verse	Text	Characters
1:22	And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."	God to creatures
1:28	And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."	God to humans
9:1–7	And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth… And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it."	God to Noah and sons, and to all flesh
12:2–3	"And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."	God to Abraham
17:16	"I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."	God to Abraham, referring to Sarah
17:20	"As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation."	God to Abraham, referring to Ishmael
22:17–18	"I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."	Angel/God to Abraham (and, indirectly, the nations)
26:3–5	"Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."	God to Isaac (and, indirectly, the nations)
26:24	And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake."	God to Isaac
28:13–15	And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."	God to Jacob (and, indirectly, the nations)

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Verse	Text	Characters
35:9–12	God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.”	God to Jacob

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APPENDIX E: SARAH'S REJUVENATION?

A persistent puzzle for commentators is the matter of how it is that Sarah—a woman now past menopause—continues to be irresistible to men of power. Ronning (1991, pp. 13-25) is a proponent of the rejuvenation view: the idea that God's solution to her barrenness was not so much to bring life out of death, but actually to reverse the clock and to restore her youthfulness—which is why, in his view, she goes on to live another 38 years. His search for evidence forces him to suppose that rejuvenations were extended to several people in association with Abraham, including Abraham himself, who described himself as too old to have children but took another wife and had six more; Abimelech and Phicol, who both appear in Isaac's wife-sister story 76 years later; and Isaac, who lives 40 years longer after giving his deathbed blessing. However, against this view, the implied author of Genesis inexplicably seems to have no explicit interest in miraculous rejuvenations of various characters; there is no hint given that any physical change has occurred. Rejuvenation would be a fitting story device for Genesis if the thematic interest of the book were more clearly upon ageing and death, or if the blessing of rejuvenation were represented elsewhere in Scripture as Abrahamic or as an association with God's promises. As it is, the interest in Genesis is upon progeny and retaining a name and a future in one's descendants ("O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless", Genesis 15:2). I think it is better to see Sarah as giving birth to life out of death, and to see nothing strange in the longevity of the patriarchs. Furthermore, their ages betray some interesting coincidences: Isaac's visit to Abimelech seems to occur in the same year as Abraham's death, and Isaac's deathbed blessing occurs when he is the same age at which Ishmael died. Sarna (1966, p. 84) also notes that the ages at death of the patriarchs can be seen to conform to a mathematical pattern:

Patriarch	Age at death	Formula
Abraham	175	7×5^2
Isaac	180	5×6^2
Jacob	147	3×7^2

He argues that this represents "schematized chronology" and "a poetic superstructure" rather than detail purporting to be historical. So, it is unlikely that their ages should be taken literally.