THE CHRONOLOGY OF GENESIS: 
GENESIS XXVI 1-33 AS “FLASHBACK”

by

GEORGE G. NICOL
Inverkeithing

The story told by the book of Genesis exhibits a clear and unmistakable sense of continuity, first as the primeval history gives way to the story of the patriarchs, then as one patriarch is succeeded by the next in the sequence Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then Jacob’s family, among whom Joseph’s story is by far the most prominent.

Nevertheless, a few sections rupture the ordinary sense of continuity evoked by the narrative, so that the book forms a more or less continuous narrative rather than one in which continuity is absolute. In a recent article, I noted that “In Genesis, material which is not entirely germane to the progress of the story is often inserted towards the beginning or end of the section in which it occurs,”¹ and I cited the stories of Isaac (Gen. xxvi 1-33), Dinah (xxxiv 1-34), and Judah and Tamar (xxxvii 1-36), as well as the poetic blessing of Jacob (xl ix 1-28a), as examples of this phenomenon. I further argued that the existence of these “episodes which function something like flashbacks or previews” suggests “a convention for transmitting episodes which would not otherwise fit easily into the narrative.”² In the present study, I shall attempt to substantiate my contention that the story told by Gen. xxvi 1-33 functions something like a “flashback” by examining several features in relation to its narrative context.

The question of chronology is certainly important for the interpretation of this chapter, and much depends on whether its interpreters locate the events it narrates before or after the birth of Isaac’s sons.

² P. 218. Cf. M. Fishbane, Text and Texture, (New York, 1979), pp. 46-8, for a number of observations on the way Gen. xxvi and xxxiv balance each other. Fishbane’s suggestion that Gen. xxvi forms an “interlude” between Gen. xxv and xxvii is less helpful.
For example, some recent interpretations have depended on the argument that because ch. xxv reports the birth of Esau and Jacob, the promise of progeny is not jeopardized in Gen. xxvi 1-11. These studies strongly emphasize the point that in the latter passage Isaac is already the father of grown sons so that his sojourn among the people of Gerar cannot endanger the promise of offspring.

The matter has been expressed most clearly by Clines ([n. 3] p. 79):

Already in ch. 25 Rebekah has given birth to Esau and Jacob, so we know immediately that here, whatever the danger may be, it cannot be to the promise of offspring. It is not the same danger.

At first sight, Clines's argument might seem almost unassailable. Recent literary study of the Old Testament has taught us to read the Genesis narratives as a whole, and has rightly insisted that these narratives form a continuous story. Yet the contention that a narrative such as Gen. xxvi 1-33 functions as a "flashback" does not detract from this notion. On the contrary, it builds upon it, for flashback and preview can function properly only within the context of a coherent story in which events are narrated in a more or less chronological order. The ordering of events is certainly not random: it is an important matter, and the text itself provides clues that help the reader detect chronology.

The question how Gen. xxvi 1-33 fits into that chronology is not so simple as Clines would have it, and B. Vawter's judgement on the context of these verses is more to the point:

The whole is timeless in relation to what precedes and follows it: Isaac and his wife are a young couple, as in 24.67, unencumbered by the young adult sons of 25.27-34, and certainly decades removed from the advanced age they have attained by chapter 27.

These remarks emphasize the manner in which Gen. xxvi 1-33 is more or less isolated from its narrative context, and point in a direction similar to my own contention that this section functions in a manner analogous to "flashback" by introducing at this stage in the narrative events that must be supposed to have taken place some time earlier. To carry

---

4 By "flashback" I mean any event narrated retrospectively, and by "preview" any event related prospectively, from the point of view of its proper chronological sequence.