

Genesis

Gary A. Rendsburg

THE BOOK OF GENESIS IS typically divided into two main parts: the Primeval History (chs. 1–11) and the Ancestral Narratives (chs. 12–50). The former relates the universal history of the world (that is, as understood by the Israelites), including the lengthy accounts of the creation and flood. The latter focuses on the four generations of the founding family of the Israelite tradition, represented in the main by Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and Joseph and his brothers.

The distinction between the two main sections is underscored by the different literary structures inherent in chs. 1–11 and chs. 12–50. The former is laid out in a redactional structure, with five units A–E, which then are echoed via the five units A'–E' (with one tweak, see anon). The latter is divided into three large narratives, each of which is laid out in a chiastic structure, with five or six units, either A–E or A–F, building toward a focal point, after which the matching units are organized in reverse order as E'–A' or F'–A'. Even though the Primeval History obviously precedes the Ancestral Narratives in the book of Genesis, herein I begin with the latter, the larger section, characterized by chiastic structures; and then toward the article's end, I will explain the layout of the Primeval History.¹

As indicated, the Ancestral Narratives span four generations, but the story is told in three cycles (not four): the Abraham Cycle, the Jacob Cycle, and the Joseph Story. Which is to say, there is no Isaac Cycle; rather, the potential main character Isaac is incorporated either into what precedes, as the son of Abraham (see esp. chs. 21–22) or into what follows, as the father of Jacob (see esp. ch. 27). There are occasional stories in which Isaac acts independently, but these

1. This essay is based in large part on my earlier article (Rendsburg 2020), which in turn is based on my still earlier monograph (Rendsburg 1986/2014).

are echoes of similar accounts within the Abraham Cycle (see especially the wife-sister account and the dealings with the Philistines in ch. 26).

Chiastic Structure of the Abraham Cycle

With the foregoing as introduction, herewith the chiastic structure of the Abraham Cycle:

A. Genealogy of Terah (11:27–32)

B. Start of Abram's spiritual odyssey (12:1–9)

C. Sarai in foreign palace; ordeal ends in peace and success; Abram and Lot part (12:10–13:18)

D. Abram comes to the rescue of Sodom and Lot (14:1–24)

E. Covenant with Abram; annunciation of Ishmael (15:1–16:16)

Focal Point: 17:1–5: Abram > Abraham,

Elohim introduced, covenant

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 peace and 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)

Five units, labeled A through E, comprise the first half of the Abraham Cycle. Throughout these episodes, (a) the patriarch is called Abram; (b) God is referred to as YHWH; and c) the concept בְּרִית *bərit* 'covenant' is mentioned only once, in the voice of the narrator (15:18). As we reach the focal point of the narrative in 17:1–5, our attention is drawn to further developments of these three key elements: (a) Abram's name is changed to Abraham (v. 5), and he will be called such for the remainder of his life; (b) the word Elohim 'God' is introduced (v. 3), and the term will appear alongside YHWH for the remainder of the Abraham Cycle; and (c) the covenant concept is elucidated in great detail, with the word בְּרִית *bərit* 'covenant' occurring now in the voice of God (2x in the focal point verses, and 13x altogether in ch. 17). Five matching units, labeled E' through A', comprise the second half of the Abraham Cycle, with the themes and motifs of A and A', B and B', etc., aligning.² To further solidify the connections between

2. For the original proposal, see Cassuto 1964, 296; and for a similar approach, see Grossman 2016, 39–40.

two corresponding units, the text uses the same, similar, or like-sounding lexical items.

Space does not permit me to demonstrate this last point in great detail, though I would note a few items here from the corresponding units B and B': (a) the obvious connection between the two לֵךְ לָכָה *lek laka* 'go forth' phrases (12:1, 22:2); (b) the echo of Moreh (12:7) in Moriah (22:2); and (c) the very similar wording in the blessings (12:3, 22:18).³

Chiastic Structure of the Jacob Cycle

Next we proceed to the chiastic structure in the Jacob Cycle:

- A. Oracle sought, struggle in childbirth, Jacob born (25:19–34)
- B. Interlude: Rebekah in foreign palace, pact with foreigners (26:1–35)
- C. Jacob fears Esau and flees (27:1–28:9)
- D. Messengers (28:10–22)
- E. Arrival at Harran (29:1–30)
- F. Jacob's wives are fertile (29:31–30:24)
*Focal point: 30:22–25: Rachel gives birth,
 Jacob decides to return to Canaan*
- F'. Jacob's flocks are fertile (30:25–43)
- E'. Flight from Harran (31:1–54)
- D'. Messengers (32:1 [31:55]–32:32)
- C'. Jacob returns and fears Esau (33:1–20)
- B'. Interlude: Dinah in foreign palace, pact with foreigners (34:1–31)
- A'. Oracle fulfilled, struggle in childbirth, Jacob becomes Israel (35:1–22)

As with the Abraham Cycle, so here with the Jacob Cycle we observe a chiastic structure which builds from the beginning of the narrative to the pivot point, and which then "unwinds" (for lack of a better term) from the pivot point to the end of the narrative. Six units, labeled here A through F, recount the first half of the story, including the story of Jacob's birth, his dealings with Esau, the journey to Harran, his settling there, and his life there. The focal point at 30:22–25 describes Rachel's giving birth to Joseph (after the period of her extended infertility) and Jacob's concomitant decision to return to the land of Canaan. As the narrative recounts the second half of the story, six additional units follow, labeled here F'

3. For further analysis, including regarding plot development, see Rendsburg, forthcoming.

through A', including Jacob's preparations for the return home, his return journey, his reunion with Esau, and the eventual arrival in Canaan.⁴

As we saw above in the Abraham Cycle, so also here, to highlight the connections between two corresponding units, the text uses the same, similar, or like-sounding lexical items alongside the matching themes and motifs. One example will suffice, the use of חֶלְקֶת צֹאֲרֵי *ḥelqat sawwa'raw* 'the smoothness of his neck' (27:16) in unit C and חֶלְקֶת הַשָּׂדֶה *ḥelqat haś-śade* 'the portion of the field' (33:19) in unit C'—the only two instances of the key word חֶלְקָה *ḥelqa*, with its two divergent meanings, in all of the Torah (with the exception of Deut 33:21 near the very end).

Chiastic Structure of the Joseph Story

The book of Genesis then closes with the Joseph Story, where once again a chiasmic structure may be observed:

- A. Joseph and his brothers; Jacob and Joseph part (37:1–36)
- B. Interlude: Joseph not present (38:1–30)
- C. Reversal: Joseph guilty, Potiphar's wife innocent (39:1–23)
- D. Joseph hero of Egypt (40:1–41:57)
- E. Two trips to Egypt (42:1–43:34)
- F. Final test (44:1–34)
- Focal point: 45:1–4: Joseph reveals himself to his brothers*
- F'. Conclusion of test (45:1–28)
- E'. Two tellings of migration to Egypt (46:1–47:12)
- D'. Joseph hero of Egypt (47:13–27)
- C'. Reversal: Ephraim first-born, Manasseh second-born (47:28–48:22)
- B'. Interlude: Joseph nominally present (49:1–28)
- A'. Joseph and his brothers; Jacob and Joseph part (49:29–50:26)

By now, the large-scale chiasmus should be familiar to the reader. The Joseph Story has six initial units, A through F, which build to the climax, or focal point, after which six corresponding units, F' through A' bring the novella to its conclusion. In the case of the Joseph Story, the climactic focal point is rather obvious: 45:1–4, where Joseph reveals himself to his brothers.

As we saw above in the Abraham and Jacob cycles, here too, to highlight the connections between two corresponding units, the text uses the same, similar, or like-sounding lexical items alongside the matching themes and motifs. Again,

4. My approach here is heavily indebted to Fishbane 1975; 1979/1998, 40–62.

a single illustration will need to suffice—namely, the collocation of the verbal roots *נ-א-מ* ‘resist’ and *ר-א-מ* ‘say’ in the two parallel expressions: *וַיִּמָּאֵן וַיֹּאמֶר* *wayma’en wayyo’mer* ‘and he resisted and said’ (39:8, with Joseph as subject) in unit C and *וַיִּמָּאֵן אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר* *wayma’en ’abiw wayyo’mer* ‘and his father resisted and said’ (48:19, with Jacob as subject) in unit C.⁵

Linking Material

The three major sections of the Ancestral Narratives are divided by two sections of linking material, inserted between the Abraham and Jacob narratives (23:1–25:18) and between the Jacob and Joseph narratives (35:23–36:43). This material does not contain the beautiful alignment of units found within the major portions, though once again the inclusion of parallel units may be observed. Thus, for example, note how both the sons of Ishmael (25:12–18) and the sons of Esau (36:6–43) occur in the respective sections, along with the death and burial of Abraham (25:7–11) and the death and burial of Isaac (35:27–29).⁶

The Ancestral Narratives as Literary Wholes

The large-scale layout of Gen 12–50 presented here demonstrates that a single narrative voice is responsible for the entirety of the Ancestral Narratives.⁷ The chiasmic structures of the three main sections (Abraham, Jacob, Joseph), with the linking material intervening, shows a deliberate design for this large swath of ancient Israelite literature. Those who would divide the text into J, E, and P components miss the inherent beauty of this literary masterpiece.

This last sentence is not just a subjective declaration; it also may be supported by a closer examination of the specific items mentioned above. Unit B (12:1–9) in the Abraham Cycle typically is assigned to the so-called J source, while unit B’ (22:1–19) typically is allocated to the so-called E source. How, then, does one explain the long list of lexical and thematic nexuses between the two episodes? Did the so-called J and E sources coincidentally use *לֶךְ לָכָה* *lek laka* ‘go forth’ in 12:1 and 22:2, respectively, as the only two places in the Bible attesting to this command? And then they just happened to be utilized at the opening of the two crucial scenes which bracket God’s relationship with Abra(ha)m? One

5. The same two verbs also are collocated in 37:35, though in a slightly different configuration, so that the two verses cited here (39:8 and 48:19) are much closer to each other.

6. For more detailed treatment, see Rendsburg 1986/2014, 71–77.

7. I use the term “single narrative voice” in a very generic sense as the best way to understand the text, though others may wish to refer to this single voice as a single source or a single author.

such coincidence perhaps may be countenanced, but not when one sees an accumulation of such nexuses linking the two stories.⁸ The approach utilized here, which analyzes sustained narratives as literary wholes, is much to be preferred.

The Primeval History

For the Primeval History, the text presents a different kind of literary structure, with the two halves presented in parallel, rather than chiastic, structure, producing the following matching sequences:⁹

- A. Creation, God's words to Adam (1:1–3:24)
 - B. Adam's sons (4:1–16)
 - C. Technological development of humankind (4:17–26)
 - D. Ten generations from Adam to Noah (5:1–32)
 - E. Downfall: the Nephilim (6:1–8)
 - A' Flood, God's words to Noah (6:9–9:17)
 - B'. Noah's Sons (9:18–29)
 - C'. Ethnic development of humankind (10:1–32)
 - E'. Downfall: Tower of Babel (11:1–9)
 - D'. Ten generations from Noah to Terah (11:10–26)

The two centerpieces, of course, are creation and flood, which serve as the longest units within the Primeval History. Most importantly for our present concern, as all readers of Genesis have recognized, the flood and its aftermath serve as a second creation. For one key nexus, note especially Gen 1:28; 9:1 פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ *peru u-rbu u-mil'u* 'et ha-'areṣ "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth."

The Creation Accounts and the Flood Story

All scholars, the present writer included, have noticed the two separate creation accounts at the start of Genesis, with their two perspectives and their key differences (order of creation, method of creation, etc.). What most scholars have missed, however, is the manner in which the two accounts work together to deliver a fundamental message. The first account is cosmocentric (with its focus on sky, earth, waters, sun, moon, stars, etc.), while the second account is anthropocentric (with its focus on the first human, who tills the soil and names

8. Above I presented only three, though in truth there are more than a dozen shared themes and lexical items; see further Rendsburg 1986/2014, 31–35; 2020, 19–20.

9. The foundational work is Sasson 1980.

the animals, for example). Thus the theological message set out at the very beginning of the Torah: Both components, God in the heavens and humanity on earth, are required to advance the Bible's narrative.

The flood story, of course, is a purported showpiece for the Documentary Hypothesis, with its supposed division into the so-called J source and the so-called P source. But this dissection fails when the story is read against the backdrop of the flood account in the Gilgamesh Epic, tablet XI.¹⁰ For example, if one looks at the end of the biblical account through the lens of the J/P division, the following chart is produced:

J	P	
	7:24–8:5	mountaintop landing
8:6–12		birds sent forth
	8:13–19	all set free
8:20–22		sacrifices

The source critics would have one believe that the J source included the episodes of the birds and the sacrifices, but not the mountaintop landing and the setting all free, while the P source included the episodes of the mountaintop landing and the setting all free, but not the sending forth of the birds and the offering of the sacrifices—and that somehow, through some random splicing, the redactor put the episodes in the right order, which just happens to accord precisely with the *unified* account of Gilgamesh (XI 142–63), which indeed contains these four episodes in the selfsame order.¹¹

Holistic Reading and the Interconnections Between Genesis 14 and 15

For another instance demonstrating the benefit of a holistic reading, we return to the Ancestral Narratives, with attention to the most atypical chapter in the extended narrative—namely, ch. 14, the story of the war between the variously allied kings. The source critics typically assign this chapter to an unknown source, outside the usual J/E/P division. A holistic reading, however, reveals how even this account has been fully integrated into the greater Abraham account. I refer here to the use of catchwords—that is, lexical items that link together successive units (similar to the lexical items that serve to bind the correspond-

10. See further Wenham 1978; Rendsburg 2007.

11. Lineation per George 2003, 1.712–13; see also Foster 2001, 88–89; Tigay 1982, 227.

ing units within the chiastic structure, as seen above). Note the following items (among others) which appear both in ch. 14 and ch. 15:¹²

1. מִגֵּן *miggen* ‘deliver’ in 14:20 and מָגֵן *magen* ‘shield’ (though also ‘benefactor’¹³) in 15:1
2. רֶכֶשׁ *rəkuš* ‘wealth, property’ in ch. 14 (5x) and 15:14
3. דַּמְעָשָׁק *dammēseq* ‘Damascus’ in 14:15 and 15:2
4. בְּרִית *berit* ‘treaty, covenant’ in 14:13 and 15:18
5. שָׁלֵם *šalem* ‘Salem’ in 14:18 and ‘whole’ in 15:16
6. דָּן *dan* ‘Dan’ in 14:14 and אֲנֹכִי דָן *dan* ‘anoki’ ‘I will judge’ in 15:14

The most telling of these items is the last one listed, for the toponym Dan is an anachronism, since the city was still named Laish at this stage (see Judg 18:29); while the verbal root ד-י-נ *d-y-n* ‘judge’ is totally unexpected in narrative prose (indeed, this is the only such usage in the entire Bible,¹⁴ otherwise one expects ש-פ-ט *š-p-ṭ* ‘judge’). And yet the two usages are intentionally employed to serve as catchwords bridging the two very dissimilar units D and E, with Abram as military chieftain in the former and as covenant partner with God in the latter.

The Theological Message: Land, People, and Covenant

I conclude by returning to the three chiastic structures described above, with special consideration of the three focal points or pivot points. As we saw, in the Abraham Cycle, the focal point at 17:1–5 introduces the crucial concept of covenant; in the Jacob Cycle, the focal point at 30:22–25 highlights Jacob’s decision to return to the land of Canaan; while in the Joseph Story, the focal point at 45:1–4 shines the spotlight on the emotional reunion of Joseph and his brothers.

The three themes expressed in the three pivot points, when read together, constitute the essence of the book of Genesis, indeed of the entire Torah, if not the entire Bible. The three themes are: (a) the *covenant*; (b) the *land* of Canaan; and (c) the *people* of Israel. When woven together, these three elements—*land, people, and covenant*—create the essential message of the Bible: God and the people of Israel are inextricably linked via the covenant; God is to be the God

12. Sarna 1966, 121–22; Rendsburg 1986/2014, 48. See also Grossman 2016, 34–35, who uses the term “chain link” to describe the effect (see also pp. 155, 182).

13. See Rendsburg 1992.

14. The only exception is Gen 30:6, where the verb is employed as the naming device for Dan.

of Israel, while Israel is to be the people of God; and the drama is to unfold in the land of Canaan, a gift from God to the people of Israel.

Nowhere is any of this spelled out for the reader of the book of Genesis. Nowhere, for example, does the text declaim, “Pay attention, dear reader, to these three pivot points, for in them is to be found the essential message.” This is true, of course, for the entire ancient Hebrew literary tradition. To state the obvious, the Bible does not come with charts of the type that I have produced above, in order to highlight the role of the pivot point in each of the three narrative cycles. Rather, the text reveals little, thereby demanding the reader’s active engagement. Only through such an encounter with the text—the whole text, as a complete narrative, not to be divided into microscopic parts—will the reader garner the fullness of its message.

RETHINKING THE COMPOSITION OF THE PENTATEUCH

EDITED BY Kenneth Bergland, Roy E. Gane,
Gary A. Rendsburg, and A. Rahel Wells

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