A Literary Analysis of the *Genesis Apocryphon*

Rocco Bernasconi

*University of Manchester*

From the time of its first publication in 1956 to date, scholars have frequently attempted to define the literary genre of the *Genesis Apocryphon* (*tQapGen [1Q20]*) and various labels such as ‘Targum’, ‘Midrash’, ‘rewritten Bible’, ‘parabiblical text’ or ‘apocalyptic text’ have been proposed. None of these has proved satisfactory, either because they are too generic or too loosely applied (‘parabiblical text’ and ‘rewritten Bible’) or because they only fit certain parts or features of the text but not the whole of it (‘Targum’, ‘Midrash’, ‘apocalyptic text’). More recently, Moshe Bernstein proposed to describe the Apocryphon as a ‘multigeneric text’ or as a *Mischgattung*.¹ These two labels, in being so general and uninformative, are clear evidence of the difficulty in defining the genre of the *Genesis Apocryphon*.²

The reason why the *Genesis Apocryphon* has proved so difficult to classify is not only its loose stylistic and narrative uniformity, which defies straightforward genre categorisations; but also (and decisively) the incompleteness of the text that severely hampers any attempt to describe its literary structure and thus to define its genre. Nonetheless, a thorough literary investigation of the *Genesis Apocryphon* is an urgent task if we want to tackle the problem of its genre.


² These labels, as Bernstein himself acknowledges, are somewhat unfortunate, yet they are not wholly unjustified. The idea behind them is in fact to admit the possibility that our expectations of coherence as modern interpreters may be different from those of antiquity. Bernstein’s article shows dissatisfaction with the way the two interrelated questions of the literary genre and the textual unity of the *Genesis Apocryphon* have been dealt with so
The methodology of the Manchester/Durham project is based on the possibility of finding coherence from the first to the last word of the text; but since the Genesis Apocryphon is incomplete, this is severely undermined. Yet, I shall try to show that despite the text’s incompleteness, our Inventory still provides us with a tool for dealing with fragmentary texts. We have decided to include the Genesis Apocryphon both in our corpus and in the present volume precisely as a test case to determine whether anything serious can be done on an incomplete text. The conclusion we reached was yes, despite the fact that, as we shall see below, this entails a number of assumptions and speculations.

It is true that on the basis of the current evidence, nothing can be said about the overall structure of the text. However, a careful and systematic analysis of the literary structure of the extant parts of the Genesis Apocryphon may shed some light on that overall structure and hence on its genre, if only by limiting the possibilities and by spelling out what these are. That is only true however, if we assume a certain coherence for the text. For instance, if we had to deal with a text such as Esther Rabbah, which starts as a commentary and then shades into a narrative, there would be no way to predict genre whatsoever. It cannot be excluded that the Genesis Apocryphon was originally a text that changed its nature in a way similar to Esther Rabbah or Targum Sheni; but that is unlikely.

As a result, in what follows, I shall single out and describe three possible text shapes of the original Genesis Apocryphon, which match its current shape. Before that, however, I shall provide some introductory information about the physical reconstruction of the scroll, its date, and the presumed date of the composition of the text. I will then present a short topical and structural overview. Then I shall show that, in the light of the extant evidence, the overall structure of the text cannot be determined. However, on the basis of a number of assumptions stemming from the extant evidence, I shall also claim that the original Genesis Apocryphon is compatible with three distinct text types: narrative, thematic discourse, or an aggregate of juxtaposed part-texts not explicitly connected to each other. After having spelled out these three hypotheses, I shall conclude by describing the text as if it was indeed an aggregate of constituent part-texts, since that is the minimal hypothesis, i.e. the one based on the least number of assumptions.

far. He does that by breaking with the common assumption that a text, which presents elements belonging to different literary genres, may by no means be seen as one text. Cf. Bernstein, ‘The Genre(s) of the Genesis Apocryphon’, pp. 337–338.