

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1. Hermeneutical Reflections

We have investigated the Abraham narrative in a sense of a text-centered approach. The purpose of this study is to offer a proposal for reading the Abraham narrative. That is, it is a suggestion that the words of the text and the meaning of the author/the final composer is the first and primary goal of interpretation. “Every word, phrase, clause comes to the reader as part of a larger interconnected whole. It is a whole in which every part has been construed in a specific and particular way. The parts are pieces of meaningful texts, not discreet utterances of a neutral language.”³⁹⁸ In this sense, the locus of revelation for this approach of the Abraham narrative remains that meaning which is derived from the texts themselves. From this, the task of this work is to understand “the text itself as a pattern of meaning and effect.”³⁹⁹ This study is thus dependent on an understanding of the biblical languages as parts of texts and stages in compositional strategies. On the basis of such an understanding of text(s), this study had employed two hermeneutical tools: composition criticism and intertextuality.

5.1.1. Composition Criticism

This method focuses on formal literary features of the Abraham narrative as clues of the author’s/the final composer’s message. Earlier in this work we discussed it attempts

³⁹⁸ Sailhamer, *Old Testament Theology*, 206.

³⁹⁹ Sternberg, *Poetics of Bible Narrative*, 15.

to trace the ways the author/the final composer of Genesis organized and fashioned literary units into unified texts and whole book as well as to understand the theological characteristics of their finished works. We have approached the Abraham narrative as single literary units composed of many smaller units of the narrative text. We have also confirmed a discernible strategy in the interweaving of these parts into a whole throughout the entire work of Genesis and the remainder of the Pentateuch. The apparent overall strategy of the author/the final composer in the Abraham narrative suggests that one of the central concerns lying behind the final shape of the Pentateuch is an attempt to uncover an inherent relationship between the past and the future. The Abraham narrative is put together in such a way that one can discern relationships among its parts in the Pentateuch. That is to say, the earlier events are presented as pointers to future events. This compositional strategy is to provide an eschatological and messianic interpretation of the historical narratives due to the terminology used, viz. “the end of the days.”⁴⁰⁰ This feature is called “narrative typology” This compositional strategy of the Abraham narrative can be traced at the level of the cohesive nature of the strategy of the various literary units in the narrative.

5.1.2. Intertextuality

This literary analysis looks at how inherently narrative units intersect with each other on a “literary,” which means that concerning the artistic use of language in its broadest sense, including motif, structure, verbal techniques, etc.⁴⁰¹ It provides a theoretical

⁴⁰⁰ Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 35-37.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. B. D. Sommer, “Exegesis, allusion and intertextuality in the Hebrew Bible: A response to Lyle Eslinger,” *VT* 46 (1996): 486-88. See also Fewell, *Reading Between Texts*.

basis for dealing with textual similarities between the Abraham narrative and the remaining of the Pentateuch, on the one hand, cannot readily be labeled as “borrowed” (e.g., citations) but, on the other hand, are obviously more than mere happenstance. It allows us to discuss the comparability of literary elements even if we cannot explain exactly how they came about. By choosing an intertextual approach we can explicate elements in the Abraham narrative. A text-centered approach adapted in this work is, thus, not to reconstruct the early “life setting” or *Sitz im Leben* of the Abraham narrative just as form critics have done. Rather, this approach aims to the *Sitz im Text* or “text setting.” As a result, this approach to the narrative reveals a distinct compositional strategy, which encompasses the entire narrative:

Terah’s Genealogy (11:27-32)

- A. YHWH’s commands and promises – offspring and land (12:1-9)
- B. Threats to the promise of heir in Egypt: Abraham separation from Lot (12:10-13:18)
- C. Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Lot militarily (14:1-24)
- D. Covenant with Abraham: the promise of posterity and land (15:1-16:16)**
- D’.Covenant with Abraham: the promise of posterity and land (17:1-18:15)**
- C’.Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Lot spiritually (18:16-19:38)
- B’.Threats to the promise of heir in Gerar: Abraham separation from Ishmael (20:1-21:34)
- A’.YHWH’s commands and promises: offspring and land (22:1-19)

Nahor’s Genealogy (22:20-24)

What this analysis of the Abraham narrative demonstrates is that there is a distinct intertextuality to the narrative. It has shape and a strategy.

5.2. Theological Reflections

The most influential yet subtle feature of the author’s/the final composer’s work in

relating historical events in the Abraham narrative is the overall framework (i.e., ‘the literary context’ or ‘structure’) within, which he arranges his account. As stated in chapter 1, structure (or the literary context) implies purpose, which in turn suggests a central concern or integration point that gives a passage its meaning and direction. In this regard, the author/the final composer of the Pentateuch employs the overall complex chiasmic structure for the Abraham narrative in order to convey his theological characteristics clearly and persuasively. This recognition of the chiasmic features in the narrative certainly helps the reader to identify the author’s/the final composer’s theological or ideological message by determining where his emphasis, criticism, and approval lay and where they do not. Thus, one may assert, “the structure is the message.”⁴⁰²

In the overall structure of the Pentateuch, the most prominent event and the most far-reaching theme in the Pentateuch is the covenant between God and Israel at Mount Sinai. The meaning of this event may go by the name “theocracy” or the kingdom of God. To say it another way, it means the rule of God among his people Israel. This is the central concern of the Pentateuch. To put it concretely, it can be described based on Sailhamer’s view as follows: “1) God comes to dwell with Israel; 2) Israel is a chosen people; 3) God gives Israel the land; 4) Israel must obey God’s will; and 5) salvation or judgment is contingent on Israel’s obedience.” In other words, the author/the final composer of the Pentateuch views the Sinai covenant as God’s plan to restore his original blessing to humanity through the descendants of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; Exod 2:24). In this respect, Sailhamer continues to argue that the author/the final composer

⁴⁰² John T. Walsh, “Gen 2:4b-3:24: A Synchronic Approach,” *JBL* 96 (1977): 161-77, states that “the ‘meaning’ of a work of literature is communicated as much by the structure of the work as by surface ‘content.’”

“wants to show that the covenant at Sinai failed to restore God’s blessing to humanity because Israel failed to trust God and obey his will.” Further, “the author wants to show that God’s promise to restore the blessing would ultimately succeed because God himself would one day give to Israel a heart to trust and obey him (Deut 30:1-10).” In other words, the entire outlook of the Pentateuch, then, might be described as eschatological, in that it looks to the future as the time when God’s faithful promise would be fulfilled.”⁴⁰³ Although the past, Mount Sinai, had ended in failure from the author’s perspective, the message of the Pentateuch is hope, namely, God’s people should trust and obey him and, like Abraham, have faith in his promises. “Thus, the primary subject matter of the Pentateuch is the Sinai covenant.”⁴⁰⁴

In this sense, Gen 12:1-3 exhibits the three elements of the promise around, which the theme of the Pentateuch is built: descendants (seed), relationship (blessing), and land.⁴⁰⁵ As for the patriarchal narratives, these divine promises are repeated for Abraham (Gen 12:7; 13:15-17; 15:7-21; 17:4-8; 22:16-18), Isaac (Gen 26:2-4), and Jacob (Gen 28:13-14; 35:9-12; 46:1-4). In particular, the theme of Abraham and his descendants marking a new beginning in God’s plan of blessing is developed in a way of the frequent reiteration of God’s blessing in Gen 1:28 throughout the narratives of Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12:1-3; 13:15-16; 15:5,18; 17:6-8; 22:17-28; 25:11; 26:2-4; 27:27-29; 49:28). Throughout the patriarchal narratives, the promises

⁴⁰³ Thus, Genesis concerns God’s promissory blessings upon Israel’s ancestors that have their partial realization in the lives of the patriarchs and the rise of the nation Israel. Genesis ends with Jacob’s sons in Egypt, not Canaan, just as the Pentateuch concludes with the burial of Moses and with Israel not yet in the “Promised Land.” See, Clines, *Theme of the Pentateuch*; Mann, “All the Families of the Earth,” 341-53.

⁴⁰⁴ J. H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *NIV Compact Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 11.

⁴⁰⁵ Together, the theme and motifs of the patriarchal stories enable an interlacing of the narratives and reveal their theological emphases. For more on the theology of the patriarchal narratives, see, P. R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).

are of first concern; even in the Joseph narrative, where they are not as readily seen, the tension of the story.⁴⁰⁶ In the Abraham narrative, the promise made to ancestors is none other than a reiteration of God's original blessing of humankind (Gen 1:28). Similarly, the verbal parallels between the accounts of the struggle that arose between Abraham and Lot (Gen 13:6) and the struggle between Jacob and Esau (Gen 36:7) have the effect of drawing the themes of the two narratives together so that they reinforce this central theme, which is the fulfillment of the blessing: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land" (Gen 1:28). Gen 12:10-13:4 reveals a recurring theme that it is the threat to God's promise in Gen 12:1-3. In nearly every episode in the Abraham narrative, the promise of a "numerous seed," "blessing to all families of the earth," or the "gift of the land" is placed in jeopardy by the actions of the characters of the narrative. The promise looks as if it will fail. In the face of such a threat, however, the narrative show that God always remains faithful to his word and he himself enters the arena and safeguards the promise. The purpose of such a recurring narrative theme is to show that only God can bring about his promise.⁴⁰⁷

Meanwhile, in the Abraham cycle, the chief tension is the question of "seed." This comes specifically only in Genesis 15 and provides the focus for Genesis 16-21. This

⁴⁰⁶ W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 47, states "The ancestral narrative are of decisive important for Israel's faith and understanding; they provide ballast for life in a world that kept this community endlessly off balance and in jeopardy."

⁴⁰⁷ In this regard, Sailhamer's analysis of the theme of separation is explicit. According to him, several narrative in the Abraham narrative are governed by the theme of struggle and shaped around the separation (Gen 13:9, 11, 14), which results from the struggle (e.g., Gen 13:5-18). At its conclusion stands the second statement of the promise (e.g., Gen 13:14-17). Just as the first statement of the promise was preceded by Abraham's separation from among the nations (Gen 10:32) and from his father's house (Gen 12:1), so the second statement of the promise is put in the context of Abraham's separation from his closest kin, Lot (Gen 13:14). It is not without purpose that the final statement of the promise to Abraham comes immediately after he has demonstrated his willingness to be separated from his only son and heir, Isaac (Gen 22:15-18). See Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 137-179.

theme does not let up even with the birth of Isaac, for the story keeps before the reader the potential threat of rival Ishmael. Genesis 12 and 22 are literary bookends that establish Abraham's credentials, his call to Canaan, and his love for God as shown by his offering of Isaac (Gen 22:15-18). For the account's continuing interest in offspring, the story includes the lengthy chapter on obtaining an appropriate wife (Rebekah) for Isaac (Genesis 24), and the matter ends with Abraham's sons by Keturah safely exiled to the east (Gen 25:1-6). Intertwined with the question of the "seed" is the second issue of "land," for burgeoning nation must secure for itself territorial sovereignty to thrive (e.g., Gen 15:7-21). The gift of the land assumed that the Lord God owned the land and could dispose of it as he pleased (cf. Lev 25:33; also Exod 19:5; Lev 20:22-24; Num 36:7). Abraham did not possess the land in his lifetime but obtained portions of it, such as a well and its adjacent property by cultivation (Gen 21:25-30; cf. Gen 26:19-32) and a cave with its field by acquisition (Gen 23:9-20; cf. Gen 33:19; 48:21-22). The building of altars, securing land usage, and the purchase of properties show symbolically Abraham's claim to the land and point to the future possession of the land that his descendants will someday enjoy.⁴⁰⁸ The blessing intended for all humanity was cradled in the arms of the mothers of Israel as the successors to the primeval promise (Gen 1:26-28; 3:15; 9:1-3). The people who met the patriarchs recognized by the patriarchs' testimony that God blessed them and those favorably related to them (e.g., Gen 21:22-24; 24:31, 50; 26:26-29; 30:27; 41:39).⁴⁰⁹ The mediation of the blessing to those outside of the chosen family becomes a centerpiece in the Abraham

⁴⁰⁸ The land promise at Gen 15:8 by the use of the perfect נתתי ("I give") indicate the grant to Abraham's descendants is immediate (Gen 23:11; cf. Gen 20:16). Westermann views the perfect form of the verb here as the enactment of a legal agreement (cf. Gen 20:16). See, Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 229.

⁴⁰⁹ For the view of the patriarch's calling as the church's missiological imperative, see M. D. Carroll, "Blessing the Nations: Toward a Biblical Theology of Mission from Genesis," *BBR* 10 (2000): 17-34.

narrative (e.g., Gen 12:10-20; 14; 16; 21; 18-19; 19:30-38; 20:1-18; 21:22-34).

To conclude, the promises are made by God unconditionally. This element of unconditionality is sounded clearly both in the promises themselves and in the covenant God makes with Abraham, and by extension with his descendants, which instituted in Gen 15:1-21 and confirmed in Gen 17:1-27. Nowhere does God ever add a conditional if clause to any promise he makes to Abraham that suggests that obedience or faithfulness is a *sine qua non* for the fulfillment of that promise.⁴¹⁰

5.3. Conclusion

This study is an exegetical investigation of the Abraham narrative to trace the literary compositional strategy of it in the narrative structure of the Pentateuchal corpora, by attempting to analyze and describe its structure and the semantics of the arrangement of source material in the periscope of the Abraham narrative. The central concern of the present work is about the role of the literary unit played in the compositional strategy of the author/the final composer of the Pentateuch as a whole. That is to say, it is understanding how these different literary units are compositionally arranged as the final form and related to each other. In order to read the Abraham narrative the two kind of methodology have employed, composition criticism and intertextuality. These hermeneutical helped us to see not simply the lesson taught by the text; it also provides the means for appreciating the basic narrative structure not mere to the Abraham narrative, but to the whole Pentateuch. These methods revealed textual interrelatedness

⁴¹⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, "Genesis: Theology of," in *NIDOTTE*, vol. 4 (Carlisle: Paternoster Publishing, 1996), 663-75.

between the Abraham cycle and the remainder of the Pentateuch. In this sense, this study is a holistic approach in an analytical, integrative, and thematic fashion.

Initially, we have determined of the inner literary arrangement of the Abraham narrative in the narrative frame of Genesis and the Pentateuch as well. Having examined the unity and structure of the Abraham cycle, it is apparent that in its present form it shows all the signs of being an intentionally constructed and closely integrated narrative. The two pivotal themes, “seed” and “land,” particularly underlie the main section of the cycle (Gen 11:27-22:19). In the following section, it is followed by a discussion of the inner textual integrity of logic, syntax, and historical milieu of the Abraham narrative, and intertextual relationships of the periscope by syntactically examining of the texts at the semantic and thematic level. From this observation, it is abundantly clear that the main section of the Abraham narrative (Gen 11:27-22:24) has a self-sustaining unity articulated in numerous parallel themes, key-words and key-expressions, and also continues the major theme of the Creation and Noah Cycles.

We have recognized the essential homogeneity of the Abraham narrative and the remaining books of the Pentateuch. The close textual relationships between the Abraham narrative and the remainder of the Pentateuch, which we had observed above allude that the author/the final composer of the Pentateuch has deliberately shaped the texts in such a way that one can discern relationships among its parts. The narrative is composed as a part of a larger typological scheme of the Pentateuch, foreshadowing the future events in the eschatological perspective of the Pentateuch. In conjunction with the theological characteristic of the Abraham narrative, we have observed the structural character of the narrative. Structure (or the literary context) implies purpose,

which in turn suggests a central concern or integration point that gives a passage its meaning and direction. By employing the overall complex chiasmic structure, the author/the final composer of the Pentateuch conveys his theological characteristics clearly and persuasively. In the narrative framework, he wants to deliver the central concern of the Abraham narrative, namely, God's plan to restore his original blessing to humanity through the descendants of Abraham (Gen 1:28; 12:1-3; Exod 2:24). In short, the present work is thus an exegetical proposal to the Abraham narrative as a holistically in the pre-critical angle.