THE JACOB TRADITION

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I. Boundaries and Themes
OF THE STORY OF JACOB IN GENESIS

From a canonical perspective, the stories of Jacob (and Esau) represent the toledot (= [story of] descendants) of his (/their) father which begin with the toledot-formula for Isaac in Gen 25:19 and end with Isaac’s death and burial by his two sons at Mamre in 35:27–29. They are followed immediately by the toledot of Esau (36:1) and then by the toledot of Jacob (cf. 37:2 and 50:12–13), which comprise the Story of Joseph and his brothers.¹ At the same time, that well ‘delimited’ tradition of Isaac’s sons shows some diversity in terms of narrative coherence: while ch. 25B² to 33 (without ch. 26!) form a remarkably integrated story with regard to plot, theme(s) and narrative art, the subsequent chs. 34 and 35 cover Jacob’s way from Shechem to Hebron with rather loosely connected episodes and notes.

Gen 26, comprising a small cycle of narratives about Isaac and the Philistines, does not form an integral part of the Story of Jacob.³ Isaac and Rebekah do not seemingly have children here as could be expected after ch. 25B. Moreover, a household with children would contradict Isaac’s pretense presenting Rebekah as his sister (26:7–11) from the start. Nevertheless, some tradent apparently found it appropriate to fill the time-gap between the young family of Isaac in 25B and the episode expecting his death in 27 with narratives about Isaac and his wife⁴

¹ For a detailed description of the structure built by the toledot-formulae and by stereotyped notes of death and burial throughout the story of the ancestors cf. Erhard Blum, Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte (WMANT 57; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1984), 432–446.
² In this contribution, “Gen 25B” will serve as an abbreviation for “Gen 25:19–34.”
⁴ Another aspect supporting this juxtaposition might have been the theme of blessing elaborated so much—though in different ways—in both ch. 26 and 27; cf. J.P. Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis (SSN 17; Amsterdam: van Gorcum, 1975), 113–115.
that originated in their own place and time\(^5\) different from the cycle about Jacob.\(^6\)

Therefore, the main Story of Jacob is to be found in Gen 25B\(*\); \(^*\)27–33. With regard to its main characters and places, its plot has a clear tripartite structure, which is only slightly extended by two (or three) scenes of an unexpected encounter of the main protagonist with God (or divine beings) which mark major turning points in the story:

A. Jacob and Esau—in Canaan: 25B+27
   C. Jacob’s encounter with God at Bethel: 28:10–22

B. Jacob and Laban—in Aram: 29–31(32:1)
   C’. Jacob’s encounter with God(/gods) at (Mahanaim and) Penuel: 32:(2–3) 23–33

This story is built out of smaller episodes and scenes which are mostly characterized by the unity of characters and place, as well as by an individual line of tension. On the basis of this episodic narration Hermann Gunkel spoke of a “Jakob-Esau-Laban-Sagenkranz” (“Jacob-Laban-Esau cycle of tales”), a description which was in line with his general assumption that the narrative tradition in the Bible started with small, rather simple units, which were later intertwined into larger ‘cycles.’ Nevertheless Gunkel himself already recognized that at least the last part (A’) of our story presupposes basic components of both, A and B.\(^7\) One should go further: part A’ functions as a real finale leading to a climax that throws new light on the story as a whole. We have reason, therefore, to speak not merely of a “cycle of tales,” but of a major integrated story with themes of its own.

Two of its main themes are ‘strife’ and ‘blessing.’ Often, though not always, both themes are actually combined into one: ‘struggle for blessing,’ especially with regard to the twins, Jacob and Esau. Their struggle begins in

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\(^5\) In general terms, Gen 26 clearly has a southern-Judahite context in contrast with the northern setting of the Jacob-tradition (see section IV), showing well-known affinities with the Abraham traditions.

\(^6\) According to Reinhard G. Kratz, *Die Komposition der erzährenden Bücher des Alten Testaments: Grundwissen der Bibelkritik* (UTB 2157; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 272, the nucleus of Gen 27 (vv. 1–4, 5b, 18a, 24–27b, 28) knew only Esau as eldest son of Isaac, continuing several Isaac episodes from ch. 26. However, one might ask whether the supposed nucleus forms a coherent unit with a narrative purpose.