CHAPTER 3

The Burial Request to Joseph

Genesis 47.28–31

Text and Preliminary Remarks

28 Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years. And it was that the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were one hundred forty-seven years. 29 The time for Israel to die drew near, and he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, “If I have found favour in your eyes, place your hand under my thigh and do with me faithfully and truthfully: do not bury me in Egypt, 30 but let me lie with my fathers. Take me up from Egypt and bury me in their tomb.” And Joseph said, “I will do according to your words.” 31 Jacob said, “Swear to me.” And he swore. Then Jacob bowed himself on top of his bed.

1 Based on a few manuscripts and ancient versions the bhs critical apparatus corrects ויהי ימי־יעקב to ויהיו ימי־יעקב. While the corrected form is more typical in Genesis (5.4, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27; 35.28), this is not the only instance where the mt has singular ויהיו in this context (also Gen 5.23 and 31). Third person masculine singular verbal forms are often used as an “agreement neutral verb form” (Joüon §150 b). Admittedly, when a noun is predicated rather than a verb, there is a noticeable tendency in Biblical Hebrew for the number of ויהיו/ויהיו to match that of the noun, but this is not universally consistent. The correction is unnecessary, however, since the sentence’s meaning is unchanged, and since we cannot from extant evidence determine whether the plural form was considered exclusively correct or whether the singular and plural forms were felt to be interchangeable, with a slight preference for the plural when a plural noun is predicated. Hamilton (ii, 621) suggests assonance with the earlier ויחי as a possible motivation for the use of the singular form.

2 The bhs critical apparatus corrects בקברתם to בקברתי based on Gen 50.5, but this kind of variation is unremarkable. The context of 47.30 pertains to Jacob’s burial with his fathers, while the fathers are not mentioned in 50.5, only Jacob, so this particular variation matches its context.

3 Multiple manuscripts have כדבריך (with mater lectionis). The meaning is not impacted either way.

4 Gr. and Syr. read נפשו (staff) for נפשו (bed). This is discussed later in this chapter.

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The narrative of Toledot Jacob starts recognizably following the pattern of the conventional deathbed story in Genesis 47.28–31, the first of two episodes whose primary concern is burial instructions. It is also the first of two episodes whose primary addressee is Joseph. Despite the typical diachronic distinction between 47.28 and 47.29–31, the whole exhibits the overarching unity of a standard deathbed episode consisting of three parts: preparation, testament, and conclusion.

The Starting Point for Jacob's Deathbed Story

Jacob's deathbed story begins recognizably following the shape of the conventional Hebrew deathbed story at Genesis 47.28, and that shape continues through to the end of Genesis. Despite the fact that Genesis 47.27 (“Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen; and they acquired possessions there, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly.”) contains material which is not incompatible with a deathbed story's exposition, it is most appropriately read in connection with what goes before. The main reason this is so is that the name ‘Israel’ in verse 27 is best understood to refer to the whole clan and not just to Jacob the individual. Though the first verb, ובש, is singular,

5 Even though the task of unit delimitation is intended to discern boundary markers inherent in a text, the division of texts into units is often at least as much a matter of imposing order as perceiving it. When identifying the boundaries of a narrative unit in biblical texts, one runs the risk of imposing onto that text a particular conceptualization of the way texts are organized that is not inherent in it. This is especially true when one assumes that all boundaries are hard boundaries, or, in other words, the place where a literary unit begins or ends is assumed to be locatable at a particular place between two sentences. It is doubtful that there are many biblical scholars who consciously make this assumption, but generations of looking at biblical texts through almost exclusively diachronic lenses (with the coordinating assumptions about the ways texts are received, edited, and inserted), combined with the prominence in modern literature of text-dividing conventions, such as chapter divisions, seems to have instilled in modern readers of biblical texts a tendency toward thinking, for example, text unit A ends here where text unit B begins. While this is sometimes (perhaps even generally) true, the ways texts interrelate with one another are far more varied than a simple sequence of relatively independent scenes, and, in ancient texts as well as modern ones, scenes bleed into one another.

6 For ישראָל as a collective, see Dillmann, p. 425; Franz Delitzsch, Genesis (Leipzig: Dörfling und Franke, 1887), p. 502; Skinner, Genesis, p. 501; Bruce Vawter, On Genesis: A New Reading (London: Chapman, 1977), p. 450; Westermann, 111, 127, 191–2 (but note that Westermann does not assign 27a to p, only 27b); Matthews, ii, 860; Richard Elliott Friedman, Commentary on the Torah (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2001), p. 155; Amos, p. 264. Among those who understand ישראָל to be singular are Gunkel (p. 417) who also notably attributes