

# THE PATTERN OF PRIMOGENITURE REVERSAL AS AN EVIDENCE FOR THE UNIFIED NATURE OF GENESIS\*

## ПРИМЕРЫ ПЕРЕДАЧИ ПЕРВОРОДСТВА МЛАДШЕМУ НАСЛЕДНИКУ КАК ДОКАЗАТЕЛЬСТВО ЕДИНСТВА КНИГИ БЫТИЕ

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**Abstract:** The source-critical approach to biblical literature accentuated the diversity of material that constitutes ancient books of the Bible. In the past several decades, however, some scholars shifted their attention to the final canonical and literary composition of the biblical texts. This article will present a piece of evidence for the unity of the book of

**Аннотация:** Подход, основанный на критике источников, в библейской литературе подчеркивал разрозненность материалов, составляющих древние библейские книги. Однако в последние несколько десятилетий некоторые ученые переклкнули свое внимание на конечную каноническую и литературную композицию библейских текстов. Данная статья представит одно из доказательств единства книги Бытия как литера-

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Genesis as a literary unit. To demonstrate this the author will trace the pattern of primogeniture reversal throughout the whole book. Arguably, the five main pairs (Cain – Abel, Ishmael – Isaac, Esau – Jacob, Reuben – Judah, Joseph, and Manasseh – Ephraim) and the two minor pairs (Leah – Rachel, Zerah – Perez) reflect six narrative features. These are parents' expectations, God's election, a threat to the younger heir, resolution, promise to the older son, departure of the older brother. The consistent usage of this pattern leads to the conclusion that the author/editor of Genesis carefully constructed the plot of the whole book, not simply incorporated diverse material.

**Keywords:** Genesis, primogeniture, heir, sibling, reversal, election, supplanting.

турной единицы. Чтобы продемонстрировать это, автор проследит модель передачи первородства младшему наследнику на протяжении всей книги. В статье утверждается, что пять основных пар (Каин – Авель, Измаил – Исаак, Исав – Иаков, Рувим – Иуда, Иосиф и Манасия – Ефрем) и две второстепенные пары (Лия – Рахиль, Зара – Фарес) отражают шесть повествовательных особенностей. Такие как ожидания родителей, Божье избрание, угроза для младшего наследника, развязка, обетование старшему сыну, уход старшего брата. Последовательное использование данной модели приводит к выводу, что автор/редактор книги Бытие тщательно выстроил сюжет всей книги, а не просто включил разнородный материал.

**Ключевые слова:** Бытие, первородство, наследник, брат, передача, избрание, замещение.

## Introduction

The book of Genesis as an ancient document is an object of interest for historians, aetiologists, sociologists, theologians, linguists, artists, writers, and others. For the last two centuries this book has attracted the attention of source-critics, form-critics, as well as those who utilize rhetorical, canonical and literary approaches. The latter two methods focus on the final form and structure of the book along with its inner coherence and function inside of the Hebrew canon. The goal of this essay is to show that, as an example of narrative genre, the book of Genesis is best read as a single, literary unit.<sup>1</sup>

To achieve this aim, one might use *toledot* or *barak* as a key term, theme development or style that ties the different parts and stories in Genesis into a unified tale.<sup>2</sup> An alternative approach would be to trace the pattern that concentrates on the younger sibling's preeminence over the older.<sup>3</sup> The approximate correspondence of this pattern in distinct narratives will support the premise of the unified nature of Genesis. This paper will argue that we can identify at least five major pairs of characters that follow closely – although not absolutely – the following single pattern: (1) parents' expectations, (2) God's election,

<sup>1</sup> One of the prominent proponents of a literary interpretation is Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 145; Everett Fox, "Can Genesis Be Read as a Book?," *Semeia* 46 (1989): 33–4.

<sup>3</sup> The motif has been previously noticed by Judah Goldin, "Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 27–44; Everett Fox, "Stalking the Younger Brother: Some Models for Understanding a Biblical Motif," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 18 (1993): 45–68; Roger Syrén, *The Forsaken Firstborn: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives*, JSOTSup 133 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993). These authors, however, approach it with provenance and dating concerns.

(3) threat to the younger heir, (4) resolution, (5) promise to the older son, and (6) departure of the older brother. In every instance the younger sibling reverses the natural order and supplants the firstborn. These five pairs are Cain – Abel, Ishmael – Isaac, Esau – Jacob, Reuben – Judah and Joseph, and finally Manasseh – Ephraim. Two pairs of siblings that also follow the same reverse pattern are Leah – Rachel and Zerah – Perez.<sup>4</sup> These pairs will not be discussed in detail – neither will they be ignored – because the first deals with women that do not share in the inheritance and the second is very short and lacks sufficient elaboration in the text to draw necessary conclusions.

As Cohen astutely has pointed out, “[i]n almost every generation we are confronted by pairs of characters who, at one and the same time, are contrasting personalities but possess certain similar qualities and share some of the same reaction pattern.”<sup>5</sup> Thus the reader of the essay in conclusion will find that the writer(s)/editor(s) utilized common thematic features in narrating different episodes of Genesis that made it a single story for the original listener.

### Genesis 4, Cain – Abel

(1) Parents’ expectations: Eve expects the fulfillment of God’s promise to give her a seed (3:15). The mother of all humankind hopes that in Cain she “got a man with the Yhwh” (4:1). The firstborn is an anticipation of the restoration of humanity’s relationship with God and victory over the serpent’s seed. Abel’s name, on the other hand, means “vapor” and anticipates the brevity of his life.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Abel’s introduction to the reader indicates his inferior status to Cain: no mention of Adam’s “knowledge” of Eve, her conception, and Abel is not called a son (cf. Seth in 4:25) or “a man acquired with Yhwh”, but merely a brother to Cain as a sort of supplement.<sup>7</sup> The children’s names indicate their parent’s joy over the firstborn and a sigh of sorrow for the brevity of life.<sup>8</sup>

(2) God’s election: Yhwh is the main character of the story since most of the speeches and interrogations come from him. God chooses the younger, Abel, and his sacrifice instead of the older, Cain. The narrator’s succinct explanation of the rationale behind God’s choice leaves room for much speculation. Enslin, for example, argues that it is a moral flaw in Cain’s character, introduced by the J writer into the text, that justifies God’s discrimination of the firstborn.<sup>9</sup> The text itself seems to suggest that the superior quality of Abel’s offering (“choicest firstlings” 4:4), which mirrors his superior

<sup>4</sup> Ginzberg lists a number of rabbinic sources that place Shem as the youngest and Japheth as the oldest son, hence a reversal of the primogeniture in 6:10. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin, 2nd ed., JPS Classic Reissues (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 146, n. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Norman J. Cohen, “Two That Are One – Sibling Rivalry in Genesis,” *Judaism* 32 (1983): 335.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Calloud, “Figure, Knowledge and Truth: Absence and Fulfillment in the Scriptures,” *Semeia* 69 (1995): 67–8. Calloud suggests that the description of Abel as “his brother” in 4:2 may imply that Abel will never become a father.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth M. Craig, “Questions Outside Eden (Genesis 4.1-16): Yahweh, Cain and Their Rhetorical Interchange,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24 (1999): 109.

<sup>9</sup> Morton S. Enslin, “Cain and Prometheus,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 88.

intensions, is the reason for the preeminence of the younger brother and his sacrifice over the older.<sup>10</sup>

(3) Threat to the younger heir: Cain is very upset with God's choice. His pride is hurt (4:6). God's rhetorical question in 4:7a might indicate that this was not the first offering either of them ever made, but this is the first time that the younger is given precedence over the older. Alter's translation of the ancient poem suggests the nature of sin that crouches on the fringe of every act – good or bad – striking with pride or self-pity and grudge.<sup>11</sup> According to Swenson, the firstborn of Eve tragically misunderstood that the task of the “guarding/keeping” given by God to humankind in the beginning had not ended once the first family was cast out of the garden of Eden. “Cain learns that his work with and for the land is inseparable from looking after the welfare of his brother.”<sup>12</sup> The divine warning to the older brother to not commit further sin by threatening his “ritual rival” falls on deaf ears. Cain gives in to the temptation and looks for an opportunity to take revenge on the younger supplanter.<sup>13</sup>

(4) Resolution: Cain murders his brother. He not only rejected God's warning to master sin (4:7), but also the one God chose and accepted. Thus, God's choice of primogeniture starts over with Seth (4:25). Eve recognizes God's election, saying that God granted her a “seed” (*zera*) through Seth (cf. 3:15), in place of Abel. The focus is no longer Eve's hopeful “gain” through Cain – whom she called a “man” – but rather a humble recognition of God's “granting” another offspring. Later in Adam's *toledot* neither Cain, nor Abel are mentioned. Seth replaces the dead Abel, while Cain is supplanted a second time (5:3).

(5) Promise to the older son: Abel's blood goes into the soil (*adama*). Previously speechless in the story, the victim's blood is now crying to God from the soil (*adama*), and the soil (*adama*) will not give Cain its strength anymore (as it used to do, v. 3), but he will be driven from the soil (*adama*) only to be a restless wanderer on the earth (*erets*) (4:10-12). God's verdict to Cain is, in essence, a curse-and-mercy, whereby the outsider is not completely outcast; he becomes the patriarch of a separate people-group (4:17-22). He also receives a mark – whatever it may be – that was to serve as a sign of protection for the murderer.

<sup>10</sup> Greidanus offers a pertinent observation in this regard “The Lord looks on the *person* before He looks at the gift.” Sidney Greidanus, “Preaching Christ from the Cain and Abel Narrative,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (2004): 387–397, emphasis original. Lohr suggests that LXX's translators of Genesis chose their wording specifically in order to show that God's deliberate choice of Abel and his sacrifice and rejection of Cain was an issue of the proper process of dividing the offering. Joel N. Lohr, “Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain: Genesis 4:1-16 in the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the New Testament,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009): 488–9. On the reception history of Cain and Abel's story in rabbinic and Christian sources with a special focus on Milton's *Paradise Lost* see Cheryl H. Fresch, “Cain Rose up against Abel: Murder, Mystery, and ‘Paradise Lost,’” *Christianity and Literature* 51 (2002): 191–207.

<sup>11</sup> 4:7 “For whether you offer well, or whether you do not, at the tent flap sin crouches...” Alter, *Genesis*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Kristin M. Swenson, “Care and Keeping East of Eden: Gen 4:1-16 in Light of Gen 2-3,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 60 (2006): 378.

<sup>13</sup> Jacobson argues that נָגַח in 4:8 could mean “plotted against” rather than simply “said” because there is no usual “indication of the contents of the speech” following the verb. Howard Jacobson, “Short Notes: Genesis IV 8,” *Vetus Testamentum* 55 (2005): 564–565.

(6) Departure of the older brother: Cain went out from the Lord's presence into the place of his wandering, in Hebrew "Nod" (4:16). Even though God elects the second child at the expense of the elder, he shows concern for the unchosen. As Lohr correctly summarizes, "[a]lthough Cain does not fare well in the story, he is not simply left without divine concern – God counsels him to do well, spares him from the vengeance of others, and ensures that he is not a wanderer and vagrant upon the earth."<sup>14</sup> The divine provision for the rejected firstborn is a distinctive feature in these biblical examples of hierarchical reversal. Hamilton is right concluding,

In some ways it is a fate worse than death. It is to lose all sense of belonging and identification with a community. It is to become rootless and detached. Perhaps we, the readers, should at this point view Cain not so much as a villain but as a tragic character. Cain, once a farmer, is now ousted from civilization and is to become a vagabond. Rootlessness is the punishment and the wilderness is the refuge of the sinner. One need only recall that in biblical typology the representatives of such wanderers are Ishmael and Esau.<sup>15</sup>

It is to the former we now turn.

#### Genesis 16-22, Ishmael – Isaac

(1) Parents' expectations: A beautiful and beloved wife but also barren is not unique in the biblical records. Being a childless woman in ancient society was a sign of divine stigma. Sarah, the matriarch of the promised great nation, wants "to be built" or "sonned" (*ibbaneh* 16:2). She thinks the son from Hagar can be her "seed" and become the fulfillment of the divine promise. When Sarah overhears God's prophecy about her becoming a mother in her old age, she laughs (18:12; 21:6). At first, Abraham accepted the fact that Eliezer will "serve as a surrogate for a son and be his heir" (15:2-3).<sup>16</sup> Yhwh clarified that the patriarch's heir will come from his own "flesh and blood" (*mimmeeka*) (15:4). Abraham realistically or pragmatically hopes that if not Eliezer at least Ishmael, the son of a concubine, will become his heir (17:18). However, God promised to Abraham to give him an heir from his true wife Sarah (17:15-16). The promise came true – Isaac was born (21:1-3).

(2) God's election: God chooses the younger brother, Isaac, instead of Ishmael, the son of the slave-girl (17:19, 21). He also approves Sarah's unfair treatment of Hagar and her son, whom the legitimate wife does not call by name to show their low social status, because the divine choice is connected with the son of the promise, Isaac (21:12).<sup>17</sup> God called Isaac "your only son" (22:2) as if Ishmael is not Abraham's son at all. For the patriarch the "sole son by his legitimate wife, is his only one."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Lohr, "Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain," 495–6.

<sup>15</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 232–33.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 477.

<sup>17</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

(3) Threat to the younger heir: Sarah is afraid that Ishmael will share the inheritance with her son, Isaac (21:10).<sup>19</sup> The tension between Hagar and Sarah is vividly manifested in the former's flight from Sarah into the wilderness and then in the dialogue of Abraham and his wife.<sup>20</sup> Another threat to the supplanter comes at the point when God tests Abraham's faithfulness through the command to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (22:1-2).

(4) Resolution: God commands Abraham to take heed to his wife's words and send the slave girl and her son away. Despite his personal feelings, the patriarch complies with Sarah's insistence to get rid of the handmaid and her son, supplying them with provision. On the occasion of testing the risk to lose an heir is resolved by the provision of a ram as the substitution for Isaac (22:13).

(5) Promise to the older son: God promises to multiply Hagar's seed through Ishmael (16:10-11). Abraham's firstborn will become a father of a great nation of his own (17:20). Even though Ishmael is rejected by God to be the heir, he did nothing wrong against Isaac and God promised to bless him. God confirms his intention to multiply Abraham's first "seed" in his address to Abraham and later to Hagar in the desert (21:13, 18).

(6) Departure of the older brother: Hagar and Ishmael are sent away (21:14). However, God did not depart from Ishmael (21:20). Eventually, the rest of Abraham's sons from his other concubines were also sent away from Jacob to the land in the east (25:6).

#### Genesis 25-28, Esau – Jacob

(1) Parents' expectations: As in the previous story of a sonless mother, Rebekah has been barren for twenty years (25:20, 26). But when God heard her cry by opening her womb, she foresees conflict of the two siblings while they were still unborn (25:22). Her anxious anticipation of rivalry came to pass in the actual birth of the brothers, whereby the younger had not given up the competition for the birthright even before his first breath by grasping the elder's heel (25:26). This primal conflict was reflected even in the name of the younger combatant: "Ya'aqob," "Jacob," and 'aqeb, "heel".<sup>21</sup> The author of Genesis gives vivid prophecy of future unease between the younger and the older. Unlike Isaac, Rebekah prefers Jacob (25:28).<sup>22</sup> She favors her younger son so much as to deceive her older son and husband by making Isaac bless Jacob before the Lord (27:6-10). She is ready to bear Isaac's curse in case the old man discovers their ruse (27:13). The irony of the story is that "plain" Jacob is able to outsmart both his old father and adroit hunter, Esau (cf. 25:27).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> On the basis of the similarity of Isaac's name and Ishmael's mockery Alter supposes that the older brother was playing the role of the younger, "presuming to be the legitimate heir." Ibid., 98.

<sup>20</sup> Greenspahn even suggested that the tension between two mothers is reason for the tension between their sons. Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 115.

<sup>21</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 128. Greenspahn, however, believes that the issue at stake is not the order of birth by itself, but the tension between the twins. The fact, that neither Isaac, nor Jacob in reality exercised their authority over Ishmael and Esau witnesses to insignificant advantage of the birthright. Moreover, the supplanted brother is rarely fully condemned. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together*, 118, 125.

<sup>22</sup> Like in the narrative of Abel, the younger twin brother of Esau, is identified as "his brother" (Gen. 25:26). Unlike in Gen. 4 with the focus on brother-brother relationships, in Gen. 25 the narrative focuses on a parent-son relationships. Craig, "Questions Outside Eden (Genesis 4.1-16)," 110.

<sup>23</sup> Cohen, "Two That Are One – Sibling Rivalry in Genesis," 335.

(2) God's election: The Lord predicts that the older of the twins will be a slave to the younger (25:23). Greenspahn is correct when he states, "Once that promise had been made, Esau could no longer claim preeminence by right. Instead, his hunger and Jacob's aggressiveness are transformed into the means whereby God's will is achieved."<sup>24</sup> The prophecy is legally fulfilled when impatient and hungry Esau hastily sold his birthright to his cunning sibling (25:33). Jacob, like his father Isaac earlier, acquired the blessing of the firstborn through the intervention of his mother. God allows blind Isaac to be deceived by his wife and younger son, pronouncing the irrevocable blessing upon Jacob as if on the firstborn son, thereby becoming overlord of his older brother (27:23, 28-29).<sup>25</sup> The narrator presents Esau, from God's point of view, as inadequate to be one of the great patriarchs. As Matthews summarizes, "...he despises his birthright (Gen. 25:34), marries outside the accepted social range, making "life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah" (Gen. 26:34), and yields to Jacob's wishes, even leaving Canaan to him in the end (Gen. 36:6-9)."<sup>26</sup>

(3) Threat to the younger heir: The threat to the younger heir comes from his older sibling who felt himself immensely swindled. Esau realizes that his "crooked"<sup>27</sup> younger brother defeated him twice: first by buying his birthright and later by taking his blessing in a cunning conspiracy (27:36). Bitterness and revenge penetrate the heart of the cheated brother (27:41). He is waiting for Isaac's death to kill the offender. Even though Esau's evil intentions are concealed in his heart, they become so obvious and open to the household that they reach Rebekah's ears (27:42).

(4) Resolution: Jacob's mother advises him to flee from his brother to Laban because in her estimation, the physical assault of Esau may cause the death of both (27:43, 45). Thoughtful Rebekah believes that anger and alienation between her sons may not be completely healed but will subside with time, which eventually is realized, although not during her lifetime. The mother's shrewd plot to save her beloved trickster takes the form of an attack (27:46). She expresses disgust to the Hittite women, achieving two things: first, to ground Jacob's escape to her relatives and second, to accuse Esau of bringing troubles into the family by marrying foreign wives.<sup>28</sup>

(5) Promise to the older son: In spite of the fact that Isaac passed the primogeniture blessing onto Jacob, he reluctantly blesses Esau with the riches of the earth and heaven that can be enjoyed by all of Abraham's descendants (27:39). However, the right to rule and dominate will belong solemnly to the younger (27:40). Like his uncle Ishmael, Esau will survive by means of war and struggle. He will serve the younger supplanter, having a slim hope for future independence (27:40). Perhaps by marrying his cousin from his father's relative, Esau intended to change Isaac's mind and earn his blessing by obeying

<sup>24</sup> Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together*, 135. Taking into account inadequacy and at times immoral tricks of the elected younger brothers, Greenspahn summarizes, "The fulfillment of God's will is not dependent on the merits of those assigned to carry it out."

<sup>25</sup> Isaac confirms the blessing of the primogeniture on Jacob before he later departs to Paddan-aram (28:3-4).

<sup>26</sup> Victor H. Matthews and Frances Mims, "Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 12 (1985): 190.

<sup>27</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 142. According to Alter, Esau bitterly acknowledges that Jacob's theft literally corresponds with the meaning of his name.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

the command with which Isaac earlier charged Jacob (28:1-2, 8-9).<sup>29</sup> The two older sons, Ishmael and Esau, are identified in their misfortune of being cheated and deprived of their birthrights by their younger siblings, sadly abandoned by their respective progenitors, Abraham and Isaac. Now they are bound by family ties through the marriage of Esau and Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael (28:9). Like Ishmael, Esau received a promise to become a father of a people in the oracle to Rebekah (25:23).

(6) Departure of the older brother: It is not stated that Esau immediately departed from his family's household. It is the younger brother who leaves the home to find refuge and a suitable wife in his mother's land. Later we find Esau inhabiting Seir, the land of Edom (32:3), which probably indicates eventual departure from Isaac's home. Even though we have a dramatic story of reconciliation in Genesis 33 – whereby Jacob returned the material blessing he had stolen from Esau and also Jacob with his sons bow down before him (33:3, 6, 7; cf. 27:29)<sup>30</sup> – the brothers are never together, each going his separate direction (cf. 36:6-8).

### Genesis 29-49, Reuben – Judah and Joseph

(1) Parents' expectations: Within the Jacob plot there is an unfavored older and favored younger sisters-wives subplot. Laban's older daughter becomes a pawn in her father's trick-games with Jacob. Leah becomes a "visual aid" in a lesson that Laban teaches his son-in-law – the older heir should not be supplanted by the younger.<sup>31</sup> Jacob the trickster, who used a masquerade to trick his elderly father, reversely tricked by Laban and Leah (and possibly Rachel) by a masquerade.<sup>32</sup> Even though she becomes the first wife, she is despised by her husband in favor of her younger sibling.<sup>33</sup> Leah believes that God vindicates her through a son (29:32). She became the mother of Jacob's firstborn and later will give birth to one half of Israel's tribe of progenitors. Leah is confident that Reuben will become a means to attract Jacob's affection (29:32). The name she gives to the first child is the cry of victory and hope, as if she invites Jacob to share her joy of superiority over Rachel, "see, a son!" The name of her second son, Simeon, "has heard," represents contrast between

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 147. Alter believes that this is an echo of Esau's earlier desperate cry about another father's blessing (27:38).

<sup>30</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, "The Face at the Bottom of the Well: Hidden Agendas of the Pentateuchal Commentator," in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12-50*, ed. Richard S. Hess, P. E. Satterthwaite, and Gordon J. Wenham (Cambridge: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), 203.

<sup>31</sup> Alter calls attention to about the vividness of irony: "...the deceiver deceived, deprived by darkness of the sense of sight as his father is by blindness, relying, like his father, on the misleading sense of touch." Alter, *Genesis*, 155. When Jacob complains about Laban's ruse, the later responds, "In your place, perhaps, the younger is set before the firstborn, but not so here!" Cohen, "Two That Are One – Sibling Rivalry in Genesis," 342.

<sup>32</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 593. Later in the story the motif of a masquerade will reappear in the Tamar (37) and Joseph (41) disguises that will make them unrecognizable to Judah and Joseph's brothers respectively.

<sup>33</sup> Kramer helpfully surveys female pairs in the biblical narratives, showing that such a literary device "allows for more exploration of character traits and reactions, and adds a fullness and multidimensional aspect that is most valuable.... Ultimately, harmony is a much less exciting literary quality than tension." Phyllis Silverman Kramer, "Biblical Women That Come in Pairs: The Use of Female Pairs as a Literary Device in the Hebrew Bible," in *Genesis: The Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 231-2.



Isaac, who could not see or hear the deception of Jacob, while God both sees and hears Leah who is deprived of love by Jacob.<sup>34</sup> The other four sons strengthen Leah's confidence that God favors her in the sufferings she endures as a neglected co-wife. Thus, she ties her expectations with Jacob's firstborn Reuben. However, she also gave birth to Judah – the leading tribe of Israelites – who attracted to significance at his birth.

The second and beloved wife, Rachel, is barren and agonized by this condition – like Sarah beautiful but childless (30:1). She hopes to improve her status in the household with a surrogate son from Bilhah (30:3), just as Sarah wanted to be built up by Hagar (16:2). Barren Rachel, at first, thinks that her vindication comes through Dan, the son of her slave-girl. Rachel's grappling with the older sister follows the example of her "heel-grabbing" husband who used all possible means to gain the authority. The irony, however, is that Jacob himself becomes the object of barter between his wives, and the younger sibling, Rachel, sells out her privilege of priority to the older one for the price of food (mandrakes in the case of Rachel vs. lentil stew in the case of Esau).<sup>35</sup> The barren wife is willing to sacrifice her marital advantage now in order to gain a greater advantage by conceiving a child with the help of the aphrodisiac nature of mandrakes. The result of the deal was less positive for Rachel than she expected – Leah bore another two sons and a daughter. In time, however, God granted the desperate woman a son, Joseph, who takes away her shame and also is a promise to receive another son, as she earlier demanded "sons" from Jacob (30:22-24, cf. 30:1). Jacob loved Joseph more than his older sons, because Joseph was the child of his old age (37:3).<sup>36</sup> According to Judah's (Leah's son) report of Jacob's speech, Jacob considered Rachel the only wife and Joseph and Benjamin the only sons (44:27). Even though Jacob rebuked Joseph for his pretentious dreams of preeminence, he "kept the matter" in memory (37:10-11). Rachel and Jacob tie their expectations with Joseph, the beloved son, the firstborn by Rachel, but not the firstborn of Jacob.

(2) God's Election: Even though God's speeches become less frequent, his plans are realized through the course of human choices. Have both Leah and Rachel envisioned that the firstborn, Reuben, will be supplanted by Judah and Joseph? Unlike Rebekah, they had no revelation to imagine such a thing before their childbirth, nor had they strived to promote the younger sons or discredit the older ones. It might be warranted to say that Reuben discarded his primordial right by the lawless act of defiling Bilhah, his father's concubine (35:22). It was a risky act – to win authority and power or lose everything (cf. 2 Sam. 16:21-22; 1 Kgs 2:22). As Alter aptly points out, sexual relationships with a wife or a concubine of a tribal leader in the ancient world were not simply driven by passions, but signified a claim or even usurpation of the chief's authority, "so Reuben would be attempting to seize in his father's lifetime his firstborn's right to be head of the clan."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 156. Cohen argues, contra traditional view, that Leah was not a person with deficiencies, but rather of tender character and more spiritual than Rachel, who "is portrayed as very aggressive: she tends her father's flock, wins Jacob's love and usurps Leah's place as Jacob's first wife." Cohen, "Two That Are One – Sibling Rivalry in Genesis," 339–40.

<sup>35</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 159–60.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph's status of a favorite was evident in a "long-sleeved coat... which would indicate that Joseph is management, not labor." Walton, *Genesis*, 662–3.

<sup>37</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 200. See also Goldin, "Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong," 37–8.

The narrator only indicates, “And Israel heard of it,” but one can only imagine Jacob’s outburst of anger. It was Reuben with his good intentions who tried to spare Joseph’s life from his brothers’ hands, but failed (37:21-22, 29-30). Later in the story Jacob will refuse Reuben’s desperate offer of his two sons – hence, risking to lose his own heirs – as the pledge for Benjamin’s security on the trip to Egypt, but will accept Judah’s offer of himself as the pledge (42:37-38 cf. 43:8-9). The firstborn had failed his father on several occasions and is not worthy of trust. At the end of his life, prophetic enunciations of Jacob include disparagement of his firstborn (49:3-4). Reuben defiled his father’s bed by violating Jacob’s marital rights. He will not have preeminence over his brothers and will no longer be of significance to Israel’s future. Whether being proactive or negligent, nothing could restore Reuben’s displacement. The violent habits of Simeon and Levi also disqualify them as rightful heirs (34:25-31). Their presence is repulsive to their father and they will be dispersed in Israel (49:5-7). Who is next in line?

Judah is acclaimed as the chief among his brothers and supplants the first three heirs (49:8-12). Judah plays a significant role in fulfilling God’s plan of salvation for Israel and his household. Initially, however, the fourth son was not a good fit either. He married a Canaanite woman (something that Isaac and Rebekah despised 27:46-28:1); raised sons, which did “evil in the eyes of Yhwh,” and were killed by God; then by mistake slept with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, who was presumably also a Canaanite<sup>38</sup> (chapter 38). Nonetheless, the gift of twins could be taken as a sign of forgiveness. It was he who convinced his brothers not to kill but to sell Joseph into slavery – after all the story of Cain’s fratricide should teach them something (37:26-27). With time, Judah’s character changes: if earlier he initiated the enslavement of Joseph, later he was ready to enslave himself in Egypt instead of Benjamin in order not to grieve his elderly father (44:33-34). He becomes the spokesman for his brothers (44:14). It is Judah who is sent by Jacob as a messenger to Joseph (46:28). According to Jacob’s blessing, Judah is going to be “like the king of the beasts,”<sup>39</sup> like the head over his brothers (49:9). The symbol of his dominance and power, even among other nations, is a perpetuation of the scepter in the tribe of Judah (49:10). All of this is not to suggest that Judah became worthy to be the progenitor. God’s election is not because of Judah’s merit but in spite of it.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, the narrative depicts Judah’s character transformation, which could be ascribed to God’s work on the future leader of Israel.

Joseph’s elevation over his siblings is predicted by his juvenile dreams (37:7-10). Moreover, not only his brothers but also his parents will bow before him. Joseph’s superiority in his dreams is shown not only on the earthly level but also in the heavenly realm, when the entire family, just as the celestial bodies, bows before him. The narrator of Genesis indicates on several occasions that God favors Joseph, accompanies him in all his travails and, in fact, sent him to Egypt to preserve many people, including Israel

<sup>38</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 147.

<sup>39</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 295.

<sup>40</sup> I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. Richard Perhai, for this comment and for pointing me to D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese Jr., *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Literary Forms* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 294-7.

(39:2-3, 5, 21, 23; 41:38-39; 45:5, 7-9).<sup>41</sup> In his last pronouncement, Jacob gives an extensive description of the blessing and preeminence of Joseph among his brothers (49:22-26). As Alter precisely indicates, “Joseph and Judah, as the dominant tribes of the north and the south respectively, get far more elaborate attention in the poem than do any of their brothers.”<sup>42</sup>

A more elaborate explanation of Joseph’s role in the future nation of Israel is given in the adoption narrative of Ephraim and Manasseh by Jacob (48:5). There the two grandsons receive equal rights with the rest of their uncles. Moreover, they supplant Reuben and Simeon as the first and second heirs.

(3) Threat to the younger heir: The threat to Judah and Joseph does not come from the eldest brother. Here we have a supplanter subplot introduced into the main Joseph plot (chapter 38). In the case of Judah, he is in danger of losing all his heirs and the extinction of his line.<sup>43</sup> His firstborn, Er, follows the well-established pattern when the older son is disqualified from primogeniture for some reason. Er is punished by God, dying without an heir. Onan, the second son of Judah, intentionally fails to restore the lineage of his older brother, by giving life to the rightful heir of Judah. Thus, he passes away in disgrace out of the hand of the Lord. Judah is afraid to lose the last son and refused to give Shelah to Tamar as a husband.

Joseph has a story of his own. Being the favorite son of the favorite wife, Joseph is despised. He is hated by his older brothers for the bad reports about them to their father, for his dreams, and endless talks about his fantasies (37:4, 8). When the opportunity comes they conspire to kill him, like Cain with Esau in the past (37:18-20). Reuben’s intention to spare Joseph’s life and bring him back to the father is partially fulfilled (37:22). The oldest son, perhaps, hoping to restore his father’s favor by sparing the father’s favorite son.<sup>44</sup> Instead, now the father could blame him the oldest son for not protecting the younger. If Judah felt that he can now obtain the primogeniture due to Jacobs disfavor with Reuben’s, Simeon’s and Levi’s behavior, Joseph remained the only potential obstacle on the way to win the heart of their father. The younger sibling is destined to spend his life in slavery, being stripped of his garment to give evidence of his death to Jacob (37:28, 32). The next stripping of Joseph’s garments happens on another occasion when he fell under the accusations of the Potiphar’s wife (39:17-18).<sup>45</sup> At this time, Joseph goes down to the lowest place, the king’s prison, and risks to end his life there (39:20).

(4) Resolution: The story of the supplanting of older siblings is unfinished. Due to her shrewd planning, Tamar becomes impregnated with twins by Judah, who mistakenly

<sup>41</sup> The major feature of the narrator, according to Fokkelman, is that “... he is *omniscient* – but in a literary rather than a theological sense.... [A] narrator may, if it suits him, look in on the council of heaven or inside the heads of his characters, God included, or inside their hearts...” J. P. Fokkelman and Ineke Smit, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 56, emphasis original.

<sup>42</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 298.

<sup>43</sup> Given insufficient information about Judah’s heirs – points (5) and (6) are missing – I decided to treat them within Judah’s rubric.

<sup>44</sup> That is how rabbinic sources interpret Reuben’s intentions. Goldin, “Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong,” 40.

<sup>45</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 227.

took her for a prostitute (Genesis 37).<sup>46</sup> The labor process echoes that of Esau and Jacob: Zerah put out his hand first, but Perez eventually forestalled his older brother.<sup>47</sup> The youngest of Judah's sons, Perez, and not the older Shelah or Zerah, will be preeminent in the lineage of their father (Gen. 46:12; 1 Chr. 4:1). Perez will become the ancestor of the great David, who is not a firstborn either (Ruth 4:18-22). The story of Perez making a breach is placed by the narrator in the middle of the Joseph story in an anticipation of Joseph's breach.<sup>48</sup>

Joseph is preserved in both life-threatening occasions. In the first occasion, Reuben convinced his brothers not to kill "the master-dreamer" but just to throw him into a well (37:22). Later Judah initiates selling him into slavery, which is not resolution by itself, but at least preservation. On the second occasion, Joseph might have lost his life for "insulting" his master's wife, but instead was thrown in another "pit" – a state jail for an unlimited amount of time. In both cases, once again the same affirmation is given, "the Lord was with him" and he "succeeded." The rest of Joseph's story is a rapid elevation from the prison to the place of becoming the second highest person in Egypt. The narrative ends with Joseph's prominence above his brothers. Before his death Jacob addresses and respects him as the head of the clan (47:29, 31); Joseph will inherit Shechem, which was the booty of Simeon and Levi (48:22); he leads the funeral procession after Jacob's death (50:7-8); his brothers plead with him for forgiveness (50:16-18); and, finally, Joseph gives his last will to his older brothers as Jacob earlier made Joseph swear (50:24-25). Hence, Joseph becomes the leader of the family in the immediate context, while Judah as a tribe is destined to assume leadership in the future (49:10).

(5) Promise to the older son: Instead of the blessing, the overridden Reuben, Simeon, and Levi received from Jacob's mouth a curse and decline of their preeminence (49:3-4). The firstborn lost prevailing status on the day when he broke Jacob's prerogative and control over his wives, undermining the power of the clan's chief. By sleeping with Bilhah, Reuben tried to play the role of the leader in an inappropriate time and manner. Simeon and Levi, who likewise are supplanted, also find their condemnation for uncontrolled rage and the murder of Shechem and his people (49:5-7). Jacob foresees their dissemination among the twelve tribes of Israel.

(6) Departure of the older brother: At this point in the story none of the deposed brothers left or disappeared (except the two older sons of Judah). The prophetic poem of the elderly patriarch awaits its fulfillment in history. Perhaps, the author or editor of Genesis gives retrospective explanations for the increase of Judah's and Joseph's dominance among the tribes of Israel.

<sup>46</sup> Walton believes that Tamar's behavior is sanctioned by the Hittite levirate law (# 193), whereby a widow can marry her father-in-law. Walton, *Genesis*, 668.

<sup>47</sup> Alter draws perfect observations about the fate of the twines, "Perez will become the progenitor of the kings of Judea. The name Zerah means "shining," as in the dawning of the sun, and so is linked with the scarlet thread on his hand. The scarlet in turn associates Zerah with Esau-the-Red, another twin displaced from his initial position as firstborn." Alter, *Genesis*, 223.

<sup>48</sup> Walton, *Genesis*, 691.

## Genesis 48, Manasseh – Ephraim

(1) Parents' expectations: Joseph wants his father to see and bless Manasseh and Ephraim that were born to him in Egypt (48:1). He insists on primogeniture and bows down before his father despite his youth dreams, wherein his older brothers prostrate before him (37:7-10; 48:12, 17-18).<sup>49</sup> He knows the practice and symbolism of the laying on of the right hand on the firstborn as a token of the primary blessing. He is concerned with the appropriate order of blessing. There is no mention of the lads' mother, probably because of her Egyptian heritage, disinterest in such occasion, or due to patriarchal structure.

(2) God's election: The narrative is quite intricate – if not convoluted – because Jacob blesses Joseph by laying his hands on Ephraim and Manasseh (48:15). Joseph's anticipated order of blessing is reversed, thus following the established tradition in Genesis of supplanting by the younger, which becomes an unspoken rule. Jacob intentionally reverses the names of the brothers, when he talks about their adoption (48:5). He deliberately places his right hand on the younger Ephraim in spite of Joseph's perplexity (48:14). Brueggemann's comment summarizes it well that Jacob recalled his own blessing "with a mixture of feeling. But the blessing will work its own way, and none can resist it. Isaac knew that. And so does Jacob. And now Joseph must face that reality."<sup>50</sup> God's choice remains unexplained by the narrator, perhaps, because it was so for the characters of the story.

(3) Threat to the younger heir: There was no actual threat to the younger supplanter in this episode. Joseph, knowing that the sight of his father has become worse, purposefully put the older Manasseh in front of the father's right hand, while Ephraim was on the opposite side (48:13). Unexpectedly, Jacob crossed his hands and with the right hand grants the greater blessing upon the younger. It was wrong in Joseph's eyes and he tried to correct the old man. Thus, Joseph is the one who misunderstood God's intent and intruded into the ceremony.

(4) Resolution: Jacob assures his anxious son that he realizes the age of the boys. Unlike his blind father, Isaac Jacob instinctively or spiritually is fully aware who is standing in front of him. There is no confusion on the part of old patriarch. It is not by accident or mistake but by prophetic annunciation that Israel blesses Ephraim to be preeminent over Manasseh (48:19). The patriarch blesses them twice with an emphasis that the seed of Ephraim will multiply in a multitude of nations. It is fascinating to observe that Jacob, adopting the two grandsons, gives Joseph a double portion of inheritance (like to a firstborn), but ironically Joseph's name will not be mentioned among the tribes of Israel, but the names of his sons.<sup>51</sup> He is honored but at the same time supplanted by his sons to carry forward the promise given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

<sup>49</sup> Russell R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 363.

<sup>50</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 363. Walton sums this pattern well, "This recurring motif could well stand as a testimony to grace as blessing comes to those who have least reason to expect it." *Ibid.*, 711.

<sup>51</sup> Reno, *Genesis*, 363. Reno comments that Jacob "outfoxed" Joseph here as he did earlier with Isaac by conferring a blessing to the younger.

(5) Promise to the older son: Jacob comforts Joseph declaring that Manasseh will be a great nation as well (48:19). Both of the grandsons receive the blessing of the patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac, and both will be invoked in the blessing of Israelites, although the precedence of younger is well affirmed (48:20).

(6) Departure of the older brother: Since the transfer of primogeniture to the younger sibling had no conflicting or deceptive effect, there was no indication or necessity of the older one's departure. In fact, the invocation of both names in the blessing shows positive coexistence of the brothers. However, even the order, in which the narrator mentions grandchildren of Ephraim and Manasseh, establishes the preeminence of the younger brother (50:23).

## Conclusion

This study has attempted to trace the pattern of primogeniture reverse in the five pairs (the two minor ones are Leah and Rachel, Zerah and Perez) of the OT patriarchs. The complexity and elaborate character of the narratives grew as the story of Genesis approximated its conclusion. In spite of divergent views among scholarship on the meaning and consequences of supplanting stories – whether they actually mean the change of birthright and status of the younger heir – one can agree that they are unified by the same structure.

All pairs reveal at least six common features. First, parents' expectations about their heirs or firstborn children manifest the natural order of primogeniture and the logical preeminence of the older brother. Second, the inscrutable character of the divine choice is not based on the birth order, personal merits or parental favoritism, at least initially. Third, God's election of the younger brother produces jealousy, hatred and in some cases even physical threat on the part of the older. Fourth, some kind of resolution leads to the replacement of the older sibling, whereby the line of inheritance continues through the younger. Fifth, as if a consolation prize, a rejected firstborn receives a promise of a lesser blessing. Sixth, to avoid further confrontation between brothers the older has to depart or at least is overshadowed by the younger's authority.

The reasons proposed by scholars as to why the primogeniture reversal becomes a pattern in Genesis are tentative and secondary to this essay. Whether these stories of reversal are to console subjugated individuals vis-à-vis their older-brothers-lords, God's inscrutable preference of the younger to correct the possible abuse of power,<sup>52</sup> a desire to legitimate the David's dynasty (who is himself a younger son), a "symbol of a downtrodden people who would ultimately rise again" after the Babylonian captivity,<sup>53</sup> or an inner-Jewish conflict in a postexilic period about who is the rightful heir of Abraham and the expulsion of foreign wives (Ezra 9-10)<sup>54</sup> is a hypothetical matter. Obviously, the divine gratuitous choice of an individual in spite of one's merit or natural order is an established theme in the Bible (Ex. 33:19; Deut. 7:7; 1 Sam. 16:7; Hos. 2:23; Mal. 1:2-3). It seems reasonable to suggest that early Christian interpreters like Paul would use this

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<sup>52</sup> Goldin, "Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong," 44.

<sup>53</sup> Fox, "Stalking the Younger Brother," 66.

<sup>54</sup> Syrén, *The Forsaken Firstborn*, 58–62.

motif to prove the legitimacy of Jesus-followers as younger sons of Abraham and Isaac, the rightful heirs of the promise (Rom. 9:6-16; Gal. 4:22-31; cf. Heb. 11:20; 12:16). Likewise, Abel is a prototype of believers in contrast to evil Cain (Heb. 11:4, 1 John 3:12; Jude 11). Among Christians the motif of Reuben being supplanted by Judah is reflected in Revelation 7:5, where Judah is listed prior to Reuben. John also mentions Joseph and Manasseh among the twelve tribes of Israel, but strikingly not Ephraim (Rev. 7:6, 8). Similarly, Matthew places Judah and his youngest, Perez, as the progenitors of the Messiah (Mt. 1:2-3; cf. Lk. 3:33). This is not to suggest that the New Testament authors espoused a suppersessionist theology, but to claim that Jesus the Messiah and his disciples – though later children – are, nonetheless, chosen by God to be equally heirs of the Abrahamic promise and covenant. Further study is needed to probe the appropriateness of this statement.

As this study has demonstrated, the pattern of primogeniture reversal is not limited to the patriarchal narratives,<sup>55</sup> but encompasses the whole book from early chapters to its end. Therefore, a coherent reading of Genesis includes both an appreciation of details connecting the episodes as well as attention to the macrostructure that is shaped by synchronized themes.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

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