1 The Literary Worlds of Genesis

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Few books have been the subject of more literary reflection and analysis than the book of Genesis. Genesis plots the story of the beginning of the cosmos, the earth, humanity, God's elect people, and more, spanning the time from creation through the account of the founding ancestors of later Israel (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and ending with Joseph and his eleven brothers, who will provide a bridge to the continuing narrative of the founding of the people of Israel (Exodus) and beyond.

A literary approach to Hebrew narrative did not begin with Robert Alter's pivotal book *The Art of Biblical Narrative*,[1] but certainly the argument can be made that his work energized and motivated a transition from an obsession with historical approaches to concern for the final form of the text.[2] Alter used passages from Genesis more than any other book to illustrate the artistic quality of biblical narrative.[3] Examples of point of view, characterization, management of dialogue, type scenes, and more drawn from the book of Genesis pepper Alter's work. Other pioneering students of biblical narrative also found themselves attracted to the book of Genesis, including Meir Sternberg, J. P. Fokkelman, and Adele Berlin.[4] While some believed that biblical studies was experiencing a paradigm shift away from historical (diachronic)

[1] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011 [orig. 1981]).

[2] The case can also be made that for a period of about a decade and a half (1980–1995), the almost monolithic focus on historical approaches turned into a monolithic focus on the final form. For a while it seemed as if every book had the word "literary" or equivalent in the title.

[3] As confirmed by a look at his "Bible Reference Index." Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 251–53.

[4] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991; J. P. Fokkelman, "Genesis," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 36–65; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983). Mention should also be made of M. Fishbane, *Biblical Text and*

interests in the text and toward literary (synchronic) ones, eventually the field realized that the two interests were not mutually exclusive. Today, insights drawn from literary studies are often embedded in commentary and exposition of the text along with the results of other approaches, including historical critical/grammatical analysis.

Still, there is great value in studies that for heuristic purposes bracket, without denying, the diachronic dimension of a narrative text like Genesis to explore the literary strategy of its final form. That is the purpose of the present chapter, though our goal must be modest considering space constraints. Considering the literary riches of the narratives of Genesis, even a large monograph would be insufficient to present the literary qualities of the book, so we will settle here for an overview of the shifting nature of the different parts of the book, indicating the subtle changes in characterization, point of view, setting, theme, and more, while also noting the coherence of the plot of the book as it moves from creation to the death of Joseph. Our description will allow for occasional, brief looks at specific passages.

The overall plot of Genesis moves along largely chronological lines (*sujet* and *fabula* roughly the same,[5] though there are exceptions to that observation). Nonetheless, there are significant differences of narrative style between the various major sections of the book. Some scholars describe only two major sections, the primeval history (Gen. 1–11) and the story of the ancestors, combining the Joseph story with that of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 12–50). We will see, however, that in terms of narrative style there is enough difference between the accounts of the three ancestors and Joseph to encourage us to speak of three major parts. But before entering into discussion of the three, we need to recognize and address two preliminary issues: the composite nature of the book of Genesis and the role of the *toledot* formula in providing an alternative structure to the book.

The narrative of Genesis may be approached by two different literary strategies, one often called diachronic and the other synchronic. A diachronic study seeks to tease out the literary sources that preceded the

Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), where half the book provides literary case studies from the book of Genesis.

[5] The terms come from Russian Formalism (see M. Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978]). *Fabula* refers to the "chronological or chronological-causal" sequence of the "raw material" of the story, while the *sujet* is "the actual disposition and articulation of these narrative motifs in the particular finished product" of the story (p. 8).

present final form of the book as we have it today.[6] Utilizing various criteria (different names for God, doublets, double-naming, different theological emphases), source critics detect fissures or gaps in the narrative that they believe allow one to separate the earlier sources from one another. Certainly the best known, though certainly not the only, of these diachronic approaches is the Documentary Hypothesis, first popularized by Julius Wellhausen,[7] various versions of which are still debated today among scholars. Perhaps the most confident and widely held conclusion of this type of study separates a later P (Priestly) document from an earlier non-Priestly document, sometimes divided into a J (Yahwist) source and an E (Elohist) source.[8]

As opposed to a diachronic study of the narrative of Genesis, a synchronic study reads the text as we have it before us, not in an earlier more hypothetical form. In such a study, a fissure or gap or tension in the text, while conceivably the result of bringing together different sources produced at different time periods and/or by different writers, now becomes a gap to be either filled by the interpreter or left in tension.

Some have argued that the mere ability to provide a reasonable narrative interpretation of the final form of the text renders the diachronic project not only speculative, but also wrong-minded. After all, if the different sequence of creation found in Genesis 1:1–2:4a (P) and in Genesis 2:4b–25 (J) can be explained by observing that there are literary or stylistic reasons for the difference and that neither account is interested in giving the "actual" sequence, then what need do we have for a diachronic explanation at all?

However, a rejection of a diachronic study based on a synchronic analysis is premature. Indeed, value can be found in both approaches. While one can imagine not only the discernment of earlier sources but also the synchronic analysis of those sources,[9] this present study is interested only in the analysis of the narrative of Genesis in its final form. Indeed, in his classic study of biblical narrative, Robert Alter, while primarily engaged in a synchronic study, referred to the narrative as "composite."[10]

[6] And these might have derived from even earlier oral traditions.

[7] Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1983 [or in German in 1883]).

[8] David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

[9] Harold Bloom (with D. Rosenberg), *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990).

[10] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 1131–54, devotes a whole chapter to the topic of "composite artistry."

We will conduct our overview of the narrative of Genesis in three parts: the primeval history (Gen. 1:1–11:26), the ancestor narrative (Gen. 11:27–37:1), and the Joseph story (Gen. 37:2–50:26). Our rationale for this three-part division derives from the different narrative strategies, which we observe and describe later. That said, we want to acknowledge that this is not the only way to structure the book of Genesis. Indeed, an argument can be made that the book itself makes explicit a structure based on the recurring *toledot* formula found throughout the book. Eleven times we encounter the formula "this is the account of x," where x is typically a person's name, though in the first instance we have the "account of the heavens and the earth" (2:4, see also 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). Many questions surround the significance and interpretation of these *toledot* formulae, but our only purpose here is to acknowledge that there is more than one way to structure the book as we proceed now to explore the narrative strategy of the primeval history, the ancestor narrative, and the Joseph story.

THE PRIMEVAL HISTORY (GENESIS 1:1–11:26)

> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Gen. 1:1

The first sentence of Genesis signals the narrative strategy of the first eleven chapters of the book that in many ways will differentiate it from the following sections.[11] In this first verse, the unnamed narrator who will take us through the book reveals himself as omniscient and omnipresent. The narrator here informs the reader of something that happened at the very beginning of time. As the story progresses, the narrator not only describes the creation of the cosmos, the earth, and its creatures, but does so by telling us what God said to bring it all into functioning order (more about the role of dialogue later).

Third-person omniscient narration is not foreign to even modern secular narrative. In a book like Genesis, and throughout Hebrew narrative where this type of narrative is the norm,[12] it is hard not to think of the narrator as divine. Is God the one telling the story?

[11] The well-known debate over whether to translate Genesis 1:1–2 as a single sentence (NRSV) or as two (NIV, NLT, ESV) is not germane to our comments about narrative style.

[12] The so-called memoirs of Ezra (Ezra 7–10; Nehemiah 8–10) and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1–7 and 11–13) being the obvious and rare exceptions.

That God is also a, or perhaps better, the primary character in the book of Genesis does not, in our opinion, invalidate that conclusion. We will come back to the question of characterization in Genesis 1–11; for now we want to note that the adoption of third-person omniscient narration allows the story to begin before even the creation of the first humans and continue through time. This strategy allows the writer to speak of things that no human being could have experienced or could have learned through their own study or even through the passing down of traditions.

In other words, in Genesis 1–11 the omniscient narrator allows for a cosmic point of view. Indeed, one of the features that will differentiate the primeval history from Genesis 12 and following is the wide-angle lens, to use a camera analogy, with which the narrator tells the story. The whole world is the subject of these stories, in particular those of the creation, the flood, and the Tower of Babel. That does not mean that within this broad scope the narrator cannot focus momentarily on a more limited subject, whether it is Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2–3), the murder of Abel by Cain (Gen. 4:1–16), or the enigmatic account of the "sons of God" and the "daughters of man" (Gen. 6:1–4). But these stories fit into the broad scope of Genesis 1–11 that has a broad lens as it surveys God's creatures from their creation up until the time of Abraham.

Indeed, the contrast will become apparent at Genesis 11:27 and following, when narrative time dramatically slows as well the narrator's point of view. We will describe this transition more carefully in the next section. That Genesis 1–11 covers such a vast tract of time with such a broad focus not only leaves readers with many questions about which we can only speculate, but may also indicate that these stories are really only, but importantly, background for the next section that begins with the call of Abraham.

When we consider the plot of Genesis 1–11, we first of all start with the recognition that these chapters contain different episodes, with their own plots, that contribute to a bigger plot that continues beyond Genesis 11 and indeed will continue through the rest of the biblical narrative. Again, bracketing historical questions, one can discern a plot that starts in Genesis 1 and continues through the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah.[13]

Genesis 1–2, the account of creation, presents what Sternberg would call "exposition."[14] In spite of their possible separate origins, Genesis

[13] For Christian readers, the plot continues into the New Testament and culminates in the book of Revelation.

[14] Sternberg, *Expositional Modes*, 1–34.

1 and 2 now stand side by side, and the question is how do these two creation stories relate to each other? One way is to think of Genesis 2 as providing a kind of second telling of creation with a focus on what Genesis 1 claimed happened on Day 6. In any case, at the end of Genesis 2 everything has its proper place in God's creation and the focus of the story, Adam and Eve, live in harmony with God, with each other, and with creation. Indeed, Genesis 1 introduces us for the first of many times to a word that will be thematic in the book of Genesis when we learn that at their creation God "blessed" them (1:22, 28; 5:2). Blessing here indicates this state of being in relationship with God, with all the good benefits that flow from that.

Genesis 3 tells the story of the shattering of that blessed life in the garden. That is, Genesis 3 presents the complication of the plot. By their rebellion against the one command God gave Adam (2:17), Adam and Eve fractured their relationship with God, leading to harm in their relationship with each other and with the rest of creation. In essence, though the term is not used in the chapter, when we see the alienation and fragmentation that are the consequences of this refusal to obey God, we cannot but conclude that the original blessing is now gone.

Even so, as the plot continues, we see that this is not the end of the story. The complication now yearns for resolution. That move toward resolution or reconciliation is signaled in Genesis 3 itself as God provides clothing for Adam and Eve. They are no longer naked and unashamed, but rather than just leaving them in that condition, God provides what has been called a token of grace for them, a signal that God will continue to be in relationship with them.

Indeed, as others have pointed out, the three main stories that follow the account of Adam and Eve's rebellion share the same basic plot. They are stories of sin, judgment, and grace. As Adam and Eve sinned by eating the prohibited fruit, so Cain sinned by killing Abel (4:8), humanity as a whole on the eve of the flood sinned by its pervasive wickedness (6:5), and finally people sinned by gathering together after God had scattered them to build a city with a tower "that reaches to the heavens" (11:4).

In all four stories, this sin is first met by a divine speech announcing judgment (3:14–19 [Adam and Eve]; 4:10–12 [Cain and Abel]; 6:7, 13–21 [Flood]; 11:6–7 [Tower]) and concludes with a description of the execution of that judgment (3:22–24 [Adam and Eve]; 4:16 [Cain and Abel]; 7:6–24 [Flood]; 11:8 [Tower]). The fourth element of these stories are what might be called "tokens of grace," symbols of God's

continued involvement with his rebellious creatures. Besides the gift of clothing to Adam and Eve mentioned earlier, these tokens include the mark put on Cain to preserve him from the hostility of others (4:15) and the survival of Noah and his family at the time of the flood (6:8). Interestingly, there appears to be no token of grace in the Tower story. Such a departure from the plot structure of the previous three major stories in Genesis 1–11 attracts our attention, but we will delay our comments on this absence until we come to the transition to the ancestor narratives.

Before going on to other literary features of Genesis 1–11, I want to make an observation that could be repeated throughout, and that is that the way the story is told is not simply a matter of ornamentation. We can appreciate how the narrative unfolds to be sure in and of itself, but we cannot help noticing that how the story is told contributes to its message or meaning. The very structure of these stories has theological significance, in other words. In these chapters, which are a prelude to the ancestor narratives that follow, we learn that humans are recalcitrant sinners, God judges sin consistently, but he also continues to work toward restoration.

Having considered the function of the narrator and point of view as well as plot, we turn our attention now to characterization in Genesis 1–11, and again we will observe both continuity and some discontinuity between these opening chapters and what follows.

The first character to whom we are introduced in Genesis is none other than God, who remains the main character throughout the book. Here we are not so interested in describing God as a character as much as to offer some comments on how God, and indeed other characters, take shape in Hebrew narrative. We will begin with some comments based on Genesis 1 where we are first introduced to God.

First, of course, the narrator controls what we learn about God. Genesis 1 presents God as the one who created "the heavens and the earth." As we read the chapter, we read that he changes a formless watery mass (1:2) to a finished product over a period of six days, after which he rests on the seventh day.

The narrator not only tells the story, but also moves the plot forward and shapes the characters not just through narration per se but by presenting the speech of the characters. Alter spoke of this literary feature of Hebrew narrative as "narration-through-dialogue,"[15]

[15] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 63–87, quote from 69.

and since characterization and plot are integrally combined we could also say "characterization-through dialogue." In Genesis1, God speaks creation into existence even though there is no one to whom he is said to speak.[16] God's speaking creation into order (e.g., "Let there be light") followed by the narrator's report ("and there was light," 1:3) presents God as the sovereign creator who can command creation into existence.

God is, not surprisingly, the most complex character in Genesis 1–11, but the narrator introduces us to a host of other characters: Adam, Eve, the serpent, Cain, Abel, and Noah among the most notable. While these characters play major roles in their particular episodes, they are not nearly as well developed or rounded as the characters we will encounter later in Genesis, particularly Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. And as in Hebrew narrative generally, the narrator is spare in presenting physical description and motivation or even in providing evaluation of characters' actions. At times, this lack is due to irrelevance to the story (so when a physical description does appear it must be important to the story and not gratuitous), but at other times the narrator's reticence invites a close reading of the story.

For instance, many readers question why God rejects Cain's sacrifice while accepting Abel's. God's response to Cain's anger, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?" (4:7) begs the question what is "right." But an attentive reader will recognize that, while Abel brought a high-quality sacrifice ("fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock," 4:4), Cain brought an ordinary offering ("some of the fruits of the soil," 4:3). While it is not explicit (the narrator shows rather than tells), the reader can reasonably conclude that the differing quality of their offerings reflects their different attitudes toward God.

We conclude our look at Genesis 1–11 with two examples where the structure of the story reveals that the composer weaves how the story is told with the message of the story. We chose one example from the beginning, the days of creation, and one from the end, the Tower of Babel.

The six days of creation as presented in Genesis 1 have an interesting parallel relationship to each other. The first three days describe the creation of realms of habitation, while the second three creation days describe the inhabitants of those realms. Day four (sun, moon, and stars) fills day one (light and darkness), day five (birds and fish) fills

[16] But perhaps we should take note of Genesis 1:26, though who the "us" refers to is a matter of extensive debate.

day two (sky and sea), and day six (animals and humans) fills day three (land), as the following chart indicates:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Light and Darkness	Sky and Sea	Land
Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
Sun, Moon, and Stars	Birds and Fish	Animals and Humans

Observing this structure supports the idea that the composer was likely not interested in giving what was thought to be the actual sequence of creation, but rather knowingly gave a figurative depiction of creation based on the analogy of the work week which ended on the seventh day, a day of rest.

Fokkelman's close reading of the Tower of Babel story (11:1–9) has revealed its intricate design.[17] He begins his study by noting word plays throughout this short episode. Certain word groups are bound together by their similar sound: "let's make bricks" (*nilbĕnâ*, *lĕbēnîm*); "bake them thoroughly" (*nišrepâ*, *šĕrēpâ*,); "tar" and "mortar" (*ḥēmār*/*ḥōmer*). There is also an alliteration between "brick" (*lĕbenâ*) and "for stone" (*lĕ'âben*). These nearly similar sounds give the story a rhythmic quality that draws the reader's attention not only to the content of the words but also to the words themselves. Other repeated words also sound alike: "name" (*šēm*), "there/that place" (*šām*), and "heaven" (*šāmayîm*). "The place" (*šām*) is what the rebels use as a base for storming "heaven" (*šāmayîm*) in order to get a "name" (*šēm*) for themselves. God, however, reverses the situation because it is "from there" (11:8) that he disperses the rebels and foils their plans. The ironic reversal of the rebels' evil intentions is highlighted in more than one way by the artistic choice of words. Fokkelman lists the numerous words and phrases that appear in the story with the consonant cluster *lbn*, all referring to the human rebellion against God. When God comes in judgment, he confuses (*nbl*) their language. The reversal of the consonants shows the reversal that God's judgment effected in the plans of the rebels. This reversal is also reflected in Fokkelman's analysis of the chiastic structure of the story (Figure 1.1).

Unity of language (A) and place (B) and intensive communication (C) induce the men to plans and inventions (D), especially to building (E) a city and a tower (F). God's intervention is the turning point (X). He

[17] Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 11–45.

A 11:1
B 11:2
C 11:3a
D 11:3b
E 11:4a
F 11:4b
X 11:5a "But the LORD came down"
F′ 11:5b
E′ 11:5c
D′ 11:6
C′ 11:7
B′ 11:8
A′ 11:9

Figure 1.1 Chiastic structure of Genesis 11:1–9

watches the buildings (F′) people make (E′) and launches a counter plan (D′), because of which communication becomes impossible (C′) and the unity of place (B′) and language (A′) is broken.

ANCESTOR NARRATIVES (GENESIS 11:27–37:1)

I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:1–3)

The ancestor narratives begin with the *toledot* of Terah (11:27–25:11), which is the story of Abraham and encompasses the *toledot* of Isaac (25:19–35:29),[18] which really focuses on Jacob. Interestingly, there is no *toledot* of Abraham and thus no extended focus on Isaac. Isaac is the least fully developed character among the three patriarchs. He is Abraham's son and Jacob's father; he also serves as a link between the two as he receives the promise from his father and passes it on to his son Jacob.

And it is the promises that Abraham receives from God in 12:1–3, contingent on his going to the land (Canaan) God shows him, that propel the plot of the ancestor narratives. As we mentioned in the previous

[18] Though his name is not changed to Abraham from Abram until Genesis 17:5, I will use Abraham throughout.

section, the Tower of Babel story departed from the structural pattern of the previous three episodes in having no token of God's grace, leading to the question whether God was once and for all done with his rebellious human creatures.

God's call to Abraham answers with a definitive no. The primeval history, describing the pervasive sinfulness of humanity, sets the stage for this pivotal moment in the narrative. And, not surprisingly, with this call, narrative time radically slows and the scope of the narrator's interest moves from a focus on the whole world to a focus on one person and those immediately around him. While the previous eleven chapters cover the unspecified, but presumably lengthy, period of time from creation to the time of Abraham, the next twenty-four chapters follow the life of Abraham, beginning when he is seventy-five years old. This retardation of time and expansion of scope signals the significance of Abraham, and that significance is centered on his reception of the promises.

Indeed, as David Clines pointed out years ago, the theme of the ancestor narratives centers on the promises as we follow Abraham's life.[19] Most of the episodes in his life concern his reactions to threats and promises and the fulfillment of these promises. God told Abraham that he would make him a great nation, implying land and many descendants, and that he would bless those descendants, but also "all peoples on earth … through you" (12:3).

The ancestor narratives, those concerning Abraham as well as Isaac/Jacob, are composed of episodes, relatively short narratives that seem to follow the chronology of their lives, but do not exhibit the type of narrative cohesion of short stories. In this, we can see similarity with the primeval history and a contrast with the Joseph story. Still there is a kind of thematic cohesion to the episodes of the story in that they give different vignettes as they follow whether Abraham responds with faith and trust or with fear and manipulation when it looks like God is not going to follow through on the promises even though Abraham has obeyed him and gone to the land he would show him.

Of course, the main challenge to Abraham's faith in terms of God's willingness or ability to fulfill his promises concerns descendants, which we have suggested is a necessary ingredient for God to make Abraham a "great nation" (12:2). If there were any doubt about that, they are alleviated by the latter promise to make Abraham's descendants as numerous

[19] D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2nd edition (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2002 [orig. 1978]).

"as the sand on the seashore" (22:17; cf. 32:12) or the stars in the heavens (15:5; 22:17; cf. 26:4).

But, of course, to ultimately have numerous offspring, Abraham has to begin with one heir, and he and Sarah do not quickly or even over a long period of time produce an heir. Since Abraham is already seventy-five and was married to Sarah by the time he received the promise, it is possible that he knew she was barren (11:30) and may have received God's promise with hope that she would now give birth. Perhaps, though, it also motivated him (remember that Hebrew narrative often does not give explicit motivations) to bring along Lot, even though God's command included leaving his "father's household" (12:1). In other words, short of producing an heir themselves, Abraham may have thought that his legacy would live through his nephew. If so, we have a good explanation as to why the narrator devotes attention to the fate of Lot.

Even if it is correct to say that Lot plays the role of backup plan, Abraham makes his disappointment known to God after God comes to him to encourage him not to be afraid. Abraham's lack of confidence is displayed through his speech: "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? … You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir" (15:2–3). In the light of the challenge of Sarah not conceiving, Abraham responds with fear, and his fear leads him to try to manufacture an heir by suggesting that his household servant will serve in that role.[20] In response, God again reaffirms his promises, performing a ritual that underlines his commitment.[21]

While Abraham may have at that time responded with belief, according to the narrator ("Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness," 15:6), the very next chapter sees Abraham back to his doubting and manipulative ways as he acts on Sarah's suggestion that he sleep with her slave, Hagar, and "build a family through her" (16:2). In response, once again God comes back to reassure Abraham that no,

[20] Some evidence exists that in the absence of a child, an aging couple could appoint their household servant an heir so that in return for taking care of them in their dotage, the heir would inherit the property. See M. J. Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, eds. A. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 91–140.

[21] Evidence exists that the ritual of passing through the divided parts of animals was a way of taking a self-maledictory oath that affirmed a person's commitment to follow through on a promise.

the heir Abraham has in mind is not Ishmael, the son of Hagar, but a child born to Sarah (17:16–19).

Divine reassurance of progeny would come again in the context of the story of the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, which may also have the purpose of once-and-for-all demonstrating that Lot will not be the heir.[22] Abraham receives three visitors, one of whom is Yahweh, who are on their way to those two wicked cities. As he extends them hospitality, Yahweh reaffirms that Sarah will soon have a son, to which news Sarah laughs, thinking herself and Abraham much too old to conceive (18:10–15). We will return to this episode in connection to other promises shortly.

We can see how narrative tension surrounding the promise of descendants has been building since the beginning of the narrative. Throughout, Abraham has responded with skepticism and doubt as well as manipulative actions to try to fulfill the promise of an heir in other ways than through Sarah. But that tension comes to an apparent resolution a year later, as the divine visitor announced. The birth of a child in Abraham and Sarah's old age is reported briefly and simply, including the fact that Abraham is now one hundred years old (21:1–7). The implication is clear, however; the birth of this child, while the result of natural human conception, could only have taken place as a result of divine intervention.

But what looks like resolution is not one after all. Like the ending of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, the apparent crescendo does not bring the piece to a close but to more tension before the final resolution.

After a period of some unspecified years, though enough that Isaac has grown at least to adolescence, indirectly indicated by his being able to carry the kindling (22:6), God issues the horrifying command to "take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you" (22:1). While the narrator relieves some of the readers' anxieties by stating that God is testing Abraham, he does not inform us what Abraham's internal response is to the order. As we have pointed out, this third-person omniscient narrator could have chosen to tell the reader what was in the mind of a character, so we need to ask what is the effect of keeping the reader ignorant. As we read the command followed by a quick and to-the-point description of Abraham's obedience, we can reasonably conclude that the narrator wants us to understand

[22] Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 80–82.

that at this point Abraham has come to utterly trust God and, while modern readers might question the ethics of the story, in the world of the story, this unquestioning obedience is a positive thing. So positive that God reiterates his intention to fulfill his promises to Abraham (22:15–18). Abraham's heir, Isaac, is now firmly in place and ready to inherit the promises upon the death of his father.

The promise that Abraham will father a great nation also implies land, so while the primary focus of the narrative follows the question of heir, land also features. God's command to "go … to the land I will show you" (12:1) takes him to the promised land. When he arrives there, Canaanites are in the land, but God promises that "to your offspring I will give this land" (12:7). So Abraham journeys from place to place building altars to Yahweh, perhaps to be seen as symbolically and proleptically claiming the land. But a threat of sorts to the land promise arises almost immediately when the promised land is struck by famine. How will Abraham respond to this threat? By heading off to Egypt. Will he go with confidence and faith? No. In a self-protective move, his lying about the status of Sarah puts her (and the promise of descendants) at risk.

The very next episode also has land at the center of its interest. In this case, the crisis arises for a more positive reason. Abraham and Lot have grown so prosperous that they can no longer live in the same vicinity. While Abraham as Lot's uncle and also as the one who received the land promise could have determined the outcome, he does not grasp at the promise but gives Lot the option to choose the land. The narrator forewarns the reader of the later narrative of the destruction of those cities by telling the readers that "this was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah" (13:10). It is difficult to access the narrator's intention when he says that "Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cites of the plain" (13:12). Is the intention to imply that Lot purposefully chose to move out of the promised land and thus disqualify himself in the eyes of his uncle as heir?[23] Perhaps. though, the land promise is later defined as including this area (13:14–17).

The land promise surfaces time and again in the remainder of the Abraham narrative. As God reassures Abraham that a natural-born son rather than his household servant will be his heir, he also reaffirms his intention to give them the land in which he now lives as a foreigner (15:7), specifying in more detail than before its scope: "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the

[23] The position of Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 67.

Euphrates – the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites" (15:18–20). The same is true when God again appears to Abraham to assure him that he will have descendants with Sarah; indeed, the promise expands to include multiple nations (17:6), though the focus is still on the land that his future son's descendants will receive: "The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you" (17:8). As the three visitors discuss disclosing God's designs on Sodom and Gomorrah, the Lord reminds the other two that "Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation" (18:18). And in the aftermath of Abraham's aborted sacrifice of Isaac, the angel tells him, "Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies" (22:17).

As with the promise of descendants, by the end of Abraham's life there are only glimmers of fulfillment of the promise of land. When he dies, while setting up altars through the land, he possesses two relatively small parcels of land. By treaty with the Philistine king Abimelek, he owns a well that he dug in the region of Beersheba (21:22–34) and a field with a cave that he purchased from the Hittites as a grave site when Sarah died (23:17–20).

We finally turn to the third promise given to Abraham at the beginning of this story, that God will bless Abraham and in turn he will be a blessing to the nations. How does that theme display itself in the narrative?

By the time God promises Abraham that he will both receive and impart blessing to the nations, "blessing" is a *Leitwort*, a repeated word that connects to a major theme, in the book of Genesis. Thus, it is important to circle back to Genesis 1–11 for some background.

On the sixth day of creation God created humans, endowing them with his image. God then "blessed them" as he instructed them to be fruitful and multiply, as well as to "fill the earth and subdue it" (1:28; see also 5:2). In a substantial article on the root *brk*, Michael L. Brown suggests that "that which is blessed functions and produces at the optimum level, fulfilling its divinely designated purpose."[24] I would suggest that this blessing flows from a harmonious relationship with God that results in a harmonious relationship with others and ultimately with the creation itself. Though the word does not occur in Genesis 3, the

[24] Michael L. Brown, "BRK," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 759.

harmony of the garden is clearly shattered when Adam and Eve eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their relationship with God, with each other, and with creation is fractured, but as we observed earlier, God signals his desire to work toward reconciliation, the restoration of blessing, through presenting Adam and Eve with clothing (a token of grace and continued relationship).

The next occurrence of the root *brk* comes in 9:1 as the narrator informs the reader that "God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.'" This is just one of a number of literary allusions back to Genesis 1 that intend to communicate that humanity is off to a fresh start. With the flood, the earth once again is "formless and empty" (1:2), and so Noah functions as kind of a second Adam. Unfortunately, as with the first Adam, Noah and his sons soon show that humanity continues to rebel against God (Gen. 9:18–29). Harmony continues to elude the relationship between God and his human creatures.

It's on this background that God calls Abraham and promises to bless him and all people on earth through him.[25] In addition, God will bless those who bless Abraham. In other words, God now seeks to restore the creation blessing, now broken by human sin, through the agency of Abraham and his descendants.

As we read the various episodes that constitute the story of Abraham, however, we note times when Abraham brings trouble rather than blessing to other nations. When he flees Canaan because of the famine, he lies about Sarah and, as a result, "the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household" (12:17). In a similar scene later in life, Abraham brings trouble, not blessing, on the court of Abimelek, king of Gerar (20:1–18). However, Abraham, while seeking his own self-interest in regard to Lot, does bring blessing on the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboyim, and Bela when he pursues the five foreign

[25] Though not the place to get into the issue, I am aware of the debate over whether the niphal form of the verb should be translated passive (as here), reflexive, "all families of the earth will bless themselves by you," or middle "and all families of the earth will find blessing through you." We agree with Anderson, citing Gruneberg, "that the reflexive sense misses the fact that this is a promise from God to Abraham and not to the nations, while the middle sense is without any linguistic corroboration. A passive sense captures the fact that Yhwh directs this word of promise to Abraham, who will be the instrument of bringing bless to all," J. E. Anderson, *Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and Yhwh's Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in the Jacob Cycle* (Siphrut 5 Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 42, citing K. N. Gruneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context* (BZAW 332; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 84.

kings who have just plundered their kingdoms, leading the mysterious Melchizedek, King of Salem, to bless Abraham in the name of "God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth" (14:19). Though Abraham exhibits a mixed record of blessing the nations during his life, still in the aftermath of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, the Lord promises, "and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed" (22:18). Indeed, we might also see this idea that Abraham will be a conduit of blessing to the nations in God's promise to him concerning Ishmael, that he will bless him and that he will be "the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation" (17:20).

Most of the occurrences of the blessing theme during Abraham's life, though, are connected to offspring. God promises that his blessing on Sarah will issue forth in her giving birth to a son, making her "the mother of nations" and promising that "kings of peoples will come from her" (17:16). And to Abraham, also in the aftermath of the Akedah, God accounts, "I will surely bless you and make all your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore" (22:17).

ISAAC AND JACOB

The *toledot* of Terah, begun in 11:27, concludes appropriately with an account of the death and burial of Abraham (25:1–11). Since, as we have already commented, *toledot* focuses on the child or children of the person named in the formula, we might expect that the *toledot* of Terah would be followed by a *toledot* of Abraham. But the narrator surprises us in two ways. First, we have a short *toledot* of Ishmael (25:12–18), surprising because Ishmael was not the son chosen to perpetuate the promises given to his father. This brief *toledot* precedes the longer *toledot* of Isaac, the chosen son (25:19–35:29), a pattern repeated in the final part of Genesis, where two *toledot* (36:1–8, 9–43) precede the lengthy *toledot* of Jacob (37–50). This pattern of short *toledot* of non-chosen descendants shows that these characters are not ignored, but certainly not central to the message of the book, supporting the point made so well by Kaminsky that non-elect should not be considered anti-elect unless they turn against God and his chosen human agents.[26]

The second surprise is that that there is no *toledot* of Abraham, but rather after the short Ishmael *toledot*, there is a *toledot* of Isaac, which focuses on Isaac's children Esau and especially Jacob. That there is no

[26] Joel Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

toledot of Abraham, which would focus on Isaac, highlights the relatively minimal role that Abraham's son plays in the narrative. Almost exclusively, he is treated as the son of Abraham or the father of Jacob rather than a character in his own right. He even plays a relatively minor role in the choice of his wife, Rebekah, since Abraham sends his servant up to Haran to bring back the appropriate choice. Touchingly, the account ends when the narrator tells us that "she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (24:67).

There is, however, no doubt that Isaac was the chosen recipient of the promises given to Abraham. That is obvious in the narrative even before he was born (17:19, 21) and is repeated in the one episode that does focus on Isaac, but even this story, wedged between episodes that focus on Jacob and Esau, replicates episodes from Abraham's life, namely lying about the status of his wife to a foreign king during a famine and making a treaty with the Philistine king Abimelek during a dispute about water rights (26). But in this context, God speaks directly to Isaac, assuring him that he is the recipient of the promises (26:1–5, 24) and thus he becomes the conduit to the next generation, which is where the *toledot* of Isaac places its emphasis.

Once again, we can only give a glimpse of the narrative richness of this part of Genesis. Like the Abraham narrative, the story of Jacob is composed of several episodes, but is filled with intrigue and character development.

When the childless Rebekah finally gets pregnant, she gives birth to twins who "jostle" within her. When she inquired of God, God announces that:

> Two nations are in your womb,
> and two peoples from with you will be separated;
> one people will be strong than the other,
> and the older will serve the younger. (25:23)

Esau (25:25, hairy) also called Edom (25:30, red) is the firstborn, named for his physical appearance at birth. He grows up as a person of adventure, a hunter who loves fresh game. Jacob, named for grabbing the heel of his brother as he leaves the womb but also signifying that he is a deceiver, is content at home winning the favor of his mother.

Readers enter the narrative knowing what God has told Rebekah, that the older, Esau, will serve the younger, Jacob. The first story we read about the men when they have grown is how flippantly Esau sells his birthright to Jacob because of his physical need for food. The narrator makes clear the significance of this act: "So Esau despised his

birthright" (25:34). Whether there is any legal significance to this sale is beside the point; we now know that Esau puts his material, physical needs ahead of more serious, spiritual considerations, thus making the reader less sympathetic to him when he becomes the object of Rebekah's and Jacob's deception.

Still, one wonders whether the narrator wants us to be fully sympathetic to Rebekah and Jacob either, when they devise the ruse to get Isaac, who is preparing to pass the blessing on to Esau, to give it instead to Jacob. In her defense, Rebekah heard from God that it is the older who will serve the younger, but should that divine message have led them to wait on God rather than to try to manufacture the outcome? That God often chided Abraham for attempting to do that in regard to an heir makes one raise the question. The fact that the deception leads to all kind of plot complications that we cannot pursue here supports that idea.

Again, we can only skim the surface and be suggestive as to the narrative depth of this material, and will content ourselves by pursuing only one other thread. Even if we should consider the method of Jacob's acquisition of the promises problematic, we should have no doubt that he does receive them. Isaac confers them (27:27–29) and God confirms them at the place renamed Bethel as he travels up to Haran (28:13–15). Jacob remains a complex figure through the rest of the *toledot* of Isaac. While arguably, after wrestling with the mysterious divine figure, he perhaps develops in the direction of maturity, having his name changed from Jacob (deceiver) to Israel (struggling with God), he nonetheless on occasion continues to deceive (e.g., 33:12–20), perhaps explaining why the narrative does not make a definitive switch to that name as it did when Abram's name was changed to Abraham. But still he is the one who bears the promises into the next generation, which becomes the subject of the final *toledot*, the one that bears his name (37:2), but that today is more popularly known as the Joseph story.

THE JOSEPH STORY

> You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good … the saving of many lives. (Gen. 50: 20)

Genesis 37:2–50:26, the *toledot* of Jacob, concerns Jacob's twelve sons, with a primary focus on Joseph and a secondary focus on Judah. While the promises of Genesis 12:1–3 have passed from father to son for two

generations after Abraham, now the assumption is that they pass to the twelve sons all together, or at least they are all considered to be among the chosen who will eventually become a great nation who will be blessed and will be a blessing to the nations. It is at the end of his life that Jacob actively confers blessings on his sons. There is a special emphasis on the blessing of Joseph (48:15; 49:22–26) that manifests itself in his blessing both Ephraim and Manasseh. In Genesis 49, even though Jacob announces a difficult future for some of his sons (notably Reuben, Simeon, and Levi), the narrator concludes his pronouncements by saying, "All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, giving each the blessing appropriate to him" (49:28).

As we noted a difference of narrative strategy or style from the primeval history to the ancestor narratives, we also note a difference between the latter and the Joseph story. The ancestor narratives were more loosely associated episodes, while the Joseph narrative displays increased literary cohesion with smoother transitions between scenes. Rather than a series of vignettes, Genesis 37–50 comes across more like a short story as it follows the vicissitudes of Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob (see later on Genesis 38).

Of course there are plot connections to the previous chapters. By the time we come to Genesis 37 we know that Jacob's family suffers significant dysfunction due to his propensity to favoritism. The latter began with his preference for Rachel over Leah that has now morphed after her death into a preference for her son Joseph. This preference is symbolized by Jacob's gift of an ornate coat that sets Joseph apart from his brothers (37:3), and then Joseph only accentuates filial animosity by describing to the family two dreams that have the obvious implication that he will be the dominant brother in the future. While the dreams are true, he has not yet come to the realization that his leading role in the family is not to rule but to serve, and that this service will result in his suffering.

Thus, it is not surprising that, when they get an opportunity, the brothers plot to get rid of Joseph. As he goes to visit them as they shepherd the flocks, they agree to throw him into a cistern. The omniscient narrator tells us the thoughts of the oldest brother Reuben, who should have simply nixed the plot, that he planned to come back and rescue him. But before he could, Judah, who perhaps even more than Joseph will mature in character in the course of the narrative, convinces his brothers in Reuben's absence to sell Joseph as a slave to passing Ishmaelites. They then break their father's heart by telling him that

Joseph has been killed by an animal. All that is left is his blood-stained ornate robe (we will note how clothing plays an important role in the storytelling in terms of both plot and character).

Space does not permit a detailed laying out of the plot, but let's just say that much of the early part of his story details how Joseph suffers one injustice after another. He enters into the service of Potiphar, an important Egyptian official, whose wife falsely accuses him of rape (Genesis 39). In prison he meets the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, high-level Egyptian officials, who tell him their dreams which he interprets successfully, telling the baker that he will be executed and the cupbearer that he will be restored to Pharaoh's service. As the latter departs the prison, Joseph requests his help to get him out of prison, after which the cupbearer promptly forgets him until Pharaoh himself has two dreams.

When Pharaoh tells him his dreams, Joseph interprets them in a way that helps him prepare for a coming severe famine. Joseph rises to a high position in Egypt, and at this point the focus of the narrative turns back to Joseph's family in famine-hit Canaan. Jacob hears there is grain in Egypt and orders his sons to go down and buy some. We now learn there is a new favorite, Benjamin, the son to whom Rachel gave birth as she died. Jacob does not allow the other ten to take him with them in case they lose him.

Joseph immediately recognizes them, but he does not reveal his identity to them. Indeed, he accuses them of being spies. Why? The reticent narrator simply says that "he remembered his dreams about them" (42:9), but what is it about the dreams? If it's that they anticipated his present superior position to them, how does that explain his actions? If it is rather their angry, jealous reaction to the dreams, then perhaps that explains his caution, but he is really in no danger from them in Egypt where he is second in power.

His motivation is revealed in his actions over the next couple of chapters as he manipulates matters to recreate a situation that mimics the moment years ago when they sold him into slavery. His accusation that they are spies leads them to tell him about the family and the son left at home. Thus, he demands, "You will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here" (42:14). After negotiating that Simeon serve as hostage, they return with grain (and their payment) to Jacob.

Jacob, though, remains adamant that Benjamin will not go to Egypt, even apparently if it means the loss of Simeon, and we might at this point remember the episode in Shechem (Genesis 34) where Jacob finds

himself in conflict with Simeon and his brother Levi.[27] Reuben, who has already shown that he is an ineffectual firstborn (37:21-22, 29), asks his father to entrust Benjamin to his care, and if he fails Jacob can kill his two sons (42:37). One can imagine that Jacob, in spite of his flaws, might not think killing his grandsons would compensate for the loss of Benjamin. The narrator is putting Reuben in a bad light for a contrast with Judah, who will now play a pivotal role moving forward.

Soon, lack of food moves Jacob to instruct his sons to go back to Egypt. Judah insists that they will only go if Benjamin comes with them. Instead of offering that Jacob kill his sons, he steps forward to say that he will be personally responsible and if anything happens to Benjamin he "will bear the blame" before him for the rest of his life (43:9). Jacob relents and allows them to go.

When they arrive, Joseph again manipulates matters by placing his diviner's cup into Benjamin's grain sack so that after they leave Joseph sends his steward out to "discover" it there. Joseph has thus successfully recreated a situation similar to the one that led to his slavery. How will the brothers react? Will they be callous toward their brother and their father and simply cut their losses and run?

At this pivotal moment in the plot, Judah steps forward, good to his word to his father. In a speech whose length calls attention to its significance (44:18–34), he offers himself in Benjamin's place. At this point, Joseph, recognizing that his brothers have changed, reveals himself to them. He then invites them to go and get Jacob and bring him down to Egypt.

We have now rehearsed enough of the storyline to get a hint at least of the masterful plot and character development of this final section of Genesis. In terms of the latter, we have seen how the firstborn Reuben is an ineffective leader. Judah's character, on the other hand, develops in a remarkable way. At the beginning of the narrative, he is insensitive to his father and his brother when he devises the plan to sell him to the Ishmaelites.

The characterization of Jacob can also explain the function of Genesis 38. Past scholars have thought that this story about Judah's marrying a Canaanite and eventually unknowingly sleeping with his daughter-in-law had no place in the Joseph narrative. It seemed an intrusion. On the contrary, though, it serves the purpose of further

[27] Though, interestingly, the narrator appears to signal his disappointment in Jacob and at least relative approval of the actions of Levi and Simeon by giving them the last word. See Longman, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 428–31.

darkening Judah's reputation early in the story, so that by the time he steps forward to offer himself as a substitute for Benjamin, we see a tremendous transformation that suggests he is ready for leadership among the brothers.

Joseph's character is harder to evaluate. Of course, God uses him (see later on Gen. 50:19–20), but how are we to think about him? What signals is the narrator sending us? On certain points, readers might differ in a similar way to how different interpreters assess the life of David.[28] We have already commented on the introduction to Joseph, where he relates the account of his dreams to his family in a way that was insensitive, provoking his brothers' jealousy (37:5–11).

When the brothers throw Joseph into a cistern and then sell him to the traders going down to Egypt, the narrator only reports the brothers' thoughts and words. We do not hear Joseph's reaction to the treatment that he receives. The emphasis is on the brothers' abuse and deception. In particular, as we commented, this scene in particular sullies Judah's character.

When we next encounter Joseph, he is serving in the household of Potiphar. Here the narrator emphasizes God's presence with Joseph that results in the prosperity of Potiphar's household (39:2–3). Because of the presence of this descendant of Abraham, God brought blessing on this Egyptian household (39:5–6; cf. 12:3). When Potiphar's wife tries to lure him into her bed, Joseph resists, citing his loyalty to Potiphar and to God (39:9). Once again an item of clothing gets him in trouble, as Potiphar's wife uses the cloak she snatched from him as he ran away to implicate him (39:16–18).

Joseph is sent to prison, and God's presence with him now brings prosperity to the prison (39:20b–23). The narrator presents him as the model prisoner, and his interaction with the cupbearer and the baker demonstrates that he is a skilled interpreter of dreams. Though the cupbearer promptly forgets him after being restored to Pharaoh's court (40:23), he remembers him when Pharaoh has disturbing dreams.

Joseph's success at interpreting Pharaoh's dreams as anticipating seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine brings him into

[28] For instance, note the difference between the dark portrait of David described by S. L. McKenzie, *King David: An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), and Cephas T. A. Tushima, *The Fate of Saul's Progeny in the Reign of David* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), with a more positive picture given by Paul Borgman, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

a position of power, symbolized by a change of clothing (41:42–43) as he is selected as the point person for preparation for the famine and then for distribution when the famine hits. It is at the point that Joseph achieves power that interpreters begin to diverge on how to assess Joseph's actions.

On the one hand, Joseph's anticipation of the famine results in his gathering grain so that when the shortage comes he can sell it to the people of Egypt, perhaps another way a descendant of Abraham brings blessing on a foreign nation. But then as the famine persists and the people of Egypt run out of money to pay for the grain, Joseph offers a plan whereby they first sell their livestock, then their land to Pharaoh (47:13–26). He even institutes a perpetual requirement in the future that they work the land that no longer belongs to them and give one-fifth of the harvest to Pharaoh. In other words, Joseph "reduced the people to servitude" (47:21) and in return for their lives the people agree to "be in bondage to Pharaoh" (47:25).

How is the reader expected to react to this?[29] On the one hand, these actions do save their lives. But on the other hand, he does it in a way that reduces them to a life of servitude to Pharaoh. Is this a blessing or a curse? Is Joseph a benefactor or a bad actor? Of course, there is another consideration to keep in mind. The story is about Egypt, after all, the Egypt that would reduce the Israelites to bondage. While there are questions about when the story was written, all agree it was post-exodus. Could this be a way of characterizing later Egyptian kings as the most ungrateful type of people? The later Pharaoh is described as one who has forgotten all about Joseph (Exod. 1:8), Joseph whose plan led to the institution's tremendous power in the first place. Could this be a story about how a descendant of Abraham brought a curse on a nation that would later curse it (Gen. 12:3)? And his actions also provide rescue for God's chosen family, who themselves journey down to Egypt, at which time Jacob blesses Pharaoh (47:7).

In a similar vein, we could also explore what Joseph's treatment of his brothers indicates about his character. By deceiving them into a situation where they have to make a choice between their own safety and the safety of Benjamin, the favorite son of Jacob, is he being wise and careful? Or is he being manipulative and vengeful? Both readings can find support from the text.

[29] I was prompted to reassess my more positive reading of Joseph at this point of the story by Robert F. Cochran Jr. of Pepperdine Law School, who has since published, "Biden, Abortion, and the Temptations of Status: Biblical Lessons from Another 'Ordinary Joe,'" *Public Discourse*, 25 May 2021, www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2021/05/75993/.

We conclude our study of Joseph and his brothers with a scene that provides a thematic lens through which Joseph views his life and through which the readers can now re-evaluate the preceding story. Upon burying Jacob, Joseph's brothers now worry that Joseph will finally take out retribution on them for their earlier actions. They report that before he died, Jacob wanted Joseph to forgive them. That Jacob did not tell this directly to Joseph indicates that they are fabricating this request. They also offer themselves as slaves to Joseph. To this, Joseph responds, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (50:20).

As Joseph looks back over his life, he remembers that his brothers betrayed him, Potiphar's wife framed him, the cupbearer forgot him. But in all that he sees the hand of God, while not exonerating their evil actions ("You intended to harm me"), but God took those very acts and used them to bring him to a position where he could rescue God's chosen family.

CONCLUSION

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, Genesis provides a rich display of literary features as the book plots the story of God's interaction with his creation and in particular with his chosen people from the very beginning of time through the life of Joseph. Indeed, the book's ending provides closure by concluding with an account of Joseph's death (Gen. 50:22–26). Nonetheless, the report of his death also signals an eventual continuance of the plot as Joseph makes the Israelites swear to take his embalmed body back to the promised land when God eventually comes to their aid. Genesis thus ends on a cliffhanger, with Joseph's coffin in Egypt setting the reader up for a sequel.