Genesis 37–50, almost universally known as the Joseph Story, fascinates ordinary readers even as it leaves scholars with questions about its boundaries and unity. Many scholars question whether ch. 38 (about Judah’s family) and ch. 49 (the Testament of Jacob) belong in “a story about Joseph.” Before examining these questions, it should be recalled that modern scholarly analysis stands in the long shadow of Hermann Gunkel (1910) on the one hand, and Gerhard von Rad (1954; 1972) on the other.¹ To Gunkel, the story was a “novella” with folkloric elements, the chapters were intended as a bridge to the book of Exodus, and chs. 38 and 49 “stand completely outside the framework of the Joseph narrative.”² Von Rad argued that chs. 37–50 (especially the J source) were covertly dealing with issues of monarchy and its officialdom, and “Wisdom” themes characteristic of his “Solomonic Enlightenment” were reflected in Joseph’s management of Egyptian affairs and enlightening of his brothers. Subsequent interpreters have taken some of these positions as starting points, though not always in agreement with them.³ Most commentators on Genesis, nonetheless, persist in the


² Gunkel, Genesis, 380.

judgments that Joseph is the dominant character, chs. 38 and 49 are marginal, and ch. 45, Joseph’s revelation of himself to his brothers, is the climax of the story.\(^4\)

There are, however, solid reasons for questioning whether “The Joseph Story” accurately describes chs. 37–50. The heading in 37:2, ‘This is the line of Jacob,” refers to the entire family of Isaac, not to one son only, in accord with the usage of the formula elsewhere in Genesis; Judah plays an important role as do the other primary Leah sons Reuben, Simeon, and Levi (especially if one includes chs. 34–35; see below); Jacob is present actually or virtually throughout the story; focus on Joseph alone obscures the powerful Genesis theme of rivalry for firstborn privilege that one expects to find in the twelve brothers no less than in Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, and Esau and Jacob; viewing Joseph as the central character eviscerates the drama, for it inevitably makes Joseph’s “reconciliation” with his brothers in ch. 45 the climax of the story, relegating chs. 46–50 (one third of the text!) to an anticlimactic appendix. Bryan Smith perceptively notes the irony of scholars who “begin by praising Genesis 37–50 for its high literary quality, but then they contradict that praise by denying that the narrative possesses one of the most basic characteristics of high literary quality, namely, unity.”\(^5\) A re-examination is called for.

My re-examination will bring to the fore two neglected aspects of the story: the powerful rivalry between the brothers for firstborn status, and the brothers’ recognition of a divine plan trumping their own plans. My analysis will proceed in three parts. Part I will argue that the Genesis theme of fraternal striving for firstborn status provides the major dramatic tension. The tension actually begins in chs. 34–35 rather than in ch. 37, and so it will be necessary to consider these earlier chapters. The rivalry among the sons sets up the expectation that their father Jacob will ultimately


\(^5\) Smith, “The Central Role of Judah,” 159. One might also add that many analyses leave key dramatic issues unexplained such as Judah’s profound change from instigator of the plan to sell Joseph into slavery (ch. 37) and scourner of marriage customs (ch. 38) to noble spokesman of family unity in ch. 44; many also do not give a convincing explanation for the brothers’ request for forgiveness in 50:15–21.