THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: REFLECTIONS/INVERSIONS OF GENESIS STORIES IN THE BIBLE

YAIR ZAKOVITCH
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

It is well known that the biblical narrators leave it to their readers to judge the characters in their writings according to their words and actions. Only rarely is the reader given additional tools to evaluate characters, such as direct comments concerning their inner thoughts or explicit evaluations of their character. In this paper, I will discuss a strategy used by narrators to aid the reader in evaluating characters, a strategy that is one of the many instances of intertextuality so common in biblical literature. More precisely, I will examine the narrators' use of covert allusions to other narratives known to them and to their audience; specifically, instances where the biblical narrator shaped a character, or his or her actions, as the antithesis of a character in another narrative and that character’s actions. The new creation awakens in the reader undeniable associations to the source-story; the relationship between the new narrative and its source is like that between an image and its mirrored reflection: the reflection inverts the storyline of the original narrative. Thus, the discerning reader, considering the implicit relation between the two narratives—the original and its reflection—and observing how the new character behaves contrary to the character upon which he or she is modeled, will evaluate the new hero in light of the model, both with regard to action and to lack of action. In addition, the comparison created between the two stories sheds new light on the source story and its protagonist.

I call these “inverted” stories reflection stories. Any attempt to identify reflection stories must be made with extreme caution: one must not be carried away by coincidental associations between one biblical narrative and another, but rather care must be taken from

1 See S. Bar-Efrat, Narrative Art in the Bible (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), pp. 64–86.
2 Usually referred to as “saying in one’s heart”, see, e.g., Gen. 8:21; 17:17.
3 Bar-Efrat, pp. 53–64.
the start to determine that a relation between the two narratives was intended: common expressions (which are not otherwise common in the Bible), plots with similar themes and which are constructed in parallel or similar fashion, or other such firm evidence. All the source stories I shall discuss here are from the book of Genesis, which served as a model—both positive and negative—for biblical writers. In several examples the reflection story is also found in Genesis, either in the same story-cycle as the source-story, or in a different one.

I

I begin with a famous example of interrelationship within the book of Genesis, one in which the symmetrical inversion is an expression of an "eye for an eye" punishment. Laban’s substitution of Leah for Rachel in Gen. 29:23–26 represents Jacob’s punishment for pretending to be his brother Esau in the story of the theft of the blessing in Genesis 27. In Genesis 27, the mother, Rebekah, takes advantage of the father’s blindness and replaces her elder son, Esau, with the younger Jacob. In ch. 29, the father, Laban (who is Rebekah’s brother), takes advantage of the darkness of the night and replaces his younger daughter, Rachel, with the elder one, Leah. Similar language strengthens the connection between the two stories: Jacob complains to Laban לְמַעֲרֵיהּ רַמָּלֶיהָ ("Why did you deceive me?" 29:25), and Isaac tells Esau, ("Your brother came with guile", 27:35). Laban’s response, לֹא יִנְשָׁא מִן בָּעְרֵי מַעֲרֵיהּ לְפָרֵי בְּכֵרָהוּ ("It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the older", 29:26), contains verbal associations to Jacob as in 25:23, and to Esau as מַעֲרֵי בְּכֵרָה in 27:19. Furthermore, Laban’s words, "It is not the practice in our place ...", represent an implicit criticism of Jacob, as if to say, "It may be the custom in your home to deprive the older child of his or her rights, but not in ours".