CHAPTER 2

The Conventional Hebrew Deathbed Story

Preliminary Remarks

The exposition of conventional structuring in Genesis 47.28–50.26 in the following chapters of this book is based primarily on comparisons with other texts. Of the conventional structures discovered, the most important is what I am calling a Hebrew deathbed story. So what is this conventional Hebrew deathbed story? What are its constituent elements, and what are the other examples of it? How have I gone about discovering this structure? These are the questions I will be answering in this chapter.

Discovering the Deathbed Story

In a nutshell, the conventional Hebrew deathbed story is a story pattern used in Hebrew and some non-Hebrew Jewish narrative to relate the final words and acts of a dying character deemed blessed or honourable by the narrator, as well as the execution of that character's final wishes that were not accomplished prior to the character's death. Typically, this story occurs when the character is near to death, but it also occurs at a point in story time when the testator's death may not happen for some time but when it is appropriate for the testator to turn his attention to matters relating to the setting of his house in order, after his life's work has been substantially accomplished.

The conventional Hebrew deathbed story is, in my opinion, the stereotypically good or noble death in Hebrew narrative. Many of its conventional features address specific characteristics of the good life or their counterpart characteristics in the context of death. What this means is that I think the implied reader of these texts would bring certain expectations to the act of reading which would be either confirmed or subverted, and the way these expectations are confirmed or subverted is a large part of how these stories create dramatic tension and give aesthetic pleasure to the reader. As will be seen, some of the stories in my corpus are probably best read as examples of structural irony, meaning the expectations of the implied reader are subverted to a much larger degree than normal, even to the point that the dying character may no longer be considered to have died a good death.1 This does not

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1 Abrams, Glossary, pp. 134–38.
change the fact that the story form itself implies a good death, because in those cases of irony, what is ironic is only ironic because of the expectation that is subverted.2

As I mentioned in the last chapter, the processes of discovering the constituent elements of the conventional Hebrew deathbed story and of discovering examples of it occurred roughly simultaneously. The obvious peril here is of circularity: without either an established set of constituent elements by which to identify the examples of the story or an established list of examples by which to isolate the set of constituent elements, how can one be absolutely certain that one is not simply finding an arbitrary set of similarities among an arbitrary set of stories rather than an actual convention? The short answer is that one cannot, at least not absolutely. However, beginning either with an established set of examples, as Vladimir Propp did, or with an established set of elements is at least as much at risk of arbitrariness as is a thoroughly inductive but conscientiously tested and argued process of mutual discovery of both elements and examples. How did Propp know a priori that the list of stories he adopted from Afanás’ev’s collection: (1) would prove after analysis to share a common story morphology (since they were not grouped by Afanás’ev based on Propp’s idea of a story morphology but on story content) or (2) was sufficiently comprehensive to reveal reliably the common morphology underlying the variations in the corpus? The answer is either that he did not (and just got lucky) or that the seeming arbitrariness of his selection of another person’s collection as a methodological ‘control’ is actually a bit misleading, since he already had some inkling that this collection would prove to have a common morphology. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, in all practicality, Propp’s and my processes of discovery of a set of stories sharing a common morphology and of the common morphology itself are not all that different.

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