Genesis

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GENESIS is the first of the thirty-six books of the Old Testament, and much in it is used as a basis for or creatively incorporated into numerous passages further on in the Bible.[1] Genesis is the beginning of the Torah, traditionally known as the Five Books of Moses, or the Pentateuch. In the standard edition, the Hebrew text comprises well over fifteen hundred "verses," which in the Middle Ages were divided, not always happily, into fifty chapters.[2] For at least two reasons Genesis, like other narrative books of the Bible, can be hard to understand. It is very complex, and it exhibits a baffling multiformity. The difficulties have not been diminished by two centuries of the so-called Higher Criticism, a historical-critical approach[3]—an "excavative scholarship," as it has been called[4]—that subjects the text to serious reduction. Philologists and historians are apt to regard the text as a source for something beyond itself because their proper interest or attention is directed to contextual realities. And theologians tend to read the text as message, and to that end separate form from content without realizing that in doing so they violate the literary integrity of the text.

Multiformity and Discord

As readers of Genesis, we must fully respect and explore the large variety in shape and structure, tone and length, which the literary units display. This disconcerting combination of highly heterogeneous elements, which often test our tolerance, prevails in books such as Exodus, Numbers, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The main aspects of this multiformity are as follows.

The narrator (or the creative writer responsible for the final version of the text) may, at any moment, switch from the narrative flow to a more elevated style, that is, to the compactness of formal verse. Thus a polarity arises between prose and poetry, and the body of prose functions as a setting in which, repeatedly, the gem of a poem sparkles. Sometimes the poetry consists of no more than one verse, as in the triadic line at 1:27:

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God created he him;
male and female created he them.

More often it is a two-line strophe, as in 2:23:

This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh:
she shall be called Woman
because she was taken out of Man;

or 8:22:

While the earth remaineth,
seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat,
and summer and winter, and day and night
shall not cease;

or 14:19–20a:

Blessed be Abram of the most high God,
possessor of heaven and earth:
And blessed be the most high God,
which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand;

and compare 25:23. There are also three-line poems, such as 4:6–7:

Why art thou wroth?
and why is thy countenance fallen?
If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?
and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door.
And unto thee shall be his desire,
and thou shalt rule over him;

or Lamech's song, 4:23–24:

Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech:
for I have slain a man to my wounding,
and a young man to my hurt.
If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold,
truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold;

and compare 27:39b–40. The blessing in which God promises the patriarchs land and offspring (12:1–3) is somewhat longer still, three triadic lines, whereas subsequent passages such as 22:16–18 and 28:13 are midway between prose and poetry—the boundaries are often not very clear. Old Isaac's blessing in 27:27–29 is a double strophe (3 + 3 dyadic lines). Later the poetry recedes until chapter 49, near the end of the book, where we encounter a large composition of well over eighty versets or half-lines. In the enumerative or serial design there, Jacob concisely characterizes each of his sons (and the tribe of which he is the eponymous forefather) with

a thumbnail portrait. He accords five of them only one line each; dedicates a three-line strophe to Reuben, Issachar, and Dan and a double strophe (3 + 2 versets) to Simeon and Levi together; and devotes a full stanza of eight and nine verses of praise to Judah (8–12) and Joseph (22–26) respectively.

Occasionally the switch from prose to poetry is explicitly marked. In the case of Lamech's song of revenge and Jacob's blessings, the transition is achieved by a formal beginning, an adjuration to be attentive (4:23a and 49:1b). Sometimes the discourse glides unobtrusively from prose into poetry. We suddenly realize with a little shock that the words are symmetrically aligned and that the language has become more intense; next we notice the text's poetical form; and finally we perceive that the personage who is blessed or cursed in the story has anticipated our shock of recognition in feeling the force of the poem. In the story of the Fall, Genesis 2–3, it is the figures of "man and his wife" and the serpent who through the poetry of 3:14–15, 16, and 17b–19 sense that they themselves have become the victims of God's curse.

An even greater source of heterogeneity in the composition is the use of different genres. We meet with a colorful variety of action-directed narratives in the strictest sense, genealogical registers, catalogues, blessings and curses, protocols for the conclusion of covenants, doxological and mythological texts, etiological tales, legal directives. This odd diversity is complicated still further by a third and a fourth factor of multiformity: size, that is, the difference between short and long units; and the polarity between narrator's text and character's text, that is, between report and speech. Genesis does not fundamentally differ in this regard from other narrative books of the Bible. The narrator may create a harmonious balance or variation between report and speech, as in chapters 24, 27, and 38, stories that are directly accessible and attractive to Western taste. Here report and speech together carry the plot. These instances of balance form the middle of a scale one extreme of which is represented by units consisting mostly or entirely of narrator's text (and thus lacking the charm and vivacity conferred by dialogue), and the other extreme of sections consisting entirely of character's text or dialogue. On the one hand, Abraham's outspoken haggling with God over the dwindling remnant of integrity which he hopes may still exist in Sodom and Gomorrah (18:23–33) is a textual unit that consists entirely of dialogue. Similarly, in the bargaining scene in chapter 23 the spoken word carries the plot entirely, the narrator being content with a marginal role. The body of the text consists of three rounds of dialogue, marked by bows by Abraham. It concerns increasingly concrete negotiations between him and the Hittites of Hebron which result in a purchase (vv. 3–6, 8–11, 13–15). The narrator confines himself to reporting the occasion of Sarah's death (vv. 1–2) and playing a participatory role in verses 17–20. There he speaks as the notary

who is responsible for the contract of sale, for the exact description of the extent and cost of the purchased ground, and for the contractors and witnesses. In that way the narrator's text frames the dialogue.

On the other hand, the genealogical registers of chapter 5 (with the exception of 29b, Lamech's naming-speech at the birth of Noah), 11:10–26, and chapter 36 consist entirely of narrator's text. The impression of discord is especially strong where a long report stands in sharp contrast with a long speech. A similarly abrupt transition from report to speech occurs in the episode of Jacob's flock-breeding (30:37–43), followed by his flight from Laban (31:1–21). The contrast between these two units warrants a more detailed analysis. The perspective of the narrator first reveals little more than the temporal aspect of Jacob's ingenious animal-breeding, through which he is able to become wealthy. Then the perspective of the character, Jacob himself, reveals that he has in fact been victimized by his uncle Laban and providentially protected by God.

Differences in length are also a source of strong contrasts. Some of the profoundest and most exciting stories are remarkably short but are found close to a long text which moves at a very relaxed pace. Consider chapters 22 and 24. In the Binding of Isaac, Abraham is cruelly ordered by God to sacrifice his son, the bearer of the promise, whose coming he has awaited a lifetime. The immense anxieties and incalculable implications of this situation are succinctly evoked in approximately 70 lines.[5] Then, after the brief intervening episode of the purchase of the gravesite, we are pleasantly entertained by the calm flow, the epic breadth, and the poised harmony of characters, report, and speech in chapter 24, in which Abraham's servant seeks a bride for Isaac in Mesopotamia. By Hebrew standards, a great amount of space is devoted to ensuring that everything falls into its proper place—approximately 230 lines, at least four times the number found in the average story. In the last lines (v. 67), which link with chapter 23, Rebekah as a matter of course takes up Sarah's position, and we understand that a new cycle has begun. The charged story of the tower of Babel (11:1–9), hermetically composed in a symmetrical thirteen-part concentric design representing measure-for-measure justice, the mirroring of human hubris in divine nemesis, requires only 121 words and approximately 25 lines. The sinister nocturnal story of Jacob's fight and rebirth in 32:22–32 (to which we shall return later) needs only 143 words in 34 cola to develop a formidable intensity.

Another form of discord appears at the level of composition, where the narrative cycles of Jacob and Joseph constitute the second half of the book. The history of the eponymous forefather of the people of Israel extends from 25:19 to the end of chapter 35 but seems on two occasions to be drastically interrupted. During the exposition (chaps. 25–28, Jacob's youth in Canaan), an excursus in chapter 26 allows the intermediary patriarch Isaac only a few paragraphs, and in the conclusion (chaps. 32–

35, Jacob back in Canaan) chapter 34 intervenes, a brutal story about two sons of Jacob who take revenge when their sister Dinah is raped by the prince of the old and respectable city Shechem. In addition, the history of Joseph (chaps. 37–50) is interrupted in its initial phase by another harsh story, also involving sexual behavior, in which the double standard of Joseph's brother Judah is painfully exposed as he is challenged by his brave daughter-in-law Tamar. These three texts seem to be intrusions only as long as we ignore the fact that they are all separated from the boundary of their cycle by the space of one story. Thus they form hooks to the adjoining cycles. If we notice this and allow ourselves to be instructed by the key words, we can integrate these passages thematically with their context despite their superficially digressive character.[6]

Finally, in several cases discord arises through the content. For example, chapter 1, which is less a story than a solemn enumeration of the majestic deeds of creation (in a formal design of two times three days which mirrors the duality heaven/earth), presents man as created in God's image. The reader, seeing this representation of man as the crown of creation (cf. Ps. 8), may feel a certain elation. What immediately follows is the shock of the second creation story (chaps. 2–3), which portrays man as a morally shaky being who eagerly sloughs off responsibility and whose aspirations to becoming God's equal in knowledge of right and wrong are realized at the price of his own fall. Moreover, the creator is called simply "God" in chapter 1, but "YHWH God" (KJV: "Lord God") in chapters 2–3. And there seems to be a contradiction between 1:27 and 2:18–23 on the origin of nature and the relation between man and woman. Another example is 27:46–28:5: does it belong organically to the story of the deceit of the blind Isaac? The diachronic approach calls its status into question.

How are we to reconcile all these seeming contradictions, and on the basis of what criteria? Are we to declare Genesis a badly sewn patchwork? Surely such a judgment cannot be justified, certainly not on the basis of Western and modern concepts of what is whole or beautiful. Instead we must handle these contrasts supplely enough to rediscover by stages what the Hebrew standards of literary organization were and how they are embodied in the texts.

Concord or Unity

In Genesis, powerful means of integration are used at the levels of genre, theme, plot, content, and key words.

Genesis is part of a grand design which unites the books of the Torah with Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings in one configuration: from the creation of the world through the choosing of the people of Israel and their settlement in Canaan up to the Babylonian Captivity. Genesis contributes two building blocks to this overarching plot: the Primeval History

(1–11) and the protohistory of the people of Israel, namely the period of the eponymous forefathers (in three cycles: 12–25, 25–35, and 37–50). These two stages prepare for the history of God's covenant with what the Hebrew Bible regularly calls "his heritage" Israel (see, for example, Deut. 4:20–21 and Ps. 28:9) in Egypt and at the foot of Mount Sinai—a history that begins in Exodus.

The characteristic contribution of Genesis to the Torah and to subsequent books is indicated by its own key word *toledot*, literally, "begettings," from the root *yld*, which is used for mothers (*yaldah*, "she gave birth"), fathers (*holid*, "he begot"), and children (*nolad*, "he was born"). The begettings provide a solid framework that supports and meticulously articulates the various sections of Genesis. The distribution of this key word is of great structural importance. Five times it occurs at the beginning of a genealogical register or enumeration, in the significant positions 5:1, 10:1, 11:10, 25:12, and 36:1. The units introduced in this manner (three chapters, two paragraphs) reveal the *toledot* as a genre in its own right and function as a conclusion; they complete two acts (chaps. 1–4 and 6–9) and two cycles (those of Abraham and Jacob). *Toledot* is also used in another way. Again it occurs five times in a strategic position, but now as an opening (with one significant exception) in a short clause, functioning as the heading of a new narrative cycle: in 6:9 (Noah and the Deluge), 11:27 (11:27–32 being the prologue of the Abraham story), 25:19 (the beginning of the Jacob cycle), and 37:2 (the beginning of the Joseph story). Thus the lives of the protagonists Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph are presented within the framework of the begettings of their fathers (Terah, Isaac, and Jacob, respectively). This image of concatenation reveals the overriding concern of the entire book: life-survival-offspring-fertility-continuity.

The one exception is 2:4a. Through its use of the key word *toledot*, it is clear that this one line, "These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth," is part of the first creation story; by forming an envelope structure together with the heading 1:1, it rounds off Genesis 1:1–2:4a and is a conclusion in itself. This exceptional usage attracts the reader's attention. Everywhere else "the *toledot* of X" refers to human beings as fathers and as subjects of begetting, but 2:4a raises the radical question whether heaven and earth may be the objects of God's begetting. The word *toledot* is, then, a metaphor which, approaching the boundaries of the taboo in Israel's strict sexual morals, carries the oblique suggestion that the cosmos may have originated in a sexual act of God. It becomes evident how daring a game the writer is playing when we consider the world from which Israelite belief wished to dissociate itself: a world characterized by natural religion, fertility rites, cyclic thinking, and sacred prostitution; a world in which the idea of creation as the product of divine intercourse was a commonplace.

The *toledot*, then, as genre (at the structural level of greater units) and as heading (at the textural level of clauses) is not distributed at random through the narrative sections, in a superficial gesture of pure technique. Its true importance becomes clear when we view it in relation to the overriding theme of most Genesis stories. Time and again, fertility in diverse and vivid variety and survival through offspring are an urgent concern in the strictly narrative material. This concern is first signaled in the choice of the name *ḥawah*, Eve, "mother of all living" (3:20), for the first woman at the end of a story in which the freshness, innocence, and harmony of man-and-wife-together have been destroyed. It recurs in Eve's pretenses in 4:1b after bearing Cain and in the enigmatic story of the Nephilim in 6:1–4. The nakedness of the first couple in 2:25 has a sequel in 9:20–27, in which the genitals of the father become taboo for the sons. The possibilities, limits, and precarious aspects of sexuality are expressly explored in, among other texts, 12:10–20; 20; and 26:1–11; in stories in which women struggle with each other for motherhood, such as 16 and 29:31–30:24; and in 19, 34, and 38, in which characters and reader are forced or invited to decide what is or is not sexually permissible under special circumstances. Tamar, who tricks her father-in-law into lying with her, is dramatically vindicated at the end of chapter 38; and it is by no means certain that the narrator condemns the curious case of incest in chapter 19 (where Lot's daughters ply their father with drink and become pregnant by him), even if he pokes fun at the dubious origin of the neighboring tribes Moab and Ammon.

Everything converges and fits perfectly at the highest level, that of theme, expressed in the words of God concerning fertility that permeate the book. From the primeval age on, God's general commandment, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (1:28), predominates, through the paradoxical intermediary episode of the Deluge (all life is destroyed except one pair of every species, which must be expressly spared to ensure continuity) to the repetition of the commandment to be fruitful in 8:17 and 9:1–3. The scores of names in the *toledot* of chapters 10 and 11 imply realization of the commandment; the scattering of humanity in 11:9 is both punishment and command.

Especially noteworthy is God's twofold blessing or promise to the patriarchs, which recurs regularly in the protohistory with the concentrated power of formal verse: 12:1–3 (the programmatic placing at the beginning of the Abraham cycle); 13:14–17; 15:18–21; 17 passim; 22:16–18; 26:3–5; 28:13–14; 35:11–12; and 46:3–4. God promises the patriarchs numerous offspring and the land of Canaan as a permanent home. Clearly, offspring are not safe without a fixed habitat, and promises of land are useless if there is no procreation. The two parts of the promise/blessing therefore presuppose each other and are intertwined. But their principal importance in terms of narrative organization is that they thematize and

explicate space and time, the fundamental coordinates of life and narrative, at the highest level of meaning. Space in Genesis is divided, ordered, and sanctified by the divine promise and is also promoted to the status of a theme: the origin, wanderings, and sojourns of the forefathers. Time, too, is ordered and, because of the promise, stands under a sign of expectation and fulfillment. In its manifestation of continuity in the genealogies, time is most relevant in the Abraham cycle, where it promotes suspense. This cycle is spanned by an immense tensile arch: will Abraham get the promised son, and will he keep him? When the story begins in chapter 12, Abraham is seventy-five years old and childless. Another twenty-five years elapse before Isaac is born, and immediately afterward God seems to want to take his son away from him, directly counter to his promise. Thus continuity is also threatened with destruction, and time itself with deprivation of purpose.

The meaning of space and time in the Torah as a whole is already determined in Genesis by God himself. Their thematic importance is felt throughout the Torah (and in the subsequent narrative books, then again in the Prophets, Psalms, and Wisdom literature). And because the promises are still unfulfilled by the end of Deuteronomy, when Moses dies, the Torah points beyond itself to the sequel, longing as it were for the fulfillment which begins with the march into the Promised Land.[7] Thus Genesis, in its thematic centering of time and space, constitutes the immovable foundation of the Torah and of the entire Hebrew Bible.

When we transpose plot as planning principle from the level of the basic literary unit, the individual story, to the level of the composition of the book, it is the promises of God that carry forward the life cycles. But at this level too the writers introduce a dramatic complication. All three matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, are barren—an insurmountable obstacle to continuity. Thus a supraplot arises through and transcends the three cycles. In chapters 5, 10, and 11 the very monotony of the genealogical enumeration suggests that begetting children is a matter of course (and the hyperbolic ages of people who reached eight hundred or nine hundred years indicate that life is long). Accompanying this is a secondary theme, that of the supreme importance of the firstborn son from generation to generation, so that only his name is worth mentioning. From 11:30 on, both certainties are radically undermined. In the stories themselves, the births of Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph, and Benjamin are never described in terms of a begetting (*holid*) by the father; only afterward is such paternity indicated in the concluding *toledot* lists. The conception is always represented by God's opening the womb of the barren woman, after which she can give birth (*yaldah*). Thus the birth achieves the status of a miracle, foreseen and effected by God alone. Only he can enable and guarantee continuity. In addition, the importance of primogeniture is three times subverted or handled ironically: Ishmael is older than Isaac and also carrier

of the promise; Jacob outrivals Esau but pays a high price, for his maturation is marred and impeded by deceit; and at the end old Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasse, deliberately reverses younger and elder. Attentive readers will compare these passages carefully and enjoy participating in the dialectic of correspondence and difference among them. Echoes of the competition between older and younger child are also present on the margin of the story, through Jacob's wives: Laban exchanges Leah and Rachel behind the bridal veil at Jacob's marriage (29:16–30—the deceiver deceived), and there is a sequel to this episode in the relation between the women, in the agreement they make to trade mandrakes for conjugal rights (30:14–24).

Whichever aspect we consider in the literary text—theme, the coordination of time and space, plot at the levels of story, cycle, or book—the means that create concord[8] are so powerful that they override the aspects of discord.[9] The differences and shifts in language and in types of text which we noted at the outset and which seemed so disturbing now fade, or rather, converge in a plane of a concord sustained from many sides. We are now in a position to reevaluate them as dynamic contrasts. The better we realize that time and space, theme and plot merge to create a synthesis of the heterogeneous, the easier it becomes to enjoy the intended play of differences and oppositions. The more we know our reading to be based on centripetal forces, the easier it is to surrender to the centrifugal movements and explore them as a system of counterpoise.

From the Whole to the Parts: A Structural Approach

A competent reader is constantly mindful of the hermeneutical principle that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and brings this insight to bear. Just as the meaning of a word is determined not by a dictionary definition but by its context, no single element in the Hebrew narrative art can be isolated and described atomistically. Thus we should first investigate the kind of interaction between prose and poetry and the effect produced by the intersection of the two genres. Then we should examine the effect of differing lengths of episode and how the points of view of narrator and characters imitate, undermine, or enrich one another.

The short poems in Genesis have a special function in the narrative flow. By serving as crystallization points, they create moments of reflection. In a powerful and compact formula they summarize what is relevant; they condense the chief idea and lift it above the incidental. It is no coincidence that the first lines of poetry in the Bible occur at 1:27 and 2:23. Together they show that man's essence is defined by two dialogical dimensions, his relation to his partner and his relation to God. The parallelism of 1:27 ("So God created man in his own image, / in the image of God created he him, / male and female created he them") suggests that

humankind is only in its twofoldness the image of God, which in its turn incorporates the fundamental equality of man and woman. The balance is represented in the concentric symmetry of 2:23b, the pattern *abcxc'b'a'*: "this (being) shall be called *'isha,* because from the *'ish* was taken this (being)" [AT]. The sin of man in chapter 3 evokes the fearful question, "Will the image of God be preserved in us?" It receives a positive answer through the thread of poetry in 5:1–2 (in 5:3 man, now called Adam, transmits the image of God to his offspring) and in 9:6.

The fascinating juxtaposition accomplished in 9:6 shows us how poetry in yet another manner distills the essential from the episodic. Verse 6a is a legal directive which prescribes an accurate balance between capital crime and punishment; 6b contains its sacral motivation (and verse 7 connects it with the theme of fertility):

shofekh dam ha'adam/ba'adam damo yishafekh (6a)
for in the image of God/made he man. (6b)

The first line is usually wrongly translated "Who sheds the blood of a human being, by a human being his blood shall be shed." The structure of the first line in Hebrew, however, reveals a symmetry, the concentric pattern *abcc'b'a'*. The purpose of this arrangement is of course to show that the "human being" in the first half-verse is the same person as the "human being" (that is, the victim) in the other. The correct rendering offers a precise image of balanced legal retribution: "Who sheds the blood of a human being, his blood shall (as compensation) for that human being be shed" [AT].[10] This passage is particularly instructive as the first instance of the literary, sometimes even poetic, shaping of many legal enactments and religious rules in the Torah. And this phenomenon in turn opens perspectives for the literary study of the interaction between the narrative and the legislative sections in the Torah.

The poem at 12:1–3 is a blessing from God with which Abraham is sent into the wide world, and it forms the first pillar of the tensile arch which spans the cycle 12–25. Just as programmatic, but in an entirely different manner, is the oracle-poem at 25:23. The sting lies in the tail, "and the elder shall serve the younger." God foments rebellion against the natural order. The strophe is an oracle to Rebekah, who is pregnant with twins. It is not only the center of power of the overture of the Jacob cycle (25:19–26) but also the foundation of the entire section 25–35, persisting as the matrix of Jacob's energetic aspiration for power and precedence. Jacob struggles (even during his birth, 25:22a, 26a), intrigues, and deceives in order to oust Esau from the position of firstborn. The moment the reversal becomes irrevocable, again there is poetry: in 27:27–28 two strophes evoke the blessing of God and the cosmos, and their ending (v. 29) makes a point of the polarity rule/serve. Thus the blessing of the deceived Isaac confirms the prenatal oracle. In 27:39b–40 we find the

antipode, again in poetry. The "blessing" left for Esau is almost a curse and also revolves on the axis of ruling/serving.

The location of these two poems within the framework of the entire story provides structural proof that the disputed passage 27:46–28:5 forms an organic part of the whole. Note the alternation of the twins and the parents in the following six scenes.

A Isaac and the son of the *berakhah/bekhorah* (blessing/birthright), Esau (27:1–5).

B Rebekah sends Jacob onstage (27:6–17).

C Jacob appears before Isaac, receives blessing (27:18–29).

C' Esau appears before Isaac, receives anti-blessing (27:30–40).

B' Rebekah sends Jacob from the stage (27:41–45).

A' Isaac and the son of the *berakhah/bekhorah* (now, Jacob) (27:46–28:5).

The family is split into two camps in such a way that the presence of parent and child in each camp excludes the presence of the other parent and the other child. The reversal in the positions of Esau and Jacob is illustrated by the sound play *bekhorah* (= primogeniture) versus *berakhah* (= blessing). Sound play and reversal come together and become cogent in a chiasm forged by the duped Esau when he ascribes to the name "Jacob" the meaning "deceiver," in 27:36a, which can be scanned as a two-line strophe:

> Isn't he called *ya'qob*?
> He has deceived [*ya'qebeni*] me twice:
> my *bekhorah* he took away
> and now he takes away my *berakhah*! [AT]

But an even more powerful structural instrument than poetry, and indeed the most powerful in biblical prose, is repetition. Repetition is used at practically every level of the hierarchy which the text constitutes, from sounds, words, and clauses to stories and groups of stories. It is rarely applied mechanically or inartistically, and usually it features ingenious variations. Thus a dialectic game of identity and difference is created which challenges us to compare parallelisms at various levels and to ask questions such as: What has remained unchanged, and why? What differences occur and what do they mean? Through the instrument of repetition, Genesis is also replete with parallelisms at various levels. Indeed, it is a classic illustration of Roman Jakobson's thesis that parallelism is the main characteristic of the literary use of language. Let us consider a few examples.

When Jacob must flee Canaan and the deadly revenge of his brother, as night falls he halts at the place that will be called Bethel (28:10–22). When the narrator then states that the sun sets, we gather that this may

be symbolic in this phase of Jacob's life. And yet the full function of the sunset can be appreciated only much later, when the narrator mentions the sun again (32:31). The sun rises at the bank of the Jabbok at the very moment when the hero, maimed by a night's battle and reborn as "Israel," joins his people, finally prepared to smooth matters out with Esau. This detail is part of a larger whole. The two fearful nights at Bethel and Penuel with their numinous encounter (dream and struggle) mark the voyage from Canaan to Haran and back and are counterparts in the larger design of the following cycle:

A Jacob grows up in Canaan, displaces Esau
birth, oracle (25:19–26)
lentil soup/*bekhorah* (25:27–34)
berakhah/bekhorah (27:1–28:5)
Jacob in Bethel, dream (28:10–22)

X Jacob in the service of Laban, in Haran: six units, pattern *ABABAB* (29–31)[11]

A' Jacob back in Canaan, toward Esau
preparations (32:1–21)
Jacob in Penuel, fight, rebirth (32:22–32)
face to face with Esau (33)
back in Bethel (35:1–15)
end: birth and death (35:16–28)

The element of space, in the form of Jacob's long journey to the east and back, structures the cycle as a central panel with two flanks. The hero himself marks the end of each of the three sections with his characteristic activity of erecting a pillar of stones for a monument.

Another characteristic repetition strengthens the balance between "God's House" (Bethel) and "God's Face" (Peniel or Penuel). Immediately before and after the period in Haran, and nowhere else in the text, a large host of angels appears on Jacob's horizon. In the dream in chapter 28, angels ascend and descend the stairs connecting heaven and earth; this spectacular vision forms the prelude to a revelation from God to the fugitive. The host of angels which Jacob meets in Mahanaim (32:1–2) has at first an ambiguous influence on him, for on his way to Esau he is terrified by fantasies of catastrophe and a bad conscience. It emerges, however, that the meaning of the angels is positive and virtually the same as in chapter 28. The one group *is* the other, an escort on behalf of the God of Abraham for the new bearer of the blessing, on the verge of the Promised Land.

The element that determines the segmentation of the Abraham cycle is the narrated time; not surprisingly, for the life of this patriarch is devoted

to waiting patiently for the fulfillment of the promise of God, and hence to faith and obedience. Chapters 12–21 carefully distribute a sequence of lines indicating age, mostly Abraham's.[12] These verses form a pattern by which this cycle, too, is divided into three sections. When the story begins, Abraham is seventy-five; when it ends with his death, he is one hundred and seventy-five. The text, then, covers exactly a century. The central panel, however, chapters 17–21, covers the hundredth year of his life, precisely the period in which God makes the concrete and definite announcement of the arrival of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, and in which the ninety-year-old woman conceives, and the miraculous birth of the son takes place. At the same time, and also in the central panel, the subplot around cousin Lot is completed. The reception of guests at the beginning of 18 is parallel to that at the beginning of 19, and the annunciation of the inferno which God will draw down upon Sodom and Gomorrah stands in polar contrast to the annunciation of the birth. The aspects of sexuality at the beginning and end of 19 (Lot is prepared to cast his daughters to the sharks all around, in contrast to the daughters who get offspring from their father) are closely related to the issue of fertility, which in chapter 20 generates the following comparison of polarities: Sarah/Gerar's wives = one/all = pregnant/sterile. This reversal of the norm (normal procreation in Gerar versus previous sterility in Sarah) is placed between the annunciation and birth of Isaac. But that period partly overlaps with the one in which Sarah is brought into the harem of the Philistine king! This timing leads us to raise the impertinent question, *Is* she already pregnant when she arrives there? Surely she has not been made pregnant by . . . , has she? Not so, of course. Abimelech has not touched her (20:4a), and God himself recognizes the king's innocence in 20:6. But the point is that the coordinates of time and space create an eerie context for Sarah's sensitive condition, her only pregnancy. And the narrator keeps the time scheme obscure by revealing nowhere in chapter 20 in which weeks of the hundredth year of Abraham's life this episode occurs!

I now propose a new integration of chapter 17 into the larger structure of the cycle. Because 18 and 19 constitute antithetical parallels on essential points and, with the fulfillment in 21, frame the ambiguous chapter 20, the principal aspects of the preparation for the birth of Isaac on Abraham's side and of his annunciation have been isolated from the narrative flow of 18–21 and are provided earlier, in chapter 17. In this case, the one type of text complements the other. Chapter 17 consists almost entirely of speech: the clauses and blessings of the covenant that God confirms with Abraham and formulates, stipulating circumcision as incumbent upon the faithful. The preceding analysis of the underlying scheme of narrated time indicates that this covenant text, with its idiosyncratic use of language, forms a part of the revelation with which God turns to Abraham in 18.

A similar kind of doubling back of narration is apparent in chapter

15. If we read the chapter as an ordinary sequence, problems arise such as the following: is verse 12, after the night supposed by verse 5, to indicate the beginning of a new night, so that verses 13–21 are later revelations? Such difficulties disappear when we regard the two sections of this text, verses 1–6 and verses 7–21, as different versions of the same nocturnal vision. Then 15:1–5 is the prologue, the short, summary version (with offspring as its subject), and 15:7–21 is the main body of the unit, the elaborate, emphatic version (with its subjects the Promised Land, the future, the Covenant).[13]

When Isaac has finally been born and Abraham thinks that the terrible strain is now over, God strikes with a horrible, inconceivable demand: sacrifice your son! At the last moment, this drastic turn of the story yields a paroxysm of fearful tension. The dynamics of life and death present in 18–21 in the form of birth and holocaust, but proceeding on two different tracks (Abraham versus Sodom), are brought together to a painful focus in 22.[14] This chapter constitutes a refined fabric of binary and ternary lines. The basic pattern (the warp) is binary and is controlled by the plot, whose most fearful moment occurs at 10b, when the knife of the father hovers above Isaac's throat. Thus the chapter is divided into halves, verses 1–10 and 11–19, problem and solution, or command and execution. The opposition between the uncertainty and tension before the reversal and the relief afterward is also hidden in the following chiasm:

Abraham . . . went unto the place of which God had told him. (v. 3)	Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught . . . (v. 13)
On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. (v. 4)	Abraham called the name of that place "YHWH provides." (v. 14 [AR])

The warp of the dual composition is complicated and enriched by the weft of a triple distribution of narrative data. Three times (vv. 1b, 7a, 11) there is a short dialogue in which Abraham is hailed and promptly answers "yes?" (*hineni*; KJV: "here am I"). Three times there are important utterances from God: the command to sacrifice (v. 2), the prohibition against the sacrifice (v. 12), and the definite confirmation of the blessing (vv. 16–18) with which the theme of the cycle is complete. Also ternary is the key phrase "God will provide": dark and ambiguous in the mouth of the father to his son in verse 8, relieved in 14a, a proverb which perpetuates the incident in 14b. Until that moment also the variation of report and speech is ternary:

speeches: command from God (vv. 1–2)
action: preparation, material, journey + refrain line (vv. 3–6)

speeches: conversation between father and son + refrain line (vv. 7–8)
action: arrival, altar built, sacrifice prepared (vv. 9–10)
speeches: command from God not to sacrifice (vv. 11–12)
action: Abraham's substitution and slaughter of the sacrificial animal (v. 13)

The double naming in verse 14 underlines and concludes this sequence. The refrain line at the end of verses 6 and 8 and in the middle of 19, "and they went both of them together," signals a nexus in the binary-ternary fabric. By means of this wordplay the narrator explores the possibilities of the root *yḥd,* "one." He uses *two* derivatives from this root, *yaḥid,* "only one," and *yaḥdaw,* "together," and places them both in *three* lines that occupy key positions, in order to set us thinking of the *unity* of father and son, now being threatened:

Speech	*Report*
Take now thy son, thine only one (v. 2 [AR])	and they went both of them together (v. 6)
thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me (v. 12)	so they went both of them together (v. 8)
thou . . . hast not withheld thy son, thine only son [from me] (v. 16)	they went (back) together (v. 19)

This ingenious wordplay creates a paradox at the heart of the message: by showing his willingness to give up his only son, Abraham gets him back, and a much deepened togetherness begins, both between father and son and between the Lord and his obedient follower.

The hardest hour for Jacob occurs during a frightful night by the brook Jabbok (32:22–32). Here, too, the issue involves life or death, this time in terms of displacement and definite psychic hardening versus inner renewal. Jacob returns to his native country and must now face what he has been able to evade for twenty years: his past as a fraud, his bad conscience toward his brother. The imminent confrontation with Esau puts him in a moral pressure cooker and forces him to pass through a process of maturation at an accelerated rate. Tricks to placate or evade Esau (32:4–5, 7–8, 14–20) no longer help; fear of death and feelings of guilt get a firm hold of Jacob. For the first time we hear him praying to God. Stripped of all ornament (vv. 9–10 and 12), his prayer becomes a simple cry for help, "Deliver me" (the center, v. 11a). The reconciliation that Jacob now attempts is still impure, for it remains in fact an effort to bribe Esau with gifts. Jacob has still to recognize that his stand on the back line (which is a refusal to take responsibility, 32:18, 20) must be replaced by a position up front (acknowledgment of guilt and a plea for forgiveness, 33:3, 10–11). But that does not happen until chapter 33. First

the impasse and self-confrontation must be complete, and Jacob's ego must undergo a horrible death (32:22–32). To demonstrate the structure of this literary unit I shall transcribe it in its entirety. The capital letters represent the five major links of the whole, which shows a design *ABXB′A′*; in the central dialogue, another concentric pattern and our chief consideration, the lowercase letters mark the subdivision. M and J stand for "man" and Jacob; the verse numbers and their subdivisions are given at the right.

A		And he rose up that night	22a
		and took his two wives, and his two womenservants, and his eleven sons,	22b
		and passed over the ford Jabbok.	22c
		And he took them, and sent them over the brook,	23a
		and sent over that he had.	23b
		And Jacob was left alone;	24a
B		and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.	24b
		And when he saw that he prevailed not against him,	25a
		he touched the hollow of his thigh;	25b
		and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.	25c
X	*a*	M. "Let me go, for the day breaketh."	26ab
		J. "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."	26cd
	x	M. "What is thy name?"	27ab
		J. "Jacob [Fraud]."	27cd
		M. "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel:	28ab
		for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed."	28c
	a′	J. "Tell me, I pray thee, thy name."	29ab
		M. "Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?"	29cd
		And he blessed him there.	29e
B′		And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel:	30a
		"for I have seen God face to face,	30b
		and my life is preserved."	30c
A′		And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him,	31a
		and he halted upon his thigh.	31b

The combination *AA′* both separates Jacob from and joins him with his family. It is marked by the key word "passed," which is also prominent in the context; compare 32:16 and 21a (Jacob hiding himself behind, v. 20) with 33:3 (Jacob finally daring to appear). With its opposition night/sunrise the pair *AA′* frames this unique night. The elements *BB′* present

the action proper, a long and frightening struggle in the dark, plus the profound interpretation of the event, given by the hero himself. They embody an opposition of report and speech, concealing and revealing respectively the identity of Jacob's redoubtable opponent. The pairs *AB* and *B′A′* frame *X* as the heart, and *X* indeed has its own nature. It is a sustained dialogue showing a perfect circularity. The axis on which the circular scheme *ABXB′A′* revolves is to be found precisely in the middle of the middle, where the old Adam is defined, and Jacob's black past is for the last time summarized in the name with the association "deceiver." Then he receives the accolade from his mysterious opponent: henceforth, your name will be Israel. The act of separation (a disjunction) in *A* ensures that Jacob is left completely on his own (that is, must stand up for himself, take responsibility). The night functions not only as a cover for the opponent but also as a symbol for Jacob's dark side, with which the hero must come to terms. Repeating the key word "passed" and reuniting Jacob with his family, verse 31 represents a conjunction. This element, *A′*, deliberately and symbolically places the sun at the beginning of the main clause. The action of *B* is clarified in *B′*. Unlike Hosea 12:5, the narrator purposely does not reveal who the man of the night is, but modestly makes room for the protagonist himself, who in verse 30 draws his own far-reaching conclusions and then spells them out for us. With his announcement of his deliverance in verse 30c comes the proper fulfillment of his cry for help in 11a.

Even under the enormous stress of this *rite de passage,* Jacob remains himself in that his obsessive desire to be blessed still asserts itself. Afterward he realizes that he can symbolically surrender the blessing he has stolen from Esau. The tying off of the network of occurrences of the root *brk* ("to bless") comes in 33:10–11, when Jacob begs his brother to accept the gift, which is a *berakhah*. After one line from Esau (*A*), Jacob replies at length:

A	"I have enough, my brother; keep that thou hast unto thyself."	9
B	"If now I have found grace in thy sight,	10
C	then receive my *present* at my hand,	
D	for truly I see thy face	
X	as I have seen the face of God [AR],	
D′	and thou wast pleased with me.	
C′	Take, I pray thee, my *blessing* that is brought to thee;	11
B′	because God hath dealt graciously with me,	
A′	and because I have enough."	

Beside the Jabbok, the mirror Jacob had to look into was called "God"; this time it is called "Esau." The key-word style and concentric structure

in both passages ensure that the vision of God and the actual sight of the exemplary fellow human being (the brother) flow into each other as halves of a metonymy.

Jacob had expected murder from Esau but received a long and ardent embrace. As a consequence of his doing no more than staying put and enduring the impasse, the future is open. How differently did matters end in chapter 4, where the relation of "a man toward his brother" (the Hebrew expression for human mutuality) was first explored. The result, fratricide, makes chapter 4 a kind of duplicate of the fall in 3. In chapters 32–33 it now appears that there are more constructive possibilities for solving a broken fraternal relationship. Finally, in the last cycle of the book, the psychology of crime, guilt, remorse, and compunction among brothers is worked out much more thoroughly, under the direction of the master manipulator Joseph. He puts his brothers, who once threw him into the pit, through a protracted ordeal (chaps. 42–44). Only when they have fully sympathized with the pain of young Benjamin and their old, fragile father and have broken down under the weight of their own bad conscience does he reveal himself to them as their brother who was predestined by God to ensure their survival—now in two senses, from famine and from crime. The brothers are then reconciled (chap. 45). Thus the theme of brotherhood, a metonymy for the bond that links humanity, is handled with growing complexity from the beginning of Genesis to the end.

NOTES

1. Just a few examples: the connection between Ps. 8, 104, 148 and Gen. 1; the garden as central metaphor of the Song of Songs against the background of the story of the Fall (the tangent points are systematically and fascinatingly discussed in Francis Landy's *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs,* Sheffield, 1983, chap. 4); Jacob the deceiver and his struggle beside the Jabbok (Gen. 32) in Jer. 9:1–8 and Hosea 12.

2. The standard edition is the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (1967–77). In that edition the Torah occupies 353 of the 1,574 pages of the Hebrew basic text.

3. Northrop Frye pointed out in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957) that "higher" criticism actually is a kind of lower criticism and indicated what genuine literary criticism should do with the Bible. Frye has continued this line of thought in *The Great Code* (London, 1982).

4. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), p. 13. Also see his humorous p. 48.

5. When I speak of lines, I suppose a so-called colometric arrangement of the prose, in roughly the same way that Buber and Rosenzweig did in their Bible translation (the so-called *Verdeutschung,* Cologne, 1954–62). An account of colometric arranging can be found in my *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel,*

vol. I: *King David* (Assen, 1981), pp. 462–466, and vol. II: *The Crossing Fates* (Assen, 1986), pp. 742–744. Erich Auerbach's inspiring analysis of Gen. 22 in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, 1953), is classic.

6. For Gen. 26 see my excursus in *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen and Amsterdam, 1975), pp. 113–115 (this book analyzes 11:1–9 and the entire cycle of Jacob). For Gen. 34 see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), chap. 12; for Gen. 38 see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* chap. 1.

7. See D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield, 1978).

8. I cannot discuss here all the smaller forms which contribute to unity; one must suffice. The dream or nocturnal vision is in all three cycles a vehicle of revelation with far-reaching consequences: with Abraham (chap. 15), with Jacob (marked by the famous stairs to heaven, chap. 28), and with Joseph (who in 37 has prophetic dreams which speak for themselves and which he uses to dazzle his brothers' eyes; he is the only one who is able to interpret the prophetic dreams of Pharaoh in 41).

9. The terms *concord* and *discord* are derived from Paul Ricoeur's three-volume masterwork, *Temps et récit* (Paris, 1983–85) (an English translation by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, *Time and Narrative,* is in progress, Chicago, 1984–). In volume I he uses these terms to define plot after providing a revealing philosophical close reading of Aristotle's *Poetics,* in particular of the notions *mimesis praxeos* and *mythos.* Ricoeur calls plot a "synthesis of the heterogeneous."

10. Note the error "by man" in the usual translations. The correct translation had already been suggested by J. Pedersen, *Israel, Its Life and Culture,* I/II (Copenhagen, 1926), 397; he recognized the so-called *bet pretii.*

11. In *A* Jacob expands: wives, children, richness; in *B* bitter conflicts take place. Under *A* I include 29:1–14, 29:31–30:24, and 31:1–21; under *B,* 29:15–30, 30:25–43, and 31:22–54. For an account of the entire construction see Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis.*

12. The places are 11:32, 12:4, 16:3, 16:16, 17:1, 17:17, 17:24, 17:25, 21:5, 23:1, and 25:7. The speech at 17:17 is the core of the sequence, an eleven-part pattern *aa'bcdxd'c'c"b'a".*

13. Translate *wayomer* in verse 7 as a flashback: God had spoken to Abraham, etc.

14. Two memorable instances from the literature on Gen. 22: Auerbach's analysis of this story as a tale "fraught with background," in *Mimesis,* chap. 1; and, in *Fear and Trembling,* Kierkegaard's brilliantly varied, fourfold account of the trial and his elaboration on the idea that ethical and religious existence are entities and levels of completely different ranks.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981).
D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield, 1978).
J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen and Amsterdam, 1975).
Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis,* abr., ed., and trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (New York, 1974).
D. Patte, ed., "Structural Readings of Genesis 2–3," *Semeia,* 18 (1980).

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