CHAPTER 2

A Muthos-logical Reading Strategy for Genesis

In the introduction I explained the view of plot that has been adopted for this muthos-logical study of the Genesis narrative. According to this view, neither chronology nor cause and effect but rather plot-structure is the organizational principle that creates textual cohesion through the construal of events into a narrative structure that moves from complication to dénouement. At the same time, it is widely recognized that the tôlĕdôt headings of Genesis provide natural textual divisions and that they also give structure to the book. One test for any theory of plot, therefore, must be that the plot-structure and tôlĕdôt structure work together rather than independently or in opposition to each other. In this chapter we will build on the current state of tôlĕdôt research to develop a modified theory of how the tôlĕdôt headings structure the book.

I will be arguing here that the tôlĕdôt structure of Genesis creates six main narrative sections within the book. The first narrative section (Gen 1:1–2:3) precedes any tôlĕdôt heading and so we can think of it as a prologue. The tôlĕdôt headings themselves function together to create five groupings made up of one to three tôlĕdôt headings. The five groupings always have at least one tôlĕdôt heading that begins a narrative section and may be combined with tôlĕdôt headings that introduce linear or segmented genealogies. To facilitate clear communication, I will call the tôlĕdôt groupings that function as units “plexuses” and these plexuses are made up of tôlĕdôt “strands” so that one to three tôlĕdôt strands make up a single plexus. The five narrative plexuses include Gen 2:4–4:26 (made up of one tôlĕdôt strand), 5:1–11:9 (three tôlĕdôt strands), 11:10–25:18 (three tôlĕdôt strands), 25:19–37:1 (two tôlĕdôt strands), and 37:2–50:26 (one tôlĕdôt strand). The narrative plexuses may be named for the main narrative tôlĕdôt heading. Thus, the narrative plexus that contains the Noah tôlĕdôt strand may be referred to as the Noah plexus. The reader should also be aware that the “Terah tôlĕdôt strand” corresponds to the “Abraham narrative.” In terms of plot, I will be arguing that the prologue and the first plexus establish the beginning of the Genesis plot by defining the complication that

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1 I have elected to use the braid metaphor in the naming of tôlĕdôt divisions, since the combination of the tôlĕdôt divisions creates a weaving or braiding of plots within a plot. Plexus is derived from the past participle of the Latin plectere, which means to braid. When a narrative tôlĕdôt division has a chiastic structure the subdivisions are often referred to as layers and, where appropriate, may also be referred to as episodes or even narrative sections.
drives its plot-structure. The next three plexuses play on and develop the tension, while the final plexus contains the dénouement, bringing the plot to its climactic conclusion.

The Tôlĕdôt Headings and the Plot-structure of Genesis

The tôlĕdôt formulae (תולדות, “these are the generations” and its variations) in Genesis became a heated topic of discussion with the documentary hypothesis. Wellhausen ascribed the tôlĕdôt headings to the P redaction of the book, asserting that they serve as the scaffolding which ties the whole together.2 However, his presuppositions regarding the nature of the P redaction led him, and those who followed him, to argue that the heading in 2:4 had been misplaced from its original location—that it should really occur at the beginning of the book. If the headings are truly the organizing structure, one would expect the author to be consistent in their use. Thus, since Wellhausen there has been general agreement that the tôlĕdôt phrases provide structure for the book of Genesis but the quest to find the logic of their arrangement has found no consensus.

There are a number of challenges that make it difficult to find the principle of composition that explains the structure. First, some of the phrases serve as headers while others are awkward in this position (e.g. Gen 2:4, as noted). Sometimes what follows is a genealogy (sometimes linear, sometimes segmented), while other times the heading introduces a narrative. With the tôlĕdôt phrase serving as header for both genealogical and narrative sections, how should the term be understood? Some of the headings trace the line of promise; some trace the line not-of-promise. If the tôlĕdôt phrases are headings for divisions of the book, how do we explain the double entry for Esau (Gen 36:1 and 9)? And finally, since Abraham is a central character in the book, we might be surprised that there is no major section for Abraham and the related fact that Terah, Isaac, and Jacob are the tôlĕdôt headings for the narratives of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, respectively. Sometimes attempts at explain-

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