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SPEAKING ON THE BRINK OF SHEOL:  
FORM AND THEOLOGY OF OLD TESTAMENT  
DEATH STORIES

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Bryan Howard Cribb  
December 2007

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SPEAKING ON THE BRINK OF SHEOL:  
FORM AND THEOLOGY OF OLD TESTAMENT  
DEATH STORIES

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To Elizabeth,  
my friend, love, encourager, and complement,  
to my parents,  
who taught me the way of God,  
and to Daniel I. Block,  
my teacher and role model

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADS	Announcement of Impending Death Stage
ANE	Ancient Near Eastern
CL	Clause Label
DS	Death Stage
POS	Putting the House in Order Stage
RS	Response Stage
TR	Transition

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## PREFACE

The completion of this dissertation is both gratifying and humbling. And expressing appreciation to all who helped me these last few years would take more pages than are currently allotted. Of course, the entire project was directed and overseen by my supervisor, Daniel Block. I could not have completed this dissertation without his fatherly love, infectious enthusiasm, and wise counsel. Even when he moved to Wheaton College, he maintained his commitment to my progress with as much personal attention as he could muster. His guidance and godly example has left an indelible impact on my life that will last far beyond my “dissertation days.”

The same can be said for all my seminary professors, particularly the other members of my committee, Peter Gentry and Thomas Schreiner. The privilege of training for the ministry at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was a priceless blessing from God. Each instructor and many fellow students imparted to me a love and passion for God and for his Scriptures that I hope to communicate to my own students. I should also say a word of thanks to my current students and fellow faculty members at Brewton-Parker College. For the past two years, the opportunity to teach and minister at such a wonderful institution has motivated me to “get it done.”

My gratitude also extends to those closest to me. My friends and church family offered prayers, financial support, and encouragement along the way. My parents taught me from an early age to love learning and most of all to love God. And my in-laws have sacrificed so much so that Elizabeth and I could pursue God’s calling on our lives.

Of course, words cannot express my thankfulness to Elizabeth. God has

blessed me with a beautiful and godly wife that I do not deserve. She is my perfect complement—the true Proverbs 31 woman. Her encouragement, strength, and sacrificial love have buoyed me through this difficult stage of life. She has also blessed me with a joy that surpasses any completed dissertation—our son, Daniel. Beyond all other motivations, his birth spurred me down the “home stretch.”

Finally, I praise God for what he has done in my life and ministry. I count the completion of my degree not only as a privilege and honor, but also as a stewardship. I pledge to use it in accordance with the Scriptures and in submission to our Lord’s perfect will.

Bryan H. Cribb

Mount Vernon, Georgia

December 2007

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The picture comes out of a child's nightmare. Ravenous jaws, dripping with the rotting residue of past victims. A cavernous stomach, irresistibly drawing multitudes into uncertain and eternal shadow. This is "Death" in the ancient Near East, personified in Canaanite religion as the god Mot. However, more than a mere archaic icon, this haunting image of death taps a font of fear, foreboding, and inevitability that transcends generations and cultures. And though we moderns do not personify death, in practice we conceive of it similarly. Death is insatiable and inevitable, universal and ultimate. People caught in its clutches soon vanish forever, leaving only last words, wills, and reminiscences.

These vestiges are the true earthly "remains" of human death, regardless of the ultimate destiny of the soul. Death does swallow the body; yet, the impact of the deceased's life, preserved as by the myrrh of memories, continues to speak to future generations. Often, the most enduring remembrances derive from the last moments of the deceased's life. Perhaps it is a final desire expressed to a loved one, or burial instructions, or some eleventh-hour action to make sure everything was in order. Given the importance of these last moments, one should not be overly astonished to find people preserving accounts of them in literature.

The Old Testament is no different. Indeed, the Hebrew Scriptures contain numerous accounts detailing the deaths and final deeds and words of individuals, particularly those individuals most prominent in the history of Israel. In many cases, these accounts are more than just reports that someone has died; some are full stories, possessing a standard structure, which in and of itself communicates literarily and

theologically. This is the genre of the Old Testament death story.

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the form and theology of these Old Testament death stories.<sup>1</sup> In the following pages, we will argue that a definable and distinct genre of “death story” does exist in the Old Testament and that form critical analyses of these stories can yield significant theological insights. This thesis will be demonstrated by an inductive study of the prose accounts of death in the Old Testament.

### Background

A survey of the history of research involving Old Testament death stories is necessarily brief. In fact, scholars have failed to produce any extensive form critical analyses of death stories in particular or death accounts in general. To be sure, numerous studies have investigated the subject of ancient Hebrew beliefs about death.<sup>2</sup> Some have even catalogued particular death formulae in the Scriptures.<sup>3</sup> And a few scholars have produced form critical treatments of other similar Old Testament narrative genres—such

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<sup>1</sup>One should note the dual purpose of the task. Many form critical studies limit themselves to literary and historical analysis. However, this dissertation does not stop with form critical exegesis. We seek to move from exegesis to theological interpretation.

<sup>2</sup>The resources are almost too many to list. Some of the better resources include Daniel I. Block, “Beyond the Grave: Ezekiel’s Vision of Death and Afterlife,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 2 (1992): 113-41; idem, “The Old Testament on Hell,” in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 43-66; Jon Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Rachel S. Hallote, *Death, Burial, and Afterlife in the Biblical World: How the Israelites and Their Neighbors Treated the Dead* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001); Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002); Hiroshi Obayashi, ed., *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992); H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966); Daniel C. Snell, *Life in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Nicholas J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969); Paola Xella, “Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 3:2059-70; E. M. Yamauchi, “Life, Death and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East,” in *Life in the Face of Death*, ed. R. N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 21-50.

<sup>3</sup>In particular, see the exhaustive study by Karl Illman, *Old Testament Formulas about Death*, (Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi, 1979). Ludwig Wächter also provides some discussion of death formulae in *Der Tod im Alten Testament*, *Arbeiten zur Theologie* II, 8 (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1967).

as birth stories, call stories, and vision and dream reports, among others.<sup>4</sup> In addition, noted form critical scholars George Coats and Burke O. Long have offered limited discussion of what they term “death reports” in various commentaries.<sup>5</sup> However, their treatments are often cursory, and many of their conclusions seem flawed, as will be observed in chapter 3. So no scholar has considered death stories in a detailed fashion. This dissertation seeks to address this scholarly omission. In addition, as stated above, it will also demonstrate the usefulness of this formal study in determining the theological message of a text.

### **Methodology**

Embarking on a study that has few precedents requires a precise methodology. The following will detail the approach and plan of attack for this dissertation. First, we will introduce some general methodological considerations that will apply to the entire study. Then, we will describe the methodological steps (as contained in the respective chapters) that the study will take in order to support our thesis.

#### **Consideration 1: Modified Form Critical Methodology**

This dissertation will employ a modified form critical methodology. These modifications will no doubt put this study at odds with form criticism as traditionally expounded and practiced. In fact, some might say that, due to our qualification of form

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<sup>4</sup>The following represent just a sampling of the endeavors: Robert Gnuse, “A Reconsideration of the Form-Critical Structure in 1 Samuel 3: An Ancient Near Eastern Dream Theophany,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92 (1982): 379-90; Norman Habel, “Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965): 297-323; Robin H. Jarrell, “The Birth Narrative as Female Counterpoint to Covenant,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 97 (2002): 3-18; and Jenny Manasco Lowery, “The Form and Function of Symbolic Vision Reports in the Hebrew Bible,” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>George W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); and Burke O. Long, *1 Kings with an Introduction to Historical Literature*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

critical methodology, we are not practicing form criticism at all. However, as will be noted, this dissertation does align with some of the recent, more synchronic trends in form critical research.

The reason for the modifications specified below is simple. Since its inception and enthusiastic acceptance at the beginning of the twentieth century, form criticism as a discipline has diminished in popularity in recent years.<sup>6</sup> This is not without good reason. Indeed, many previous form critical studies have suffered from obvious circular reasoning, fragmentation of the text, a disregard for the literary context, an imposition of foreign (and often anachronistic) forms on ANE texts, and speculative and artificial historical reconstructions of supposed oral prehistories.<sup>7</sup> These deficiencies leave open the question whether form criticism will remain viable in the twenty-first century, much less for the duration of the present study.

Nevertheless, if appropriately modified, form criticism still has much to contribute. So the practice of form criticism—both for this dissertation and for the discipline as a whole—must overcome its flaws, as well as capitalize on its fundamental and lasting insights. The following paragraphs will describe both the shortcomings and contributions of form criticism. We will also provide several methodological principles applicable to the current form critical study.

**Flaws of form criticism.** First, what are the flaws of form criticism as

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<sup>6</sup>James Muilenburg's 1968 Society of Biblical Literature address (subsequently published as "Form Criticism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 [1969]: 1-18) marked a significant turning point. His advocacy of rhetorical criticism helped turn the focus away from form and tradition criticism. Perhaps one of the most helpful works in critiquing form criticism's past and in defining its future emerged from a two-part session of the 2000 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held in Nashville, Tennessee, entitled "The Changing Face of Form Criticism in Hebrew Bible Studies." The collection of addresses can be found in a book entitled, *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Several articles from this book are cited below.

<sup>7</sup>For an excellent discussion of many of these deficiencies, see Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 35-50.

generally practiced? Gunkel initially popularized form criticism as a response to what he deemed to be an unhelpful interest in written history found among source critical scholars. The answer for Gunkel was to investigate the pure stages of oral prehistory of a particular text. Accordingly, his work exhibited an interest in history, but not history as portrayed by the text. It was a history of the text itself, from its pure oral form in its particular setting in life to its incorporation as a particular form in the text. In fact, the search for the structure of a particular text was deemed secondary to the discovery of this oral prehistory. It was a means to an end. As New Testament form critical scholar Rudolph Bultmann wrote:

Form-critical work consists neither of an aesthetic consideration nor of a descriptive and classifying process, that is, it does not consist of simply describing the individual pieces of the written tradition according to aesthetic or other characteristics and classifying them in certain genres. On the contrary, it is the task “of reconstructing the origin and history of the individual pieces in order to illuminate the history of the preliterate tradition.”<sup>8</sup>

In the end, this type of emphasis proved too speculative and produced too few viable results to satisfy subsequent scholarship—especially the scholarship of the latter third of the twentieth century, which tended to stress the text as it stands. As Anthony Campbell writes, “The focus away from the present text into a surmised past accessible to a scholarly few was too burdened with subjectivity to survive in a generation focused on the present reality of what was possessed in the final text.”<sup>9</sup>

This emphasis on the early oral prehistory to the neglect of the final text had several other deleterious effects. In an effort to classify precisely the ideal genres, form critics would often import literary genres foreign and anachronistic to the ANE context.

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<sup>8</sup>Rudolph Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1931), 4. Bultmann is quoting M. Dibelius. Cf. Erhard Blum, “Formgeschichte—A Misleading Category?” in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 36.

<sup>9</sup>Anthony F. Campbell, “Form Criticism’s Future,” in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 22.

Thus, classification often derived from the mind of the scholar and not from an inductive study of the passages in question. In addition, in an attempt to break larger accounts into smaller, oral, and more original components, scholars would often fragment the text, meanwhile neglecting how these petite portions fit into the greater whole. Indeed, the literary context was often ignored completely. Finally, intrinsic to many early form critical methodologies—most notably that of Gunkel—was an incredulity regarding the historicity of the texts themselves. As oral accounts with long prehistories, their historical validity was doubtful at best. At worst, the accounts were deemed pure fiction.

**Form criticism's established value.** Despite its flaws, many scholars still view form criticism to be salvageable. Indeed, form criticism has touched on several of what Campbell correctly labels as “essential insights,” which point to a viable future for the discipline.<sup>10</sup> First and foremost, form criticism has established how the typical structure can communicate meaning. Campbell explains, “Whatever is regarded as an individual text, whether shorter or longer, needs to be treated as a whole, and each individual whole will be affected by the influence of the typical.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the key to a successful form critical study is to avoid some of the pitfalls mentioned above without discarding its essential insights. This may be accomplished by adhering to several key methodological principles.

**Principle 1: A responsible form critical study is inductive.** Inductive analysis allows the classification of the genre to derive from the ANE text and not be imposed from some other foreign or anachronistic literary genre. Our classification of death stories will be based on common structural elements and formulae found within the

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

texts themselves, not from structures and terminology found outside the text.

**Principle 2: A responsible form critical study is primarily synchronic rather than diachronic.** This study will focus principally on the patterns in the written material in its context; the oral stage and prehistory behind the text will not receive much attention.<sup>12</sup> Practically speaking, this principle dictates that the scholar relegates to a secondary role (or no role at all) speculation about the *Sitz im Leben* of the form and the history of the transmission of the text from oral to written. Instead, the main concern will be the final form of the text in its literary and historical context—the *Sitz im Text*, *Sitz im Literati*, and *Sitz im Buch*. While this study will consider *Sitz im Leben* and the function of the form, we deem these too speculative to be very helpful. At this point, some may contend that ignoring the prehistory means we are no longer practicing form criticism.<sup>13</sup> After all, it is *Formgeschichte*—“history” of the form. But to remain in the past with form criticism would not recognize the seismic shift that Old Testament studies experienced in the 1970s and the attendant transition to more literary and synchronic studies of the Scriptures. Also, to keep the old “form” of form criticism fails to admit the impracticality and hypothetical nature of *Formgeschichte* proper.

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<sup>12</sup>Per Garrett’s suggestions in *Rethinking Genesis*, 50.

<sup>13</sup>Some have advocated discarding form criticism all together, opting for different terminology. In other words, since we are not doing form criticism as traditionally practiced (with the emphasis on the prehistory), would it not be better to say that we should just look for conventions in the text? Robert Alter argues strongly for this term, “convention.” R. Alter, “How Convention Helps Us Read,” *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 119. He writes, “In the literary convention, culture has been transformed into text, which is rather different from form-criticism’s tendency to insist on the function performed by text in culture.” While this alternate designation is appealing, we have chosen to stay with the standard form critical terminology. First, this decision was made for the sake of simplicity, clarity, and popular appeal. Second, as is argued in this introduction, form criticism does yield some essential insights. Thus, one should not toss out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Third, whether form or convention, a standard structure seems to be used in many Old Testament accounts. Thus, for all practical purposes, the literary analysis is the same—Alter and form critics are both looking for the typical. True, Alter argues that “what is finally more significant [than the typical structure] is the inventive freshness with which the formulas are recast and redeployed in each new instance.” But this is a fact with which most form critics would agree in part. In addition, one still needs to understand the typical before one understands the atypical.

**Principle 3: Closely related to the previous principle, responsible form criticism assumes the final form of the text.** As with the last principle, assuming the final form of the text creates some tension with form critical methodology as traditionally held. Many form critics see the present text of Scripture as a piecemeal compilation or collation of a large number of previously oral compositions that detract from rather than enhance the narrative purposes of the author/editor.<sup>14</sup> This sentiment is reminiscent of one of the fundamental concerns of typical form critics—to gain access to the prehistory in the oral traditions. Unfortunately, interpreting Scripture in this fashion downplays the hermeneutical importance of context and, as Berlin writes, “underrates the present text as a unity.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast, while the methodology of this dissertation does see individual units in the narrative complexes of Scripture, it views these as having been woven expertly and purposefully into a larger narrative according to ancient literary standards. They contribute to the whole like individual frames of a film.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, these stories may not have existed independently of the larger narrative. Regarding death stories specifically, the author may have been using a typical form/convention from the language to describe the death of the individual, in the midst of describing the entirety of the deceased’s life.

More practically, it seems that in order to perform a proper form critical examination of the text, research should begin with the text as a whole. Then, if the form leads one to see insertions and sources, so be it. However, excluding portions of text *a priori* compromises the form critical process, in that possible formal elements can be lost

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<sup>14</sup>Adele Berlin, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1983), 124. As an example of a scholar who disparages textual unity, Berlin quotes Klaus Koch, who writes, “In such books [the Tetrateuch, the Psalter, etc.] literary types are merely strung together, and this has obscured the essential purpose of the book as a whole.”

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 125.

or ignored based on prior assumptions. Scholars can become so preoccupied with supposed sources and insertions that they miss what the text is communicating in its literary context.

**Principle 4: Responsible form criticism recognizes that genre classification cannot be inflexible.** In recent years, scholars have recognized that Gunkel maintained a fairly unbending methodology in classifying the genre of a piece of literature. Gunkel and other early form critics asserted that a single text could only belong to one genre with one *Sitz im Leben*.<sup>17</sup> Such reasoning is inherently flawed and overly rigid. Individual texts may indeed possess characteristics of multiple genres, as the authors of Scripture expertly weave together traditions and stories into a complete whole. On a large scale, the book of Deuteronomy is an example of this fact. This book is cast as a series of sermons, but it also mirrors in some ways ANE treaty texts. In addition, the book contains some legal material.<sup>18</sup> And each one of these aspects enlightens our understanding of Deuteronomy. For the purposes of this study, we should remember that, just because a text has characteristics of a death story does not mean that it cannot have characteristics of other genres. For example, the death account of Jacob consists largely of a series of farewell speeches.

### **Consideration 2: The Definition of “Story”**

The justification of the use of this term for this form critical study will appear in chapter 3, which will survey and categorize the major narrative death accounts in Scripture. For the moment, since death “story” is the subject of the present dissertation, it is important to define precisely what is meant by this nomenclature. Indeed, one should

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<sup>17</sup>Kenton Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 6.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

proceed cautiously when establishing new form critical terminology, and especially when utilizing or modifying old form critical patterns. This caution is required because most terms used by form critical scholars to identify genres suggest something very precise. So, for example, the form critical designation of “lament” connotes a particular type of poetry with specific vocabulary, formal elements, *Sitz im Leben*, and function. Thus, when one identifies a new form critical *Gattung* or genre,<sup>19</sup> he or she must take care that the appellation fits the genre. In the present case, this dissertation is applying an existing form critical designation—“story”—to a new genre, “death story.” And in form criticism, “story” does carry semantic baggage. So what is story as a genre?

The general expression “story” implies two principal ideas. First, as a narrative genre, it is distinguished from other such genres (e.g., report or notice) in that it implies a plot—typically moving in an arc from tension to resolution. Thus, it is more developed than reports and notices and involves character development. However, it is neither as complex nor as long as a saga.<sup>20</sup> It also maintains a distinctive, though not frozen, structure. Thus, a “death story” would be a specific version of this genre involving the demise of the protagonist. Resolution, in this case, would come at the death of the individual and/or the achievement of an ordered house prior to death—ideas that will be explained at length later. In this dissertation, the definition of “story” will resemble Coats’ definition of “tale” in his *Introduction to Narrative Literature* at the beginning of his Genesis commentary.<sup>21</sup> However, because “tale” is generally thought to

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<sup>19</sup>*Gattung* is German word for form or type that is approximate to the French word, genre (kind, sort). English often translates *Gattung* as genre, and we will use the terms somewhat interchangeably. Similarly, see Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 12. However, it should be noted that some distinguish between the terms. See Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1971), 66-67.

<sup>20</sup>For definitions of these, see Coats, *Genesis*, 3-10.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 7-8. See also George Coats, *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1989). Coats even argues that story and tale are interchangeable. However, he opts for the latter designation because he believes story has a broader field of meaning and is not as precise. We choose the former for the reason stated in the text above.

connote fiction, we chose to use the more neutral term, “story.”

This last sentence raises one last issue about the designation, “story.” One should note that the use of “story” neither insists on nor disparages the historicity of the account at hand. Though in its initial stages in the early part of the century, this term might have been used in opposition to history, most scholars today believe “story” makes no claims one way or another to historical accuracy.<sup>22</sup> For example, many people refer to the gospel “story” with every intention of affirming its historicity. Also, by affirming historicity, we are not denigrating the literary quality of the text. Indeed, literary excellence and historical accuracy are not mutually exclusive. We use the term “story” merely as a device that defines the structure and literary characteristics of the text, including plot, characterization, etc. Furthermore, regardless of how scholars may judge the historicity of a story, the fact remains that the authors of these “stories” believed them to be historical.<sup>23</sup>

### **Structure of the Dissertation**

With the methodological considerations and presuppositions defined, the next section will describe the overall progression that this study will take through the various chapters.

**Chapter 2: Death in Israel and in the ancient Near East.** Chapter 2 will begin the argument by providing an overview of death in the ancient Near East and Israel. While the synopsis will prove rather general, the purpose is not to offer an all-

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<sup>22</sup>Gunkel distinguished story from history in that the former was out of touch with reality and did not present what actually happened. Campbell, “Form Criticism’s Future,” 18-19. Most scholars today assert stories can be fact or fiction. *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>23</sup>For a good discussion of this issue, see Stuart Lasine, “Fiction, Falsehood, and Reality in Hebrew Scripture,” *Hebrew Studies* 25 (1984): 24-40. See also Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 51-97.

encompassing investigation of subject. Instead, the ANE thanatology<sup>24</sup> portrayed in this chapter will serve first to introduce the reader to the topic of death in the ancient Near East. Second, the information in this chapter will provide a basis for comparison with the thanatology derived from the death stories. In addition, the study of the sources of ANE thanatology will demonstrate the relative uniqueness of the “death story” genre in Hebrew Scripture. This determination will be made in chapter 3.

**Chapter 3: Death accounts in the ancient Near East and Israel and the Old Testament genre of death story.** Chapter 3 will begin by surveying death accounts in the ancient Near East and in the Old Testament. After an initial survey of four ANE accounts, the next section will classify the various death accounts in the Hebrew Scriptures as notices, reports, or stories. A third section will justify the classification of some accounts as stories instead of reports. With the nomenclature established, the next step in the chapter will be to establish and describe the typical “death story.” This step is essential for two reasons. First, if there is no discernable form, then there is no purpose for this dissertation. Second, the step is necessary in order to establish a point of comparison with the actual texts to be studied in chapter 4—a comparison that is vital for theological exegesis.

We will ask and answer a number of questions in this section. For instance, what exactly constitutes a *Gattung*?<sup>25</sup> How can one be certain that an Old Testament genre has been identified satisfactorily? What does the *Gattung* of death story look like in its pure form? Does it even exist? This dissertation will suggest that one can be

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<sup>24</sup>In this dissertation, the term “thanatology” will be used to denote beliefs about death as held by a particular society or religion. Typically, the word designates the study of death, but we are using it in a more specific manner. Just as soteriological studies outline a religion’s views about salvation, thanatological studies summarize beliefs about death.

<sup>25</sup>George W. Coats, “Genres: Why Should They Be Important for Exegesis,” in *Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature*, ed. George W. Coats, JSOT Supplement Series 35 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1985), 11.

assured of a genre's presence if four elements of the investigated texts "emerge as in some sense typical": vocabulary/formulae, structure/formal elements, setting, and function.<sup>26</sup> The hypothesis is that if we can find Old Testament death passages that have these common features, then Israel probably had a particular literary genre to correspond to these features.<sup>27</sup> Thus, this section of the dissertation will discuss these typical elements specifically for the *Gattung* of death story. In so doing, it will not only establish the stereotypical genre of death story, but it will also describe it.

#### **Chapter 4: Form critical exegesis of death stories in the Old Testament.**

Once the ideal form of the death story is established, the bulk of this study will engage in a form critical examination/analysis of the death stories in the Old Testament. Finding the ideal form of a death story prior to form critical exegesis may seem circular, but it is necessary to establish this typical structure first in order to evaluate the individual stories.<sup>28</sup> Nine stories will be analyzed. These will include the death stories of Sarah (Gen 23:1-20), Abraham (Gen 24:1-25:11), Jacob (Gen 47:28-50:14), Joseph (Gen 50:22-26), Aaron (Num 20:22-29), Moses (Deut 31:1-34:12), Joshua (Josh 23:1-24:30), David (1 Kgs 1:1-2:12; 1 Chr 23:1-29:20), and Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:1-21).

As stated above, the method of analysis will follow the generally accepted

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 11-13. Coats lists these criteria in a different order (vocabulary and structure are switched), but the general idea is the same.

<sup>27</sup>This hypothesis arises from the conservative nature of Israelite culture. A conservative culture will preserve and use forms more rigidly—even to such an extent that a few examples can establish a form. As Barton writes, "A culture which values tradition more highly than creativity is likely to be very conservative in the way it uses its traditional forms, and so even a few examples of a *Gattung* may give us quite a clear impression of the conventions governing its composition." John Barton, "Form Criticism (OT)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:840.

<sup>28</sup>As Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible*, 11, accurately states, the process of genre identification itself is somewhat circular. He writes, "Generic classification is always an exercise in circular reasoning because we cannot derive a generic definition—such as 'myth'—without presupposing already what myths are and what texts fit the category. This is only one symptom of what scholars call the hermeneutical circle, the interpretive path that our thought takes as we attempt to make sense of the parts in light of the whole and of the whole in light of the various parts."

form critical process—which involves an investigation of the form/structure, genre, setting, and intention of the text.<sup>29</sup> The center of gravity will focus on the first two. While setting and intention can be helpful at times, they often prove speculative. To this list of four, we will also add an introduction to the literary and historical context of the texts mentioned above. Naturally, the purpose of the form critical exegesis is to pave the way for theological excavations. Each story investigated will therefore include a section detailing some initial theological conclusions. Ideally, mining theology from death stories would involve an extensive process, employing a variety of exegetical tools.<sup>30</sup> Due to space considerations and due to its more narrow purpose, this dissertation will limit its *modus operandi* to form criticism. So, while we will utilize other tools in the theological analysis of these texts, the theological conclusions will be based primarily on form critical exegesis.<sup>31</sup> We expect that this exegesis will unearth insights into both Israelite theology and thanatology.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>This method has been discussed at length in books such as Tucker's *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* mentioned above. For a more updated and condensed version of the method, see Marvin A. Sweeney, "Form Criticism," in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications*, rev. and expanded ed., ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 58-89.

<sup>30</sup>These exegetical methods would (1) grasp the big picture (such as finding the literary and historical context, as well as examining the macrosyntax of the passage) and (2) apprehend the finer details (such text critical analysis, syntactical/grammatical work, semantic study, structural analysis, and investigation of literary features).

<sup>31</sup>"Theology" is a nebulous term. What exactly is "theology" and how does the theologian discover it? In searching for "theology," one must attempt to discern the "stuff" that "drives" a text. Here, Martens' distinction between theology and theme/message is useful. The message involves the subject matter; but theology is what "drives a book," or in this case a passage. Theology is "multicolored," whereas message is "monotone." Theology transcends time; message is often tied to the time period of the text audience. Elmer Martens, "Accessing Theological Readings of a Biblical Book," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 34 (1996): 223-24.

<sup>32</sup>In a recent book, Walter Crouch helpfully proposed three questions to ask in determining a narrator's thanatology. He suggests that the reader should examine the narrator's comments on death ("direct definition"), the characters' comments on death ("indirect presentation"), and the presentation of death as compared to the presentation of life ("analogy"). Walter B. Crouch, *Death and Closure in Biblical Narrative*, *Studies in Biblical Literature* 7 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000), 38-39. Crouch points out that the narrator represents the "most authoritative voice" in a narrative. The thanatology of the characters may be determined by looking at their actions and speech. However, because it is indirect and at times untrustworthy, this theology is not as authoritative as the narrator's statements.

**Chapter 5: Conclusions.** The final chapter will serve as the conclusion of the dissertation. As such, it will accomplish several tasks. First, it will determine the success of the study in achieving its stated aims. Second, it will summarize and synthesize the various theological and thanatological conclusions based on the form critical analyses of chapter 4. Finally, it will offer some concluding thoughts on the significance of the study for biblical form critical exegesis.

**Appendix.** The appendix of this dissertation will include a large table listing, describing, and classifying all the death accounts in Scripture. This information will provide the data for our inductive analysis of these death accounts.

## CHAPTER 2

### DEATH IN ISRAEL AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Imagine having to summarize the beliefs about death for the United States, or for any other country in the world today. Could it be done? Now imagine accomplishing this as an outsider. And assume that in describing these beliefs, only written literature (wills, religious books, etc.) and the physical funerary accoutrements (tombs, urns, coffins—the basic materials found at a local cemetery) can be examined. No interviews or first hand experiences are allowed. Undoubtedly, regardless of the society examined, such a survey would be difficult and at times misleading, if not hopelessly confusing. But if one attempts to describe the beliefs of a particular people group over a millennium or two, complete certainty in conclusions becomes even more elusive. And though the societies of the ancient Near East were not nearly as heterogeneous as today, similar difficulties exist in defining ANE beliefs about death.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these challenges, modern scholars have still produced many worthy volumes on the subject of death in the ancient Near East and Israel, and considerable consensus does exist. No doubt, in comparison with these tomes, the following synopsis of the current state of the scholarship will seem meager.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, our purpose is not to be comprehensive, but introductory and comparative. This chapter will sketch out what ANE peoples believed on end-of-life issues to introduce the reader to the topic in general; and additionally, this survey will inform the exegesis chapter in this dissertation

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, in Egypt, much of what is known relates to the funerary practices of royalty (or at least the nobility), not of ordinary individuals.

<sup>2</sup>In many cases, we will merely summarize and point to other sources.

(especially the initial theological conclusions section at the end of each death story). We will examine whether the death stories will confirm, deny, or clarify these notions about Israelite thanatology.

In describing ANE conceptions of the end of life, the following will first provide information on the sources relevant to this study.<sup>3</sup> A subsequent section will summarize briefly the scholarly consensus concerning four aspects of ANE thanatology—the conceptions of death, the dispositions toward death, the preparations for death, and finally the responses to death.<sup>4</sup> With each of these topics, the general ANE data will be provided first, followed by the Israelite data. The ANE beliefs will derive from and be limited to the major civilizations of the Fertile Crescent that surrounded and influenced Israel—Egypt, the civilizations of Mesopotamia, the Hittite empire, and smaller West Semitic societies (principally Ugarit, but also Phoenicia, Ebla, and Mari).

### **ANE and Israelite Sources on Death**

#### **ANE Sources**

Not surprisingly, ideas about death in the ancient Near East may be derived from an array of sources—both archaeological (tombs, monuments, shrines, etc.) and textual (extant literature, inscriptions, etc.).<sup>5</sup> While the survey below will briefly touch on the archaeological remains, given the topic of this dissertation, the principle focus will be on the literary sources.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>This information will also be used in chap. 3 to compare biblical and extrabiblical death accounts.

<sup>4</sup>One notices immediately that the focus is on the “this-worldly” aspects of death. This is intentional, in that the death stories reveal much more about these aspects than about issues of afterlife, heaven, hell, etc.

<sup>5</sup>Indeed, in the past several decades, these materials have multiplied, as archaeologists have made many new discoveries from all the civilizations, but especially from previously furtive West Semitic societies (Ugarit, Mari, etc.).

<sup>6</sup>The former tends to elucidate the physical aspects of death—burial, ceremonies, handling of the bodies—while the latter offers a clearer glimpse into the ANE theology of death. Any death stories outside Hebrew literature will be found among the ANE literary sources.

In the ancient Near East, Egypt provides one of the most fertile sources of literature dealing with death. One may attribute this phenomenon to several factors. First, perhaps no other ancient society placed more emphasis on the topic of death (and afterlife) than that of Egypt.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the relative stability of the nation over the years, the quality of burial methods, and the existence of temple libraries led to the preservation of more than 3,000 years worth of tomb inscriptions, artifacts, monuments, and a substantial collection of literature. The most important evidence is written evidence, much of which consists of texts placed in the tombs with the deceased in order to provide instructions for the afterlife. Three large collections of these “tomb texts” exist, each having been predominant in the three eras of Egyptian history. The Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom are the earliest of these texts. As the name suggests, the Egyptians inscribed the Pyramid Texts in the royal tombs for the pharaohs.<sup>8</sup> Later, in the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom, nobles began borrowing from some of the Pyramid Texts. Adapting and even keeping some of the royal language, Egyptian aristocrats wrote texts with pen and ink on the inside of their coffins, thus producing the nearly 1,200 Coffin Texts available to scholars today.<sup>9</sup> Finally, in the New Kingdom, Egyptians combined the Coffin Texts with new spells in the so-called Book of the Dead, which was to be used as a sort of guide in the afterlife.<sup>10</sup> Primarily penned on rolls of

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<sup>7</sup>Although each ANE religion emphasized and was concerned with death, Egyptian religion especially could be classified as “death-centered.” Rachel S. Hallote, *Death, Burial, and Afterlife in the Biblical World: How the Israelites and Their Neighbors Treated the Dead* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 115. However, one should not overemphasize this fascination with death. It should be remembered that much of the material from the purportedly extensive libraries of Egypt (which housed books dealing with all kinds of topics) no longer exists today. Thus, most of what we currently possess is that which was buried—i.e., texts used in funerary practices. In other words, it should not be surprising that the majority of these texts are about death.

<sup>8</sup>Some 759 utterances survive. Leonard H. Lesko, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Two Ways* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 1.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>*The Egyptian Book of the Dead: Documents in the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago*, ed. Thomas George Allen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 1. No one “book” contains all the texts; instead, scholars use the designation to refer to all the possible contents.

papyrus, this “book” was available to all who could afford it. However, these are not the only Egyptian sources extant today; Egyptians also produced other funerary and mortuary literature, such as the Book of Gates, the Book of Caves, Amduat, and the Book of Two Ways. These texts consist primarily of spells and instructions on how to navigate the next life. Interestingly, all the Egyptian sources present fairly consistent thanatological beliefs for more than 3,000 years.<sup>11</sup>

Though not consumed with end-of-life issues like the Egyptians, Mesopotamians still passed down a myriad of sources for scholars to consider.<sup>12</sup> But as with Egypt, the most abundant and instructive sources from Mesopotamia are textual sources—including literary texts, ritual texts, economic texts, grave inscriptions, magico-medical texts, royal and private letters, royal inscriptions, and religious rites detailing the dying and rising of gods.<sup>13</sup> Pride of place among the texts dealing specifically with death belongs to the lengthy and intricate Epic of Gilgamesh. In this account of the hero Gilgamesh’s quest for immortality, numerous thanatological themes emerge, such as the inevitability of death, the fear of death, and the eternal sleeplike nature of death.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>William Murnane, “Taking It with You: The Problem of Death and Afterlife in Ancient Egypt,” in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, ed. Hiroshi Obayashi (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 35. However, there are some significant differences in the views of the afterlife between the Old and New Kingdoms. For a discussion of these differences, see Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, trans. Andrew Jenkins (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 157.

<sup>12</sup>Indeed, the eastern wing of the Fertile Crescent boasts a fruitful archaeological record. For an extensive bibliography of the various sources, see Jo Ann Scurlock, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 3:1893.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 1883. Many of these texts are collected in a helpful work by Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 2 vols. (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup>Jerrold S. Cooper, “The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, ed. Hiroshi Obayashi (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 22. Later sections will cite heavily from this epic. One of the better versions is the Norton Critical Edition of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, ed. and trans. Benjamin R. Foster (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001). For detailed analysis, see *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, ed. Andrew George, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Due to the quality of its translation, its readability, and its ready availability to most readers, this dissertation will use Foster’s edition.

However, this epic is not the only helpful literary text. Many extant myths deal with other thanatological topics, such as the fate of souls in the netherworld and the dying and rising of gods (usually in connection with religious rites). These myths include the Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld and Nergal and Ereshkigal, among others.<sup>15</sup>

The once mysterious Hittite Empire also passed down a variety of literary and archaeological sources. Some of the more relevant sources include assorted Hittite letters, a version of the Gilgamesh Epic, the Anitta text (the earliest Hittite document), numerous statues with offering lists, and a myriad of recorded incantations to the souls of the dead.<sup>16</sup> And still other texts are described on a Hittite library catalog.<sup>17</sup> Distinctive among these sources are the texts of various cremation rituals and incantations. The most important of these is a collection of tablets describing a fourteen-day cremation ritual for Sharri-Kushukh, king of Carchemish.<sup>18</sup>

The area of Syria-Palestine has yielded sources that vary widely, due to the diversity of people and societies that occupied the much-disputed area. Some of the most fruitful sources have emerged relatively recently—most notably the cuneiform texts found at the Late Bronze Age (1500-1200 BC) city of Ugarit, located on the Syrian coast at a site called Ras Shamra.<sup>19</sup> In addition, knowledge of West Semitic religion has been augmented by discoveries from ancient Phoenician sites—a society that in the early first

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<sup>15</sup>Good versions of these may be found in Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). See also Samuel Noah Kramer, “The Death of Ur-Nammu and His Descent to the Netherworld,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 21 (1967): 104-22; and idem, “The Death of Gilgamesh,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 94 (1944): 2-11.

<sup>16</sup>Many of the Hittite literary texts may be read in Harry Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., SBL Writings from the Ancient World, vol. 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup>For a complete listing and description of these sources, see Volkert Haas, “Death and the Afterlife in Hittite Thought,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 3:2021-30.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>E. M. Yamauchi, “Life, Death and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East,” in *Life in the Face of Death*, ed. R. N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 36.

millennium BC had spread its influence over Canaan. This later people group shared with its West Semitic counterparts many similar views on death and religion, particularly in its pantheon of gods.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Phoenician inscriptions offer valuable insights into various responses to death, including cremation, burial practices, and funeral offerings.<sup>21</sup> Finally, research into West Semitic religion has benefited from recent finds at Ebla (modern Tell Mardikh) and Mari. Documents found at both sites describe in an important manner the post-death deification of kings and worship of dead ancestors.<sup>22</sup>

As a whole, the various West Semitic texts say little regarding human mortality in a general sense. Rather, they focus more on the mythological aspects of death.<sup>23</sup> Of all the texts dealing with these myths, the Ugaritic Aqhat Epic and Epic of Kirta yield the most valuable information regarding human death. They speak of the inevitability of death, mourning, burial, and vengeance.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Ugaritic texts such as these supply most of what we know of West Semitic thanatology.<sup>25</sup>

### Hebrew Sources

Like their ANE counterparts, the ancient Hebrews passed down a number of

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<sup>20</sup>Paola Xella, "Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 3:2066-67.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 2066.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 2060. For a recent and detailed discussion of these texts, see Brian B. Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition*, *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*, vol. 11 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1994), 14-131. Chaps. 2 and 3 of his volume deal with extrabiblical evidence (or lack thereof) for these practices from Ebla, Mari, Ugarit, Nuzi, and Emar.

<sup>23</sup>Xella, "Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought," 2059, writes, "Although there are written documents, no text has been discovered that shows a direct and theoretical interest in the phenomenon of death and its biological and cultural consequences." One could assume that their views on human death probably mirrored those that they ascribed to their gods.

<sup>24</sup>See the versions in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker, trans. Mark S. Smith, Simon B. Parker, Edward L. Greenstein, Theodore J. Lewis, and David Marcus (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 49-80. In addition to these epics, several Ugaritic texts describe rituals and rites dealing with death. See Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002).

<sup>25</sup>Xella, "Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought," 2061, argues that Ugaritic beliefs may be considered representative of the entire region of Canaan.

archaeological and textual sources.<sup>26</sup> Regarding the former, physical funerary remains are plentiful, and they generally parallel those of the Canaanite surroundings.<sup>27</sup> But the primary source for ancient Hebrew thanatology is the Hebrew Bible. More than any of the surrounding societies, Hebrew textual sources dealing with death have been preserved and diligently copied throughout the ages—mostly in the form of Holy Scripture. Thus, in the Hebrew Scriptures, scholars possess an amazing window into the thanatological beliefs of an ancient society—in a way unparalleled in the ancient Near East.

Some caution that the Scriptures are not a reliable source for these (or any other) popular beliefs in ancient Israel. They note that the Scriptures underwent significant polemical redaction over the years, in response to the pagan Canaanite culture. That which was orthodox and preserved does not necessarily correspond to what was actually thought and practiced by common folk. This is an appropriate caution. The Scriptures themselves testify to considerable theological deviance many times in Israelite history. However, it is one thing to say that the authors of Scripture reacted against Canaanite beliefs in their writings, even when orthodoxy was not trendy; it is another thing to assert that the biblical writers misrepresented their historical situation and culture, or that later editors redacted away unorthodox material. The latter cases cannot be proven. Though they may have held minority theological positions, the authors of the Old Testament present a consistent picture. Thus, the proper way to use the Scriptures is to recognize them for what they are—polemical and theological, but reliable witnesses to

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<sup>26</sup>Information on Hebrew thanatological beliefs is abundant. One of the best recent efforts is Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002). See also the helpful, if not classic, treatment by Nicholas J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969).

<sup>27</sup>Resources on this aspect of Hebrew thanatology include Schmidt's and Hallote's books cited above; Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead*, JSOT/ASOR Monograph Series (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992); and Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

orthodox ancient Israelite beliefs. And by proper analysis and exegesis, one can paint a rather comprehensive portrait of Israelite beliefs on death.

### **A Brief Survey of Thanatological Beliefs**

With the sources now identified, this chapter will next investigate various thanatological beliefs as held by ANE peoples. This section will consider four topics—conceptions of death, dispositions toward death, preparations for death, and finally physical and emotional responses to death. For each of these, the ANE material<sup>28</sup> will be provided first, followed by a description of the Israelite beliefs.

#### **ANE Conceptions of Death**

The first topic to be considered is the conception of death among ancient Near Easterners. We will consider basic questions surrounding the nature of death. What happened when someone died? What caused death? What is the origin of death?

Appropriately, the first people group to be examined is the Egyptians. As stated above, the Egyptians seem to have emphasized issues of death and afterlife more than any other society in the ancient Near East. But as Lesko has pointed out, one should remember that this preoccupation has more to do with the Egyptians' love of life and their yearning to possess it eternally than with an "excessive morbidity."<sup>29</sup> The Egyptians' conception of death was tied to their cyclical view of all of life, in which death is just another of a series of changes in life.<sup>30</sup> Thus, death was not viewed as the conclusion of life, but the climax of life—a new stage or a transition, which commenced

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<sup>28</sup>Agam, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Hittite, and West Semitic civilizations will be covered.

<sup>29</sup>Leonard H. Lesko, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egyptian Thought," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 3:1763.

<sup>30</sup>John H. Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 12. The Egyptians had a ready parallel to the cyclical character of human life in the agricultural cycle of the Nile Valley. The annual flood of the Nile built into Egyptian thought a natural procession from life into death into life again.

a new existence.<sup>31</sup> To use a frequent Egyptian metaphor, like a boat arriving in a harbor, death ended one journey, but began another.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Egyptians viewed this life and the next as being integrated into a single sphere. Unlike modern Christians, who sharply distinguish spiritual and physical dimensions, Egyptians saw continuity between “here” (this world) and “there” (the afterlife), between the spiritual and physical, between the realms of the gods and humans.<sup>33</sup> Physical death would merely transfer someone to the immediate neighborhood of the gods.<sup>34</sup> Also important for understanding the Egyptian conception of death is that people group’s view of the person. In Egyptian anthropology, a person was composed of the self, which owned and governed a multiplicity of other components.<sup>35</sup> The most basic of these other constituents was the physical body. And the body was thereby animated by the *ba*—a concept that is difficult to translate but is probably best understood as a soul, intellect, or the “vital energy incarnated in the body during a lifetime.”<sup>36</sup> While these components remained joined in life, death dissolved this community of constituents.<sup>37</sup> However, by means of ritual and burial procedures, a new

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<sup>31</sup>Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 172. Egyptians actually adopted this view over time. In the Old Kingdom, death was viewed more as a perpetuation of the old life. But in the Middle Kingdom, the emphasis switched to the idea of death as a transition. *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>32</sup>Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, 13.

<sup>33</sup>Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 170. Thus, actions in this world—e.g., the mortuary cult and rites—had real and immediate effects on the deceased’s relative comfort and success in the next.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 172. Before death, there is indirect access to the gods. After death, this access is direct.

<sup>35</sup>Jan Assmann, “A Dialogue between Self and Soul: Papyrus Berlin 3024,” in *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience*, ed. J. Assmann, A. I. Baumgarten, and G. G. Stroumsa (Boston: Brill, 1998), 384.

<sup>36</sup>Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 172.

<sup>37</sup>For instance, at death, the Egyptians believed the *ba* left the body, but stayed nearby. Lesko, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egyptian Thought,” 1764. Also surviving after death was the *ka*, a complicated concept, usually meaning second self/twin. Though its use is inconsistent, in most cases, the *ka* was that which remained in the corpse. It had to be fed to sustain the deceased in the afterlife. Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, 19. Finally, the deceased strove for a state of existence called the *akh* (“transfigured one” or spirit). K.-J. Illman, Helmer Ringgren, and H.-J. Fabry, “אֲחִי,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, and Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 8:188.

and more potent assemblage of these constituents could be attained.<sup>38</sup>

Inevitable and inescapable and unexpected, in Mesopotamia death was pictured as an eternal, sleeplike repose.<sup>39</sup> The common euphemism for death—“to go to one’s fate”---captured this universal, morbid resignation regarding the future state. Mesopotamians believed that death chewed up the body, so to speak, and spit out a spirit or sometimes a shadow or *etemmu*—a roaming evil spirit capable of harming those left among the living.<sup>40</sup> As with Canaanite thanatology, death involved a total loss of blood and a blowing out of the last breath. As Bottéro explains, this final exhale signified the “final return of ‘breath,’ which had been given *ad tempus* by the gods, and which during the entire lifetime had left and reentered man continuously, but now left him forever.”<sup>41</sup> Immortality was reserved only for the gods—a view portrayed poignantly in the Gilgamesh Epic, which speaks of the hero’s vain quest for eternal life and immortality. For instance, the tavern keeper asks the main character a rhetorical question: “Gilgamesh, wherefore do you wander?” And the keeper responds himself: “The eternal life you are seeking you shall not find. / When the gods created mankind, / They established death for mankind, / And withheld eternal life for themselves.”<sup>42</sup> In addition, as this quote illustrates, in Mesopotamian thanatology, death itself originated through the mandate of the gods. From another work, the Babylonian Atra-Hasis Epic, one learns further the reason for this divine mandate—that the gods wished to limit human population because

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<sup>38</sup>Assmann, “A Dialogue between Self and Soul,” 384.

<sup>39</sup>Cooper, “The Fate of Mankind,” 23, and Yamauchi, “Life, Death and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East,” 29. Cf. Wolfram Von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, trans. Donald G. Schley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 201. He writes, “No one can outrun Death, for Death has a great lead on people: even the heroes of the primeval age had to experience this.”

<sup>40</sup>Illman, Fabry, and Ringgren, “מִוֶּת,” 189.

<sup>41</sup>Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 271.

<sup>42</sup>Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 75.

the growing multitudes were making too much “uproar.”<sup>43</sup> Once dead, the individual Mesopotamian went to a shadowy netherworld—a place ruled by Nergal, the god of the underworld. There, Nergal was surrounded by 600 Anunnaki, the judges of the underworld. These judges were not so much monitors of morality as they were enforcers who kept the dead ensnared in the underworld.<sup>44</sup>

Similar to Mesopotamian beliefs, Hittite thanatology affirmed the inevitability, finality, and darkness of death. Indeed, the Hittite version of Gilgamesh speaks of the dead as being “sent to dark earth.”<sup>45</sup> Unlike other ancient Near Easterners, the Hittites envisioned less of a union between the spirit and body; at death, the two were separated, with the latter becoming superfluous in the afterlife.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the grave and death served as the means by which the spirit shed its body in order to become a *GIDIM*, a “ghost of the dead.”<sup>47</sup>

As stated above, the most helpful insights into West Semitic conceptions of death emerge primarily from the documents found at Ras Shamra in the city of Ugarit.<sup>48</sup> Like the Hittites and Mesopotamians, Ugaritic texts universally conceive of death as inescapable and of immortality as enjoyed only by the gods. Even rulers, though viewed

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<sup>43</sup>“The [land] was bellowing [like a bull].” W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 67. Because the gods were the source of death, humans eyed the divine with a great amount of fear and superstition. This is seen particularly in the elaborate incantatory and supplicatory prayers of the Mesopotamians. Cf. Jon Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 54.

<sup>44</sup>H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 122.

<sup>45</sup>Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 161.

<sup>46</sup>Hence the Hittite’s allowance of (and preference for in the case of rulers) cremation rituals. Trevor Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 178.

<sup>47</sup>Haas, “Death and the Afterlife in Hittite Thought,” 2023.

<sup>48</sup>As Xella, “Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought,” 2061, writes, “In spite of its small size and relatively limited political importance, the ancient kingdom of Ugarit handed down a combination of widespread beliefs, myths, and rites from early antiquity and can therefore be considered representative of the religious situation of the whole geographical area.” Still, as Xella notes, thanatological beliefs fluctuated even in Ugarit.

as god-like, were not exempt.<sup>49</sup> As with other religions in the ancient Near East, Ugaritic religion affirmed that the “soul” (*nps̄h*; cf. the Hebrew word, נֶפֶשׁ) left a man when he died, going out his nose like wind or smoke. For example, in the Aqhat Epic, Aqhat is killed by the goddess Anat, and his death is described as follows: “[His] life went off like a breath, / His soul [like a sneeze](?), / From [his nose] like smoke.”<sup>50</sup> Once dead, individuals—poor and rich, good and bad—descended into the shadowy world of Mot, the god of death. Not much is known about what they experienced after their journey to his abode—though given the nature of Mot (see below), it could not have been pleasant.

### Hebrew Conceptions of Death

Ancient Israelite conceptions of death share some definite features with those of their northern and eastern neighbors—the people of Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Syria-Palestine.<sup>51</sup> For instance, all ancient Near Easterners, including the Hebrews, affirmed the universality of death for all men (Ps 49:10; Eccl 2:16). Yet, as a whole, Israel held rather distinctive beliefs, given their close proximity to these polytheistic societies. As Davies states, “Whatever the temptations, and occasional backsliding, the Israelites were officially monotheistic, and their thanatology reflects this.”<sup>52</sup> So, for example, the Israelites believed death originated not with the gods or due to demonic

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 2063. Xella cites the deathbed scene of Keret, king of Khubur. His children at his side, exclaim, “Ah, father! Should you die like mortal men? Is not Keret the son of El, the child of the Benevolent and Saint?”

<sup>50</sup>Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 66. Cf. Yamauchi, “Life, Death and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East,” 36.

<sup>51</sup>On the contrary, Hebrew and Egyptian conceptions differed greatly. Yamauchi, “Life, Death and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East,” 49.

<sup>52</sup>Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity*, 60. He writes, “The Hebrew Bible is full of Israelite opposition to the various ‘Baal’ and the idolatries with which the Jewish leaders and prophets associated them. The Jews in their Exodus were only too aware of the altogether ‘other’ nature of their single God to be able to adapt, never mind adopt, the Osiris-Isis solution to death, with its radical indifference to the mortal/immortal dualism. Neither was the grim pessimism of the Babylonian Epics an object of interest, as the Bible insisted that God deemed his Creation to be ‘good,’ and humans were in no sense to be seen as nothing more than discardable slaves of the gods.”

malice, but rather with human sin and the judgment of the one God, YHWH (Gen 3:14-19).<sup>53</sup> Even their conception of the event of death reflects this monotheistic metanarrative. The Hebrews believed that when one died, the divine breath (רוּחַ), which was imparted to humans in creation (Gen 2:7), was lost (Eccl 12:7), thereby returning man to the dust from which he came (Gen 3:19; Pss 90:3; 103:14; Eccl 3:20).<sup>54</sup> While at first this may seem to mirror ANE and particularly Ugaritic belief, it is actually quite different. This breath is taken away by the only true God, YHWH, who personified life (Deut 30:19; Job 12:10; Ps 68:20)—not by any god of death (Mot) who overcomes the god of life (Baal). Indeed, in the Old Testament YHWH is most often directly responsible for death.<sup>55</sup> YHWH alone rules, controls, and is sovereign over death and life (1 Sam 2:6; Jer 21:8), and YHWH alone numbers the days of life (Job 14:5; Ps 139:16).<sup>56</sup>

The Hebrews believed that, once dead, one went down to a shadowy place below the earth's surface called Sheol (שְׁאוֹל; Gen 37:35; Job 7:9; Ezek 31:15, 17; among others).<sup>57</sup> But just as Sheol was conceived as ghostly in appearance, it is also vague in

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<sup>53</sup>Some have tried to connect the origin of death in the Scriptures with the Mesopotamian viewpoint, as portrayed in the Atra-Hasis Epic. While it is true that both texts present death as stemming from divine reaction to human action, it is not true that the stories are significantly alike or dependent. In the stories, the character of the gods/God and the nature of the mortal sin are considerably at odds. In the Atra-Hasis Epic, the gods are cantankerousness and capricious, and the humans are not sinful, just noisy.

<sup>54</sup>This breath distinguished a living individual from the deceased. Cf. Xella, "Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought," 2067.

<sup>55</sup>For instance, in the prophetic book of Ezekiel, YHWH is often seen as a direct cause of death—either by using his agents, but most powerfully through his own direct action. For instance, he makes whole nations and peoples "desolations" and a "reproach" (Ezek 5:14; 20:26; 25:13). He makes cities and land and even mountains desolate (Ezek 6:6, 14; 15:8; 26:19; 30:12, 14; 32:15; 33:28, 29; 35:3, 4, 7, 9). He destroys people (Ezek 9:8; 14:9; 25:7; 28:16; 34:16) and even cattle (Ezek 32:13). He causes people to perish (Ezek 6:3; 25:7, 16; 28:16). He smites (Ezek 32:15) and consumes (Ezek 20:13; 22:31; 43:8) and requires blood (Ezek 3:20). He gives flesh to the mountains (Ezek 32:5) and fills them with slain (Ezek 35:8). He brings people down to the pit (Ezek 26:20; 28:8; 32:18), makes people dwell in the lower parts of the earth (Ezek 26:20; 31:18), and consigns people to Sheol (Ezek 31:16). Thus, whether through divine sentence or divine action, YHWH is portrayed as quite lethal.

<sup>56</sup>Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 40.

<sup>57</sup>Two of the best resources on Sheol in the Old Testament are articles by Daniel I. Block, "The Old Testament on Hell," in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 43-66; idem, "Beyond the Grave: Ezekiel's Vision of Death and Afterlife," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 2 (1992): 113-41.

terms of the Bible's presentation of it. Given the abundant mention of death in the Old Testament (hundreds of times, using various terms), Sheol is mentioned relatively rarely (65 times). And even when it is cited, many times it is used in a figurative or comparative sense. Thus, relatively little is known about Sheol, its inhabitants, or its topography—especially when compared to the New Testament treatment of the afterlife.

Here is a sampling of what is known concerning Sheol. Entering through Sheol's gate (Isa 38:10; cf. Job 38:17; Pss 9:14; 107:18), shadowy individuals would encounter a pit (Isa 14:15; and many others), where “shades” dwell (שְׁדַיִם; Isa 14:9). In most cases, inhabitants seem to have been fully conscious and existing as a faint image of their former bodies.<sup>58</sup> And they are often portrayed as prostrate and stratified according to their conduct on earth.<sup>59</sup> As the author of Ecclesiastes indicates in his typical matter-of-fact fashion, Sheol is not a satisfying place: “All that your hand finds to do, do it with all your ability; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going” (Eccl 9:10). Indeed, many texts speak of death as bringing separation from YHWH himself (Pss 6:5; 88:5; 115:17; Isa 38:18). Finally, as with other aspects of Hebrew thanatology, it is YHWH who sends people to, and even brings them back from, Sheol (1 Sam 2:6; Isa 26:19).<sup>60</sup> In fact, the only escape from the netherworld is the gracious deliverance of YHWH, who controls the gates of Sheol—a concept mentioned in the Old Testament (Pss 16:10; 49:15[16]; 56:13[14]; 86:13), but would have been unthinkable in other ANE contexts.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Block, “Beyond the Grave,” 128.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>60</sup>Eugene Merrill, “שְׁאוֹל,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:7.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

## ANE Dispositions toward Death

How did the people of the ancient Near East perceive the experience of death itself? What kind of emotions and ideas did death evoke? For the Egyptians, death was a rite of passage necessary to attain that which awaited one in the new eternal existence. However, because of their emphasis on the afterlife, Egyptians tended to be more positive overall in their view of death, as opposed to the bleakness of their northern and eastern neighbors.<sup>62</sup> But this positive outlook is only in a relative sense. It would be wrong to assert that Egyptians longed for death with great anticipation.<sup>63</sup> Rarely is death welcomed in the literature, and in many cases death brought danger of annihilation, eternal imprisonment and sleep, and even torments in the netherworld—especially for the common person.<sup>64</sup> These dangers highlighted the necessity of the burial and funerary preparations described below.<sup>65</sup> Afterlife was generally assured, but the quality of the afterlife was not.<sup>66</sup> Thus, at times Egyptians expressed ambivalence towards death.<sup>67</sup>

However, this ambivalence might seem cheery compared to the gloomy thanatology of the Mesopotamians. To grasp the dark Mesopotamian disposition toward

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<sup>62</sup>Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity*, 50.

<sup>63</sup>This position is classically asserted in Jan Zandee, *Death as an Enemy according to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1960). Cf. P. S. Johnston, "Death in Israel and Egypt," in *The Old Testament in Its World*, ed. R. P. Gordon and J. C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 100-04. Johnston cites several helpful texts attesting to negative attitudes toward death.

<sup>64</sup>Murnane, "Taking It with You," 36. In the Middle Kingdom, an idea of the judgment of the dead becomes prominent. For a discussion of this topic, see Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 169-82.

<sup>65</sup>Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 170.

<sup>66</sup>A quote from the Pyramid Texts, quoted by Murnane, "Taking It with You," 37, illustrates this belief: "Raise yourself up. . . . Take your head, collect your bones, gather your limbs, shake the earth from your flesh! Take your bread that rots not, (and) your beer that sours not." However, the exact destination depended on status. The pharaohs had a heavenly destination; meanwhile non-royal individuals either crossed to the "beautiful West" (Old Kingdom) or descended to the underworld (end of Old Kingdom and beyond). See Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 157-58.

<sup>67</sup>This ambivalence is perhaps illustrated best in the The Dispute between a Man and His Ba. For a good version, see Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 1, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 163-69. For an insightful discussion of this text, see Assmann, "A Dialogue between Self and Soul," 384-403.

death fully, one must understand that people's view of afterlife. Once persons died, they had no "real" existence to anticipate—neither heaven nor hell.<sup>68</sup> Illustrative of this belief is a speech by Utanapishtim to Gilgamesh in the latter's epic: "No one sees death, / No one sees the face of death, / No one [hears] the voice of death, / But cruel death cuts off mankind. . . . The sleeper and the dead, how alike they are! / They limn not death's image, / No one dead has ever greeted a human in this world."<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Mesopotamians believed that the only real "living on" or "eternal life" was experienced through a person's progeny or through the remembrance of one's great deeds and accomplishments.<sup>70</sup> Still, a kind of shadowy existence after death was available in the netherworld, provided that burial and mourning rites were performed in a proper manner. But the netherworld did not offer a concrete existence; nor was it something anticipated with joy. For instance, the *Death of Ur-Nammu and His Descent into the Netherworld* describes the place as "the desolate," complete with bitter food and brackish water.<sup>71</sup> Thus, unlike the Egyptians, Mesopotamians really had nothing to gain in death. Even so, death's inevitability led to the fact that they maintained a realistic, albeit dark, disposition toward it.

Like the Mesopotamians, the Hittites regarded death largely with pessimism. This negativism is quite understandable given their view of the netherworld as a place of muddy and undrinkable waters, inedible and rotten food, malevolent spirits, and pale

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<sup>68</sup>Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought," 1883.

<sup>69</sup>Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 82-83.

<sup>70</sup>Again, the latter attitude is witnessed in the Epic of Gilgamesh. In a speech to Enkidu, Gilgamesh tries to convince his companion to join a fight against Humbaba: "The gods dwell forever in the sun, / People's days are numbered, / Whatever they attempt is a puff of air. / Here you are, even you, afraid of death, / What has become of your bravery's might? / I will go before you, / You can call out to me, 'Go on, be not afraid!' If I fall on the way, I'll establish my name: / 'Gilgamesh, who joined battle with fierce Humbaba' (they'll say)." Ibid., 19.

<sup>71</sup>Kramer, "The Death of Ur-Nammu and His Descent to the Netherworld," 118 (ll. 73, 82).

phantoms.<sup>72</sup> Yet, while this bleak fate awaited most individuals, death for Hittite kings seems to have been a happier experience.<sup>73</sup> For instance, Haas cites a substitution ritual, where the king requests with expectancy his “divine destiny among the gods of heaven,” apart from the “spirits of the dead” as found in the netherworld.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the kings were believed to ascend to a pastoral utopia of sorts—a land of lush lawns and livestock occupied by fellow royalty. This belief in a divine destiny for kings seems to have led to a long-standing tradition of royal ancestor worship among the Hittites. In fact, deceased kings continued to receive homage and sacrifices from former subjects and family members.<sup>75</sup> Thus, the disposition toward death in the Hittite world seems to have depended on one’s status.

As seen in many of the Ugaritic texts, the West Semitic peoples maintained a somber resignation towards death. This attitude is exemplified in the Epic of Aqhat. In this story the hero is offered immortality by the goddess Anat in exchange for his beautiful bow. He can only respond despondently, “Maid, don’t beguile me: / To a hero your guile is slime. / In the end a man gets what? / A man gets what as his fate? / Glaze is poured on the head, / Lye all over the skull. / [ ] the death of all I shall die, / I too shall die and be dead.”<sup>76</sup> Not only were they resigned to the prospect of death, but the people of Ugarit, like the Hittites and Mesopotamians, also dreaded death. This view is seen

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<sup>72</sup>Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World*, 181. The Hittite view of the netherworld seems at this point to mirror that of the Mesopotamians. Haas, “Death and the Afterlife in Hittite Thought,” 2030, claims that the Hittite netherworld beliefs are not as uniform as some portray, however. While they do seem to follow Mesopotamian beliefs in some portrayals of the netherworld, at times the portrayal is not as negative, with the dead continuing in a sort of pastoral state of existence.

<sup>73</sup>But there are references to terrified kings attempting to avoid death at all costs. Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World*, 181.

<sup>74</sup>Haas, “Death and the Afterlife in Hittite Thought,” 2023. The Hittites conceived of the earth and netherworld as a unity, and both were distinguished from heaven, the dwelling place of the gods.

<sup>75</sup>Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World*, 180-82.

<sup>76</sup>Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 61-62. Aqhat soon experienced this fate.

most clearly through the lens of Ugaritic mythology. Indeed, in Ugarit and later in Phoenicia, death was personified as the fearsome god Mot, whose characterization in Canaanite texts gives scholars an idea of how Canaanites perceived death in its demythologized form.<sup>77</sup> Mot was often portrayed as a voracious devourer, who swallowed both humans and even gods (such as Baal). Pictured as living in a pit of mud or sometimes as guarding a gate between two mountains, Mot would gulp down unsuspecting mortals in a single mouthful. A quote from a Baal and Anat poem illustrates: “Do not get too close to Divine Mot. / Do not let him take you like a lamb in his mouth, / Like a kid crushed in the chasm of his throat.”<sup>78</sup> Given this bleak picture, preservation from death was seen as a reason for rejoicing, and death itself was seen as a cause for great mourning.<sup>79</sup>

### Hebrew Dispositions toward Death

Israelite dispositions toward death as found in the Scriptures vary somewhat. Certainly, the biblical writers made no attempt to sugarcoat death. So, for instance, death

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<sup>77</sup>For more resources on Mot, see Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament*, 99-107; John Barclay Burns, “Some Personifications of Death in the Old Testament,” *Irish Biblical Studies* 11 (1989): 23-34; M. S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990): 55; Theodore Lewis, “Mot,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:922-24; J. C. de Moor, “Lovable Death in the Ancient Near East,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 22 (1990): 233-45; and J. F. Healy, “Mot,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Karel von der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem Van Der Horst (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 598-603.

<sup>78</sup>Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 139. Cf. Hallote, *Death, Burial, and Afterlife in the Biblical World*, 112. This poem’s title brings up a crucial role for Mot—as the mythological enemy of Baal, the Canaanite fertility god. Healey, “Mot,” 599, writes, “He [Mot] is the representative of all that is contrary to Baal’s nature. Baal represents principally the life-giving fertility associated with essential autumnal rainfall. Mot represents the death-dealing sterility associated, at least in part, with the summer heat and drought.” Indeed, Mot often has this type of agricultural role to play—i.e., functioning to dictate the agricultural cycle. In this cycle, Mot is involved in a constant seasonal struggle with Baal—the struggle between sprouting and withering that never sees completion. Interestingly, Mot played no role in the cult of Ugarit. Though he makes it into the pantheon of gods, he is never worshiped, and he is never the base of Ugaritic name formulation. For this reason, some scholars posit that he functioned as more of a demonic character, rather than divine.

<sup>79</sup>Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 34. In the Kirta Epic, the family rejoices because of the father’s “not-dying.”

is often personified as a terrible enemy. The psalmist describes death as possessing terrors and snares (Pss 18:4; 55:4). Habakkuk speaks of an unsatisfied death, which opens its throat like Sheol (Hab 2:5). In the book of Job, Bildad describes the firstborn of death consuming limbs (Job 18:13), and he associates death with the King of Terrors. In Jeremiah 9:21, one finds death coming into windows and entering palaces.<sup>80</sup> Yet, despite death's terrifying reputation, the Hebrews often perceived it as an accepted, and even peaceful, end to life—especially if it followed a long, blessed life, with many offspring.<sup>81</sup> If these latter stipulations were met, the Israelites considered this as a “good” death. But Hebrew thanatology also deemed certain deaths as “bad.” For example, a person usually experienced a “bad” death if it was premature or violent or if there were no surviving heirs.<sup>82</sup> Finally, unique among their ANE neighbors, the Israelites held out hope of escaping death (Ps 78:50) and of redemption. As the Psalmist writes, “But man in his splendor will not remain; He is like the beasts that perish. . . . Death shall be their shepherd; and the righteous will rule over them in the morning. But their image shall be for Sheol to wear out so that they have no home. But God will deliver my soul from the hand of Sheol, for he will receive me” (Ps 49:12-16). A few later passages also suggest the beginnings of the hope of resurrection (Isa 26:19; 53:10-12; Ezek 37:1-14; Hos 6:1-3; explicitly in Dan 12:2) and immortality (Ps 16:10-11).

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<sup>80</sup>These descriptions of death's activities seem too similar to those of the ANE god Mot to be just coincidence. As Johnston states, “Whether this refers directly to the god Mot (i.e., ‘Death,’ known from Ugaritic texts), or uses ancient mythology without adhering to it, or is just evocative imagery, is impossible to say.” Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 29. However, in many cases the author seems to be using the personification for Yahwistic purposes. Indeed, in all cases, it is not voracious Mot who takes initiative and swallows the individuals, as might be found in Canaanite religions. Instead, YHWH consigns people to Sheol.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 26. Abraham, David, and Gideon are all described as dying at a good, hoary age (Gen 15:15; 25:8; Judg 8:32; 1 Chr 29:28).

<sup>82</sup>T. D. Alexander, “The Old Testament View of Life after Death,” *Themelios* 11 (1986): 42.

## ANE Preparation for Death

To a great extent, preparations for death in the ancient Near East were tied to the physical and emotional responses to death as described below. Without exception, the majority of death preparations in ANE societies involved attempts to ensure proper responses to the death—especially the physical responses (burial, mourning, care of the dead, etc.)—as described in the following section.

Of all the ANE peoples, the Egyptians provided for death in the most elaborate fashion. For the Egyptians—at least for the upper classes—much of life was consumed with the preparation for death, and they deemed these arrangements essential to a positive existence in the afterlife. Thus, Egyptians made many of these preparations far in advance—often a long time before death was even a possibility.<sup>83</sup> The most visible and best documented of these preparations was the construction of tombs. However, planning the mourning and burial rites, gathering proper burial supplies (including texts for guiding one in the afterlife), and provisioning the burial site were just as important. The following section will provide more details on the specifics of these preparations for death.

Preparations for death in ancient Mesopotamia also involved making provisions for proper burial and mourning rites. However, for Mesopotamians, preparations began in earnest shortly before death. Not unlike today, a person would begin by gathering loved ones. Family and friends would then place the dying on a special funerary bed, with a chair on the left side that was presumably used as a seat for the soul.<sup>84</sup> Finally, attendants would recite a spell to release the soul from the body and provide the first funerary offerings to the newly departed family member.<sup>85</sup> This would

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<sup>83</sup>Murnane, “Taking It with You,” 35.

<sup>84</sup>Scurlock, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought,” 1884.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

lead into other arrangements to be described below. Mesopotamians also prepared for death in another way—by ensuring that one’s memory persisted even after death through heroism or fame. As noted above, one’s notoriety is what truly lived on after death, over and above the shadowy existence of the soul in the netherworld. The most celebrated example of this attitude is found in the Epic of Gilgamesh, which, though mythic in some respects, undoubtedly taps a prevalent desire among the Mesopotamians. Gilgamesh also points to another way to prepare for death—to attempt to escape it.<sup>86</sup> This type of “preparation” was prevalent among some Mesopotamian sovereigns. For instance, Cooper notes that the seventh-century Assyrian ruler Esarhaddon was “notoriously superstitious, or rather excruciatingly attentive to anything that might portend ill for him and his regime.”<sup>87</sup> Apparently, Esarhaddon expended much royal time and energy following the ritual instructions of astrologers and diviners in an attempt to prolong his life. He even used a ceremony where a substitute king was enthroned and summarily executed so that the intended punishment would not befall the actual king.<sup>88</sup> Other ancient kings used the same method.<sup>89</sup>

Not much is known about Hittite preparations for death—though scholars know more about royal practices than those of the common people. For example, like the Mesopotamians, the Hittites also “prepared” for death by attempting to prolong life—either by means of killing off substitute kings or through appeals to the underworld

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<sup>86</sup>In Gilgamesh’s case, he tried to escape by finding the secret to immortality.

<sup>87</sup>Cooper, “The Fate of Mankind,” 22.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>For a good, succinct discussion of this practice, see Daniel I. Block, “My Servant David: Ancient Israel’s Vision of the Messiah,” in *Israel’s Messiah in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll R. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 52-53. The relevant texts may be found in S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, State Archives of Assyria 10 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1993), nos. 1-4, 12, 25, 189, 219-21, 314, 350-52. Cf. Jean Bottéro, “The Substitute King and His Fate,” in *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, trans. Z. Bahrani and M. Van de Mieroop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 138-55.

goddesses of Istustaya and Papaya.<sup>90</sup> Another type of preparation was the political preparation made in advance of the death of Hittite kings—an event that often led to instability and crisis in Hittite society. Indeed, Hittite literature labels royal deaths as a great “sin.” As Bryce writes, “His [the king’s] death is a catastrophic event, a disturbance of the cosmic order, for without the charisma of the king—the medium between gods and men—the destiny of the land, the very existence of human society, is threatened.”<sup>91</sup>

In Ugarit and among other Western Semites, one of the principle preparations for death involved architectural planning. The people of Ugarit often participated in an ancestor cult, in which the living desired to maintain constant communication with the dead.<sup>92</sup> The design of houses was one of the primary means of facilitating this interaction. In fact, people planned houses with the living and dead in mind, and they constructed their homes to ensure adequate space for generations of both. Ancestors could pass through shafts to the family tombs, which were generally located beneath the house. Once there, the living offered prayers and offerings in exchange for healing, fertility, and insight into future events.<sup>93</sup>

### **Hebrew Preparation for Death**

Few scholars deal with this aspect of Israelite thanatology; instead, most focus on rites after death, such as mourning and burial. Propitiously, it is these final pre-death preparations that Old Testament death stories elucidate. So, we will postpone the

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<sup>90</sup>Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World*, 181. Haas, “Death and the Afterlife in Hittite Thought,” 2023, notes that the Testament of Khattushili I gives other indications of preparations for death. In this text the terminally sick sovereign appeals to his wife: “Wash me [my corpse] well! Hold me to your breast; at your breast protect me in/through the Earth!”

<sup>91</sup>Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World*, 176.

<sup>92</sup>Xella, “Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought,” 2061.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*

discussion of this aspect of Hebrew thanatology until then.

### **ANE Physical and Emotional Responses to Death**

Regardless of era or locale, society or ethnic group, death always induces intense reactions. In most cases, the response includes some sort of physical action: burial, funerary preparations (including preparation of the corpse), grief-filled ceremonies, and religious and cultic rituals. And almost universally, people respond to death with intense emotional reactions, such as mourning, wailing, and recited lamentations. These reactions to the end of life are no less evident among the societies of the ancient Near East. The following will briefly survey these responses among the major ANE peoples.

In ancient Egypt, the responses to death best known to scholars today are physical in nature and can be organized into four categories. These include: mummification, tomb construction and provision, burial inscriptions, and mourning and ritual rites. Space limitations allow only a brief comment on each. First, as mentioned above, the Egyptians stressed the continuity of this life and the afterlife. Because of this emphasis, they expended enormous effort in order to preserve the corpse for the next life.<sup>94</sup> The primary means of preservation was through mummification—a process that involved removing the brain and viscera (except the heart, which was often draped in linen and replaced) and meticulously wrapping the hollow shell of the body.<sup>95</sup> The next step of the journey for the mummified body was the tomb—usually a rectangular stone

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<sup>94</sup>Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 170. This was at least the case for royalty and nobility. Scholars know much more about their burials than those of the poor—the former being buried in more substantial and better preserved tombs.

<sup>95</sup>The procedure, which often took between thirty and 200 days, improved significantly over the years, resulting in a better preservation of the body. Lesko, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egyptian Thought,” 1766. For an excellent, illustrated, and historical treatment of mummification, see Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, 46-91.

structure, away from population centers. The more elaborate tombs would normally include several rooms, niches for continual offerings, various protective devices against robbery, and stelae describing the deceased's life. And most Egyptians outfitted tombs with ritual burial texts, food, clothes, and other provisions—virtually anything that might be of service for the corpse in the next life.<sup>96</sup> The final step included the funeral—an event that entailed a series of religious rites, the most important of which was the “opening of the mouth” ceremony. In this ritual, priests touched the eyes, ears, mouth, and nose of the deceased with adze to revive the corpse symbolically.<sup>97</sup>

As with the Egyptians, the Mesopotamian responses to death best known today are revealed through funerary and burial artifacts.<sup>98</sup> Also like the Egyptians, Mesopotamians depended on proper burial and funerary rites to reach and survive the netherworld, though their perception of that place differed significantly from their western neighbors. After the extensive preparations described above (which positioned the corpse on the funerary bed), the next step in the process was to prepare the body for burial. This involved washing and perfuming the body and outfitting it with items for the journey to the netherworld.<sup>99</sup> Individuals were then interred in tombs, coffins, or sarcophagi. Some of these would have been placed in family or royal crypts beneath houses and palaces. However, many common Mesopotamians probably used public cemeteries.<sup>100</sup> The funeral itself included about a week of mourning rites, which followed

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<sup>96</sup>Murnane, “Taking It with You,” 40-41. Again, for a more detailed discussion, see Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, 46-91.

<sup>97</sup>Lesko, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egyptian Thought,” 1766.

<sup>98</sup>Few burial texts remain, and most are in poor condition. Cooper, “The Fate of Mankind,” 24.

<sup>99</sup>Items could range from food and sandals for the common people to even chariots for royalty. Mesopotamians would also include offerings to the netherworld gods. Scurlock, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought,” 1884.

<sup>100</sup>Since these would never be built upon by successive generations (and thus preserved in tells), most cemeteries are assumed to have vanished due to weather and looters. Few remain today. Cooper, “The Fate of Mankind,” 23.

set patterns. Family members (and subjects in the case of royalty) were expected to participate in this mourning. Dressed in tattered clothes, they would cut themselves and shout loud, literary laments, as well as eulogies for the dead.<sup>101</sup> At times, professional mourners would be engaged to help fill out the crowd.

For the Hittites, the physical responses to death included both inhumation and cremation—the latter being somewhat unique in the ancient Near East.<sup>102</sup> Whatever the process, it needed to be done quickly, for a neglected corpse was thought to wander the world as a malevolent spirit.<sup>103</sup> In cases of inhumation, nobility were normally buried in stone cist graves, while the common people were sometimes stuffed into large jars called *pithoi* or buried in tombs under houses.<sup>104</sup> Royalty were often cremated, and the ceremony that accompanied the burning was quite elaborate. Of all the known texts describing cremation rituals, the description of the fourteen-day observance for the death of Sharri-Kushukh, king of Carchemish, is the most complete. Each day, different offerings were made, feasts were eaten, and incantations were recited—all with the purpose of placating the gods of the next world and the ancestors of the king.<sup>105</sup>

Finally, as mentioned above, in Ugarit, individuals responded to death by placing corpses in tombs underneath the houses—though aboveground cemeteries have been found.<sup>106</sup> The purpose for these below-the-house burials seems to be related to the

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 24. For one of the laments honoring the deeds of the dead, see Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 60-61.

<sup>102</sup>As stated earlier, since the spirit left the body at death, the Hittites did not see the necessity of preserving of the body, like the Egyptians did. Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World*, 179. Evidence for both cremation and inhumation are found close to each other near Hattusa and Yazilikaya. Ibid., 178. The Phoenicians also engaged in this practice.

<sup>103</sup>Haas, “Death and the Afterlife in Hittite Thought,” 2023.

<sup>104</sup>Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World*, 178-79.

<sup>105</sup>Haas, “Death and the Afterlife in Hittite Thought,” 2024-27, describes it in detail.

<sup>106</sup>Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity*, 56, notes that one has been found near the temple of Baal at Ugarit.

cult of the dead, which played a central role of Ugaritic society.<sup>107</sup> Mourning began immediately for the dead, with primary responsibility for leading the lamentations falling to the children of the deceased.<sup>108</sup> Like the Mesopotamians, mourning rituals for the people of Ugarit included loud wailing, body mutilation, and the wearing of dusty garments.<sup>109</sup> Ritual mourning was also common in Phoenicia. For instance, a depiction on the lid of a Phoenician sarcophagus portrays wailing mourners proceeding before the king with offerings.<sup>110</sup>

### **Hebrew Physical and Emotional Responses to Death**

Once again, Israelite practices both mirror and deviate from ANE customs in the responses to death. Like their ANE neighbors, the Israelites reacted with strong emotions in their bereavement. Immediate responses included intense weeping (Gen 23:2; 2 Sam 3:32; 18:33; 19:4), persistent anguish (Gen 24:67; 37:35), and the chanting of laments (1 Sam 1:17-27; 2 Sam 3:33-34; 2 Chr 35:25). In fact, it was considered scandalous for Ezekiel not to mourn for his wife (Ezek 24:16).<sup>111</sup> The lamentation ritual lasted anywhere from seven days (Gen 50:10ff.; 1 Sam 31:13) to thirty (Num 20:29; Deut 34:8). Mourning customs included wearing sackcloth and torn clothes (2 Sam 3:31), and fasting and feasting (Gen 37:34; 2 Sam 1:11-13), though self-mutilation was prohibited (Lev 19:27; 21:5; Deut 14:5). The Scriptures also contain references to men and women “skilled in mourning” (2 Chr 35:25), which likely indicates the existence of professional

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<sup>107</sup>Indeed, the dead and the living appear to have lived in a mutually beneficial arrangement—as opposed to other ANE cultures where the dead threatened the living. Xella, “Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought,” 2064.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 2064-65.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 2065.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

<sup>111</sup>Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 47.

mourners of some sort.<sup>112</sup>

Aside from Jacob's Egyptian-like procession and burial and Abner's funeral (2 Sam 3:31-36), little is said in the Scriptures regarding Israelite funerals. For the most part, accounts simply state that a person is buried; and these statements are mostly found in the stories of major figures.

The Old Testament is similarly vague regarding the physical aspects of burials.<sup>113</sup> Most of what is known of Israelite burial practices arises from archaeological study. In particular, Bloch-Smith's analysis of some 850 Iron Age burials in Palestine and the Transjordan has become the standard work—adding to our understanding of both the burial types and contents in that time period and location.<sup>114</sup> Her first chapter identifies eight different types of burials—simple; cist; jar; anthropoid coffin; bathtub coffin; cave, chamber, or shaft; arcosolia and bench; and cremation.<sup>115</sup> She notes that the type chosen seems to vary based on geography; but more importantly, this distribution reflects the influences of “different cultural groups.”<sup>116</sup> For example, one can find Phoenician influences in the practice of cremation. Evidence of this practice is found only on the coast and only in the late eighth to early sixth centuries BC—an era and area of high Phoenician activity in Palestine.<sup>117</sup>

Bloch-Smith also identifies an assortment of tomb artifacts, which, like the

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 52. The Scriptures speak of the location of the tomb as being important for the Israelites (Gen 23; Judg 8 32; 16:31; 2 Sam 2:32; 17:23; 18:37). But not much else is revealed.

<sup>114</sup>This study is found in her published dissertation cited above. For a good summary of her arguments and analysis, see Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, “The Cult of the Dead in Judah: Interpreting the Material Remains,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 213-24.

<sup>115</sup>Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead*, 25-62.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid. So also, cist graves are found mostly in the Canaanite lowlands; anthropoid coffins are an obvious Egyptian influence; bench tombs are the method of choice in the Judahite and Transjordan highlands; and Assyrian influence is found in the bathtub-like coffins.

tomb types, vary based on location and period, as well as the relative wealth of the deceased.<sup>118</sup> The diversity increases after the tenth century BC, from which time, Bloch-Smith found food remains, combs, mirrors, cosmetics, gaming pieces, amulets, and cult objects, in addition to the typical ceramic storage items.<sup>119</sup> Perhaps most interesting of these artifacts are the female pillar-base figurines, which Bloch-Smith connects with the cult of the mother goddess in Israel (Asherah). According to Bloch-Smith, families included these in tombs for the benefit of the surviving childbearing members.<sup>120</sup> She maintains that all of these items were used in the prevalent cult of the dead in Israel.

This leads to the final topic to be examined in this section—whether or not Israelites engaged in an ancestor cult and necromancy. This issue has received much attention of late and has generated discussions beyond the scope of this dissertation. We will merely note the state of current scholarship, and reserve judgment on the question of the existence and extent of these practices. Many scholars, such as Bloch-Smith, have argued for a widespread cult of the dead in Israel.<sup>121</sup> In light of Ugaritic evidence, Theodore Lewis contends—and many scholars agree—that biblical texts attest to “an ongoing battle throughout ancient Israel’s history between adherents of what becomes normative Yahwism and those who practiced death cult rituals.”<sup>122</sup> These rituals—which are thought to have mirrored practices of Egypt, Ugarit, and Mesopotamia—were done either to placate or secure favors from the dead.

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<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 63-108.

<sup>119</sup>Bloch-Smith has a helpful table of these on p. 144.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>121</sup>As biblical evidence is scant, this consensus among most scholars is based on archaeological remains and/or ANE texts. However, Bloch-Smith engages in a more integrated study, interpreting the various biblical names for the dead and formulae in light of archaeological finds. Ibid., 109-32.

<sup>122</sup>Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit*, 2. For Lewis, normative Yahwism is defined by prophetic and Deuteronomistic literature; on the other hand, these deviant practices were popularized in the royal cult (e.g., of Manasseh).

One recent significant work has challenged this view. In *Israel's Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition*, Brian Schmidt maintains that beliefs that the dead had beneficent powers did not enter Israel until the late eighth and seventh centuries with the rise of Assyrian influence.<sup>123</sup> He objects to arguments for the pre-exilic existence of necromancy based on biblical texts (such as 1 Sam 28 and various prohibitions in the Israelite law codes and prophetic traditions). Instead, he says that the current prohibitions in the texts are due to Deuteronomistic redactors (even of the Isaiah texts), who polemically projected necromancy into the more distant past.<sup>124</sup> For further information on these issues, one should consult the sources cited.<sup>125</sup>

### Conclusion

As stated above, the material on the ANE and biblical views of death is vast, rich, and heterogeneous. And though this survey has been necessarily cursory, it provides a sufficient overview for the topic of death in the ancient Near East for the remainder of this dissertation. In addition, this dissertation will revisit many of these same themes in chapters 4 and 5, in which we will compare the thanatology of the death stories with the Israelite views on death presented in this chapter.

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<sup>123</sup>Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead*, 281. Manasseh is identified as a chief culprit in allowing these practices to become popularized.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid., 164, 201-44. By projecting Canaanite origins of the practices and by demonstrating their ill effects on the reigns of Saul (1 Sam 28) and David (2 Kgs 21:6; 23:24), redactors hoped to quell their influence on exilic and post-exilic Israel.

<sup>125</sup>For a succinct treatment of all of the issues, see Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 150-217.

## CHAPTER 3

### DEATH ACCOUNTS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND ISRAEL AND THE OLD TESTAMENT GENRE OF DEATH STORY

With the background of ANE thanatology established, the next stage of this study involves a task any scientist would recognize—classification. Just as botanists or zoologists seek to categorize plants and animals according to their genus and species, this chapter will group pieces of literature according to their respective “species”—otherwise known as genres. For example, suppose an entomologist wants to identify a group of insects newly discovered in the Sahara Desert. These bugs are all associated in one sense, being from the same region. But not all of them look or act alike. The discriminating scientist might then narrow the selected sample to those insects that have hairy legs, dwell in the dunes, boast hard exoskeletons, and retaliate when poked. As the characteristics become more specific and select, the scientist would gradually be able to specify the species. To apply this analogy to our study, this chapter will begin by analyzing a group of texts that originate from the same general area and era—the ancient Near East—and that deal with the same topic—death. And as we become more specific and select in characteristics and provenance, we too will end this chapter knowing exactly what a death story in the Hebrew Scriptures entails.

This chapter will accomplish this process of classification in four steps. An initial section will examine several death accounts from the civilizations surrounding ancient Israel. These will serve as comparative tools for chapters 4 and 5. And this section will also determine if any parallels to biblical death stories exist in the ancient Near East. A second section will become more specific. We will classify biblical death accounts according to their characteristics, dividing them into three categories—notices,

reports, and stories. For each category, we will provide a definition and scriptural examples that illustrate that definition. A third section will offer justification for classifying some biblical death accounts as stories as opposed to reports. At this stage, we will have a collection of death accounts from the Hebrew Scriptures that appear to be “death stories” based on their literary character. A final and crucial section will establish the existence of a specific genre of “death story” based on the stories’ formal character. We will achieve this goal by using traditional form critical methodology—that is, by using the vocabulary, structure, setting, and function of the accounts to demonstrate the existence of the genre. Thus, by the end of this chapter, we will have moved from the general to the specific in our analysis of ANE death accounts. And we will have demonstrated that the Old Testament does indeed possess a set of death accounts that should be classified as “death stories.”<sup>1</sup>

### **ANE Death Accounts**

First, we will offer a brief survey of ANE death accounts. The groundwork for this section was laid in first part of chapter 2. As seen in that discussion, the ancient Near East is home to many textual sources that offer considerable insight into ancient beliefs on death, burial, and afterlife. But most of these texts do not bear any significant resemblance to the narrative accounts found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Many of these ANE literary sources have a far different literary character than the historical and theological nature of the Pentateuchal accounts and those of the Former Prophets. So, for example, while the Egyptian Book of the Dead and other burial texts provide fascinating details about Egyptian conceptions of the afterlife,<sup>2</sup> they lack narrative presentations of

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter will set the stage for chap. 4, in which we will examine and provide a form critical exegesis of those accounts identified as biblical death stories. The final section of this chapter will establish the stereotypical form of a death story, which will then be used to analyze the form of each of the individual death stories.

<sup>2</sup>More precisely, they reveal conceptions of the afterlife as held by the nobility of Egypt.

individual deaths. In fact, they mostly contain spells and instructions on how to survive the afterlife. Hittite letters and inscriptions speak of burials and cremation rituals, but they are matter-of-fact descriptions, not theological histories.

The closest parallels to the biblical death accounts are the epics and narrative poetry of Israel's neighbors.<sup>3</sup> In fact, four of the best known of these epics do give accounts of the deaths of human beings (as opposed to the gods), so they serve as the best points of comparison with the biblical accounts.<sup>4</sup> The ANE accounts include: the Ugaritic Epics of Kirta and Aqhat, the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic (specifically the tablets describing the death of Enkidu), and the older Sumerian Death of Bilgamesh. In what follows, we will briefly survey the literary characteristics and structure of the accounts of death in these four epics.

### **The Epic of Kirta**

The Epic of Kirta represents perhaps the earliest of the Ugaritic epics, dating to the mid-fourteenth century BC.<sup>5</sup> It relates the tale of the main character's bereavement of his household and the subsequent restoration of that household by the chief god El.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the basic story revolves around the issue of death—in this case, of an entire family. After losing his household, Kirta mourns, and in his grief, he encounters El in a dream. El graciously provides Kirta with instructions on how to restore his family, and soon Kirta gains both a new wife and eight children. The plot of the ensuing account is complex. Kirta finds himself in constant trouble—first for not fulfilling a vow to the

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<sup>3</sup>These speak eloquently about death, and they usually have distinct mythical characteristics—with strange interactions between gods and humans and with fantastic events and plotlines.

<sup>4</sup>If the ancient Near East possesses any “death stories,” they will be found here.

<sup>5</sup>*Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker, trans. Mark S. Smith, Simon B. Parker, Edward L. Greenstein, Theodore J. Lewis, and David Marcus (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 9. The structure, text, and translation described in this subsection are based on Parker's version of the epic.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 9-10. In this way, some of the themes of the story mirror that of the biblical Job.

goddess Asherah and then for granting firstborn status to the youngest of his new children to the chagrin of his eldest child. But by the end of the epic, Kirta has solved, to a certain extent, both dilemmas—the first again through the intervention of El and the second by cursing his firstborn.

Of primary interest for this study is the account of the death of Kirta's family and his subsequent response—both found at the beginning of the epic. The text of this account spans almost all of the first three columns, and the majority of the content details the dream theophany, in which El appears to Kirta in his grief. The structure is as follows:

- Column 1, lines 1-6: An introduction to King Kirta<sup>7</sup>
- Column 1, lines 7-25: The report of the deaths of Kirta's family members
- Column 1, lines 26-35: The response of Kirta to the deaths (mourning/sleep)
- Column 1, line 36—Column 3, line 49: El's instruction via a dream on how to restore Kirta's family

We can make several observations based on this structure. First, the account begins abruptly—with no introduction to the individuals who died or to the circumstances of their deaths. It merely states bluntly that the various family members have died—in each case by different means, both natural (disease, sword, and “in health”) and divine (Rashap and by the Lad of Yamm). The fact that the account does not describe either the background or any preparations for these deaths demonstrates that the deaths themselves are not the main concern of the epic. They merely present the problem to be solved. The main focus of the story is not the death of Kirta's wife and offspring, but how the king is to cope with *his* loss. In essence, the story is about life and the preservation of the quality of life for the protagonist—not about death of lesser characters or how to prepare for it.

Second, the report of the deaths of the family members is rather extensive

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<sup>7</sup>In the first section (introduction to King Kirta), ll. 2-6 are missing, but they are assumed by the editors to introduce the reader to the king. *Ibid.*, 12.

compared to the biblical texts that we will study. Principally, this verbosity is due to the nature of the text as ANE narrative poetry—literature that often employs literary devices like repetition, *inclusio*, and parallelism. So, for example, the report stresses repetitively the loss experienced by Kirta: “Kirta—his progeny’s ruined / Kirta—his line is sundered” (Col. 1, ll. 10-11). When making comparisons across societies and genres, this difference in literary style must be taken into consideration.

Third, the progression of the story—from death to response—will mirror the biblical death accounts. But this seems to be a natural progression in any story about death. The differences between the biblical accounts and the Kirta Epic are seen most clearly in what is emphasized. In the case of the present story, the response (Kirta’s mourning for his own loss and his quest for reparation from the gods) is accentuated most—whereas in the biblical death stories, typically the death and response are anticlimactic and the preparations for death are highlighted.

### **The Epic of Aqhat**

The Ugaritic Epic of Aqhat also centers on a death—in this case the murder of the epic’s namesake by the gods. The epic begins with an account of how a childless father, Daniel, appeals to the gods to grant him a son.<sup>8</sup> This request is granted and a son named Aqhat is born, though we lack an account of this event due to a gap in the columns. As the story continues, the gods give Daniel a beautiful bow, who then presents the ornate weapon to his cherished son. Aqhat’s new possession soon attracts the attention of the goddess Anat, but she fails in her attempt to pry the bow away through bribes of riches and even of immortality.<sup>9</sup> Angry at Aqhat’s rejection, Anat employs the

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<sup>8</sup>As above, the following summary is based on the text, translation, and description found in Parker’s *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*. See especially pp. 49-51.

<sup>9</sup>Aqhat argues that immortality is reserved for the gods and cannot be attained by mortal humans.

Sutean warrior YTPN to swoop down out of a flock of birds and kill Aqhat—a deed soon accomplished. This murder brings several results. First, the natural world responds to the murder in sorrow as vegetation withers. Second, with the help of Baal, Daniel and his daughter seek out the bird that ultimately swallowed his son. Third, after finding Aqhat and extracting him from the bird’s belly, Daniel buries him. Fourth, the bereaved father curses three towns near the murder site, mourns for seven years, and sends his daughter out for vengeance (after she asks for the opportunity). The epic ends with Daniel’s daughter in the camp of YTPN working to ensure the warrior’s demise.

As with the Epic of Kirta, our primary focus is on the account of the death of Aqhat. The story of Aqhat’s death and his family’s response begins at Tablet 2, Column 4, and continues to the end of the epic. The structure of that account is as follows:

Tablet 2, column 4, lines 1-27: Anat’s planning of the murder with YTPN

Tablet 2, column 4, lines 28-42: The report of Aqhat’s murder

Tablet 3, column 1, lines 1-27: Damaged text

Tablet 3, column 1, line 28—column 2, line 49: Daniel and his daughter see the results of the murder (drought, withering plants) and learn of the death

Tablet 3, column 3, lines 1-38: Daniel searches for and finds the murder victim in the bird’s belly

Tablet 3, column 3, line 39—column 4, line 27: Mourning and cursing on the part of Daniel in response to the murder

Tablet 3, column 4, lines 28-61: Daniel’s daughter seeks revenge for the murder

We can make several observations about this account. First, compared to the Epic of Kirta (and the biblical accounts), Aqhat is much more mythological in nature, with the gods playing a significant part in the progression of events and particularly in the death itself.<sup>10</sup> Second, this is an account of a murder—a subject matter foreign to biblical death stories. Indeed, though the Scriptures do tell of such occurrences, we classify none of these as “death stories.” They simply do not have the structural elements necessary (see the last section of this chapter); but more importantly, the intention of the literature is

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<sup>10</sup>Tbid., 51.

different. As will be demonstrated, a principal purpose of Old Testament death stories is to use the final moments of life to communicate theologically. In the case of Aqhat, there are no final moments of life—the poem’s hero dies quickly and without warning.

Perhaps a more appropriate parallel (without the mythological elements) would be the poetic account of Sisera’s death in Judges 5.<sup>11</sup> Third, as in Kirta and the biblical accounts, the plot progresses from death to response. But unlike the biblical accounts, the character’s demise is not immediately known to the bereaved. Thus, the mourning, cursing, and revenge of Daniel and his daughter are delayed until they realize something is wrong (via the withered plants) and subsequently search for a body.

### **The Epic of Gilgamesh (The Death of Enkidu)**

The Babylonian Gilgamesh cycle relates an intricate and intriguing account of the hero’s pursuit of immortality. The turning point of the entire story and the instigation of Gilgamesh’s quest are both found in Tablets 7 and 8, which describe the tragic death of Gilgamesh’s companion, Enkidu. In witnessing his friend’s demise, the previously stout and steadfast Gilgamesh is confronted with the shocking reality of his own mortality, spurring him to seek an escape from death. So, like the two Ugaritic epics, the Epic of Gilgamesh has death as its primary subject matter.

Tablet 7 begins with Enkidu’s response to learning of his impending death. Apparently (though we do not know for sure due to a lacunae in the text), Enkidu had discovered via a dream that the gods (Enlil especially) had determined that either he or Gilgamesh must die.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately for Enkidu, he was their choice. Upon learning of

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<sup>11</sup>Both use poetry to communicate an event; both recount a premeditated murder; and both describe in graphic detail the murder itself and the mourning of the bereaved.

<sup>12</sup>As in chap. 2, the analysis, structure, and quotations are based on the Norton Critical Edition of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. and ed. Benjamin R. Foster (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001). See especially pp. 53-65.

his doom, he does not attempt to avoid it, but instead, he bewails and curses those whom he deems responsible for his fate. Unrequited, he presents his grievances before Shamash, the god of justice. The god reminds Enkidu that he has led a full life and has even had the blessing of Gilgamesh's companionship. This line of reasoning placates Enkidu, who accepts his destiny and relents from his curses. Next, Enkidu has a terrifying dream of the afterlife, which he shares with Gilgamesh. Apparently, Enkidu does not need to wait long to experience his dream, for the subsequent lines speak of his fatal illness.<sup>13</sup> Tablet 8 picks up the story after Enkidu's death and describes Gilgamesh's laments and his construction of a funerary statue for his friend. The bitterness, grief, and fear that overcome Gilgamesh at the sight of his friend's demise provide impetus for his future quest for immortality. The progress of the story is as follows:

- Tablet 7, lines 1-3: Enkidu learns that Enlil has decreed his death<sup>14</sup>
- Tablet 7, lines 4-32: Enkidu curses the cedar door, after learning of his impending death
- Tablet 7, lines 33-54: Gilgamesh's speech to Enkidu about the inevitability of death and his promise to build Enkidu a funerary statue
- Tablet 7, lines 55-95: Enkidu asks the god of justice (Shamash) to curse the individuals he sees as the reasons for his death, the harlot and the hunter
- Tablet 7, lines 96-111: Shamash's response, saying that Enkidu will still die, but that he will have a proper funeral
- Tablet 7, lines 112-125: Enkidu reverses his curse of the harlot
- Tablet 7, lines 126-172: Enkidu relates a dream to Gilgamesh of the horrors of the netherworld
- Tablet 7, lines 173-187: Enkidu's illness and assumed death
- Tablet 8, lines 1-63: Gilgamesh laments Enkidu's demise
- Tablet 8, lines 64-92: Gilgamesh builds a memorial statue for Enkidu
- Tablet 8, lines 93-144: Gilgamesh engages in other funerary practices

These events could be summarized in the following structural categories:

- Part 1: Tablet 7, lines 1-3: Announcement of Enkidu's impending death
- Part 2: Tablet 7, lines 33-172: Enkidu's attempts to deal with his own mortality
- Part 3: Tablet 7, lines 173-187: Report of Enkidu's death
- Part 4: Tablet 8: Gilgamesh's response to Enkidu's death

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<sup>13</sup>Again, there is a gap in the text, so unfortunately we lack an account of Enkidu's death.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 53. Foster notes that there is a gap between ll. 1 and 4, but he posits this content based on comparison with the Hittite Gilgamesh Epic.

We can make several observations based on this structure. First, unlike the two Ugaritic epics, this account details the death of an individual who knows what is coming (see Part 1). In this way, the account of Enkidu's death mirrors most of the biblical death stories, which consistently announce the impending death before it happens. Second, after this announcement, Enkidu struggles to accept his fate (Part 2). However, Shamash assuages Enkidu's grief with assurances that he enjoyed a good life and would be honored in death. Thus, the focus of Part 2 is not on ensuring the well-being of those left behind (as is often the case in biblical death stories), but rather ensuring the "good death" of the individual who is dying.<sup>15</sup> Third, as with the Ugaritic epics but unlike most of the biblical stories, the report of the death (Part 3) is lengthy. Though the actual death itself is not described (due to a gap in the text), the fatal illness is reported with great detail. Fourth, Part 4 depicts Gilgamesh's response to the death—describing how he memorialized his friend through various funerary arrangements and a statue. The devotion of an entire table to this reaction shows the importance of memorializing the dead in the ancient Near East, but it also demonstrates the magnitude of Enkidu's death in the life of Gilgamesh.

In summary, as will be evident in chapter 4, the overall flow of the plot and the basic elements of the story seem to mirror the scriptural death stories in many ways. Like the biblical narratives, the account of Enkidu's death possesses an announcement of impending death, a response to the announcement by the dying, a report of the death, and a response to the death by those remaining. However, there are key differences, such as the type of literature (mythic and epic poetry versus historical narrative), the purpose of the literature (mentioned above), the theology of the literature, and the type of responses by both the dying and the bereaved—all of which will become more evident in chapters 4

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<sup>15</sup>But the account of Samson's death may be a possible parallel. In his final moments, Samson seems more concerned about his demise being avenged than actually achieving a victory for his country.

and 5. Still, the parallels in plot progression are quite striking. This may suggest a deeper literary convention shared among the societies of the ancient Near East. But it could also be simply a logical ordering of events. We cannot be certain one way or another.<sup>16</sup>

### The Sumerian Death of Bilgamesh

Our final example comes from the Sumerian precursors of the Gilgamesh Epic, which have been collected and titled “The Death of Bilgamesh.”<sup>17</sup> This text represents the earliest and most complete account of an individual’s death found in the ancient Near East. Based on a recent study by Veldhuis on the collected fragments, the story begins with a lament for Bilgamesh, who lies ill and mournful on his deathbed.<sup>18</sup> While Bilgamesh lolls in sorrow, the god Enki (disguised as Nudimmud) reveals a dream to him, in which the hero stands in the council of the gods who are determining his fate.<sup>19</sup> As Veldhuis points out, the dream divides into two sections.<sup>20</sup> In the first part (M49-

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<sup>16</sup>The biblical death stories will have more than just structure and the ordering of events in common; they will also possess common formulae, vocabulary, function, and setting. The existence of all these shared traits point to the existence of the genre (see the last section of this chapter). Here, we only have the structure in common, which cannot prove the existence of the genre in and of itself.

<sup>17</sup>This title was coined by S. N. Kramer (“The Death of Gilgamesh,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 94 [1944]: 2-11) in the early 1940s. He had collected and restored the extant texts of five Sumerian tales (from Nippur) involving Gilgamesh, the principal topic of which was the hero’s death. Recent excavations at Tell Haddad (ancient Meturan) have supplemented the Nippur texts with additional scenes. In 2000, Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi published a new version of the text based on all witnesses. See A. Cavigneaux and F. N. H. Al-Rawi, *Gilgameš et la Mort. Texts de Tell Haddad VI*, Cuneiform Monographs 19 (Groningen: Styx Publications, 2000). A revised interpretation of the text was published soon after in the form of a review of Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi’s work by Niek Veldhuis (“The Solution of the Dream: A New Interpretation of Bilgames’ Dream,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 53 [2001]: 133-48). His version seems to make the most sense of the text, and it will form the basis of the following analysis. For a brief introduction to “The Death of Gilgamesh,” see *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, ed. Andrew George (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1:14-17. George admits that Veldhuis’ study came out too late to be included in his two volumes, but he describes it as an important work.

<sup>18</sup>Veldhuis, “The Solution of the Dream,” 133, 140-41.

<sup>19</sup>George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 15.

<sup>20</sup>Veldhuis, “The Solution of the Dream,” 134.

87),<sup>21</sup> the gods recount Bilgamesh's accomplishments and the story of the Deluge. Also, in this first part, the gods debate whether Bilgamesh (as half human, half divine) deserves immortality. They decide against it, and Bilgamesh is doomed to descend to the netherworld—though he would be the governor there. The second part of the dream (M92-125) looks to the future. The gods attempt in the dream to comfort Bilgamesh; they indicate that despite his mortality, he will be honored by funeral proceedings and festivals and he will soon be reunited with his family and friend, Enkidu.

Upon waking from his dream, Bilgamesh shudders with the knowledge of his impending doom (M126-28), and he worries whether he will be remembered after his death. The next few lines (M129-39) are broken, so the interpretation here is unclear. However, the story picks up again with a wholesale repetition of Bilgamesh's previous dream (M140-216). Scholars have traditionally interpreted this duplication as Bilgamesh recounting his dream to someone as he seeks counsel in his distress.<sup>22</sup> But Veldhuis has proposed a different and perhaps more logical solution—that the dream facsimile is actually an account of the dream coming true.<sup>23</sup>

After the realization of the dream and after another gap in the text (M217-234), the plot is soon resolved. This resolution is achieved when Urlugal (perhaps Bilgamesh's son) builds a stone tomb for Bilgamesh in the middle of a dammed-up Euphrates (M235-260), thereby avoiding the hero's ultimate nightmare—not being remembered in death. The text (M261-263; N<sub>3</sub>1-42; M<sub>4</sub>1-10; M295-305) further explains how Bilgamesh enters the underworld in peace, accompanied by his family and entourage (including his

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<sup>21</sup>“M” represents the Meturan version. “N” represents documents from Nippur.

<sup>22</sup>E.g., George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 15.

<sup>23</sup>Veldhuis, “The Solution of the Dream,” 134. He argues that the dream seems clear enough as is, and thus Bilgamesh does not need someone to interpret it for him. He further states that this makes the most sense out of the plot. Veldhuis also puts forward several arguments for this interpretation based on nuanced translations of specific passages.

barber!). Finally, the tomb is closed and the waters of the Euphrates sweep back over the tomb, hiding the site forever.

Based on the preceding and on the reconstruction by Veldhuis, the structure of the story could be summarized as follows:

- Part 1: Bilgamesh is mournful while on his deathbed
- Part 2: Bilgamesh's impending doom is confirmed via a dream
- Part 3: Bilgamesh's dream comes true and Bilgamesh presumably dies
- Part 4: Bilgamesh's tomb is built
- Part 5: Bilgamesh is buried and enters the netherworld in honor

We can make several observations about this account and its structure. First, mirroring the biblical death stories, this account prompts the reader to expect Bilgamesh's death immediately by showing him on his deathbed. Second, the dream and its subsequent fulfillment represent a unique feature of this text, which is never seen in the biblical texts. Third, the account interestingly possesses no explicit notice of the actual death—a formal element in all the biblical death accounts (though this could be due to broken text). Instead, the text presents Bilgamesh as ill and then appearing in the netherworld. Fourth, entering the netherworld is again a distinctive element present in this story, which is absent in the biblical death accounts. The afterlife is never emphasized in biblical death accounts. Fifth, as with the ANE and biblical accounts, the general sequence of events moves from announcement to death to response. But the Death of Bilgamesh and the biblical death stories have too many other differences, and thus there is probably no direct correspondence. Finally, the story confirms the Mesopotamian view of death, which sees the legacy and fame of the deceased as being the primary concern of any death event. This fact is shown clearly in the plot; the complication to be solved is how (or whether) Bilgamesh will be remembered in death. As stated above, the resolution to the dilemma comes in the building of the tomb. Even the dream itself is designed to exalt the dying Bilgamesh; the gods tell him that, even though he still has to die, he will receive as much honor and fame as a mortal may be allotted by the gods.

## Summary of Observations

All four of these accounts are stories about the deaths of individuals, but they do not parallel in any significant manner the genre of death story found in the Hebrew Scriptures. As noted, structural similarities do exist, and the progression of the plot at times mirrors the flow of the biblical stories. However, the dissimilarities—such as presentation, theology, thanatology, emphases, and literary character—are too great to posit a shared genre or convention.<sup>24</sup> Still, the ANE accounts do present an appropriate foil against which to compare the Old Testament death accounts in the following study.

The previous discussion raises the issue of whether or not the lack of exact and unequivocal ANE parallels to death stories should be a concern. Yes, Old Testament form critics should always strive to locate unambiguous ANE counterparts in the classification of a biblical genre—especially a new one.<sup>25</sup> However, the mere fact that we do not have plain parallels in this case does not mean that a genre of death story does not exist. One need only look to the Psalter to find forms that are readily identifiable *and* unique in their ANE context.<sup>26</sup> Another example would be the apocalyptic genre, which can be observed only in biblical literature and that which mimics it.<sup>27</sup> Thus, with the death accounts in the Scriptures and specifically with the death stories, we have a unique genre found nowhere else in the ancient Near East.

## A Survey of Biblical Death Accounts

Having surveyed the ANE death accounts, we will now focus on the death

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<sup>24</sup>These differences between ANE and biblical death accounts will become clearer as we progress in our study.

<sup>25</sup>For an excellent discussion of comparative form criticism and the process of identifying genres, see the recent work by Kenton Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 1-24.

<sup>26</sup>Sparks identifies these as “ethnic genres.” *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>27</sup>Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 50.

accounts in the Hebrew Scriptures. The following section will examine all the Old Testament passages in which someone is described as dying and will classify these accounts according to their characteristics. As stated above, the purpose is to identify the narrative accounts that may be legitimately classified as “stories.”<sup>28</sup> In order to classify these accounts, this section will first offer definitions of the three types of death accounts in the Old Testament—namely, notices, reports, and stories. Following each definition, we will also classify each of the death accounts according to these three categories and describe them.<sup>29</sup> The following analysis is based on the data in Table A1 of the Appendix.

Before beginning, two provisos must be stated. First, since “story,” “report,” and “notice” are narrative genres, the survey will be limited primarily to the narrative portions of Scripture—that is, the Pentateuch and the historical books.<sup>30</sup> Second, the investigation will focus on the deaths of individuals—not groups of people (or even animals), armies, or nations, as might result from battles, sieges, other types of violence, or being put to death.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>In other words, many death accounts exist in the Old Testament. Some are long, extended, and story-like; some are succinct, undeveloped, and, at times, anticlimactic. The form critical study in chap. 4 will focus on those that may honestly claim the nomenclature “stories.”

<sup>29</sup>The next section will then justify our classification of some accounts as stories rather than reports and notices.

<sup>30</sup>Though there are exceptions, such as the notice of the death of Ezekiel’s wife in Ezek 24:18.

<sup>31</sup>Examples of deaths that will not be considered in the study include Hamor, Shechem, and the people of the city (Gen 34:25-26); the men seeking Moses’ life (Exod 4:19b); the fish of the Nile (Exod 7:21); frogs (Exod 8:13); the livestock of the Egyptians (Exod 9:6); all the firstborn of the land of Egypt (Exod 12:29); the army of Egypt (Exod 14:27); 3,000 people at the hand of the Levites after the Golden Calf incident (Exod 32:28); the people of Israel from plague (Num 11:33); the men who brought an unfavorable report about the land (Num 14:37); the family of Korah (Num 16:33); the people bitten by the serpents (Num 21:6); the kingdoms of Sihon and Og (Num 21:21-35); the people dying after the plague of Peor (Num 25:9); the five kings of Midian and the men of their kingdoms (Num 31:7-8); the conquered cities and the Israelite warriors in the book of Joshua; Achan and his family (Josh 7:25-26); the five Amorite kings (Josh 10:26); 600 Philistines killed by Shamgar (Judg 3:31); the sons of Jerubbaal (Judg 9:5); the people of the tower of Shechem (Judg 9:49); the Giliadites (Judg 12:6); Samson’s thirty companions (Judg 14:19); 1,000 Philistines (Judg 15:15); the seventy descendents of Jeconiah (1 Sam 6:19); Goliath and the Philistines (1 Sam 17:48-50); the eighty-five priests of YHWH (1 Sam 22:18); 70,000 people after David’s census (2 Sam 24:15); the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:40b); the many who die in battles in Samuel and Kings; and Job’s family (Job 1:15). More examples could be offered.

## Death Notices in the Old Testament

This study uses “notice” to apply to a succinct (usually one-sentence) description of a fact—whether action or state of being—in the course of a narrative. It is not a specific genre as if it existed independently apart from the narrative account as a whole. Instead, it is part and parcel with the narrative. More specifically for this study, a “death notice” is a technical term for a brief statement in a narrative account describing someone’s death.<sup>32</sup> In this way, all death accounts—whether reports or stories—possess a death notice; reports and stories simply will boast other formal elements. That is, if an account merely states that a person died without further elaboration (e.g., about burial, eulogy, preparations for death), then we classify it as a notice. Because reports and notices are brief, some scholars do not distinguish between the two, classifying both as reports.<sup>33</sup> However, in order to be precise, we have chosen to separate the two terms.

As seen in Table A1 of the Appendix, the Old Testament contains many death notices. For the most part, these short statements that someone died are found in larger narratives, in which the principal subject is not death.<sup>34</sup> Frequently, these larger narratives are historical in nature or are stories (in the general sense) pertaining to a

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<sup>32</sup>Notices also may belong to other genres, where the main focus is not death (such as the narrative of Cain and Abel).

<sup>33</sup>Anthony Campbell, *1 Samuel*, *The Forms of Old Testament Literature*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 345.

<sup>34</sup>Examples of this use of notice are found in the Cain and Abel story (Abel’s death; Gen 4:8); the Flood narrative (the death of all living things; Gen 7:21-23a); the narrative of Judah and Tamar (the death of Judah’s wife; Gen 38:12a); the account of Moses’ exile to Midian (the Egyptian killed by Moses; Exod 2:12); the account of the offering of strange fire (Nadab and Abihu; Lev 10:2); the Baal-Peor narrative (the Israelite and Midianite killed by Phinehas; Num 25:7-8); the report of the battle against Midian (Baalak; Num 31:8b); the Ehud cycle (Eglon; Judg 3:21-22); the Deborah and Balak cycle (Sisera, Judg 4:21); the Gideon cycle (Oreb and Zeeb; Judg 7:25); the account of the Philistine capture of the Ark (Hophni and Phinehas; 1 Sam 4:11b), the story of Nabal and Abigail (Nabal; 1 Sam 25:37-38); the story of Saul’s death (Jonathan, Abinadab, and the armor-bearer; 1 Sam 31:2-6); the various stories surrounding David’s reign (Asahel [2 Sam 2:23]; Abner [2 Sam 3:27]; Ishbosheth [2 Sam 4:7]; Uzzah [2 Sam 6:7]; the king of the Ammonites [2 Sam 10:1]; Shobach [2 Sam 10:18]; Uriah [2 Sam 11:17b]; Absalom [2 Sam 18:15]; Amasa [2 Sam 20:12]; Nahash [1 Chr 19:1b]); the account of Solomon’s rise to power (Adonijah [1 Kgs 2:25]; Shimei [1 Kgs 2:46a]); the story of the disobedient prophet (the prophet; 1 Kgs 13:24); the story of Ahab’s coveting of Naboth’s vineyard (Naboth; 1 Kgs 21:13-14); the account of Elisha and the Shunammite woman (Shunammite child; 2 Kgs 4:20); the stories of the demise of Jezebel (Jezebel; 2 Kgs 9:33) and Athaliah (Athaliah; 2 Kgs 11:16); and the story of Haman’s fall from grace (Haman; Esth 7:10).

particular person or event. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Genesis 19:26 provides a good example of this use of a notice. Although the reader is notified of the death of Lot's wife (by becoming a pillar of salt), the focus of the narrative is on the destruction of the cities and the preservation of Abraham's family. Another example is found in the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. The account of Abel's death reads: "And while they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel his brother and murdered him" (Gen 4:8). In the narrative, Abel's death obviously plays an important part. But the principal subject of the story is Cain, his sin, and the increase of sin among humanity, not Abel's murder.

Elsewhere, notices are found in various historical lists, like genealogies or king lists, as in Genesis 36:33-39 or 1 Chronicles 1:44-51.<sup>35</sup> The former provides a typical example: "Then Bela died, and Jobab the son of Zerah of Bozrah succeeded him as king" (Gen 36:33). Similarly, notices appear in succession formulae and regnal resumes, in which the narrator recapitulates the reigns of kings.<sup>36</sup> These notices typically state simply that the king died and someone succeeded him. For instance, in 1 Kings 22:40, the author notes, "So Ahab lay with his fathers, and Ahaziah his son succeeded him." Notices also appear in transitional sections of Scripture, which often provide background material for larger accounts.<sup>37</sup> An example of this use of a death notice is found in the beginning of the book of Exodus, where Joseph and his sons die. This notice serves as a transition to the account of the future generations of Israelites, who were oppressed by

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<sup>35</sup>See also 1 Chr 2:30b (Selah) and 1 Chr 2:32b (Jether).

<sup>36</sup>Examples of this type include the notices of the following individuals' deaths: Nadab (1 Kgs 15:28a); Zimri (1 Kgs 16:18); Tibni (1 Kgs 16:22b); Ahab (1 Kgs 22:40a); Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:17a); Benhadad (2 Kgs 8:15); Joram (2 Kgs 9:24); Zechariah (2 Kgs 15:10); Shallum (2 Kgs 15:14); Menahem (2 Kgs 15:22); Pekahiah (2 Kgs 15:25); Pekah (2 Kgs 15:30); Amon (2 Kgs 21:23); Jehoiakim (2 Kgs 24:6a); Gedaliah (2 Kgs 25:25); and Jehoiada's son (2 Chr 24:22).

<sup>37</sup>Examples of this type include the following individuals' deaths: Joseph and the other sons of Israel (Exod 1:6); the king of Egypt (Exod 2:23a); Adoni-bezek (Judg 1:7); Othniel (Judg 3:11b); Ehud (Judg 4:1); Elimelech (Ruth 1:3a); and Mahlon and Chilion (Ruth 1:5a).

the pharaoh. Finally, notices occur occasionally in poetry and prophecy.<sup>38</sup> The death of Ezekiel's wife provides an illustration: "So I spoke to the people in the morning and my wife died in the evening" (Ezek 24:18a). Again, regardless of location, one can see that these easily fit the definition of notice offered above. Each one is a mere statement of fact in a larger account, and there is little or no elaboration.

### **Death Reports in the Old Testament**

The majority of the death accounts in the Old Testament fall into this category. In modern form criticism, "report" connotes a short, unadorned account of an event—a "just the facts" type of depiction.<sup>39</sup> Coats further describes a report as resembling history in that it seeks "to record without developing the points of tension characteristic for a plot."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it seems to be a mere formality in the course of the account, with little narrative intentionality.

Specific report types vary depending on content. In particular, the Old Testament contains reports describing adoptions, battles, births, blessings, deaths, dreams, theophanies, and marriages, among others.<sup>41</sup> The lengths of reports also vary. They may take up several verses.<sup>42</sup> Or a report may be a simple, one verse notice of death and burial, as might be found in a genealogy.<sup>43</sup> However, as stated above, for the

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<sup>38</sup>These are found in Lamech's song (Gen 4:23); the book of Jeremiah (Hananiah; Jer 28:17); and the book of Ezekiel (Pelatiah son of Benaiah, Ezek 11:13b; Ezekiel's wife, Ezek 24:18b). Yet, even here, the occurrences are in narrative-like literature.

<sup>39</sup>George W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 10; and Burke O. Long, *1 Kings with an Introduction to Historical Literature*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 5-6.

<sup>40</sup>Coats, *Genesis*, 10.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 259. For Coats, a report can be a developed account, such as with the Jacob death report, which spans four chapters. He sees it serving as a redactional frame for Jacob's speeches.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 69. For example, see the genealogy in Gen 5.

purposes of this study, a death report must contain a further elaboration of the death—whether that is a notice of burial, response, preparation, or eulogy/pronouncement about the life. Otherwise, if it contains just a simple statement that someone died, then it is classified as a death notice.

As stated in the definition above, Old Testament reports share many features with notices, both stylistically and contextually. And an analysis of the death reports of the Old Testament points to this fact as well. Like death notices, Old Testament death reports are included in genealogies and other lists.<sup>44</sup> For example, the genealogy in Genesis 5 includes nine death reports. A typical report found there describes the death of Adam: “Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died” (Gen 5:5). One can immediately see that this report is very similar to a death notice. However, since it has two formal elements—a declaration of length of life and a death notice—we classify it as a death report. The death report of Noah (Gen 9:29) actually has a similar form as these other genealogical death reports in Genesis. Indeed, it could be considered to be part of the genealogy in Genesis 5, with an expanded excursus on his life. The death report of Ishmael (Gen 25:17) could also be classified as genealogical, in that it follows a register of his descendents.

Again, like death notices, death reports also serve as important parts of regnal resumes and succession formulae.<sup>45</sup> For example, the death of Manasseh is described as follows: “And Manasseh lay with his fathers and was buried in the garden of his palace,

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<sup>44</sup>Death reports in genealogies include: Adam (Gen 5:5); Seth (Gen 5:8); Enosh (Gen 5:11); Kenan (Gen 5:14); Mahalalel (Gen 5:17); Jared (Gen 5:20); Enoch (Gen 5:23-24); Methuselah (Gen 5:27); Lamech (Gen 5:31); Haran (Gen 11:28); and Terah (Gen 11:32).

<sup>45</sup>Examples of this type include: Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14:20); Rehoboam (1 Kgs 14:31); Abijam/Abijah (1 Kgs 15:8); Asa (1 Kgs 15:24); Baasha (1 Kgs 16:6); Omri (1 Kgs 16:28); Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 22:50); Joram (2 Kgs 8:24); Ahaziah (2 Kgs 9:27-28); Jehu (2 Kgs 10:35); Joash (2 Kgs 12:21); Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 13:9); Joash (2 Kgs 13:13); Jehoash (2 Kgs 14:16); Amaziah (2 Kgs 14:19-20); Jeroboam (2 Kgs 14:29); Azariah/Uzziah (2 Kgs 15:7); Jotham (2 Kgs 15:38); Ahaz (2 Kgs 16:20); Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:18); Josiah (2 Kgs 23:29-30c); David (1 Chr 29:26-30); Jehoram (2 Chr 21:19-20); Jehoiada (2 Chr 24:15-16); and Hezekiah (2 Chr 32:24-33).

in the garden of Uzza, and Amon his son succeeded him as king” (2 Kgs 21:18). This report is short and to the point. But since it includes two formal elements—the death notice and burial notice—it is classified as a report and not a notice.

Death reports also mirror notices in that they appear as insertions into larger narrative complexes and other stories.<sup>46</sup> For instance, the book of Job concludes with a death report: “After this, Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons and grandsons, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days” (Job 42:16-17). Though brief like a notice, this report actually contains three formal elements—a declaration of length of life (v. 16a), a pronouncement on the life of Job (v. 16b), and a death notice (v. 17a, b). The report concludes the narrative bookend of the story of Job. Finally, like death notices, death reports may supply background information or function as transitions between larger narrative blocks.<sup>47</sup> One example of this type is the report of Jair’s death in Judges, which marks a narrative transition (along with the death report of Tola) between the stories of Abimelech and Jephthah. Jair’s death is described in a familiar fashion, with a death and burial notice: “And Jair died and was buried in Kamon” (Judg 10:5).

From this survey, one can see the similarities between reports and notices. Both are stylistically simple—usually reporting in a straightforward and unsophisticated manner the events surrounding a person’s loss of life. And like death notices, reports of a person’s death are ubiquitous in Old Testament narrative and appear in a wide range of contexts. However, as shown above, unlike simple death notices but like death stories,

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<sup>46</sup>Examples of this type include: Rachel (Gen 35:16-20), as part of the narrative of Jacob’s journeys; Isaac (Gen 35:28-29), as part of the patriarchal narratives; Er (Gen 38:7) and Onan (Gen 38:10), as part of the Judah-Tamar narrative; Eleazar (Josh 24:33), as a conclusion to the death story of Joshua; Gideon (Judg 8:32-35), as part of the Gideon cycle; Abimelech (Judg 9:53-56); Jephthah (Judg 12:7); Eli (1 Sam 4:18); Samuel (1 Sam 25:1); David’s first child of Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:18-23) and Ahithophel (2 Sam 17:23), as part of the narratives surrounding David; Joab (1 Kgs 2:34); Solomon (1 Kgs 11:42-43); Jeroboam’s child (1 Kgs 14:17b-18a), as part of a fulfillment oracle; Elisha (2 Kgs 13:14-20), as part of the narratives surrounding this prophet; and Job (Job 42:16-17), as part of the narrative conclusion of the book.

<sup>47</sup>Examples of this type include: Deborah (Gen 35:8); Miriam (Num 20:1c-d); Tola (Judg 10:2); Jair (Judg 10:5); Ibzan (Judg 12:10); Elon (Judg 12:12); and Abdon (Judg 12:15).

reports are more developed, possessing one or more formal elements in addition to the death notice. So they may include references to the length of life or reign of the individual, concise pronouncements on the life of the deceased, burial notices, and other brief responses to the death. However, upon further investigation, marked differences exist between death reports and stories. Unlike stories, death reports are short and make no attempt to develop a plot. Furthermore, they are not as significant theologically as death stories. Indeed, like death notices, as part of greater narratives or genealogies or as transitional elements, death reports are often not the focal point of the narrative. These differences will be highlighted in more detail in the next section.

### **Death Stories in the Old Testament**

As stated in chapter 1, a “story” is similar to what many form critical scholars label “tale.” Unlike a “saga,”<sup>48</sup> a story is a short narrative,<sup>49</sup> with a relatively small collection of characters, a simple plot, and usually a single scene. But in contrast to reports, stories do have a plot—the most notable aspects of which are tension, resolution, and characterization.<sup>50</sup> In addition, stories exhibit a compositional intentionality and theological consequence, which is not the case with mere reports. In some cases, stories may contain embedded narratives or speeches, which we will argue are incorporated into and inseparable from the story itself. Indeed, these formal elements often lend the story

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<sup>48</sup>A “saga” is traditionally defined as a long, prose narrative with an episodic structure and plot, many characters, and stereotyped themes. Sagas may include many other narratives and genres. Coats, *Genesis*, 5-7, 319. He cites several examples of these: primeval saga (the Yahwist’s version of Gen 1-11); family saga (e.g., the Yahwist’s version Abraham’s Saga in Gen 12-26); and heroic saga (e.g., the Yahwist’s version of the Moses saga).

<sup>49</sup>For characteristics of biblical narrative, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); and Jerome Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Narrative* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).

<sup>50</sup>One will notice that there is a continuum of complexity. Death notices are the least complex structurally and literarily; death reports are more complex; and death stories are the most complex.

its theological weight and narrative intricacy. Like reports, specific stories deal with many topics. Thus, in the Old Testament, one finds stories about curses, prophets, births, heroes, and, of course, deaths.<sup>51</sup> Also like reports, stories vary in length. A story may span several chapters—as with the stories of the deaths of David, Jacob, or Moses. Or a story can include only a few, fertile verses—as with the story of Joseph’s death.

Compared to reports and notices, stories dealing with the death of an individual are relatively infrequent—occurring only nine times. Persons for whom the Old Testament provides death stories include Sarah (Gen 23:1-20), Abraham (Gen 24:1-25:11), Jacob (Gen 47:28-50:14), Joseph (Gen 50:22-26), Aaron (Num 20:22-29), Moses (Deut 31:1-34:12), Joshua (Josh 23:1-24:30), David (1 Kgs 1:1-2:12; 1 Chr 23:1-29:20), and Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:1-21). One notices immediately that these stories vary in length and in function. The shortest story describes Joseph’s death (five verses). But others are much longer, sometimes spanning several chapters. They also vary structurally, but the consistent feature for each is an effort, via either a speech or an act, to “put one’s house in order.” This feature generally determines the “story” character of the account. In addition, some stories resemble reports more than others. For instance, the short stories of the deaths of Sarah, Joseph, and Aaron could all be considered reports. But for reasons stated below, we have chosen to label them as stories. The next section of this chapter will explain why we identify some accounts as stories and some as reports.

### **The Classification Question**

Most form critical scholars who have classified death accounts according to their genre identify them as “reports.” As argued above, while this term is helpful and

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<sup>51</sup>Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 348. Campbell argues that these are stories specified by content and are not separate genres. Campbell’s claim is based on praiseworthy rationale. One should not base genre classification on content. However, in the case of death stories, a specific genre seems to exist, in that death stories all have similar formal elements and structure. Thus, rather than being grouped by content, we are grouping them based on common structure, vocabulary, setting, and function.

applicable to many texts describing an individual's death, the designation seems too narrow to encompass all the texts. For example, Coats classifies as "death report" both a one-verse notice of death (as might be found in a genealogy) and the account of Jacob's death (spanning parts of four chapters).<sup>52</sup> However, even the untrained eye can discern differences between the two accounts—in structure, in length, in literary features, in plot, and in theological significance.

Our survey of death passages reveals some features that do not correspond to the form critical genre of report. On the other hand, some of these passages can be classified as stories.<sup>53</sup> In order to substantiate this claim, the following will examine the Old Testament death stories more closely and demonstrate that the selected stories are much more story-like than report-like in literary character. In fact, there are five characteristics that distinguish Old Testament death stories from death reports. These include plot development; tension; characterization; compositional intentionality and theological consequence; and a developed structure with embedded speeches and narratives.

### **Plot Development**

First, the chosen texts tend to have developed plots—though some are more developed than others. The progression of the plots of the death stories is rather straightforward. The impending death is announced; the individual gathers loved ones together for a speech or performs some act to prepare for death; the death occurs (at times anticlimactically), bringing the plot to its peak; and some sort of response, whether burial

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<sup>52</sup>With the account of Jacob's death, Coats states that the death report serves as a redactional frame for the speeches of Jacob. But he still classifies the whole—Gen 47:28-50:14—as a death report. Coats, *Genesis*, 300-03.

<sup>53</sup>As stated above, we find nine that exhibit story-like characteristics.

or mourning, brings the plot and the story to its conclusion.<sup>54</sup> The key element seems to be the initial announcement. This statement signals the reader to begin to look for resolution.<sup>55</sup> Will the person actually die? Will the individual set his house in order (see especially the story of Hezekiah's death)? Will necessary blessings be bestowed (as with Jacob)? Will divine promises continue (e.g., Abraham)? Will national leadership pass smoothly (as with Moses, Joshua, and David)? Will cultic offices remain stable (e.g., Aaron)? Will proper burial be secured (as with Sarah and Joseph)? These questions are all answered in one way or another during the stories, bringing about both resolution and conclusion to the plot.

### **Tension**

Tension is created in death stories in several ways. First, as stated in chapter 1, the topic of death is by nature filled with tension. Even in modern times, some of the most nerve-racking films and books are those that relate an individual's death. Second, anticipation of formal elements builds tension. Death stories lead one to expect certain structural constituents, including the death notice itself; and when the narrative fails to meet this expectation immediately, tension can be created. Similarly, as illustrated in the paragraph above, as the reader awaits the death and the resolution of the plot, many questions arise that demand answers. Until a solution surfaces, tension reigns in the story. And finally, death stories often serve as redactional frames for larger narratives. Thus, in some passages, impending death will be announced, but the death will not occur until several chapters later. Consequently, the reader is left hanging and anticipating that person's death throughout the framed narrative. A good example would be the death

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<sup>54</sup>The final section of this chapter will show how these elements of the plot are also formal elements in the genre.

<sup>55</sup>Only one story lacks this initial announcement: that of Sarah. With the story of Sarah's death, the plot focuses on what occurs after the death.

story of David, where his death is announced in 1 Kings 1:1, but does not occur until 1 Kings 2:10. Meanwhile, the anticipation of David's death creates a sense of tension as the embedded account of the succession narrative progresses.

### **Characterization**

Third, biblical death stories also employ the narrative tool of characterization.<sup>56</sup> By the time these major characters in Scripture approach death, their individual nature, personality, and qualities have usually been substantially developed by the author.<sup>57</sup> However, death stories can powerfully elaborate on, confirm, and even adjust the reader's conception of the dying individual. One of the clearest examples of the use of characterization is in the account of David's death found in 1 Kings 1:1-2:12. Here, the author's portrayal of David echoes the depiction of Israel's greatest king as seen throughout the so-called "Succession Narrative." As has been the case throughout his reign, David is portrayed as pious yet political, vulnerable yet resilient, a caring parent yet a fallible father. Abraham's death account also bears out conceptions of the patriarch already found in Genesis 12-23, such as his faithfulness to his role in blessing the entire world through his seed. In the same way, in Deuteronomy Moses is reaffirmed in his death story as one of the greatest preachers, prophets, and leaders in the history of Israel. But at times, death stories also add new perspectives on the character of dying individuals. A case in point is the story of Hezekiah's death. This king, who is otherwise portrayed by the narrator very favorably in 2 Kings 18-19, shows his imperfections and

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<sup>56</sup>Some use this literary device more than others, usually depending on the length of the story. For instance, a five-verse story like Joseph's does not have time to develop character as much as the four-chapter story of Jacob. For an explanation of characterization in biblical narrative, see Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and Fokkelman's *Reading Biblical Narrative*.

<sup>57</sup>These complex characters are classified by literary critics as "round characters," as opposed to "flat." Adele Berlin argues for three categories: full-fledged characters (round), type characters (flat), and agents (who function to move the story along). Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1983), 23-32.

weaknesses when he is confronted with his own mortality by Isaiah the prophet in 2 Kings 20.

### **Compositional Intentionality and Theological Consequence**

Fourth, the stories examined exhibit compositional intentionality and theological consequence. Again, these are qualities lacking or muted in a report, but present in a story. As defined by Coats above, a report connotes an account that serves merely as a formality—as an obligatory step, which adds little to the overall plot and theological meaning. However, death stories have great theological significance. For instance, the story about Sarah’s death—which may at first seem insignificant—introduces the important burial site of Machpelah and shows Abraham purchasing a piece of the Promised Land. The story relating the death of Abraham confirms the continuation of the God’s promise through the patriarch’s offspring. The story relating Jacob’s death foreshadows the destinies of the various tribes of Israel. At the end of Genesis, the story of Joseph’s death provides a significant transition to the book of Exodus and the narrative of God’s deliverance. The story of Aaron’s death not only sets the stage for Moses’ death, but it also allows the reader to witness how the priesthood was maintained in the early stages of Israel’s history. The significance of Moses’ final prophetic speeches and song in his death story is obvious, as they provide crucial theological foundations for the remainder of the Old Testament. Joshua’s orations in Joshua 23-24 prepare the people for the conquest of the Promised Land. The death story of David in 1 Kings 1-2 makes noteworthy evaluations of David’s kingship. Finally, Hezekiah’s death (or postponement thereof) lays the groundwork for the fall of Judah. Thus, in every case, the inclusion of these stories by the narrator is purposeful and significant—much more so than the death reports of the Old Testament. We will comment more on these aspects of the stories in chapter 4.

### Developed Structure with Embedded Speeches and Narratives

A fifth and final distinguishing mark of Old Testament death stories is their developed structure. A comparison of the nine death stories reveals that they have at least three common structural elements and most have more (see the end of this chapter and Table A1 of the Appendix). By contrast, reports rarely have more than two, and in every case these elements are brief and without extensive elaboration.

For stories, the distinctive formal element and the most important component for the purposes of plot are the embedded speeches, songs, and narratives. These embedded elements most often give the stories their length and developed structure. The question then becomes whether or not these speeches, songs, and narratives are indispensable and perhaps original components of the death story. And in fact, strong evidence exists to show that the final words (embedded speeches and songs) and final acts (embedded narratives) function as formal elements in the death stories. They were purposefully embedded in the death stories.<sup>58</sup> This fact will become clearer as we analyze the stories in more detail in chapter 4.

However, we should not be surprised to see embedded narratives and speeches functioning as formal elements. Hebrew literature displays a propensity to mix its literary forms. So, one finds prose mixed with poetry, prophecy mixed with narrative, and often one genre combined with another.<sup>59</sup> This latter situation is apparent in the case of death stories. Perhaps an appropriate analogy would be the genre of birth story, like that found in 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11. This passage, which details the birth and consecration

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<sup>58</sup>The Israelites valued highly the final words and acts of the dying. If an author or historian were going to preserve in writing the death of a prominent individual—especially a king or patriarch—he would naturally include these all-important final speeches and deeds.

<sup>59</sup>John Barton, “Form Criticism (OT),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:839. Cf. James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative*, JSOT Supplement Series 139 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 11. For an excellent discussion of the place of speech in narrative, see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 63-87.

of Samuel, contains both a story and the hymn of Hannah. But the latter is not situated outside of the story as a whole.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, when a song, speech, or narrative is enclosed by the death story, they function as essential parts of the death story.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, in surveying the various forms of the Old Testament death passages, one finds that they divide readily into three distinct genres—shorter “death reports” and “death notices” and longer, more theologically significant “death stories.” The remainder of the dissertation will focus on the latter.

### **Typical Form of Death Stories in the Old Testament**

The final step of this chapter will be to examine these death stories to see if they reflect a particular genre in Hebrew literature. Are death stories a specific genre or are they merely general story-like accounts, which are specified by content?<sup>61</sup> We will argue for the former—though there are stories about a death that do not belong to the genre (as will be discussed in the conclusion of this section), the Old Testament does contain a specific genre of “death story.”

In order to prove this thesis, the following section will both establish and describe the genre of the death story.<sup>62</sup> How does one establish that a genre exists? Like any form of inductive identification, one should look for specific features shared by all the items in the group. For instance, if one had a group of animals, and some had beaks

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<sup>60</sup>Interestingly, Campbell considers this to be a birth narrative (or what we would call a birth story), whereas he calls similar accounts of death “death reports.” See Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 38-44.

<sup>61</sup>And once these questions are answered and the typical form is established, then this form may be used in the exegesis of the specific stories (as done in chap. 4). One should note that it is possible to have “story” characteristics in a death account and not have a death story, because it does not have the appropriate formal elements. For example, the story of Abel’s death in Gen 4 lacks the structural elements common to other death stories, even though it is a story about a death.

<sup>62</sup>These are tasks that can and should be done simultaneously.

and feathers, uttered cackling noises, lived in a coop, and laid eggs, then one would assume that these feathered friends belonged to the particular variety of animal called “chickens.” In identifying forms of literature, scholars do something similar. Only, as stated in the introduction, we suggest that one can be assured of a genre’s presence if four elements of the investigated texts “emerge as in some sense typical”: vocabulary/formulae, structure/formal elements, setting, and function.<sup>63</sup> If we can find Old Testament accounts that have these common features, then Israel probably had a particular genre to correspond to them.<sup>64</sup> The following will survey the scope of death accounts and look for these “typical” elements. In so doing, we will not only describe death stories in their most fundamental form, but we will also establish that the genre of death story actually exists. Some stories about death obviously do not have these typical elements. In the conclusion of this section, we will identify which stories are merely stories specified by content (stories dealing with a death) and which stories belong to the genre “death story.”

### **Typical Formulae/Vocabulary**

The first step in establishing and describing the death story genre is to search for typical vocabulary and formulaic expressions. An initial survey of death stories reveals a propensity to accumulate in a single account characteristic terms and formulae. Such an observation may not surprise, given the morbid content of the stories; nor is the

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<sup>63</sup>As noted in the introduction above, Coats lists these criteria in a different order (vocabulary and structure are switched), but the general idea is the same. George W. Coats, “Genres: Why Should They Be Important for Exegesis,” in *Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature*, ed. George W. Coats, JSOT Supplement Series 35 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1985), 11-13.

<sup>64</sup>As noted in chap. 1, this hypothesis arises from the conservative nature of Israelite culture. A conservative culture will preserve and use forms more rigidly—even to such an extent that a few examples can establish a form. As Barton writes, “A culture which values tradition more highly than creativity is likely to be very conservative in the way it uses its traditional forms, and so even a few examples of a *Gattung* may give us quite a clear impression of the conventions governing its composition.” Barton, “Form Criticism (OT),” 840.

use of one of these words or expressions in isolation particularly enlightening in and of itself.<sup>65</sup> However, the accumulation of these different expressions in the same passage helps at least to substantiate the identification of a death story. Below is a listing of some of the most common expressions. They are apportioned according to the formal stages to be discussed later in this section.

### **Formulae and vocabulary for the announcement of impending death**

**stage.** First, announcements of impending death are some of the most stereotypical of all the expressions in the death story genre. They can be explicit, as in the announcement of Jacob's death with a straightforward, "the days drew near for Israel to die" (Gen 47:29; וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת; cf. Deut 31:14; 1 Kgs 2:1a). Sometimes, this explicit announcement is placed in the mouth of the dying (אֲנֹכִי מוֹת; "Behold I am dying"; Gen 48:21; 50:24; and אֲנֹכִי הֹלֵךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ כָּל־הָאָרֶץ; "I am going the way of all the earth"; 1 Kgs 2:2) and even in the mouth of YHWH's prophet (מֵת אַתָּה וְלֹא תַחְיֶה); "for you will surely die and not live"; 2 Kgs 20:1). These death pronouncements can also be implicit. For example, a reference to someone's old age can imply that death will soon follow, as it does in the stories of Abraham, Joshua, and David (with a similar circumstantial clause describing them as "old and advanced in years"; זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים; Gen 24:1a; Josh 23:1c; 1 Kgs 1:1a; cf. Gen 27:1; 1 Chr 23:1a). Impending death can also be announced via a statement regarding the person's poor health (Gen 48:1a; 2 Kgs 20:1; cf. Gen 35:16; 2 Kgs 13:14). And finally, imminent death is at times signaled in the story with a declaration of length of life (וְאֵלֶּה יְמֵי שְׁנֵי־חַיֵּי; "these are the years of the life"; Gen 23:1; 47:28; 50:22b; cf. Gen 25:7, 17; 35:28). However, most often, declarations of length of life occur in conjunction with more explicit announcements.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Indeed, with more than 1,000 occurrences in the Old Testament, the Hebrew root מוֹת ("to die")—not to mention other morbid words—is sure to appear in any number of circumstances and genres.

<sup>66</sup>They can also be scattered throughout the particular death story.

One should also note that death may at times be announced, but the individual does not die—at least not in the near future. For instance, Moses' impending death is predicted no fewer than five times (Num 27:13; 31:2; Deut 1:37; 3:26; 4:21-22) before the actual death story proper begins in Deuteronomy 31. In this case, the early announcements are driven by literary and theological concerns.<sup>67</sup>

#### **Formulae and vocabulary for the “putting the house in order” stage.**

Once death is announced, narrators use several typical literary devices that show efforts by the characters to “put their houses in order” before death. This is often achieved through a farewell speech, which involves calling (קָרָא, Gen 47:29; Deut 31:14; cf. Gen 27:1b), charging (צִוָּה, Gen 49:33; 1 Kgs 2:1a; 2 Kgs 20:1b), and swearing oaths (שָׁבַע, Gen 24:3; 47:29; 50:25). “Putting the house in order” can also be accomplished through embedded narratives. Given the complexity of this stage, we will delay further analysis of it until the next section below.

**Formulae and vocabulary for the death stage.** Next, the narrator usually describes the actual death event with the most common Hebrew verb for “to die,” מוֹת (e.g., Gen 23:2; 25:8; Num 20:28; Deut 34:5; 1 Chr 29:28; cf. Gen 5:5; 7:22; 25:17; 1 Sam 25:1; 2 Kgs 13:20).<sup>68</sup> Sometimes, the verb גָּעַח, “to expire” or “to breath one’s last,” is used, but it is usually in conjunction with and always preceding מוֹת (e.g., Gen 25:8; 49:33; cf. Gen 7:21; 25:17; 35:29).<sup>69</sup> More idiomatic and formulaic expressions are

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<sup>67</sup>Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 3. Olson argues that from the first chapter “the motif of the death of Moses casts its shadow over the entire book of Deuteronomy with important theological results.”

<sup>68</sup>This verb comes with a certain theological connotation, as well as with distinct ANE parallels. For further discussion, see chap. 2 n. 77.

<sup>69</sup>This word probably reflects the Israelite conception of death as described in chap. 2. Again, the Hebrews believed that when one died, the divine breath (רוּחַ), which was imparted to humans in creation (Gen 2:7), was lost (Eccl 12:7)—that is, the person expired (גָּעַח), thereby returning man to the dust from which he came (Gen 3:19; Pss 90:3; 103:14; Eccl 3:20).

also used. In the Pentateuch, a common phrase used to describe a person's demise is "to be gathered to one's people" (Gen 25:8; 49:33; וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל-עַמּוּיוֹ; cf. Gen 25:17; 35:29; Judg 2:10).<sup>70</sup> This phrase is usually used in tandem with simple statements of death, as in the stories describing the deaths of Abraham and Jacob (Gen 25:8; 49:33; cf. Gen 25:17; 35:29). The preferred idiomatic expression in the Former Prophets is "to lie down with one's fathers" (1 Kgs 2:10; 2 Kgs 20:21; וַיִּשְׁכַּב דָּוִד עִם-אַבְתָּיו; cf. 1 Kgs 11:43).

**Formulae and vocabulary for the response stage.** When describing the survivors' response to death, the narrator will also use typical expressions. In the death stories the bereaved express grief by mourning (סָפַד in Gen 23:2) and most often weeping (בָּכָה in Gen 23:2; 50:1; Num 20:29; Deut 34:8; cf. 2 Kgs 13:14, where there is weeping before death occurs). The response can also be quite dramatic, as when Joseph falls upon and kisses his dead father Jacob (Gen 50:1). One often finds in the death stories the expected response of burial (קָבַר in Gen 23:19; 25:9-10; 50:13; Deut 34:6; 1 Kgs 2:10; cf. Gen 35:29b; Judg 8:32; 16:31; 1 Sam 25:1; 1 Kgs 11:43; 2 Kgs 13:20) in a grave (קִבְרָה in Gen 23:20; 50:13; Deut 34:6; cf. Judg 16:31).<sup>71</sup> And in the case of Joseph, he is not buried, but placed in a casket (Gen 50:26) after being embalmed as an Egyptian nobleman (cf. Gen 50:2).

As will be discussed below, the narrators often include eulogies or evaluations of the life of the deceased. These formal elements also utilize stereotypical expressions. Frequently, the dead are given a positive assessment. Some are said to have lived to a

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<sup>70</sup>This phrase is also used in the announcement of Aaron's impending death (וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל-עַמּוּיוֹ, Num 20:24). Some dispute exists as to what this phrase references. Westermann gives one opinion. "This does not refer to a state in which one might imagine the deceased, but to their significance for those still living: they are among the departed ancestors, whose memory is preserved." Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, trans. David Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 176. As will be demonstrated below, this assessment is flawed and requires modification.

<sup>71</sup>In a related gesture, in the death report of Rachel, Jacob sets up a memorial for the deceased wife (Gen 35:20).

“good hoary age” (טוֹבָה זָקֵן) in Gen 25:8; cf. 35:29a; Judg 8:32; 1 Chr 29:28) or to have experienced the blessing of YHWH (Gen 24:1b). Sometimes, narrators give a positive assessment by pointing to the person’s vitality even at death. For instance, Moses’ blessed life is inferred when the narrator writes, “His eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated” (Deut 34:6, לֹא־כָבְדָה עֵינָיו וְלֹא־נָס לַחַיָּה). Abraham is even able to remarry and bear more children in his old age (Gen 25:1-6).

**Conclusion.** As stated above, the amassing of typical terms and expressions within these stories reinforces the notion of death stories as a distinctive genre. As this section has demonstrated, the expressions of most of the stories are related. While the specific wording may vary in any one of the death stories, the general meaning is consistent throughout them all. This affinity among death stories is seen even more clearly in their use of typical structures and formal elements.<sup>72</sup>

### Typical Form and Structure

The ideal death story consists of seven typical formal elements: the announcement of the impending death, a statement declaring the length of life or length of reign, the description of the gathering of family members/successors/servants for the farewell address and final deeds, the actual farewell address or final deeds, the death notice, the response to the death (burial, mourning, etc.), and finally a eulogy or a pronouncement on the life of the deceased.<sup>73</sup> These elements can be further grouped into four distinct stages—announcement, “putting one’s house in order,” death, and response. These stages will be considered below. Few death stories possess all the conventional

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<sup>72</sup>Coats writes, “A genre, a general class of various pieces of literature, might properly be identified when the various members of a class reflect a common pattern of structure.” Coats, “Genres,” 11.

<sup>73</sup>Formal elements may occur more than once in a death story.

elements; however, the aim of this section is to ascertain and describe the stereotypical form.

**Announcement of impending death stage.** This first stage includes basically one, but sometimes several, formal elements—the announcement of impending death and occasionally a declaration of length of life/reign or a pronouncement on the life of the dying individual. However, the latter elements are not restricted to this stage. When the declaration of length of life does appear in the stage, it often serves to reinforce the announcement.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the actual announcement of impending death is the most crucial formal element of the stage. A survey of the major death stories of the Old Testament reveals that with one exception—the death story of Sarah—all have this element. And as seen above, the announcement of death may come via a variety of formulaic expressions—both explicit and implicit.

This announcement and the stage itself exhibits some interesting narrative functions. First, the narrator uses these expressions as a signal, both to denote the beginning of the death story and to invite the reader to anticipate the other formal elements—such as a farewell speech and the actual death notice. In fact, the narrator will sometimes repeat the announcement—as in the death stories of Jacob, Moses, and David—in order to introduce a second, but different, farewell speech or narrative. The Jacob story is a good example. The first announcement of impending death prepares the reader for Jacob's final words to Joseph; and the second announcement paves the way for his speeches to his twelve sons and to Joseph's children.

As indicated in the previous chapter, a second narrative purpose of these announcements is to create tension. In some of the stories, the announcement is made several chapters before the actual death account. Throughout these intervening texts, the

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<sup>74</sup>It may even function as the announcement itself, as in the death story of Sarah (Gen 23:1).

reader's anticipation builds, as he or she wonders anxiously when (but not if) the death will occur. For instance, in the story concerning Abraham, his death is announced in Genesis 24:1, but the death itself does not occur until the next chapter. The story of the finding of Rebekah interrupts the flow. Meanwhile, the reader anticipates the patriarch's death throughout the intervening narrative.

A final, less obvious narrative function of the announcement element and stage is to indicate the focus of the texts between the announcement and the eventual death notice. For example, as will be discussed in chapter 4, many believe the story of David's death in 1 Kings 1-2 to be concerned primarily with the character of Solomon and with legitimating his throne. However, the announcement of impending death at the beginning of the account signals to the reader that the narrator's focus in the succession story is on David himself. Everything that happens in the story until the notice of the king's death revolves around the issue of whether or not David would fulfill his royal responsibility and ensure his son's succession.

**“Putting the house in order” stage.** Before describing this stage, perhaps the designation should be explained. In ancient Israel, the issues of inheritance and legacy were crucial, as dying individuals believed they lived on in some sense through their children. Thus, persons on the brink of Sheol considered it imperative that they provide for the next generation and “put their house in order” before death. This desire is seen in several Old Testament passages. For instance, Ahithophel returns to his own city to “set his house in order” (lit., “charge,” צוֹרֵה) before he hangs himself (2 Sam 17:23).<sup>75</sup> Thus, this dissertation uses “putting the house in order” to designate this stage in the death story.

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<sup>75</sup>Hezekiah receives the same instructions, when YHWH pronounces the king's impending doom (2 Kgs 20:1).

The chief means of assuring an ordered house in death stories included gathering one's loved ones, successors, or servants and then declaring one's final words of encouragement and instruction or performing some final deed. These are the two basic elements of this formal stage. In most cases, the first element does not play a significant role. In fact, similar to the announcement of impending death, its main function is to introduce other formal elements, specifically the final speech(es) or acts. However, exceptions to this rule do exist. For instance, in the Chronicler's account of David's death, this element is extended over many verses. There, all the gathered leaders of Israel are catalogued in detail. In that case, the narrator purposely adjusts the typical form in order to demonstrate the orderliness of David's house and the orderliness of the transition to Solomon's rule.<sup>76</sup>

Compared to the first formal element, the "final words/deeds" element is much more complicated and diverse. Usually, the final words/deeds take the form of an embedded song, speech, or even narrative. As suggested in the previous section, these embedded texts may have been original to the death story, and they actually function as formal elements and integral parts of the death story. In fact, of all the formal elements, the final words and narratives are perhaps the most important theologically in the death story. The illustration of a Broadway musical may be helpful.<sup>77</sup> In musicals, the narration serves merely to set up the musical numbers. Similarly, in death stories, the other formal elements often serve to set the stage for these embedded speeches and narratives. This would explain the relative brevity of the other formal elements. The most space is given to that which is most important.

How do these embedded speeches and narratives function? Frequently, the

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<sup>76</sup>As opposed to the 1 Kings account of David's death.

<sup>77</sup>Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 187. Watts applies this illustration to embedded hymns.

function is compositional in nature. For instance, the embedded narrative in the death account of Sarah introduces the important burial site of Machpelah for later use in Genesis. The many speeches and songs in Moses' death story serve in a concluding role to carry the Pentateuchal narrative to a climatic culmination.<sup>78</sup> Sometimes, their function is literary. For instance, final speeches and narratives may characterize the speakers.<sup>79</sup> As stated above, this will be seen in particular in David's final speech, which shows David's political and pious character. More often, the function is theological. The most theologically-rich embedded texts are the hymns and speeches. For example, Moses' speeches and the song he recites commission a new leader, offer cultic instructions, present reassurances and covenantal warnings to the children of Israel, and give final blessings. Another example of this theological use is Joshua's speeches, which encourage the people to renew their covenant commitment prior to entering the Promised Land.

In addition, just like the embedded speeches, the embedded narratives may also serve theological purposes. The story of Abraham's death provides a good illustration. In this death story, following an announcement of impending death, one finds Abraham's farewell speech. But this speech is directed towards an unexpected person—his most trusted servant. In the speech, Abraham assigns his servant with a mission to find a wife for his son. The speech flows smoothly into an extended embedded narrative describing the search for Isaac's future belle. This narrative serves an important theological purpose in that it draws attention to the importance of passing on the seed/promise through a successor. Indeed, of all Abraham's pre-death preparations, this is the most important task for him to accomplish in order to put his house in order.

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 191.

One of the most powerful ways of communicating theology in a death story is by omitting this formal element. The primary example of this technique is found in the death story of Hezekiah. Here, the initial announcement of his impending death comes emphatically through the mouth of YHWH (“for you will die and not live,” 2 Kgs 20:1). However, the expected formal element does not follow; Hezekiah does not put his house in order either through speech or action. Instead of a farewell speech, the narrator describes Hezekiah’s pleading for his life. YHWH grants his request for more time, but one cannot help but wonder if the proper progression of pre-death preparations has not been unnaturally altered. And indeed, instead of employing these extra years to “put the house of Israel in order,” Hezekiah spends it fraternizing with the enemy and naming as successor the man who would later become the most wicked king in the history of Judah (Manasseh). His actions during the postponement of his death story only ensure that foreign nations will soon put his house in a state of disorder. Thus, the omission of the farewell speech is an ingenious and ironic tool used by the narrator.

**Death stage.** This stage is found in every death story—which should not surprise since the genre is identified as a “death” story. The stage contains only one element—the death notice itself. The description of death tends to be very brief, simple, and occasionally anticlimactic, especially after the anticipation that normally builds during the preceding passages. Longer idiomatic expressions can be used in the description, but most often the descriptions use only one or two verbs, covering only one verse. One may surmise that the brevity of such notices shows: (1) that the death itself is not as crucial as preparations for death, and (2) that a character’s loss of life pales in comparison to how he or she lived his or her life. The two exceptions to the rule are the deaths of Moses and Aaron. Both accounts have longer death notices. In the account of the Aaron, the narrator offers a brief report of the dying priest bequeathing his frock before his death. As such, the length of the notice (Num 20:27-28) can be explained as

“putting his (or YHWH’s!) house in order.” The account of Moses’ death is found in Deuteronomy 34:1-5. The actual death notice does not occur until verse 5; but in the first four verses, YHWH keeps a promise to allow Moses to view the Promised Land before his death.

**Response stage.** The last formal stage of the death story is the response stage. This stage possesses two principal formal elements—a description of the actual response from those around the deceased (burial, mourning, etc.) and occasionally the narrator’s pronouncement on the life of the individual. The actual response is stereotypical and simple. It is also a consistent stage in the death stories of the Old Testament—with only the Chronicler leaving it out in David’s death account. Most often, this stage simply relates the burial notice of the individual—perhaps embellishing the account with a description of weeping and mourning. During the monarchy, the description of the response to a king’s death begins to include a statement of succession.

The pronouncement on the life is a less common formal element and tends to be placed inconsistently within the death story form. At times, it occurs in this response stage; at other times it appears earlier. However, even when occurring earlier, in terms of function, it still belongs to the category of “response.” On each occasion, it is the narrator who offers the pronouncement. Sometimes, the pronouncements are brief. For example, in the story of Abraham’s death, he is simply described as being blessed by YHWH in all things. Sometimes, they are longer. For instance, the laudatory tribute of Moses comprises several verses. Similarly, the Chronicler eulogizes David with prolonged praise. However, pronouncements are not always positive. For example, the pronouncement on Aaron’s life describes the sin that led to his death.

### **Typical Setting**

The first two features of death stories were text based—that is, the evidence used to determine a typical vocabulary and structure is found directly in the text. The

next two features—setting and function—are more speculative for three reasons. First, setting and function are inferred from the text. Therefore, interpreters often base their conclusions upon their own hermeneutical principles and presuppositions. Hence, decisions on these two features tend not to be substantiated by internal evidence. Second, since passages may be complex and consist of more than one genre, the piece of literature can have more than one setting and function. Third, the author can always use the form in a different setting or for a different function than what is believed to be normal or original—all for his or her own literary purposes.<sup>80</sup> To use a modern example, an organist may play a funeral dirge at a sporting event in order to rally the home team—a setting and function completely different from the original. Thus, given the speculative nature of setting and function, these elements are not as useful to the process of establishing the genre of death story. Nevertheless, setting and function can, at times, corroborate the evidence.

A setting refers to the social location—that is, where a type of literature originated and was used.<sup>81</sup> In form criticism, passages that make up any given genre should share similar settings. Therefore, for the purposes of this dissertation, the question to answer will be whether the majority of the death stories have a similar setting. Upon initial investigation, they seem to have typical settings in life. The most ancient setting for the death stories is probably found in oral family traditions and genealogies (as in the patriarchal narratives), by which succeeding generations would preserve the memory of death events and deathbed accounts of the famous forefathers.<sup>82</sup> The accounts of the death of kings have a similar setting, though these would probably be recorded in court

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<sup>80</sup>Coats, “Genres,” 13. In addition, determining what is normal versus abnormal is somewhat speculative.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>Long, *1 Kings*, 44.

records and histories. However, as death stories are currently composed, their settings probably should be deemed as literary in nature. Most play a role in the longer narratives of kings and patriarchs.<sup>83</sup>

### **Typical Function**

Finally, the examples of a genre should have a typical function.<sup>84</sup> Function is defined as the purpose the genre fulfills in its original setting. Function should be distinguished from “intention.” The latter concerns the purpose for which a genre is used “when given life by combination with particular content” (i.e., in a particular passage).<sup>85</sup> Thus, while the function of the death story genre can be social (to serve the purposes of a family or nation), the intention of the individual death stories can be literary, theological, or historical. Therefore, though the functions for the death stories seem to be fairly similar, the intentions will vary based on the individual story. For instance, the death stories of Hezekiah and David have different intentions literarily and theologically, even though the genre of royal death stories had similar social functions originally. In each case, the author adjusted the original function to suit a particular intention. Our exegesis below will focus on intention rather than function.

### **Death Stories or Stories Specified by Content**

The analysis of this chapter has demonstrated that “death story” is a distinct genre of Scripture, and it has established the typical features of the *Gattung*. Using these features, we can now group together the accounts that may accurately be classified as

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<sup>83</sup>Coats, *Genesis*, 173.

<sup>84</sup>Coats, “Genres,” 13. He writes, “This point reflects a general rule of thumb that genre and content correspond to accomplish a particular goal.”

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*

“death stories,” and we may exclude those accounts that lack the typical features and are thus mere stories including a death report or notice. As noted above, stories with typical features and thus may claim the label “death story” include the accounts of the deaths of Sarah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Aaron, Moses, Joshua, David, and Hezekiah. That these accounts are indeed “death stories” will become clearer in the next chapter, which will provide a detailed form critical exegesis of each.

In surveying the Scriptures, we found several accounts have story-like features, but they lack the typical features (especially the structural features) of a death story. We may classify them as stories specified by content (i.e., a story that speaks of a death, but is not a “death story”). One example of this was given earlier—the account of Abel’s death in Genesis 4. This account relates the death of Abel, and his death plays an important role in the entire Cain/Abel story; however, the story lacks the typical features of a “death story,” and therefore, it cannot reflect that particular *Gattung*.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps the best example of a story specified by content is the story of Saul’s death. The account—found in 1 Samuel 31:1 through 2 Samuel 1:27 (cf. 1 Chr 10:1-5)—contains descriptions of the circumstances of Saul’s death and even David’s response. However, it lacks the important formal characteristics that define a “death story”—in particular, the announcement of impending death and the “putting one’s house in order” stage. In

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<sup>86</sup>As mentioned in a footnote earlier in this chapter, other examples of this include the Flood narrative (the death of all living things; Gen 7:21-23a); the narrative of Judah and Tamar (the death of Judah’s wife; Gen 38:12a); the account of Moses’ exile to Midian (the Egyptian killed by Moses; Exod 2:12); the account of the offering of strange fire (Nadab and Abihu; Lev 10:2); the Baal-Peor narrative (the Israelite and Midianite killed by Phinehas; Num 25:7-8); the report of the battle against Midian (Baalak; Num 31:8b); the Ehud cycle (Eglon; Judg 3:21-22); the Deborah and Balak cycle (Sisera, Judg 4:21); the Gideon cycle (Oreb and Zeeb; Judg 7:25); the account of the Philistine capture of the Ark (Hophni and Phinehas; 1 Sam 4:11b); the story of Nabal and Abigail (Nabal; 1 Sam 25:37-38); the story of Saul’s death (Jonathan, Abinadab, and the armor-bearer; 1 Sam 31:2-6); the various stories surrounding David’s reign (Asahel [2 Sam 2:23]; Abner [2 Sam 3:27]; Ishbosheth [2 Sam 4:7]; Uzzah [2 Sam 6:7]; the king of the Ammonites [2 Sam 10:1]; Shobach [2 Sam 10:18]; Uriah [2 Sam 11:17b]; Absalom [2 Sam 18:15]; Amasa [2 Sam 20:12]; Nahash [1 Chr 19:1b]); the account of Solomon’s rise to power (Adonijah [1 Kgs 2:25]; Shimei [1 Kgs 2:46a]); the story of the disobedient prophet (the prophet; 1 Kgs 13:24); the story of Ahab’s coveting of Naboth’s vineyard (Naboth; 1 Kgs 21:13-14); the account of Elishah and the Shunammite woman (Shunammite child; 2 Kgs 4:20); the stories of the demise of Jezebel (Jezebel; 2 Kgs 9:33) and Athaliah (Athaliah; 2 Kgs 11:16); and the story of Haman’s fall from grace (Haman; Esth 7:10).

addition, the account also includes other death notices, and not just that of Saul. Thus, it seems that this story merely serves as a story about death in the larger account of the ascension of David to the throne. Perhaps the lack of a death story in the case of Saul also is a reflection of the narrator's view of the failed king of Israel.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of this final section of chapter 3 has demonstrated that death stories are a distinct genre of Scripture. The commonalities in vocabulary/formulae, form/structure, setting, and function of the nine death stories in the Old Testament prove their family resemblance. It has also shown which stories are death stories and which are merely stories that tell of a death. In the next chapter, we will engage in a form critical exegesis of the nine true death stories.

CHAPTER 4  
FORM CRITICAL EXEGESIS OF THE DEATH  
STORIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

**Introduction**

A recent commercial campaign for a prominent hotel chain portrays various “professionals” participating in tasks ranging from hazardous hand-gliding to serious surgeries. When asked their credentials, these “experts” responded that they had none, but they did smartly stay at the particular hotel the previous night. Viewers naturally find such ads amusing, but if placed in a similar situation, most persons would not want an unprepared businessman-turned-surgeon to wake up one day and decide to open up a chest cavity. Instead, intricate surgery requires trained professionals who have made careful pre-procedure preparations, such as studying the precedents, understanding the infirmity, mapping out the methodology, and gathering the instruments.

In a sense, chapters 2 and 3 have provided the pre-procedure preparations for the form critical surgery that will occur in this chapter. Chapter 2 gave the background to the subject matter for this chapter’s individual death stories. The beginning section of chapter 3 engaged in a pre-surgery exploratory exam—identifying which accounts in the Scriptures would be analyzed in this chapter. And the final section of chapter 3 established the existence and typical form of a death story—showing the exegetical “surgeon” what to expect when the passage is analyzed.<sup>1</sup> With the exegetical instruments

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<sup>1</sup>As stated above, finding the typical form of a death story prior to form critical exegesis may seem circular, but it is necessary to establish this standard first in order to evaluate the individual stories. For a discussion of this principle, see Kenton Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 11.

now in hand, the study is ready to move into the surgical chapter, which will be the most extensive of all the chapters in this dissertation.

The study will follow the canonical order of the death stories. This section will analyze nine stories, including those of Sarah (Gen 23:1-20), Abraham (Gen 24:1-25:11), Jacob (Gen 47:28-50:14), Joseph (Gen 50:22-26), Aaron (Num 20:22-29), Moses (Deut 31:1-34:12), Joshua (Josh 23:1-24:30), David (1 Kgs 1:1-2:12; 1 Chr 23:1-29:20),<sup>2</sup> and Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:1-21). And as stated in the introduction, the method of analysis will follow the generally accepted form critical process—which involves an investigation of the form/structure, genre, setting, and intention of the text.<sup>3</sup> To this list, this dissertation will also add an introduction to the literary and historical context. The purpose of this exegesis is to pave the way for the theological insights section at the end of each story—insights to be summarized and synthesized in chapter 5.

### **Exegesis of the Death Story of Sarah (Gen 23:1-20)**

The first death story to be analyzed may be surprising—the story of Sarah’s death, found in Genesis 23:1-20. Indeed, one might have expected that the primeval ancestors of Israel—such as Adam or Noah—to have claimed this distinction. The reason for this choice on the part of the author remains a mystery. Perhaps he merely utilized a tradition passed down in the form of the death story. Or maybe this generation—the patriarchal generation—was the first to use this literary/story-telling convention. Or maybe the use of death stories began with the matriarch (Sarah) and

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<sup>2</sup>We will consider the Chronicler’s account (which both resembles and does not resemble a typical death story) as an excursus in the section dealing with the 1 Kings account of David’s death.

<sup>3</sup>This method has been discussed at length in books such as Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971). For a more updated and condensed version of the method, see Marvin A. Sweeney, “Form Criticism,” in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications*, rev. and exp., ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 58-89.

patriarch (Abraham) of Israel. Or more likely, the death story is used here to communicate something theological about Abraham, rather than his wife.

### **Historical and Literary Context**

Based on the chronological note in 23:1, Sarah's death transpires thirty-seven years after the birth of Isaac and three years before his marriage. Thus, it occurs at the end of Abraham's life. The patriarch is now in Canaan to stay, and he has recently endured the climactic trial of his life—the potential sacrifice of his promised son in chapter 22. But the death of Sarah must have represented an even greater ordeal for Abraham. Not only had he lost his cherished wife, but he also had a tangible reminder of his own impending death. In addition, he has yet to realize the land and large numbers of progeny promised by YHWH. Hence, the account is filled with tension.

The passage is significant historically and traditionally in that it introduces one of the most important burial locations for the Hebrews—the cave at Machpelah. In fact, this site would later serve as the resting place for Abraham (25:9), Isaac (35:29), Rebekah and Leah (49:31), and Jacob (50:13). Because of its prominence in the lives of the patriarchs (and matriarchs), the place not only enjoyed veneration among the Hebrew people, but it also served (and serves) as a “symbol of national and social unity.”<sup>4</sup>

In its literary context, the death story of Sarah, along with that of Abraham, is transitional. As part of an epilogue to the Abraham cycle (22:20-25:11), these chapters bring closure to the events of the life of the first patriarch. But they also set the stage for the forthcoming patriarchal narratives. The story of Sarah's death itself follows immediately after a genealogical note describing the descendents of Nahor (22:20-24)

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<sup>4</sup>Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 156. This fact is remarkable given that the proselyte Caleb received this land (Josh 15:13).

and immediately before the account of the finding of Rebekah (24:1-67). Since the genealogy in 22:20-24 mentions Rebekah, many believe it anticipates chapter 24—thus, leaving the death story of Sarah in chapter 23 isolated from its immediate context.<sup>5</sup> These scholars view this isolation as further confirmed by standard source analysis of the epilogue, with 22:20-24 and 24:1-67 associated with J and chapter 23 attributed to P.<sup>6</sup> However, in reality the account of the death of Sarah and the purchase of Machpelah as a sepulcher fits nicely in its immediate literary surroundings. As Mathews writes, the story emphasizes the “same concerns of land and family succession that permeate” chapters 12-22.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the inclusion of this story in the Abraham cycle would seem logical, relevant, and even essential to telling the entire story.<sup>8</sup>

### Form/Structure

The death story of Sarah is one of the shortest in the Old Testament, consisting of only twenty verses. It is unique in that the death and that which leads up to it plays a relatively small role in the account. Instead, unlike most death stories, the response—which is extended via an embedded narrative<sup>9</sup>—takes center stage in the plot. As will be demonstrated below, this emphasis signals the focus and purpose of the story as a whole.

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<sup>5</sup>For example, see George W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 164. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 156. Sarna asserts that “chapter 23 breaks the narrative continuity.”

<sup>6</sup>Coats, *Genesis*, 164. See also Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 371. Cf. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2 (Waco: Word Books, 1994), 124. But many scholars now disagree over whether the attribution to P is so cut and dry. Wenham provides a thorough discussion of the problems.

<sup>7</sup>Kenneth Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 1B (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 311.

<sup>8</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 156. According to Sarna, “Not only is it the first recorded death and interment in the history of the Jewish people, but it also concerns none other than Sarah, the first matriarch.”

<sup>9</sup>This again shows the tendency of death stories to develop certain formal elements with detailed speeches and even embedded narratives. In future stories, the typical stage extended via the embedded narrative is the “putting the house in order” stage.

The borders of the textual unit are clearly defined. The account begins with a declaration of the length of life, implying impending death (23:1), and it ends with a burial notice (23:19). These two verses, along with the death and mourning notice in verse 2 and the narrator's summary in verse 20, frame a larger embedded narrative (vv. 3-18), which describes the purchase of the burial site. As will be discussed below, this embedded element mirrors several ANE genres (though not exactly), and is considered to be the more ancient account. In total, the narrative contains only four formal elements and three stages (see Table 1). The following will consider these elements in more detail.

**Declaration of length of life (23:1a-b).** Typically, death stories announce impending death with a direct statement, but this death story uses a declaration of length of life to imply impending death. The use of only a declaration of length of life to announce death is unique among death stories.<sup>10</sup> But since the formal element is always connected with the death event, the mention of Sarah's age is a clear sign that death is coming.<sup>11</sup> This declaration is also unique in that Sarah is the only female in the Old Testament whose age at death is specified. Hence, the employment of the declaration of length of life hints at the esteem the author held for Sarah.<sup>12</sup> A final purpose for the element is to bring Sarah back into the narrative, after being absent since Genesis 21:12.

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<sup>10</sup>In other instances when the declaration of length of life occurs at the beginning of the death story, it always occurs with a more explicit announcement of impending death. See Gen 47:28b-29a; 50:22b, 24b. Cf. Deut 31:2.

<sup>11</sup>The declaration of length of life is a typical element of the death story structure and is always associated with a death. Thus, in absence of other formal elements before it, its appearance here at the beginning lets the reader know that death is coming.

<sup>12</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 157, believes this testifies to Sarah's great importance as the nation's matriarch. Cf. Isa 51:2. This opening also uses repetition in describing Sarah's age—translating literally, "And Sarah's life was 127 years, the years of Sarah's life." This stylistic use of repetition, which is also employed in the death accounts of Abraham and Ishmael, might be used to emphasize her status further. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 108. But it could be simply be a case of dittography. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 314. Sarah's elevated status is also seen in the midrashic tradition, which saw the years as symbolic—100 represented great age, 20 beauty, and 7 blamelessness. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 125.

Table 1. The formal structure of the death story of Sarah

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Formal Element</i>	<i>CL</i>	<i>Hebrew Text</i>	<i>Translation</i>
ADS	Declaration of length of life	1a	וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים	And Sarah lived one hundred twenty-seven years,
		1b	שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:	the years of the life of Sarah.
DS	Death notice	2a	וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע	Sarah died in Kiriath-Arba
		2b	הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן	(that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan;
RS	Description of response, part 1	2c	וַיָּבֹא אַבְרָהָם לְסַפֵּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ:	and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and weep for her.
RS	Description of response, part 2 <sup>13</sup>  Includes the burial notice (v. 19a) and a narrator's summary (v. 20)	3-20		Embedded narrative, describing the negotiations for the cave of Machpelah and the burying of Sarah
		19a	וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן קָבַר אַבְרָהָם אֶת־שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ	After this Abraham buried Sarah, his wife...

CL=Clause Label    ADS=Announcement of Impending Death Stage  
DS=Death Stage    RS=Response Stage

**Death notice (23:2a-b).** The reader does not need to wait long for Sarah's demise. Unlike most death stories, the death (described using the typical term, *מות*) comes immediately following the announcement stage. No tension is developed revolving around the death itself. Indeed, the death is reported without elaboration—except for the reference to where Sarah died. By mentioning the location, the author introduces the reader immediately to the importance of geography and land in this account. In fact, Sarah's is the only death notice in the patriarchal narratives to identify

<sup>13</sup>Because of the length of the embedded narrative, this chart will not include either the Hebrew or English text of these verses. Such will be the practice in forthcoming charts as well.

the place of death. In this case, the site of the matriarch's demise is Kiriath-Arba in the land of Canaan—the very territory pledged to Abraham by YHWH.<sup>14</sup> This reference to the Promised Land and the second mention of Canaan in 23:19 form an *inclusio* in the account, indicating the theme of the intervening passage.

**Description of response, part 1 (23:2c).** In most death stories, a notice of burial immediately follows the death report. However, in this case, the reader must wait until verse 19 for that information. The narrative between the death and burial naturally becomes filled with tension, as the reader wonders when and where the interment will take place.<sup>15</sup> However, before reporting the events of the embedded narrative, the author continues to add to the anxiety of the moment by depicting the anguish of Abraham at the death of his wife. Though brief, the description of Abraham's mourning ritual is striking. The patriarch enters the tent where Sarah lay, indicating that his bereavement was experienced before the corpse. There, Abraham both laments (כָּפַד, probably refers to exclamations of ritual lament) and weeps (בָּכָה, indicating wailing over death) for his departed wife.<sup>16</sup> This description sets the tone for the account of the search for a burial sepulcher described in verses 3-20.<sup>17</sup> This first response element also places the focus specifically upon Abraham—where it will remain for the rest of the death story.

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<sup>14</sup>The name probably means the “city of four,” perhaps referring to a group of four related cities. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 315. However, this name is not as significant as the mention of Canaan—the place of promise.

<sup>15</sup>And this complication in the plot also indicates the focus of the plot—that is, finding a burial “plot.” In most cases, the announcement of impending death creates the tension, as the reader wonders when the death itself will occur. But here, the death has transpired already, and the lack of a burial notice creates the tension.

<sup>16</sup>Apparently, he is seated or even prostrate to the ground. Note that he “arose” in v. 3. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 315.

<sup>17</sup>In addition, the dearth of detail concerning the ritual mourning contrasts with the vivid detail of the embedded narrative. This demonstrates the narrator's focus. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 317.

**Description of response, part 2 (23:3-20).** The remainder of the death story details the more practical (yet necessary) response to death—securing a location for a burial tomb. The response is explained in the form of an embedded narrative, describing a standard ANE legal transaction. As noted above, this expanded element in the death story form demonstrates the focus and concern of the account as a whole.

The structure seems to be dictated by the three-fold repetition of the Hebrew וַיָּקֶם in verses 3 and 7 (both translated, “then he rose”) and 17 (translated alternately, “it was deeded”).<sup>18</sup> In the first section (vv. 3-6), Abraham makes his initial request to the Hittites that they give him a place to bury his wife. The group replies cordially, addressing Abraham as a mighty prince (literally, “prince of God”) and stating that no one from their company would withhold a grave from such a dignitary. In the second section (vv. 7-16), Abraham becomes more specific in his request, showing that he already had a location in mind. He asks the Hittites to persuade Ephron to sell him the cave of Machpelah for a price. Ephron, who had been sitting in the gate with the others all the time, responds in the hearing of all (thus making any deals binding) that he would give Abraham the cave for free. However, Abraham presses Ephron directly, asking him to take money for it. Ephron then offers the land for a hefty sum, 400 shekels—an amount to which Abraham subsequently agrees.<sup>19</sup> In the final section (vv. 17-20), the narrator details the actual transaction, the witnesses to it, and the actual burial of Sarah.

From the beginning, the negotiations do not seem to favor Abraham. As an alien, Abraham had to receive permission from the local authorities to bury someone on their property.<sup>20</sup> But also as a foreigner, he normally would not be allowed to acquire

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<sup>18</sup>Per the structure given by Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50.26*, 313.

<sup>19</sup>For comparable prices, cf. 2 Sam 24:24; 1 Kgs 16:24; and Jer 32:9.

<sup>20</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 155-56.

land. And even if he could, many ancient Near Easterners would not permit aliens to own land “in perpetuity.”<sup>21</sup> This fact explains why Abraham wanted to purchase the land outright instead of receiving it as a gift. Finally, even if Abraham overcame these legal obstacles, he would still need to convince reluctant landowners to part with their property.<sup>22</sup> Still, at each step, Abraham receives a positive response. A Hebrew audience would probably have recognized in these events the hidden hand of God. They would have also recognized the theological significance of the purchase. Though Abraham did not negotiate a profitable deal (in an economic sense), he purchased a permanent plot in the Promised Land.

### Genre

The death story of chapter 23 represents a fusion of two distinct genres—a death report and an embedded narrative functioning as a formal element (the response stage, part 2). Most scholars believe the account to have been originally constructed as a unified whole. Therefore, from its creation, the account possessed a modified, yet recognizable, death story structure.<sup>23</sup> In this case, the structure emphasizes the response stage and downplays the death and the preparations for death, but it still has most of the formal elements of a death story. The lack of the “putting the house in order” stage—a stage found in every other death story—is significant, as will be discussed below.

Some comment should be made regarding the original genre of the embedded account of the burial plot transaction. Scholars have debated whether the genre has

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 155.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 156. Sarna cites Naboth’s reluctance to give his land to Ahab (1 Kgs 21:3) as an example.

<sup>23</sup>E.g., Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 371. He writes that chap. 23 “is by origin a unity.” One should note that, without the embedded narrative, it would just be a death report, not a death story.

specific parallels in the ancient Near East—with theories of origins ranging from Hittite legal proceedings<sup>24</sup> to neo-Babylonian dialogue documents of sale<sup>25</sup> and Ugaritic tripartite translations.<sup>26</sup> While each of these genres parallels the current passage in some manner, none does so exactly—primarily because Genesis 23 is a narrative text, not an official document of record.<sup>27</sup> However, the common features show that the proceedings of Genesis 23 fit nicely in the context of ANE legal practices. Furthermore, since most of the parallels are dated in the late second to early first millennium BC, some scholars now believe the account to reflect a more ancient context than that normally attributed to P.<sup>28</sup>

### Setting

As with most death stories, Sarah's account has two settings—one literary and the other social. The latter can undoubtedly be traced to the patriarchal traditions, which would have preserved orally (or even in written form) until the time of Moses the account of the death of the matriarch along with the purchase an important piece of property for her grave. Like the genre itself, the *Sitz im Leben* of the transaction account is disputed. But most likely, the current passage reflects an ANE transaction dialogue used for purposes of record keeping. However, again one cannot be certain about the original setting of the embedded narrative because we are unsure about the original genre.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>M. R. Lehman, "Abraham's Purchase of Machpelah and Hittite Law," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 128 (1953): 15-18. The flaws of this view were pointed out by G. M. Tucker, "The Legal Background of Genesis 23," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 77-84.

<sup>25</sup>See Tucker's article above and H. Petschow, "Die neubabylonische Zweigesprächsurkunde und Genesis 23," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 19 (1965): 103-20.

<sup>26</sup>R. Westbrook, "Purchase of the Cave of Machpelah," *Israel Law Review* 6 (1971): 29-38.

<sup>27</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 312.

<sup>28</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 125. This shows one problem with attributing chap. 23 to P.

<sup>29</sup>In other words, the ambiguity is due to the fact that the current setting is a literary setting, not the original setting.

The text as it now stands combines these two genres—a death report and transaction dialogue—and presents them in a literary setting as a death story. Most scholars view this setting “in the literature of P.”<sup>30</sup> But as indicated above, this view has its own drawbacks. More appropriately, in its present literary setting, it functions as an epilogue to the Abraham cycle and serves as a transition to the narratives of Isaac and Jacob.

### **Intention**

With respect to intention, the story of Sarah’s death operates on several levels. On the surface, the story describes in a rather secular fashion a transaction for a burial plot. Thus, in one sense, the account serves both a traditional and historical purpose. In this way, the account introduces a venerated location in the history and tradition of the Hebrew people. But given the literary context, the primary intention is theological and transitional—a point argued below.

### **Theological Conclusions**

Some scholars have asserted that the story of Sarah’s death and burial possesses minimal theological significance and adds little to the overall theological motifs of the patriarchal narratives. For instance, Coats contends, “It does not develop theological intentions. It is simply a report of acquisition of burial property.”<sup>31</sup> Brueggemann seems to concur that at root the tone of the narrative is atheological: “The narrative gives no hint of any theological intention.”<sup>32</sup> Certainly, the narrative is silent on

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<sup>30</sup>Coats, *Genesis*, 165.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 165. Coats also argues, “Divine promise and all other theological motifs of the patriarchal stories stand far removed from this unit. . . . As far as this text is concerned, the land acquisition occurred strictly for purposes of burial. If that event is in itself theological, so much the better. But the unit itself draws no theological consequence from the acquisition.” Ibid., 164.

<sup>32</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 195. He goes on to state that, if pressed, he could come up with three “expository comments” about the text.

divine involvement, and the transaction between Abraham and the Hittites seems secular. In addition, the narrative fails to mention explicitly the theological themes of land and promise so prominent in chapters 12 to 22. Finally, as noted above, the story itself falls outside of the main action of the Abraham narratives, seemingly serving as kind of an atheological epilogue along with chapters 24 to 25.

Yet, interpretations like those of Coats and Brueggemann fail to understand that the story is crucial theologically and that it was included in the Abraham cycle for an important purpose. As Westermann notes, “There must be a reason for the elaboration of the note about the death and burial of Sarah by means of a detailed account of the purchase of the burial place.”<sup>33</sup> How one identifies this “reason”—whether theological or otherwise—depends greatly on how one understands the purpose of text. For instance, Gunkel and Van Seters believe the story to have an aetiological purpose—explaining why the local population venerated the cave of Machpelah.<sup>34</sup> Westermann himself sees the story as fulfilling the intentions of the exilic Priestly author—that is, providing a paradigm to the Jewish community of a proper burial.<sup>35</sup> However, both of these hypotheses regarding the purpose of the account possess shortcomings. For instance, Gunkel’s theory seems to ignore totally the literary context of the account and the fact that the author in Genesis is communicating more than just historical human interest stories.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Westermann bases his hypothesis on the highly disputed

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<sup>33</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 376.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid. He writes, “P makes the patriarchal story the base for what this writer regards as the three most important precultic family rites of birth (chapter 17), marriage (chapter 28), and burial (23).” For a similar interpretation, see Jason S. Bray, “Genesis 23—A Priestly Paradigm for Burial,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 60 (1993): 69-73.

<sup>36</sup>In other words, Gunkel fails to answer, Why this story and why now? His explanation has a low view of Scripture. Accounts are not included in the canon just to report the history of a place.

attribution of the passage to the priestly editor.<sup>37</sup>

The following will argue that the passage has a theological purpose.<sup>38</sup> To see this fact requires that one understand that this passage is included at this point in the overall narrative to further the purposes of the author. In Genesis (particularly in the patriarchal narratives), the principal purpose of the author is to describe how the patriarchal promises are passed down from generation to generation and finally realized.<sup>39</sup> Thus, one would expect this passage to play a part in that storyline.

And that is exactly what we find—though perhaps furtively. First, as noted above, this theme of the promise of land is seen in the author’s use of an *inclusio* in verses 2 and 19 (both mentioning Canaan). Second, the author seems interested in showing how Abraham achieved a *permanent* stake in the Promised Land.<sup>40</sup> In the embedded narrative, the author describes how Abraham negotiated a purchase of the property (rather than taking it as a gift) in order to have a place of burial for future

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<sup>37</sup>In addition, if a supposed exilic author had wanted to illustrate a proper burial, would he not have used a story involving one of the actual patriarchs?

<sup>38</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 250. He writes, “A very small part of the Promised Land—the grave—belonged to them; therefore they did not have to rest in ‘Hittite earth’ or in the grave of a Hittite (cf. v. 6), which Israel would have considered a hardship difficult to bear.” Cf. John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 179-80.

<sup>39</sup>David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, JSOT Supplement Series 10 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1978). Taking a holistic approach to the text, Clines argues, “The theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfillment—which implies also the partial non-fulfillment—of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs. The promise or blessing is both the divine initiative in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster, and a re-affirmation of the primal divine intentions for man. The promise has three elements: posterity, divine-human relationship, and land.” *Ibid.*, 29. Clines further asserts that the posterity-element of the promise is dominant in the patriarchal narratives, and that is exactly what we see in the story of Sarah’s death (as well as with the death stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph). *Ibid.*, 46. But we also see here the land promise as part of this story.

<sup>40</sup>Certainly, this focus of the death story is evident from the author’s modification of the “death story” structure. As stated above, unlike most death stories, this one downplays the actual death event and any preparations for the death. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the purchase of the land, as described in the embedded narrative. A full seventeen of the twenty verses describes the negotiations. In this way, Sarah’s death story is like most of the other death stories. That is, in most cases, the embedded speech or narrative carries the theological weight in the story.

generations to use. Indeed, Abraham would not have buried his dead wife at Machpelah in Canaan unless he knew that he would be able to keep the land permanently.<sup>41</sup> But given the emphasis on the promise of God in previous chapters, the reader would immediately sense that Abraham was receiving not just a permanent burial plot, but a permanent (though small) piece in the Promised Land. In other words, Abraham was receiving the first fruits of what God would eventually grant in fullness—the pledged territory of Canaan.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the author included this death story, with its peculiar embedded element, to describe the beginnings of the realization of the covenant promises.<sup>43</sup>

This focus of the narrative on Abraham (rather than Sarah) is demonstrated in the author's manipulation of the death story genre. True, this is the only death story involving a woman, and we have noted how this shows the significance of Sarah as the nation's matriarch. However, it becomes evident very quickly that the issue is not Sarah or her demise. Instead, her death provides the occasion for dealing with an important issue for her husband. This emphasis on Abraham probably explains the omission of the "putting the house in order" stage. In fact, as a woman in that patricentric society, Sarah could not have put her house in order even if she had wanted. The issue is not her house, but her husband's. In a sense, her death forces Abraham to put his house in order. Her

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<sup>41</sup>And as Sarna, *Genesis*, 156, states, "His insistence on acquiring the estate in perpetuity is an expression of faith that his descendants would indeed inherit the land." Cf. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 310. He argues that the notion of burial itself indicates permanency.

<sup>42</sup>Also significant is the manner in which Abraham came to possess the land. Throughout his life, Abraham has shown reluctance to receiving gifts from others (see, for instance, his rejection of the reward from the king of Salem in 14:23). Instead, the author clearly presents Abraham as coming into his wealth through God's blessing. In this case, the wealth that God had provided to Abraham enabled him to purchase this first bit of real estate in God's Promised Land.

<sup>43</sup>This small plot of land embodied a future hope of receiving the entire territory. See Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 180. He appropriately draws a parallel to Jeremiah's purchase of a parcel of land prior to the Babylonian exile: "Though the people would soon be removed from the land in captivity, Jeremiah purchased a plot of ground because he was confident that they would one day return and enjoy the good land God had given them."

death provides him the opportunity to procure the first of the promises. Thus, the deviation from the typical form is a key to understanding the text theologically.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, the text also speaks to an important thanatological issue. The emphasis in the death story on the response demonstrates the intense reverence the Hebrew people possessed for the dead. We see this in part in Abraham's initial response to his wife's death. The mourning and the weeping show the great sorrow that Abraham experienced. However, this respect manifested itself primarily in the desire to secure a proper burial in a place of permanency.

### **Exegesis of the Death Story of Abraham (Gen 24:1-25:11)**

The first death story in the Old Testament to be extended over several chapters is appropriately that of the patriarch of the Hebrew nation, Abraham. His death story is significant for the current study for several reasons. First, the passage provides a crucial theological transition; here the patriarchal promises pass to the next generation. Second, the passage in question (Gen 24:1-25:11) is the first to possess all of the requisite formal elements of a stereotypical death story. Third, the death story of Abraham is the first of many to emphasize and develop the "putting the house in order" formal stage described in chapter 3. Finally, the death story of Abraham seems to inform other death stories. Of special interest are its parallels with the death story of King David found in 1 Kings 1:1-2:12. As will be discussed at length in that section, the structure, vocabulary, and formulae of these two death accounts mirror each other in significant ways.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Such will be the case in future death stories as well.

<sup>45</sup>Given the canonical priority of Abraham's death story over David's account, the parallel will make a larger impact on our interpretation of the latter story.

## Historical and Literary Context

According to the internal evidence of Genesis, the death of Abraham occurs 100 years after his initial departure from Haran.<sup>46</sup> But before his death, the patriarch has one task yet to accomplish—find a wife for his son. In fact, even though the Scriptures report several more activities of Abraham after this event (Gen 25:1-6), the author seems to want the reader to recognize the arranging of Isaac’s marriage as Abraham’s last and perhaps most crucial action before his death. The chronology of the narratives suggests this marriage took place three years after the death of Sarah and 35 years before Abraham’s actual death. However, after the report of Abraham’s old age in Genesis 24:1, the reader knows the patriarch must act quickly—despite his present vitality.<sup>47</sup> And indeed, after the return of the servant and the marriage of Isaac, the reader soon reads of Abraham’s death in chapter 25. But prior to reporting Abraham’s death, the narrator details several other historically important events—namely, the marriage of Abraham to Keturah and the bequeathing of his wealth to his son Isaac, as well as to his other sons.

As with the death story of Sarah, this account occurs in the epilogue of the Abraham narratives (22:20-25:11), and so it concludes and finalizes the Abraham cycle. Though traditional source criticism has viewed the various accounts in Genesis 24:1-25:11 as independent compositions,<sup>48</sup> the passage fits well within its literary environment. In fact, both Genesis 24:1-67 and 25:1-11 exhibit many connections with prior and future narratives. Regarding the former passage, some have considered Genesis 24 to be an “erratic boulder within Genesis.”<sup>49</sup> But this narrative actually echoes many themes and

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<sup>46</sup>Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 31.

<sup>47</sup>His marriage to Keturah in Gen 25:1-6 demonstrates that he was still fruitful and multiplying. But vitality does not necessarily mean that death will be prevented. For example, Moses is quite spry when YHWH takes him from the mountain in Deut 34.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 167. He writes, “Nevertheless, the story [of Gen 24:1-67] stands in obvious isolation, both in form and genre.”

<sup>49</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 137.

phrases from earlier in the Abraham cycle.<sup>50</sup> For instance, the statement in 24:67 that “Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” intimately ties the entire story of his marriage with the story of Sarah’s death in Genesis 23. Another example is 24:60, which echoes an earlier promise given to Abraham that his descendants would “possess the gate of their enemies” (22:17). Besides looking backward, Genesis 24 also introduces important characters<sup>51</sup> and themes that reappear in future narratives. For instance, the passage parallels the Joseph story in its emphasis on the providence of God.<sup>52</sup> The accounts of 25:1-11 also fit well in their literary setting. For example, Abraham’s burial at Machpelah recalls Genesis 23, where the cave was purchased. Also, the organization of the death story establishes a pattern for later death accounts in Genesis 35 and 48-49—each of which gives an account of the death of the wife, followed by the son’s marriage, a list of descendants, and the death and burial of the patriarch.<sup>53</sup>

### Form/Structure

Most scholars break the textual unit under consideration (24:1-25:11) into three separate narrative portions—24:1-67; 25:1-6; 25:7-11. In addition, many commentators group verses 12-18 (the Ishmael genealogy) with the latter passage.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid. Wenham cites the following: Gen 24:1 (cf. 18:11; 12:2; 22:17); 24:3, 37 (cf. 12:6; 13:7); 24:4 (cf. 12:1); 24:5 (cf. 15:7); 24:7 (cf. 22:16; 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8); 24:10 (cf. 11:27-29; 22:20); 24:35 (cf. 12:2, 16; 13:2); 24:36 (cf. 21:1-7; 25:5); 24:40 (cf. 17:1; 13:17); 24:60 (cf. 22:17); 24:62 (cf. 16:14); 24:67 (cf. 23:1-20).

<sup>51</sup>Especially Rebekah and Laban. The character of Rebekah also recalls the Nahor genealogy (Gen 22:20-24) earlier in the epilogue.

<sup>52</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 137. He points out specific verbal links, such as: 24:2 (cf. 41:38; 50:7; 47:29); 24:9 (cf. 47:31); 24:28 (cf. 39:17, 19); 24:36 (cf. 39:7-8); 24:42, 56 (cf. 43:4; 39:2, 3, 23); 24:49 (cf. 47:29); 24:65 (cf. 38:14).

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 156.

<sup>54</sup>For a representative of this perspective, see Sarna, *Genesis*, 171. He and others who hold this position argue that the genealogies of the rejected lines of Abraham (vv. 1-6 and 12-18) frame the death report of Abraham (vv. 7-11). For a good discussion of the problems with this view, see Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 349.

These divisions correspond roughly to the sources that source critics propose for the text.<sup>55</sup> So for instance, most contemporary scholars attribute Genesis 24 in its entirety to J.<sup>56</sup> Commentators also see J's hand in 25:1-6, 11b, and 18. Meanwhile, they believe P to be behind most of 25:7-18.<sup>57</sup>

However, we will argue that the death story genre acts as a structuring device for the entire range of verses, revealing a remarkable literary unity in its present form. Although the author may have employed other existing compositions or sources in his work (e.g., the tradition of Isaac's marriage or the Keturah marriage report), the existing structure was determined primarily by the death story genre. To demonstrate this theory, the following will first show that the boundaries of the death story—24:1a and 25:11—are appropriate. Then, we will show the interconnectedness and intentional structure of the narrative within 24:1a and 25:11. In this way, the passage will be shown to be a coherent and purposefully-constructed unit.

First, do 24:1a and 25:11 function as boundary markers for the text? As stated above, most scholars agree that this passage falls within the epilogue of the Abraham cycle—22:20-25:11/18. These are the closing events of Abraham's life. But though we know that Abraham is aged when Sarah dies, we do not know that his death is in any way imminent in 22:20-23:20. The author gives no indication of declining vigor. However,

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<sup>55</sup>In fact, some commentators have further divided chap. 24 along source critical lines. But as discussed in the next footnote, fewer scholars today fragment the text in this way. The conclusion of von Rad, *Genesis*, 254, is typical. "The widely differing results of source criticism show that one here runs the risk of becoming lost in overrefined analyses." To avoid this mistake, he just attributes the whole passage to J. Of course, von Rad's judgment here could also be applied to the source critical fragmentation of the Pentateuch as a whole.

<sup>56</sup>Most modern commentators (Noth, von Rad, Zimmerli, Van Seters, and Roth) have returned to the original consensus of Dillmann, Wellhausen, and others, who held chap. 24 in its entirety to be attributable to J. For a brief, intermediate period, some scholars (such as Smend, Gunkel, Eissfeldt and Eichrodt) divided it into two sources. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 383. While there is now a consensus on the issue of attribution, the issue of prehistory is still very much disputed.

<sup>57</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 349.

Abraham's outlook and prospects change with the circumstantial note in 24:1a—after which, for the first time, the reader becomes aware of Abraham's impending demise due to his old age. Thus, this verse represents a distinct thematic shift, which indicates that a new section—indeed a new stage in Abraham's life—is beginning. The verse functions as a textual signal that what follows is the concluding act, the last scene, of Abraham's life.

Furthermore, since a new section definitely begins in 25:12, 25:11 serves as another border. As noted above, some have grouped 25:7-11 and 25:12-18, asserting that the latter (the Ishmael genealogy) is the conclusion of the Abraham cycle.<sup>58</sup> But the textual evidence clearly points to a separation between 25:11 and 25:12.<sup>59</sup> Most convincingly, the *tôlēdōt* formula in 25:12 indicates that a new stage in the patriarchal narratives is beginning. In this case, 25:1-11 would close the Terah *tôlēdōt*, as well as function as an appropriate conclusion to the entire Abraham cycle. And 25:12 would begin the Ishmael *tôlēdōt*. In addition, the few thematic connections between 25:1-11 and 12-18—cited by many as the reasons for putting the two passages together—may be explained by the tendency of the author/editor of Genesis to place a “trailer for the next section toward the end of the previous one.”<sup>60</sup> Finally, perhaps the most convincing argument for 24:1 and 25:11 as the parameters of the death story is the *inclusio* formed by these two verses. In 24:1b, we read that God had “blessed” Abraham in all things. And in 25:11, we read that God “blessed” Isaac after the death of his father. This literary tool not only demonstrates the focus and theme of the intervening text (on the passing on of the promised blessings of God), but it also indicates the boundaries of this story of

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<sup>58</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 171. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 394-95.

<sup>59</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 350-51, offers several convincing reasons why this is the case.

<sup>60</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 156. He cites Gen 4:25-26; 6:5-8; and 9:18-29 as examples.

patriarchal succession.

But does the text between these boundary markers cohere, and is it interconnected as should be the case if it were a formal death story? The answer is affirmative. First, the text coheres thematically. In fact, the emphasis in both chapters is on the final events in Abraham's life and on the transition from Abraham to Isaac. At the beginning of chapter 24, Abraham is still the master of the house (24:9, 10, 12, 14, 27, 35, 36, 37, 39, 42, 48, 49, 54, 56) and in possession of the blessings of God and wealth (24:1b, 9, 27, 35)—though he is declining (24:1a). At the end of the death story, Isaac has become the master (24:65) and has been blessed by God (25:11) with Abraham's possessions (25:5). Thus, the thematic focus on patriarchal succession is evident in both Genesis 24 and 25.<sup>61</sup> Second, the text coheres textually. Several references tie the content of chapters 24 and 25 together—such as the mention of Beer-lahai-roi (24:62 and 25:11), Isaac's inheritance (24:36 and 25:5), and gifts (24:53 and 25:6). But the most significant argument for 24:1a-25:11 being a complete unit is that the text coheres structurally. The structure of the passage follows the stereotypical pattern of the death story genre as found in other parts of Scripture.

As stated above, the textual unit begins with an announcement of impending death in 24:1a and closes with the burial report in 25:9-10 (along with a transitional note in v. 11). Between these boundaries, the structure is highly developed, with several embedded components functioning as formal elements. The most crucial of these is the embedded narrative describing the search for Isaac's future wife. This narrative depicts Abraham's effort to put his house in order—the second formal stage in the typical death story as mentioned in chapter 3. In fact, this narrative contains three elements typical of

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<sup>61</sup>In fact, the story of patriarchal succession is incomplete without one or the other—that is, without Gen 24 or 25.

this formal stage—an implied gathering of loved ones for final words (in this case, the trusted servant) and the final words themselves (24:2-9), as well as the final deeds (the actual finding of Rebekah, 24:10-67).<sup>62</sup> The other embedded element follows immediately after this narrative and gives a genealogical listing of inheritance lines, as well as a report of the marriage of Abraham to Keturah. This type of embedded account is unique among death stories, but it is inserted to emphasize Isaac’s inheritance of the patriarchal blessings—the immediate concern of the entire death story. In this way, it serves as “part 2” of the “putting the house and order” stage. The story of Abraham’s death closes with a declaration of length of life, a death and burial notice, and a final transitional statement. In total, the narrative contains eight formal elements (see Table 2).

**Announcement of impending death (24:1a).** The death story begins with a circumstantial declaration on the part of the narrator that Abraham is nearing death—“Now Abraham was old, advanced in age” (עַתָּה זָקֵן אַבְרָהָם וְגָמַל בְּיָמָיו). While not an explicit announcement, the very mention of old age implies the imminent death of Abraham. This inference is reinforced by comparison with other death stories and reports, which are introduced similarly (Josh 23:1c; 1 Kgs 1:1a; cf. Gen 27:1; 1 Chr 23:1a).<sup>63</sup> More specifically, in the patriarchal narratives, the narrator ascribes old age to each patriarch—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—to indicate that they are concluding their earthly affairs.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Since the gathering of Abraham’s servant for final words is not directly described, but is merely implied from the subsequent conversation, we do not consider it as a separate formal element.

<sup>63</sup>The wording of the announcement is exactly the same in the Abraham and David accounts. One should also note that this statement recalls a similar statement in Gen 18:11 (“Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age”). The absence of other formal elements and its separation from the actual death event demonstrate that Gen 18:11 is not part of any death story. On the other hand, Gen 24:1a does imply imminent death—especially since it follows immediately after the death and burial of Sarah, who was close in age to the patriarch. In addition, Gen 24:1a is accompanied by other formal elements in a death story—such as the pronouncement on the life of Abraham in 24:1b. This indicates that it is part of a death story.

<sup>64</sup>However, the narrator does not use the same wording each time.

Table 2. The formal structure of the death story of Abraham

Stage	Formal Element	CL	Hebrew Text	English Translation
ADS	Announcement of impending death	24:1a	וַאֲבִרְהֵם זָקֵן בָּא בַיָּמִים	Now Abraham was old, advanced in age;
ADS	Pronouncement on the life	24:1b	וַיְהוּה בֵּרַךְ אֶת־אֲבִרְהֵם בְּכָל:	and YHWH had blessed Abraham in all things;
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 1	24:2-67		Embedded narrative, telling the story of the search for Rebekah
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 2	25:1-6		Embedded element, describing the marriage to Keturah and the giving of inheritance
DS	Declaration of length of life	25:7a 25:7b	וְאֵלֶּה יְמֵי שְׁנֵי־חַיֵּי אֲבִרְהֵם אֲשֶׁר־חָי מֵאֵת שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה וַחֲמֹשׁ שָׁנִים:	And these are days of the years of Abraham's life that he lived, one hundred and seventy-five years.
DS	Death notice	25:8a 25:8b 25:8c 25:8d	וַיָּנֹעַ וַיָּמָת אֲבִרְהֵם בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן וְשָׂבֵעַ וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל־עַמּוּיוֹ:	Abraham breathed his last and died in a good hoary age, an old man and satisfied; and he was gathered to his people.
RS	Burial notice	25:9a 25:9b 25:10a 25:10b	וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אוֹתוֹ יִצְחָק וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנוֹי אֶל־מְעַרַת הַמַּכְפֵּלָה אֶל־שָׂדֵה עֶפְרָן בֶּן־צֹחַר הַחִתִּי אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי מַמְרֵ: הַשָּׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר־קָנָה אֲבִרְהֵם מֵאֵת בְּנֵי־חֵת שָׁמָּה קָבַר אֲבִרְהֵם וְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:	Then Isaac and Ishmael, his sons, buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field Abraham bought from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried along with Sarah his wife.
TR	Transition (not part of the typical death story form)	25:11a 25:11b 25:11c	וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אֲבִרְהֵם וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיֵּשֶׁב יִצְחָק עַם־בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי:	And it was after the death of Abraham that God blessed his son Isaac; Isaac dwelt at Beer-lahai-roi.

CL=Clause Label ADS=Announcement of Impending Death Stage TR=Transition  
 POS=Putting the House in Order Stage DS=Death Stage RS=Response Stage

The reader may have expected this statement, based on the fact that Abraham's wife had

just died at a similar age; but with this declaration, the reader's suspicions are confirmed.

This announcement serves several purposes in the death story. First, the mention of Abraham's old age is a literary indicator that the death story is beginning. Indeed, the structure, syntax, and subject-matter of the sentence signal a new phase in the narrative. Second, the announcement introduces apprehension. The author undoubtedly wants the reader to expect Abraham's death at any time, thus filling the next verses with tension. One obvious source of tension involves the timing of Abraham's death; but as indicated by the forthcoming narrative, the principal concern in the face of Abraham's impending doom is succession.<sup>65</sup> Who would inherit the patriarch's status, land, wealth, and divine promises? Of course, the former uncertainty (the time of death) influences the latter (succession). In other words, Abraham's impending death adds urgency to the mission of finding a wife. Will the servant even return before Abraham's death occurs?<sup>66</sup> As will be seen, Abraham's old age may serve a final purpose—as a paradigm to which to compare the death announcements of the other patriarchs.<sup>67</sup> This final function will be explained in the exegesis of the story of Jacob's death.

**Pronouncement on the life, initial (24:1b).** Before moving on to the next formal element—in this case the embedded narrative—the narrator offers an initial evaluation of the life of Abraham. It is almost as if the author takes a moment before the patriarch's final action to reflect on his life. The mention of God's blessing here indicates that the narrator is drawing the story of Abraham to a close. Indeed, throughout

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<sup>65</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 326.

<sup>66</sup>While Abraham still possesses obvious vitality, this verse lets us know that death could come at any time. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 254. Of course, 25:1-6 proves this worry was unfounded to a certain extent.

<sup>67</sup>See, in particular, Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 349-54.

the Abraham cycle, God had promised Abraham that he would bless him (12:2-3; 17:1-7; 22:17). Now that promise has been fulfilled.<sup>68</sup> And it is fulfilled in a superlative fashion; YHWH had blessed Abraham in “everything.”<sup>69</sup> Only one thing is left to accomplish—passing on that blessing to the next generation. The mention of God’s blessing does not lessen the urgency of the moment or the tension in the story. As the “eulogy” is offered, the reader expects all the more the impending death of the hero.<sup>70</sup>

**Description of putting the house in order, part 1 (24:2-67).** This embedded narrative represents the longest continuous story in the book of Genesis and, as von Rad states, it is “the most pleasant and charming of all the patriarchal stories.”<sup>71</sup> The inclusion of this account at this point in the death story of Abraham has a very specific function; it describes Abraham’s effort to “put his house in order.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, it serves as the second stage in the typical death story structure as described in chapter 3.<sup>73</sup> In most death stories, this “stage” will depict a gathering of loved ones (in this case, Abraham’s servant), then a declaration of one’s final words or perhaps a performance of some final deed. This death

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<sup>68</sup>Waltke, *Genesis*, 326.

<sup>69</sup>The blessing included not just wealth, but also continued procreativity and spiritual discernment—traits seen in the following embedded narratives. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 349.

<sup>70</sup>As mentioned above, this statement has one final purpose—it indicates the focus of the following narrative on the blessing of God. The verse forms one part of an *inclusio* (coupled with Gen 25:11). This literary tool signals to the reader what the author will be relating in the intervening narrative—the transfer of the blessing from Abraham to Isaac.

<sup>71</sup>Von Rad, *Genesis*, 253. It displays masterfully all the traits characteristic of good Hebrew storytelling (dialogue, repetition, etc.). For a list of those traits, see Waltke, *Genesis*, 323. Yet, as Sarna, *Genesis*, 159, notes, “Its leisurely pace, attention to detail, and concentration on speeches as well as action belie the importance of what is being recounted.” At risk in the narrative is the very survival of the line that is promised to become a great nation.

<sup>72</sup>This contradicts Coats’ judgment that the story “has relatively little to do with Abraham himself.” Coats, *Genesis*, 167. In fact, the story is all about Abraham’s provisions for the next generation.

<sup>73</sup>As stated in the introduction to this section, this death story is the first of many to have embedded narratives or speeches functioning as this formal element. Other death stories that include them are the ones of Jacob, Joseph, Aaron, Moses, Joshua, David, and Hezekiah (but not what we would expect).

story has both—an embedded narrative detailing a final speech (by Abraham) and deeds (by his trusted servant). Each has the specific and crucial intent of ensuring patriarchal succession. Space does not allow a detailed treatment of these verses; such has been done extensively by others.<sup>74</sup> Instead, the purpose of this analysis is to determine how the narrative functions as a formal element of a death story.

Most scholars divide the narrative into four scenes, with the last three developing a particular complication(s) to be resolved.<sup>75</sup> The following divisions are evident: Abraham's final words and commission (vv. 2-9); the first complication and resolution (vv. 10-27); the second and third complication and resolution (vv. 28-61); and the fourth complication and resolution (vv. 62-67). The plot begins in a manner typical of other death stories. Following the announcement of impending death and evaluation of the life (24:1), one finds Abraham's final speech, directed towards an unexpected person—his most trusted servant, perhaps Eliezer. Abraham then utters his last recorded words in Scripture. What would he say? What would be the most important message to communicate before he dies? In the address, Abraham gives his servant an urgent

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<sup>74</sup>Indeed, the text and content of the narrative have been treated exhaustively in other studies. See, for example, L. Rabinowitz, "A Study of Midrash—Gen 24," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 58 (1967): 143-61; W. M. W. Roth, "The Wooing of Rebekah: A Tradition-Critical Study of Genesis 24," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 (1972): 177-87; Esther Fuchs, "Structure and Patriarchal Functions in the Biblical Betrothal Type-Scene: Some Preliminary Notes," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 (1987): 7-13; Alexander Rofé, "An Enquiry into the Betrothal of Rebekah," in *Die hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte*, ed. E. Blum, C. Macholz and E. W. Stegemann (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1990), 27-39; Lieve Teugels, "A Strong Woman, Who Can Find?": A Study of Characterization in Genesis 24, with Some Perspectives on the General Presentation of Isaac and Rebekah in the Genesis Narratives," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 63 (1994): 89-104; E. J. van Wolde, "Telling and Retelling: The Words of the Servant in Genesis 24," in *Synchronic or Diachronic: A Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis*, ed. J. C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 227-44; Wilfried Warning, "Terminological Patterns and Genesis 24," *Estudios bíblicos* 60 (2002): 51-76.

<sup>75</sup>Representatives of those dividing it into four scenes include: Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 197; von Rad, *Genesis*, 259; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 138; Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 415-16; and John Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 529-31. Sarna, *Genesis*, 163, adds one more section (vv. 10-14, "the servant's prayer"). Coats, *Genesis*, 166-67, also apportions the story into five sections (vv. 1-9; 10-27; 28-54a; 54b-61; 62-67). However, the text seems to indicate just four distinct scenes. For instance, 24:54b-61 is not a separate scene since there is not a change of place or characters (which would suggest a scene change). Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 138.

mission to find a wife for his son. Indeed, of all Abraham's pre-death preparations, this was the most important task to accomplish in order to put his house in order. He and the reader know that the passing on of the patriarchal promises is at stake. The patriarch procures the servant's commitment to this vital mission via an oath, made when the servant places his hands under Abraham's thigh.<sup>76</sup> The significance of the hand placement probably relates to the groin area being the source of procreation and thus the key to the continuation of the promise.<sup>77</sup> Thus, this oath again demonstrates what is in the balance with the servant's mission—the covenant promises of many seed. But the patriarch does not doubt God's ability or his faithfulness. Indeed, Abraham's last recorded words (vv. 6-8) "express absolute faith in the workings of benign Providence" to secure success in this task.<sup>78</sup>

Abraham's speech flows smoothly into the next scene, detailing the divinely-directed encounter between the servant and Rebekah (vv. 10-27). The servant's pious prayer points to the first complication to be solved. How will he know who the chosen woman is? This complication is resolved when a woman of the family of Abraham (vv. 23-24) comes to the well and provides water for the servant and his camels in fulfillment of his prayer (vv. 15-20). But this first issue is soon followed by another. Will she know that she is the one? And will she come with him? Will her family let her go? The next verses (vv. 28-61) answer these questions. They depict the servant's negotiations with Laban (who is acting as head of the household). The extended discussions end with

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<sup>76</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 326. The fact that Abraham extracts an oath from his servant instead of merely giving simple instructions demonstrates that the patriarch thought this mission of crucial importance. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 162. In addition, in the context of Genesis, the very mention of this type of oath indicates the urgency of the task. In fact, the same rite occurs later in the book with Jacob clearly on his deathbed (47:29).

<sup>77</sup>The groin was also the location of the covenantal sign of circumcision.

<sup>78</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 163.

Laban agreeing to let Rebekah go and Rebekah consenting to leave. The final scene shifts from Mesopotamia back to Canaan. In this last scene we find the last complication and resolution. Would Isaac and Rebekah connect, bond, and unite successfully? The narrator gives an affirmative answer. This final issue is resolved as Isaac takes Rebekah as his wife and “is comforted in his mother’s death” (24:67).

This beautiful and complex story plays a key role in the death story of Abraham and fulfills three crucial functions. First, as with the introductory announcement of impending death and eulogy, the embedded narrative serves to extol the dying patriarch.<sup>79</sup> In particular, as Wenham writes, the servant’s speeches serve as a “prospective obituary for Abraham,” which reiterate once again the promised blessing of YHWH on the patriarch (24:35).<sup>80</sup> And as stated above, even Abraham confesses the divine favor on his life in his final speech (24:7).

Second, the author uses the story of Isaac’s marriage to show that God has providentially overseen the last events in Abraham’s life.<sup>81</sup> As God overcomes each complication that could have stymied the search for a spouse, the reader “is left with the absolute conviction that the guiding hand of Providence is present from first to last” in the embedded narrative.<sup>82</sup> The servant makes his oath in YHWH’s name. YHWH is the one who rules heaven and earth (24:3)—that is, he is not bound by national borders even as the servant ventures beyond them. Indeed, YHWH had brought Abraham from his

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<sup>79</sup>That is, the narrator uses the characters to echo his own sentiments in Gen 24:1b.

<sup>80</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 137.

<sup>81</sup>Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 414, quotes Eichrodt as saying, “It was particularly in the stories of the Patriarchs that the Israelite story-tellers loved to provide their people with illustrations of divine Providence.” Cf. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 168.

<sup>82</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 161. He writes further, “The narrative conveys the clear impression that the commonplace and the natural are the arena for the realization of God’s unfolding plan in history.”

homeland in the first place (24:7). YHWH sends his angel before the servant to ensure success (24:7, 40). The servant clearly confesses through his prayer that YHWH's gracious dealings represent his only hope of success (24:12-14, 42-44). By telling of the immediate response to the servant's prayer, the narrator shows that YHWH has immediately heard and responded (24:15; lit., "he had hardly finished speaking when"). In fact, throughout the rest of the narrative, the servant repeatedly admits that YHWH has "guided" him on his journey (24:27), has "led him on the right way" (24:48), and has made his errand successful (24:21, 56).<sup>83</sup> In summary, the narrative clearly demonstrates that the proper ordering of the house of Abraham has been accomplished by the providential hand of YHWH. He has blessed and providentially watched over the patriarch in this final scene of his life, just as he has done throughout Abraham's days.

Third, it is evident that Abraham's efforts to put his house in order are an unqualified success. As will be seen, later characters sometimes struggle and waver (like David) or fail (like Hezekiah) in their endeavors to put their house in order. But Abraham has no such difficulty.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the text is clear that Isaac's new-found wife fulfills all the qualifications. She is from Abraham's family, possesses beauty and purity, and exhibits faith akin to Abraham himself.<sup>85</sup>

However, the primary message communicated by the author through this embedded narrative is the success not just in finding a wife, but the success in passing down the covenant promises. As stated above, much has been made about the theme of

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<sup>83</sup>The servant here is clearly expressing the opinion of the author.

<sup>84</sup>The beauty and style of the composition also contribute to the impression that God has blessed this undertaking.

<sup>85</sup>As many commentators have noticed, Rebekah is portrayed in terms that recall the patriarch's early experiences. As Wenham writes, "Indeed, Rebekah's willingness to leave her land and kindred shows that she is, as it were, a female Abraham, who like him will be blessed." Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 138.

God's providence in this narrative, and it is obvious in contrast to chapter 23. But upon reading the death story in context, one is struck by the fact that the overarching theological theme is the fate of the covenant promises.<sup>86</sup> The book of Ruth provides an appropriate analogy.<sup>87</sup> God's providence pervades that story (though somewhat furtively); yet the reader knows that the real purpose of the author is not to tell a beautiful story (which it is) or to demonstrate God's providential working in the lives of his people (though this is evident). Instead, the principal intent of the author is to show how God worked to bring about salvation to his people through the royal line of David.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, in this story, the author does emphasize providence. But his main concern is how the patriarchal promise will be passed to the new generation. It is for this reason that God providentially intervenes.<sup>89</sup>

**Description of putting the house in order, part 2 (25:1-6).** This final listing of inheritance lines at this point in the account of Abraham's death represents a unique addition among death stories.<sup>90</sup> So, the inclusion of this passage is somewhat curious. Indeed, at first, this second embedded passage (vv. 1-6) may seem to break the flow of

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<sup>86</sup>Waltke, *Genesis*, 324, comments, "Driving each scene of the Abraham narrative is the implicit question: How will God carry out his incredible promises? Abraham has been promised immeasurable seed that will bless the earth. What woman will the Lord find for Isaac to further this promise? How will he overcome the inevitable human stumbling blocks?"

<sup>87</sup>Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 415.

<sup>88</sup>Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary, vol. 6 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 734-36.

<sup>89</sup>In fact, it is for this reason that the servant must go back to Abraham's family to find a wife for Isaac. The servant does not look for a wife in Mesopotamia because Abraham's family members there were monotheistic; they were not. Instead, it was a covenantal matter. As Walton writes, "At this early stage, intermarriage with the people of the land would risk assimilation into those people and thus jeopardize the covenant promises of the land to Abraham's descendants." Walton, *Genesis*, 529. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 154. In this way, Isaac serves as an example to Jacob (28:1-2), who also goes to a foreign land for a wife. Thus, even before the law is given, Isaac follows the prescriptions of the Torah regarding intermarriage (Exod 34:16; Deut 7:3).

<sup>90</sup>No other death story has an embedded element of this type; the others have either embedded speeches or narratives.

the story. Some have even seen the various reports and genealogical lists of the passage as disparate parts strung together and inserted by a later editor.<sup>91</sup> And perhaps a later editor did append these verses to the original death story. But there is no reason why the original author would not have used such an element in his initial composition.<sup>92</sup> In fact, the passage does play a similar role as other elements found in the “putting the house in order” stage—that is, it explains how a fruitful and blessed Abraham passed down the promised blessings (of wealth) to Isaac and also to his other sons.<sup>93</sup> In this way, verses 1-6 further the author’s theological agenda for the entire story. One might argue that more descendants are not really necessary, but this formal element echoes and reaffirms what was asserted at the start of the death story—that Abraham was blessed by God in all things (24:1b). As Sarna writes, “God promised that the patriarch would be ‘exceedingly numerous,’ the father of a multitude of nations,’ ‘exceedingly fertile’; the genealogical lists specify how this was brought about.”<sup>94</sup>

Technically, two separate elements make up the passage—a segmented genealogy (vv. 1-4)<sup>95</sup> and a narrative summary of inheritance lines (vv. 5-6). The former introduces for the first time Abraham’s wife/concubine, Keturah, who bore him six sons. Some disagreement exists as to the exact status of Keturah—that is, whether she is a concubine (Gen 25:6; 1 Chr 1:32) or wife (Gen 25:1; *אִשָּׁה*; lit., “wife”) taken after Sarah’s death.<sup>96</sup> But her identity is not the focus of the author. Again, he is concerned

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<sup>91</sup>E.g., Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 395.

<sup>92</sup>If the author of a death story can use an embedded narrative, then he surely can use other embedded elements.

<sup>93</sup>Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 202.

<sup>94</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 170.

<sup>95</sup>The segmented nature of the genealogy (more than one son per generation) is only applicable to Jokshan and Midian, not the other four sons. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 352.

<sup>96</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 395-96.

with communicating a theological message. In this case, the two prevailing theological themes of Abraham's faith in God's promises and God's faithfulness to his promises take center stage again. God had promised Abraham that he would have many sons and would be the father of nations; here, he is described as fathering six Arabian nations.<sup>97</sup>

The passage closes with a reaffirmation of Isaac's primacy among Abraham's sons (vv. 5-6). The other sons had received gifts, but Isaac received everything that the patriarch owned. Isaac's inheritance also included the promised blessing—which is portrayed almost as a “tangible, identifiable substance (v. 11).”<sup>98</sup> Not only does Isaac receive these blessings, but Abraham also ensures that the blessings will not be threatened. He precludes possible sibling strife and jealousy by sending the concubines' sons away from Isaac with loads of gifts.<sup>99</sup> Thus, again we see the theological motifs of the author being reiterated by this formal element in the death story. God had promised that Abraham's son would become the covenantal heir of the promises; here, Isaac is described as receiving those blessings.

**Declaration of length of life (25:7).** After the two embedded narratives, the house of Abraham seems ordered rightly. The author now prepares the reader for the actual death of the patriarch. The author uses a genealogical statement detailing the length of Abraham's life to introduce his mortality and the death stage in the death story form. As will be noted below, the principal focus of both this verse and the next is to

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<sup>97</sup>Three of the names of the sons (Zimran, Medan, and Jokshan) have not been connected to ANE nations with any certainty, but they are assumed to be Arabian people groups at the time of Abraham. Sarna, *Genesis*, 172.

<sup>98</sup>Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 203.

<sup>99</sup>Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 349.

demonstrate the fact that Abraham is blessed in the end as in the beginning. Indeed, his longevity in itself—a good, hoary 175 years—points to the blessing of God on his life. Thus, at the start (24:1b) and finish (25:7-8) of the death story, the author emphasizes Abraham’s privileged position before God.

**Death notice (25:8).** Immediately following this genealogical note, the narrator reports Abraham’s death. The announcement itself is somewhat anticlimactic, as the main tension of the plot has been resolved in chapter 24.<sup>100</sup> Thus, rather than bringing the plot to a climax, the notice brings closure to the entire plot and even to the entire Abraham cycle. But as noted above, the author uses the death notice for another purpose as well: he elaborates on the typically brief death notice to give some final evaluations on Abraham’s life.<sup>101</sup> The assessment is extremely positive and “sketches an idyllic picture.”<sup>102</sup> As Sarna writes, “Such a summation on a life is found with no other personality in biblical literature.”<sup>103</sup> First, the notice of death is used to emphasize Abraham’s “good” and peaceful death. Abraham’s death was neither premature, nor did he die unsatisfied. Instead, he is described as “full” (שָׂבַע) at the end.<sup>104</sup> This contentment undoubtedly stems from God’s blessing of wealth, seed, and land during his life—including the end of his life. But Abraham seems to have secured his satisfaction at

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<sup>100</sup>In addition, the reader has known for a chapter and a half that the death is coming.

<sup>101</sup>The author does use stereotypical formulae. For instance, he describes the actual death event with the most common Hebrew verb for “to die,” מָוֹת (e.g., Gen 23:2; Num 20:1, 28; Deut 34:5; 1 Chr 29:28; cf. Gen 5:5; 7:22; 25:17; 1 Sam 25:1; 2 Kgs 13:20). And his use of the verb נָפַח, “to expire” or “to breath one’s last,” follows the typical pattern, occurring in conjunction with and always preceding מָוֹת (e.g., Gen 49:33; cf. Gen 7:21; 25:17; 35:29). Finally, he describes Abraham as being “gathered to his people” (Gen 49:33; cf. Gen 25:17; 35:29; Judg 2:10). However, it is the use of all of these formulae and the addition of the evaluation of Abraham as “an old man and full [of life]” (שָׂבַע וְזָקֵן) that makes this death notice unique.

<sup>102</sup>Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 349.

<sup>103</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 174.

<sup>104</sup>Probably, the idea here is “full of years.”

the time of death primarily as a result of his successful ordering of his household before death. Abraham's final deeds enabled these blessings of wealth, seed, and land to be passed to the next generation. Second, the author's description of Abraham's death recalls God's promise to the patriarch in Genesis 15:15—"You will be buried in a good old age." This fulfillment of God's promise demonstrates that even in his death, Abraham is blessed by God. It also emphasizes the theological theme in the Abraham cycle of YHWH as a deity who is faithful to his promises. Finally, the author's use of the idiom, "gathered to his fathers," seems to suggest that the author sees Abraham as having a peaceful transition to the afterlife. Scholars have offered several theories as to the meaning of this phrase, ranging from being buried in grave of ancestors to joining the ranks of the departed in history.<sup>105</sup> While the exact interpretation of the phrase is unclear, it at least suggests "an immortal element that survives the loss of life."<sup>106</sup> The author seems to see death as some kind of "transition to an afterlife where one is united with one's ancestors."<sup>107</sup>

**Response (25:9-10).** The response stage of the death story covers two verses, and provides details on where, with whom, and by whom Abraham was interred

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<sup>105</sup>For a complete discussion of all the various viewpoints, see I. Cornelius, Andrew E. Hill, and Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., "פָּדָן," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:470. The first view mentioned above is represented by Johannes Pedersen in his work, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, trans. A. Møller and A. I. Fausbøll, vols. 3 and 4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1991), 480-82. The second view is held by Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 397.

<sup>106</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 174. Cf. Waltke, *Genesis*, 340-41; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 160; and classically, B. Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Torah: Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1934), 536. Pedersen's interpretation does not work in this case, since Abraham was not buried with his fathers in Haran. (In addition, both Moses and Aaron are described as "being gathered to his fathers," but neither Moses nor Aaron is buried with his ancestors.) Westermann's theory seems foreign to the ANE context. He argues that there was "no thought of a state in which the dead find themselves," but such a state—however ethereal—is evident in many ANE writings. So, instead, the use of the term "gathered" seems to imply an actual locale—Sheol.

<sup>107</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 174.

(Machpelah, Sarah, and his sons, respectively). The actual burial notice is stereotypical in its use of vocabulary, describing Abraham simply as being buried (the Hebrew verb, קבר).<sup>108</sup> Both Isaac and Ishmael supervise the burial. Even though Isaac is listed first, demonstrating the narrator's perception of his theological priority, the inclusion of Ishmael shows that he is not forgotten.<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, the narrator does not mention any grief or weeping on the part of the sons. As with the description of the death, the author does not want to focus on bereavement, but on his theological message. In this case, the mention of Machpelah and of the transaction with the Hittites to procure a portion of the Promised Land refreshes the reader's memory of God's faithfulness to his covenant promises.<sup>110</sup>

**Transition (25:11).** The last verse of the death story serves as a transition element between the cycles of Abraham and Isaac (and Ishmael).<sup>111</sup> While not a typical element in a death story and probably not part of the original death story, the author chose to include it when the story was incorporated into the Abraham cycle. The author does this for several reasons. First, the statement brings the entire death story to a culmination. As noted above, the author begins his story by mentioning God's blessing of Abraham. The issue that arises with his impending death is whether or not that divine blessing will be passed to the next generation. By ending his account with the statement,

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<sup>108</sup>Cf. Gen 23:19, 35:29b; 50:13; Deut 34:6; Judg 16:31; 1 Kgs 2:10; 2 Kgs 13:20. Typically, the deceased would be placed in a grave, קבר (cf. Gen 23:20; 50:13; Deut 34:6). Here, he is placed in the cave.

<sup>109</sup>A similar concern for all his offspring is demonstrated by Abraham in Gen 25:6.

<sup>110</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 356.

<sup>111</sup>One could also view this verse as an introduction to the Isaac narratives to follow. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 184. In this case, the statement "and God blessed his son Isaac" parallels Gen 24:1b as an introduction to the subsequent narrative. With either interpretation, the borders of the death story are still clearly defined by this transition verse. The beginning of the death story is still the same and the ending varies by only one transitional verse.

“and God blessed his son Isaac” (forming an *inclusio*), the author reiterates that the main dilemma of the death story—the issue of succession—has been resolved.<sup>112</sup> Just as God had blessed Abraham in all things (24:1b), so also will Isaac be blessed.

In this way, the verse also provides an appropriate transition to the Isaac cycle, which follows the Abraham cycle in Genesis.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, it closes with a reference to where Isaac was now dwelling—Beer-lahai-roi.<sup>114</sup> So the attention of the reader and the author is now squarely upon Abraham’s son.

### Genre

As stated above, most scholars see the epilogue to the Abraham cycle as an amalgamation of disparate passages, stemming from different sources. And each of these incongruent accounts claims a specific genre. So, for example, the narrative of Genesis 24 has been labeled a novella (like the Joseph story),<sup>115</sup> an example story,<sup>116</sup> a bridal transfer story,<sup>117</sup> and even a guidance narrative.<sup>118</sup> In addition to disagreeing as to the genre of the chapter, commentators also differ about when the Yahwist adapted the

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<sup>112</sup>Again, the use of the *inclusio* in Gen 24:1b and 25:11 demonstrates that the focus of the narrative is the passing down of the promise—i.e., the succession of the patriarch.

<sup>113</sup>The fact that this verse is a transition is also pointed to in the phrase, “It was after the death of.” Sarna, *Genesis*, 174, accurately points out that this phrase is used only three other places in the canon—Josh 1:1; Judg 1:1; and 2 Sam 1:1—with the deaths of Moses, Joshua, and Saul, respectively. He writes, “In each instance it indicates that a historic turning point has been reached; an era has come to an end, but the continuity of the leadership has been assured.”

<sup>114</sup>Waltke, *Genesis*, 341, writes, “The place where the angel of the Lord promised Hagar she would have a son (see 16:14) is now occupied by Isaac. The allusion [to Beer-lahai-roi] forms a transition to the account of the descendants of Ishmael and suggests that Isaac will displace him.”

<sup>115</sup>Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 197; von Rad, *Genesis*, 253.

<sup>116</sup>Roth, “The Wooing of Rebekah,” 177-87; Coats, *Genesis*, 170. In this case, the story tells of an ideal servant who obeys his master.

<sup>117</sup>K. Aitken, “The Wooing of Rebekah: A Study in the Development of Tradition,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30 (1984): 3-23.

<sup>118</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 383.

underlying oral source. However, more concord exists regarding the genre of the “mutually independent texts” of 25:1-18.<sup>119</sup> Most scholars believe that the first six verses include a marriage report (v. 1), a genealogy (vv. 2-4a) with a narrative caption (v. 4b), and a narrative fragment (vv. 5-6).<sup>120</sup> Finally, the account closes with the report of Abraham’s death (vv. 7-11), which most assume was originally appended to P’s account of Sarah’s death and burial in chapter 23.

The underlying logic for these theories is that late editors adapted and elaborated upon original and simple biblical stories in constructing their theologically developed compositions. But as Mathews writes, “There is no reason, however, why the theological meaning of the story could not have been original and the plot line could not have been complex.”<sup>121</sup> This is particularly true if the original author possessed a story convention, such as a death story, to direct his composition. True, some original sources had to have been used; the stories had to be passed to this author in the first place—orally or otherwise. But as shown above, the structural, theological, and thematic coherence of Genesis 24:1-25:11 shows that it is most plausible that the death story genre governed the structure and style of the present text.

### Setting

Although most commentators agree on the current literary setting of the various accounts of 24:1-25:11, they hold differing positions on the original *Sitz im Leben*

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<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 394. These are Westermann’s words, but they represent the typical scholarly opinion. Again, notice that the conclusion of the Abraham story is deemed to include vv. 12-18.

<sup>120</sup>The fragment was appended in order to demonstrate that the addition of sons did not in any way lessen Isaac’s importance. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 172; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 395. Some state that the genealogy may have been a register for a six-member tribal confederation. See Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. B. W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 149.

<sup>121</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 324. He also believes that some of these classifications of the oral prehistories are reductionistic.

of the accounts. For example, most believe that chapter 24 has a setting in the literature of J and that much of chapter 25 belongs to P. However, the opinions on the *Sitz im Leben* of the original stories depend on one's identification of the genre. For instance, those who consider chapter 24 an example story may posit a royal court setting.<sup>122</sup>

But the original setting is very difficult to determine with certainty. They definitely are narratives (such as chap. 24) and information (such as the genealogies and death reports of chap. 25) that may have been passed from generation to generation in a family context. To say more than this would be pure conjecture. Indeed, this story illustrates the assertion in chapter 3 of this dissertation that judgments on setting and intention tend to be speculative by nature. Another plausible theory is that the original setting for some of these "sources" is literary—that is, the sources (the story of chap. 24 and the genealogical information in chap. 25) were originally written to be part of the death story itself.

### **Intention**

As with the setting, there is general agreement regarding the intention of the account in its current literary setting—that is, it provides a conclusion to the Abraham cycle. But opinions on the intention of the original sources vary—again generally based on one's identification of the genres. For example, if the original story in chapter 24 is deemed a guidance narrative, the original intention would be to illustrate God's providential direction in the important events of life.<sup>123</sup> However, if our assessment of the original setting is correct, then the original intention may have been to pass down these stories because they were of interest to a particular family—in this case, the family of

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<sup>122</sup>Coats, *Genesis*, 170. He argues that such an institutional context would provide an appropriate context for a story that instructs and inspires administrative officials.

<sup>123</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 383-84.

Abraham. As it now stands in its current literary setting, the story provides an appropriate conclusion to the Abraham saga. But as discussed, it also has deeper theological purposes as well. These will be summarized below.

### Theological Conclusions

As seen above, the story of Abraham's death possesses great theological significance. The following will recap and summarize a few of the significant theological themes emerging from our form critical exegesis.

First, the author uses the death story form to exalt and eulogize the dying patriarch. Indeed, the image that appears in the story is a dying (24:1a), though still virile and vivacious man (25:1-6), who remains faithful to YHWH, his promises, and his call (24:7) even to the end.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, in the embedded narrative, Abraham's quality is noticed by the narrator (24:1b), the servant (24:35), and even the patriarch himself (24:7).<sup>125</sup> Such acclaim is fitting for the father of a nation. And in this way, the author may intentionally put the hero forward as an example for his readers—the nation of Israel—to emulate. In fact, both the author's nation and Abraham himself have experienced bumps on the journey of faith even from the start.<sup>126</sup> But the author must hope that his readers—his nation—will end well like their father Abraham.<sup>127</sup>

Second, this death story speaks of God's providential involvement in the death

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<sup>124</sup>Compared to later biblical characters, Abraham receives some of the highest praise. Some, like Moses and Joshua, are comparable to Abraham by being faithful and fit even when dying. However, others, such as David and Jacob, do not compare as favorably. At death, the former seems to experience an impotency both in his physical ability and in his ability to lead. Meanwhile, the latter lived a life that was "few years and evil" (47:9), as opposed to Abraham who lived to a "good, hoary age" (25:8).

<sup>125</sup>As Sternberg writes, "Yet so blessed is Abraham that he can spend his last years raising a new family while taking measures (with his characteristic wisdom and foresight and fairness) to safeguard the interests of his old and divinely appointed one." Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 349.

<sup>126</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 163, notes that the first words ascribed to Abraham are expressions of doubt (15:2f, 8). This is in contrast with his last words (24:6-8), which are expressions of "absolute faith."

<sup>127</sup>Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 184.

event. As noted above, the theme of God's providence permeates much of the action—particularly the events of Genesis 24. One is left with the obvious impression that YHWH has a deep-seated interest in ensuring certain things happen before death.

Third, this account demonstrates how a death story can contribute to the theological message of an entire saga—that is, the larger complex of stories about an individual. For example, the principal theme of the patriarchal narratives is the promise of YHWH, and Abraham's death story plays an important role in developing this theme by showing how that promise is passed to the next generation.<sup>128</sup>

Fourth, the death story clearly portrays the distinctive Hebrew interest in ensuring an ordered house before death. This story is the first of many to possess the "putting the house in order" formal stage. The inclusion of this stage provides a key insight into the thanatological beliefs of the Hebrew people. Unlike their ANE neighbors, the principal concern for the Hebrews was not making provisions for the individual's afterlife.<sup>129</sup> Instead, the dying wanted to provide for those who survived them. Certainly, in Abraham's case, his efforts to provide for future generations are all the more important given what is at stake in salvation history and in the storyline of the Pentateuch.

Finally, the death story portrays what the ancient Israelites would have considered a "good death." Of course, the Hebrews did not believe that life was something endless, but instead it was "something assigned to man."<sup>130</sup> However, the dying could be "satisfied in death" if certain qualifications were met. Abraham's death

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<sup>128</sup>Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 37. Clines asserts that God's promise of land, progeny, and relationship is the theme of the entire Pentateuch. Our exegesis has demonstrated that this death story contributes to the development of this theme. Cf. Gen 24:7, 60.

<sup>129</sup>Cf. the stories of the death of Enkidu and the death of Bilgamesh detailed in chap. 3.

<sup>130</sup>Von Rad, *Genesis*, 262.

story illustrates what these are. The patriarch had lived to a good, hoary age. He had a burial location in the land of promise. And as Brueggemann states, “He dies midst the generations, confident that all things valuable have been transmitted to his son(s).”<sup>131</sup>

### **Exegesis of the Death Story of Jacob (Gen 47:28-50:14)**

The next patriarch after Abraham—Isaac—receives comparatively limited attention by the author of Genesis.<sup>132</sup> Instead, the majority of the last half of Genesis deals with the life of the nation’s namesake, Israel.<sup>133</sup> Of all the events of Jacob’s life, his death seems to be the primary concern of the author.<sup>134</sup> The account of Jacob’s death itself covers parts of four chapters—Genesis 47:28-50:14—making it one of the longest death stories, along with that of Moses.<sup>135</sup> The following form critical exegesis will examine the importance of this individual, his death, and the literary presentation of it in more detail.

This death story is significant for the current study for several reasons. First, it demonstrates how the death story form can serve as a redactional frame for important embedded narratives and speeches. In this case, there are four separate embedded

<sup>131</sup>Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 203.

<sup>132</sup>As with the biblical characters prior to Abraham and Sarah in the book of Genesis, the author provides only a rather brief description of Isaac’s death—a scant two verses (35:28-29). Instead, the author’s gaze seems focused on the father of the twelve tribes—Jacob himself. Even the narrative between Isaac’s succession in Gen 25 and his death in Gen 35 seems to center on his son Jacob.

<sup>133</sup>Even the so-called Joseph story (Gen 37-50) seems to emphasize Jacob. Thus, when the favored son is sold into slavery, his father’s grief is highlighted. When Joseph ascends to power in Egypt, he only desires one thing—to see his father again. As von Rad writes, “With the narratives about Jacob’s legacy, death, and burial we come to the end of the Joseph story, which the final redactor, however, as is here evident, wished to be understood as a Jacob story.” Von Rad, *Genesis*, 412.

<sup>134</sup>In fact, throughout the Joseph narrative, the narrator constantly anticipates this event. Cf. Gen 37:35; 42:38; 43:27ff.; 44:22, 29, 31; 45:9, 13, 28; 46:30. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37-50: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 181.

<sup>135</sup>Waltke calls this scene “Jacob’s finest hour.” Waltke, *Genesis*, 617.

elements.<sup>136</sup> The author adjusts the death story form to highlight the content of each one of these elements. Second, the story of Jacob's death illustrates how an author can embellish one particular element in the typical structure for rhetorical purposes. In this account, the response stage is expanded more than any other death story, save perhaps that of Sarah. Third, this death story exemplifies the theological and literary use of a genre, as the author adjusts, fills, and expands the form to characterize, to anticipate, to evaluate, and to make theological points. Fourth, this account is the first death story to include a lengthy farewell address/deathbed blessing.

### **Historical and Literary Context**

Genesis 47:28-50:14 brings to a conclusion the entire account of Jacob's life, which commenced in Genesis 25. The events surrounding Jacob's death take place in Egypt, which has provided the setting for most of the Joseph story.<sup>137</sup> Jacob was 130 years old when he moved his family to Egypt, and he lived there for some seventeen years before dying at the seasoned age of 147.<sup>138</sup> Jacob's location and impending death in these final chapters of Genesis introduce a new complication to the story of the patriarchs and the Joseph story. To be sure, Joseph's conflict with his brothers had been resolved, and Joseph had successfully delivered Egypt from famine (Gen 47:1-26). In addition, Jacob and his family had experienced the blessing of God to the extent that the family was becoming a nation (Gen 47:27).<sup>139</sup> However, it was a people on foreign soil, far from

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<sup>136</sup>The first is Jacob's speech to Joseph, who must swear to bury his father properly—that is, in the Promised Land. The second element involves Jacob's adoption of Joseph's two sons. The third and fourth elements detail Jacob's last words to the twelve sons. Yet, in no way does the composition seem patchwork; instead, the author weaves all these elements into a unified and logical story.

<sup>137</sup>In fact, Jacob is the first of the patriarchs to die outside the Promised Land.

<sup>138</sup>The events of Gen 47-50 probably occur later in this seventeen year Egyptian hiatus.

<sup>139</sup>The use of the singular "Israel" with plural verbs in Gen 47:27 indicates that the author has in mind more than just Jacob's family, but also Israel as a nation. As Sarna writes, "Israel the individual merges with the national entity." Sarna, *Genesis*, 323.

their divine inheritance in Palestine. Furthermore, Jacob had yet to confer the patriarchal blessings on his sons. To this point, throughout the patriarchal narratives, this bestowal of blessing had been central to the main plot. Abraham needed to have a son to whom to pass the blessing, and then he needed to find a wife for his son to ensure the process would continue. Jacob and Esau competed to be the recipient of the blessing from Isaac. But until this point in the story, the issue of who would receive the blessing from Jacob had yet to be resolved. Thus, Genesis 47:28-50:14 is integral to the entire storyline and plot of the book. If Jacob remained in Egypt without making any provision for his progeny, all the miraculous and providential events of the patriarchal narratives hitherto would be for naught.

The story of Jacob's death is embedded within the complicated and yet cohesive story of Joseph (Gen 37-50). This placement is not haphazard or without purpose, since, as Sarna writes, "from the time that Jacob settled down in Canaan after returning from Haran, his life had been wholly intertwined with that of Joseph."<sup>140</sup> Scholars have generally isolated chapters 38 and 48-50 from the original story. The reason is that the main plotline, introduced by Joseph's dreams in chapter 37, seems to find its resolution and conclusion in Genesis 39:1-47:27.<sup>141</sup> Thus, Genesis 47:28-50:14 (along with chap. 38) is often seen as having been tacked on to the original Joseph story, with little impact on its plot.<sup>142</sup> While it is true that the complication introduced by the dreams is an important part of the Joseph story, the resolution to the complication is not the only or even the main focus of the narrator.

One must remember the overarching purpose of the author. He did not include

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<sup>140</sup>Ibid.

<sup>141</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 344.

<sup>142</sup>For example, see Coats, *Genesis*, 301.

the Joseph story to entertain his audience with an intricate and intense story about a son betrayed by and then reconciled to his brothers. Instead, the Joseph story is about promise and fulfillment and about the passing of the patriarchal blessings.<sup>143</sup> It concerns the whole family of Jacob—the nation of Israel itself. The *tôlēdôt* formula at the head of the Joseph story (“this is the family history of Jacob,” Gen 37:2a) substantiates this point.<sup>144</sup> If the Joseph story does in fact emphasize the themes of promise and blessing, then the story of Jacob’s death is indispensable to the narrative. Here we find Jacob bestowing the covenantal blessings on the future generations—not only upon his favored son Joseph, but upon all his sons and grandsons.<sup>145</sup> And here we find Jacob securing his own return to the Promised Land—the focus of the patriarchal blessings. Thus, the story of Jacob’s death cannot be isolated from its literary context.

### Form/Structure

Though source critics have traditionally considered Genesis 47:28-50:14 to be a composite patchwork of various documents,<sup>146</sup> some have argued convincingly for the unity, consistency, and purposeful arrangement of the unit.<sup>147</sup> This study will again argue

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<sup>143</sup>For example, the story shows the fulfillment of several of the promises to Abraham—in particular the promise of being a blessing to the nations (by saving surrounding nations from famine). Again, for a good discussion of this theme of promise, see Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*.

<sup>144</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 345.

<sup>145</sup>For this reason, Longacre believes chap. 49 (Jacob’s blessing) to be the “high point” of the Joseph story and the entire Pentateuch. R. E. Longacre, *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 23. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 345.

<sup>146</sup>For example, see Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 181. He writes, “These texts are independent of each other and of different origin.”

<sup>147</sup>For an excellent survey of the history of interpretation and the source critical consensus, see Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 865-69. Mathews states that scholars generally hold to a text consisting of multiple sources (e.g., Wellhausen, Gunkel, Skinner, von Rad, and Seebass), though some (e.g., Redford, Dietrich, and Kebekus) take a tradition historical approach—i.e., an interpretation that sees layers of tradition supplementing an original base text. Beginning with Wellhausen, source critics have maintained that the strata of interlocking source documents are seen more clearly here than in any other part of Genesis. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 413.

that the death story genre acts as the structuring device for Genesis 47:28-50:14. Although the author may have employed other existing compositions or sources in his work (in particular, Gen 49:1-28), the existing structure seems to have been determined primarily by the death story form. To support this hypothesis, the following will demonstrate the appropriateness of the boundaries of the death story (Gen 47:28 and 50:14), as well as the interconnectedness and intentional structure of the narrative within these chapters. Then, we will explain how the structure conforms to the typical death story form.

Initially, one may note that the declaration of length of life in Genesis 47:28 (and thus, 47:28-31) is the starting point for the actual death story. Though the declaration of length of life is not normally placed at the beginning of death stories (see below), it is a stereotypical element. And in other death stories, the declaration of length of life is always connected with and anticipates an impending death.

This placement of the beginning point of the story at verse 28 is disputed by some. For instance, Wenham argues that verses 27 and 28 belong together because of the parallel sequence of verbs and thought patterns in those two verses, and thus verse 28 cannot be a transition marker by itself.<sup>148</sup> While there does seem to be some connection between these verses, at best verse 27 serves as a narrative transition between the account of the famine in Egypt (47:13-26) and the account of Jacob's death (47:28-50:14).<sup>149</sup> But the death story itself commences at verse 28. As Coats argues, Genesis 47:28 functions like 50:22, which introduces the death story of Joseph.<sup>150</sup> In fact, the two verses are

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<sup>148</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 438-39.

<sup>149</sup>In fact, v. 27 could have been patterned purposefully after v. 28 in the joining of the accounts.

<sup>150</sup>Coats, *Genesis*, 301. Coats labels both as death reports.

virtually parallel. Both begin with a statement about the dying individual (Jacob and Joseph) living in Egypt (cf. 47:28a; 50:22a); and they both end with a declaration of length of life (cf. 47:28b; 50:22b).

Others have argued that Genesis 47:28-31 should be grouped with the previous narrative (vv. 1-27) and not with the subsequent chapters.<sup>151</sup> So for example, based on the phrase, “after these things” (in Gen 48:1), they assert that a major scene shift occurs in chapter 48.<sup>152</sup> But the last four verses in chapter 47 more naturally belong with Genesis 48-50. First, they share the same main character—Jacob—as that which follows. Whereas 47:13-27 concerns the fortunes of Joseph and the entire nation, 47:28-50:14 is focused more narrowly on Jacob himself.<sup>153</sup> Second, the summation of Jacob’s years of life (v. 28) and his first deathbed speech (vv. 29-31) indicates that the theme is unmistakably Jacob’s death—a subject matter clearly distinguished from the topic of life and blessing in the midst of famine (47:13-27). Third, similarly, the narrator’s placement of Jacob on his deathbed establishes the setting for the remainder of the 48:1-50:14.<sup>154</sup> Finally, the initial burial instructions in 47:29-31 are repeated in 49:29-33, thus forming a clear literary frame around the blessing and adoption accounts.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup>E.g., Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 437-40.

<sup>152</sup>As Westermann writes, “The first verse of ch. 48 is obviously a new beginning.” Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 182. He comments that such a phrase moves the narrative forward in time and always indicates a passage of time. But while this verse does introduce a new scene in the death story, it is not a separate story. As Seebass writes, “[Genesis] 47:28-31 cannot be separated from 48:1-22.” Horst Seebass, “The Joseph Story, Genesis 48 and the Canonical Process,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35 (1986): 29-30. He argues that the prostration of Jacob anticipates further action (as in 1 Kgs 1:47), and that 47:28-31 and 48:1-22 are intimately connected structurally and thematically. So for example, 48:21a (“behold I am about to die”) corresponds with 47:29 (“the time for Israel to die drew near”).

<sup>153</sup>In fact, Jacob had not even been mentioned by the narrator since v. 12.

<sup>154</sup>Wenham argues that vv. 27-31 serve as a kind of trailer for the next section. But v. 28 is more than a trailer; it is a natural beginning point for the death story. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 438-39.

<sup>155</sup>Waltke, *Genesis*, 618.

Comparatively little disagreement exists regarding the end of the death story—Genesis 50:14, which notes Joseph’s return to Egypt after his father’s burial. Clearly, the burial account in 50:1-14 cannot be separated from that which precedes it. Indeed, the deathbed speeches all anticipate both the death *and* burial of Jacob. Two of the deathbed speeches themselves (47:29-31 and 49:29-33) specifically presage the prodigious funeral procession to the Promised Land in 50:1-14. In addition, most death stories typically go on to speak of the response to the death; that is, a death story would be incomplete without an account of the response. Thus, the story of Jacob’s death possesses very clear boundaries—47:28 and 50:14—and coheres thematically around the topic of the patriarch’s preparations for death.

As with the story of Abraham’s death, the primary argument for 47:28-50:14 being a complete unit is that the text coheres structurally. In fact, the structure of the passage follows the stereotypical pattern of the death story genre as found in other parts of the Old Testament (see Table 3). The account begins with a declaration of length of life, which serves to bring the focus of the narrative back to Jacob and to introduce the idea of death (47:28). This intuition that Jacob will die is immediately confirmed by an explicit announcement of impending death (47:29a). This announcement is connected with the next formal element and stage—a brief narrative describing Jacob’s final words to Joseph, urging him to remove the patriarch’s body to the Promised Land (47:29-31). This represents Jacob’s first effort to put his house in order.

A second announcement of impending death introduces the next embedded narrative describing Jacob’s blessing and adoption of Joseph’s two sons (48:1-22). After this second effort to order his house, Jacob blesses all his sons (49:1-28). This embedded element is the third effort by Jacob to bring order to his household. Following the last will and testament of Jacob, the chapter closes with a reiteration of Jacob’s burial instructions (49:29-32). This last effort to put the house in order is introduced by a final announcement of impending death made by Jacob himself.

Table 3. The formal structure of the death story of Jacob

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Formal Element</i>	<i>CL</i>	<i>Hebrew Text</i>	<i>Translation</i>
ADS	Declaration of length of life, with an introductory geographical note	47:28a	וַיְהִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שֶׁבַע עָשָׂר שָׁנָה	And Jacob was in the land of Egypt seventeen years;
		47:28b	וַיְהִי יְמֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁנֵי חַיָּיו שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים וָאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה:	And it was that the length of Jacob's life was one hundred forty-seven years.
ADS	Announcement of impending death	47:29a	וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמוּת	When the days for Israel to die drew near,
POS	Gathering for final words	47:29b	וַיִּקְרָא לְבָנוֹ לְיוֹסֵף	he called for his son Joseph
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 1	47:29c-31		Embedded speech, detailing Jacob's specific instructions to his son Joseph
ADS	Announcement of impending death: setting up next POS	48:1a	וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה	Now it came to pass after these things
		48:1b	וַיֹּאמֶר לְיוֹסֵף	that Joseph was told,
		48:1c	הִנֵּה אָבִיךָ חָלָה	"Behold, your father is sick."
POS	Description of putting the house in order: part 2	48:2-22		Embedded narrative, detailing Jacob's adoption and blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh
POS	Gathering for final words	49:1a	וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל-בָּנָיו	Then Jacob called for his sons
POS	Description of putting the house in order: part 3	49:1b-28		Embedded speech, Jacob's final testament and prophecy to his twelve sons
POS	Description of putting the house in order: part 4	49:29-32		Embedded speech, detailing Jacob's final burial request to his twelve sons
DS	Death notice	49:33a	וַיִּכַּל יַעֲקֹב לְצוֹת אֶת-בָּנָיו	When Jacob finished charging his sons,
		49:33b	וַיֹּאסֶף רַגְלָיו אֶל-הַמִּטָּה	he gathered his feet into the bed
		49:33c	וַיָּנֹעַ	and breathed his last,
		49:33d	וַיִּאָסֶף אֶל-עַמּוּיוֹ:	and was gathered to his people.
RS	Description of response	50:1-14		Embedded narrative, detailing the responses to Jacob's death, including burial

CL=Clause Label    ADS=Announcement of Impending Death Stage  
 POS=Putting the House in Order Stage    DS=Death Stage    RS=Response Stage

This account is immediately followed by a brief death notice in verse 33. Together, these five verses (vv. 29-33) serve as a transition, concluding the efforts by Jacob to order his household, as well as introducing the response stage in the death story.<sup>156</sup> The response stage is extended—a purposeful attempt by the author to show the patriarch’s return to the Promised Land. In total, the narrative contains eleven formal elements, including four embedded texts (both narratives and speeches) and spanning four formal stages (again, see Table 3). The following will examine each of these elements in more detail.

**Declaration of length of life (47:28), with an introductory geographical note.** The story of Jacob’s death begins with a declaration of length of life (47:28b)—which is preceded by a brief geographical note about the length of the patriarch’s stay in Egypt (47:28a). This indication of the length of Jacob’s stay in Egypt is not a typical element in a death story,<sup>157</sup> but it does serve to tie the story in with the larger Joseph narrative, adding a certain degree of symmetry. Just as Joseph stayed with Jacob seventeen years before going into Egypt (Gen 37:2), Jacob stayed with Joseph seventeen years in Egypt before dying.<sup>158</sup> The notice also serves to redirect the reader’s eyes, which had been focused on Joseph in 47:13-27, back to Jacob.

On the other hand, the declaration of length of life is very typical of death stories—particularly in Genesis. However, the placement of the statement in the story of Jacob’s death differs significantly from the other death stories. In every death notice, report, or story in Genesis until this point, a declaration of length of life has immediately

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<sup>156</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 913. That the five verses should be taken as a group is evidenced by the repetition of “gathered” and “gave instructions” in vv. 29 and 33

<sup>157</sup>But it does mirror the Joseph story in 50:22.

<sup>158</sup>Alter, *Genesis*, 285. Sarna, *Genesis*, 323, argues that this literary framework has influenced the placement of the numerical summation here. He states that it marks the end of the Canaan period, just as seventeen years also marked the beginning.

preceded the death notice.<sup>159</sup> But here, the narrator places his announcement many verses before the actual death event. This arrangement seems calculated. Based on comparison with other stories, the reader expects an immediate notice of Jacob's death.<sup>160</sup> But his death does not occur for two more chapters. Thus, the narrator adds much tension to the forthcoming deathbed scenes.

However, the narrative function of this declaration of length of life may be even more subtle. The reference to Jacob's old age seems to invite the reader to compare Jacob in his final years with the earlier patriarchs. But what is the reader to expect? In the death account of Abraham, the mention of his old age seems to be an "overt metonymy" for the blessings and fortune granted by God.<sup>161</sup> In fact, the narrator associates Abraham being "old and advanced in years" with "and God had blessed him in everything" (Gen 24:1).<sup>162</sup> However, in the story of Isaac, the narrator does not fulfill the reader's expectations. Indeed, although the reader may have expected Abraham to be a "typal precedent" for future accounts, history does not repeat itself with Isaac.<sup>163</sup>

Abraham was vigorous in his old age; Isaac could not see.<sup>164</sup> Abraham protected his

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<sup>159</sup>For example, see the accounts of the deaths of Adam (5:5), Noah (9:29), Sarah (23:1-2), Abraham (25:7-8), Ishmael (25:17), and Isaac (35:28-29). An exception would be Rachel, whose death report lacks a declaration of length of life. But this omission is typical for death reports of women in the Old Testament. In fact, the death story of Sarah is the only account in the Old Testament to detail the number of years lived by a woman.

<sup>160</sup>The explicit announcement of impending death in v. 29a only serves to heighten this sense of anxious anticipation.

<sup>161</sup>Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 349.

<sup>162</sup>The subsequent narrative also indicates God's favor toward and the continued vigor of the patriarch in his "declining" years.

<sup>163</sup>Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 349. On a separate note, one could argue that the death story form was the basis for the structure of the narrative of Isaac's blessing of his sons (Gen 27:1-28:6). Indeed, there is a hint that Isaac's death is impending in Gen 27:1. But the actual death event is too far removed from this announcement for the account to be considered a death story. An appropriate analogy would be Gen 18:11—where Abraham's death is announced, but it is too distant from the death event to be part of the death story itself.

<sup>164</sup>Cf. 27:1. This seems to be a judgment on his spiritual, as well as physical, capacity.

successor; Isaac's actions (or lack thereof) caused his heir—Jacob—to flee.<sup>165</sup> Thus, when one reads of Jacob's old age in Genesis 47:28, the reader is unsure how an aged Jacob will perform in putting his house in order—like Isaac or Abraham? Based on Jacob's past record of deceit and preferential treatment of Joseph, most readers are probably not optimistic. This intuition will be reinforced further in subsequent verses, which portray Jacob at death as being like Isaac physically--that is, blind so that he cannot distinguish between those he might bless. In fact, in Jacob's case, his condition is even worse; he is bedridden and mortally ill. But the narrator has shown an affinity for irony and is able to dash expectations. Jacob may turn out better than anticipated.

**Announcement of impending death (47:29a).** Though death is expected after verse 28, its certainty seems assured with the narrator's explicit announcement in the first clause of verse 29—"the time drew near for Israei to die."<sup>166</sup> This announcement serves a dual purpose. Along with the declaration of length of life in verse 28b, it introduces the death story as a whole--establishing the focus of the subsequent narratives. It also commences the first scene in the death account of Jacob--his initial issuance of final words.

**Description of putting the house in order, part 1: Final words to Joseph (47:29b-31).** After the narrator's definitive declaration of Jacob's impending death, he describes the patriarch's first act to put his house in order. Like Abraham and Joseph in Genesis, this "ordering" is accomplished through final words and instructions.

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<sup>165</sup>Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 350. Sternberg writes, "The day having come for Isaac, too, to put his house in order ('I am old, I do not know the day of my death'), he only manages to create disorder, ranging himself openly against his wife and exacerbating fraternal tensions to a point never reached since the days of Cain."

<sup>166</sup>וַיִּקְרַבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמוֹת; cf. Deut 31:14; 1 Kgs 2:1a.

Introducing these words, we find a minor formal element, a description of the gathering of family members for final words. The text states simply that Jacob called for (קרא) Joseph. Thus, the favored son is the only one present.<sup>167</sup>

After summoning Joseph, Jacob requests that his son bear his bones out of Egypt and back to the burial place of the patriarchs. The urgency of such a request and its relevance to an ordered house should not be understated. As Berman points out, “It is not death that Jacob fears but interment in a fashion inconsistent with ancestral tradition.”<sup>168</sup> In particular, the ancestral tradition he means to observe is burial in the Promised Land. Jacob frames his appeal to Joseph in both negative (“do not bury me in Egypt”) and positive (“bury me in their [my fathers’] grave”) terms. As the second-most powerful man in Egypt, Joseph would be the natural person to carry out these orders—orders that would have required his Egyptian facilitation.<sup>169</sup> To guarantee that Joseph will fulfill this request, Jacob asks his son to make an oath. The oath recalls Genesis 24, where Abraham had secured a similar oath from his servant (vv. 2, 9). In that passage, as here, the patriarchal promises were at stake. Some have pointed out the submissive nature of Jacob’s request. For instance, he uses the deferential phrase, “If I have found favor” (cf. 18:3; 33:10; 50:4). But this phrase more likely indicates the importance of the matter to Jacob and his realization that his son has the ability to honor or reject his request. Joseph does not allow his father to fret long. He immediately responds with an emphatic and solemn promise, “I will do it.”<sup>170</sup> This promise is then confirmed as Joseph

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<sup>167</sup>This element will be repeated in 49:1a, introducing Jacob’s third effort to order his house.

<sup>168</sup>Joshua Berman, “Identity Politics and the Burial of Jacob (Genesis 50:1-14),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68 (2006): 12.

<sup>169</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 183. Normally, this task would have fallen to the eldest son, but here Joseph assumes the responsibility.

<sup>170</sup>The emphasis is clear in the Hebrew construction: אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה כְּדַבְּרֶךָ. Hebrew uses the pronoun here with an emphatic nuance. Paul Jouon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Pt. 3, *Syntax* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1996), 539.

actually performs the oath.

The account closes with a curious action on the part of Jacob; he “bowed at the head of the bed.” This phrase probably is not an indication of Jacob’s frailty. The verb (כָּרַח, only in the *hishtaphel*) does not indicate “bowing” because of weakness. Instead, it refers to reverential prostration before a human (in a secular setting) or divine (in a worship setting) figure—in both cases recognizing authority.<sup>171</sup> Who is the focus of his reverence? Given the nature of the verb, God could be the object of the prostration.<sup>172</sup> But based on the submissive nature and urgency of Jacob’s request to Joseph, the son seems to have been more likely the object of the father’s genuflection. However, one should not read any more into this than a mere expression of profound thankfulness. In fact, in the next chapter, Joseph prostrates himself before Jacob (Gen 48:12).

What might be the purpose of the inclusion of this account? It could possibly identify Joseph as “Jacob’s successor” or the *pater familias*.<sup>173</sup> This would make sense of the responsibility given to Joseph to oversee Jacob’s burial.<sup>174</sup> And given the exact parallel with 1 Kings 2:1 (“the time drew near for David to die”), succession is possibly in view. Those who view the Joseph story as political in nature (that is, concerned with validating the rule of Ephraim or Judah) would argue for this purpose. However, the purpose seems more than political. Instead, the story reveals more about Jacob’s

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<sup>171</sup>Terence E. Fretheim, “כָּרַח,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:42.

<sup>172</sup>A similar scene is found in 1 Kgs 1:47-48, where David bows (כָּרַח) on his bed in worship to God. However, de Hoop has effectively argued that the Kings passage is not an appropriate parallel, since David also expresses his praise verbally before God. Jacob does not. Raymond de Hoop, “Then Israel Bowed Himself . . .” (Genesis 47:31),” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28 (2004): 469.

<sup>173</sup>B. J. van der Merwe, “Joseph as Successor of Jacob,” in *Studia Biblica et Semitica: Theodoro Christiano Vriezen decicata*, ed. W. C. van Unnik and A. S. van der Woude (Wageningen: Veenman, 1966), 221-32.

<sup>174</sup>de Hoop, “Then Israel Bowed Himself . . .” (Genesis 47:31),” 468.

commitment to the promises of God and to the faith of the patriarchs. As Waltke states, Jacob “is not bamboozled by the prosperity in Egypt,” but instead he is focused on the greater divine promises of nationhood in the land promised by God (Gen 48:21; 50:24).<sup>175</sup> This location represents his family’s future.<sup>176</sup> What seems important to Jacob is not primarily who carries out the orders, but the fact that they are carried out. A number of textual indicators substantiate this interpretation. First, the deathbed instructions are stated twice in this one passage accentuating the request itself. Second, the request to remove Jacob’s bones is repeated later and in more detail in chapter 49—but to all the sons, not just to Joseph.<sup>177</sup> Third, the pressing and vital nature of the request is seen in Jacob’s three-fold use of the Hebrew particle of entreaty,  $\text{נָּ$ . Fourth, the use of the oath emphasizes Jacob’s need for assurance that Joseph will honor his desire.

**Announcement of impending death (48:1a).** As important as the burial instructions are, the focus of the story of Jacob’s death is found in the next two chapters, describing the blessing conferred on his sons (chap. 49) and grandsons (chap. 48). Of all the last acts of the failing and blind patriarch, these seem to be the most crucial to ordering his household. Both chapters 48 and 49 are filled with tension. Indeed, by all accounts, Jacob seemed ready to die at the end of chapter 47.<sup>178</sup> But instead, the narrator continues with an account of the adoption of Manasseh and Ephraim.

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<sup>175</sup>Waltke, *Genesis*, 590. These promises would not be realized in their “provisional residence of Egypt,” but in the Promised Land. Again, in reading Genesis, one has to remember the overarching purpose of Genesis as seen particularly in the previous death stories—the continuance of the promise.

<sup>176</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 183.

<sup>177</sup>Waltke, *Genesis*, 593. These passages form an *inclusio* around Jacob’s blessing of his progeny (in chaps. 48 and 49). The frame suggests that the key to the future blessing of Jacob’s sons is the securing of the Promised Land itself.

<sup>178</sup>Donald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)*, Vetus Testamentum Supplements 20 (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 22.

The narrator introduces this scene with a second announcement of impending death.<sup>179</sup> Joseph is told that his father is ill.<sup>180</sup> This formal element serves to introduce the setting for the blessings in both chapters 48 and 49. From now on, when we meet Jacob in the narrative, he is sick and on his deathbed.<sup>181</sup> As noted above, some believe the phrase, “after these things,” indicates a break in the passage.<sup>182</sup> However, “these things” seems to refer to the speech at the end of chapter 47. In this way, the phrase would represent a direct attempt by the narrator to connect the blessing scenes to the previous deathbed request. In fact, as noted above, the accounts of 47:29-31 and 48:1-22 are intimately related thematically. For instance, the statement, “Behold your father is sick,” holds little significance apart from the narrator’s previous description in 47:29a—“the time drew near for Jacob to die.”<sup>183</sup>

#### **Description of putting the house in order: Final words and deeds, part 2**

**(48:1b-22).** After the announcement of impending death element, we find the second act by Jacob to put his house in order, again described by means of an embedded narrative. Though this scene perhaps occurred at an earlier occasion, the author clearly wants the

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<sup>179</sup>While this may seem to be an unnecessary repetition of a formal element, in this case the author seems to be using it as a structural indicator. Using a second announcement highlights and draws attention to chaps. 48 and 49 as the central chapters in the plot. Such a repetition is also seen in other death stories, such as those detailing the deaths of Moses and David.

<sup>180</sup>Perhaps Joseph did not know of his father’s illness first hand because of his duties as vizier. Waltke, *Genesis*, 595. Sarna notes that this is the first mention of illness in the Old Testament. Sarna, *Genesis*, 325.

<sup>181</sup>Gen 48:2; 49:33. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 873.

<sup>182</sup>E.g., Sailhamer writes, the phrase “separates the passage from the preceding events.” Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 229.

<sup>183</sup>The root, חלה, can indicate a sickness leading to death (1 Kgs 15:23; 2 Kgs 13:14), but it can also describe less serious ailments. R. K. Harrison, “חלה,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:140-42. Thus, apart from 47:29a, the reader would not know the relative severity of Jacob’s weakness—a fact that provides the important background for the following scenes. The latter description also explains the former. That is, Jacob’s illness clarifies to the reader why Jacob’s time to die drew near.

reader to understand it as part of Jacob's pre-death preparations.<sup>184</sup> The embedded narrative is composed of one minor and two major scenes—the adoption of Ephraim and Manasseh as sons and heirs (vv. 1-12), the blessing of the younger Ephraim over the older Manasseh (vv. 13-20), and Jacob's prophecy concerning Joseph and his progeny (vv. 21-22).

The account begins with the adoption narrative (vv. 1-12), which is framed by the physical actions of the protagonists—Jacob sitting up in verse 2 and Joseph bowing down in verse 12.<sup>185</sup> In response to the report about his father, Joseph gathers his two sons together to approach Jacob—perhaps knowing what his father desired to do for Manasseh and Ephraim.<sup>186</sup> Rallying his strength and sitting up in bed,<sup>187</sup> Jacob receives the visitors. He begins his speech by recalling God's own blessing of him in Genesis 35:9-12. As Sailhamer notes, changes in the wording from Genesis 35 give the reader some key insights into how Jacob currently understands the patriarchal promises.<sup>188</sup> For instance, Jacob remembers the imperative of the initial blessing ("Be fruitful and multiply") as a declarative promise ("I will make you fruitful and numerous"). In Jacob's mind, that God will bring his pledges to pass is beyond doubt. Jacob also adds the words "for an everlasting possession" to the initial land promise in Genesis 35, recalling Genesis 17:8. By recalling the promise as originally given to Abraham, Jacob acknowledged that the blessing given to him and his sons was in line with the promises to

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<sup>184</sup>Waltke posits that the author moved the earlier event here "to establish Jacob's authority to adopt and bless Joseph's sons." Waltke, *Genesis*, 594. It fits well in its literary context. The theme of death unites it to the previous verses and the theme of blessing links it with chap. 49.

<sup>185</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 873.

<sup>186</sup>This gathering of loved ones represents another typical formal element death stories, used in introducing a farewell speech. Here, it provides a hint to the reader of what is to come.

<sup>187</sup>These statements indicate both his frailty, but also that he still was able to perform his duty as patriarch.

<sup>188</sup>Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 230.

the original patriarch.<sup>189</sup>

Following this initial speech, Jacob commences the adoption proceedings for Ephraim and Manasseh. They will now belong to the patriarch, with all the rights and privileges that such status implied. The importance of this action should not be understated. The reader knows that Jacob's adoption makes the grandsons not just heirs, but also "ancestors of tribes on a par with those tracing their origin back to Jacob's own sons."<sup>190</sup> Even future children of Joseph will fall "under the names" of their brothers. Later revelation confirms that the honor granted to the grandsons stems from Joseph's status as firstborn in place of Reuben (1 Chr 5:1-2). Another reason for the adoption is given in verse 7. Jacob still grieved over the premature passing of his favored wife, Rachel, and the text seems to indicate that the adoption makes up for the fact that Rachel had no more sons.<sup>191</sup>

The adoption account continues with a strange question on the part of Jacob—"Whose are these?" Given verses 3-7, the patriarch should already know. The question seems not to indicate ignorance on the patriarch's part; instead, it is more likely a part of the formal adoption proceedings.<sup>192</sup> Joseph answers the question by stating that they are the sons that God had given him, representing God's faithfulness to the patriarchal promise of many offspring. Thus, this phrase again reminds the reader of the overall purpose of the author and the overarching theme of the narrative. The adoption concludes with another physical action by Jacob, whose poor eyesight necessitates him using another sense—touch, through kissing, hugging, and bringing near (v. 10). In

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<sup>189</sup>Ibid.

<sup>190</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 463.

<sup>191</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 875. The mention of Rachel's death could also serve as literary tool—another foreshadowing of Jacob's death. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 463.

<sup>192</sup>Cf. Gen 27:32. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 876.

response, Joseph bows before Jacob, acknowledging “the superiority of his father’s mediation of God’s promises.”<sup>193</sup>

The text moves seamlessly to the blessing scene—a more typical element in a death story. The reader has been expecting the passing of the patriarchal blessing since the first announcement of Jacob’s impending death in Genesis 47:29. However, like his father before him, Joseph attempts to manipulate the occasion to his own desires, by placing Manasseh in line to receive the rights of primogeniture. Jacob foils this plan by crossing his arms and granting the primary blessing to the younger Ephraim (vv. 14, 17-20), to the chagrin of Joseph. Though both boys would be blessed, the younger would surpass the older in every way—a typical theme in the patriarchal narratives. The blessing itself (vv. 15-16) recalls earlier promises in the narratives. Indeed, the boys would have a special spiritual relationship with God, which would include pastoral protection (v. 15b, c) and prodigious progeny (v. 16c).

The last scene (vv. 21-22) is minor in terms of length, but not in importance.<sup>194</sup> It describes Jacob’s prophecy to Joseph that he (and most likely his descendents) will return to the Promised Land, as Jacob himself would in death. Thus, it again points to a principal theme of the narrative—God’s faithfulness to his promise to provide a land for his people. The account also serves as a transition to the next scene—the testament of Jacob in chapter 49. By reiterating what the reader already knows—that the patriarch is about to die<sup>195</sup>—the narrator is preparing the reader for another blessing scene in 49:1-28,

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<sup>193</sup>Ibid., 878.

<sup>194</sup>As Seebass writes, it “is no mere addition to the structure, but forms the climax and aim of the whole narrative.” Seebass, “The Joseph Story, Genesis 48 and the Canonical Process,” 30. Coats believes the verses to be the continuation of the original death report in 47:29-31. Coats, *Genesis*, 302. But while there is a definite transition between vv. 20 and 21, this account should not be totally separated from the previous narrative.

<sup>195</sup>This time, the announcement of impending death is in the mouth of Jacob himself.

which incidentally lacks a formal announcement of impending death. A final purpose for verses 21-22 is to frame the preceding narrative. The prophecy uttered by Jacob concerning Joseph recalls his request concerning his own bones in 47:29-31. The prophetic word also looks forward to the end of Genesis, when Joseph makes his own request to this effect (Gen 50:24).

The narrator includes the embedded narrative of chapter 48 in the death story for several reasons. First, the account makes judgments on the character of this patriarch of Israel. Given the rather spotty history of Jacob as a birthright burglar and angel wrestler, one might expect the narrator to evaluate him more critically. But as Sternberg explains, the narrator “cuts the ground from under our feet,”<sup>196</sup> and actually gives Jacob a positive appraisal. One example of this narrative twist is in the blessing account of verses 13-20. Based on the previous history in Genesis of precedence being granted to the younger sibling, the reader suspects that Ephraim might be God’s elect. But given Jacob’s history of favoritism, the reader wonders if he will get it right. Would he defer to his favorite son, Joseph, whose obvious and natural preference was the eldest, Manasseh? Further doubt is raised when Joseph tries to influence his blind and apparently unaware father by positioning Manasseh so that he might receive the primary blessing. But Jacob foils the plan, crossing his hands and aligning himself with the clear pattern of previous biblical narrative that recognized that God’s will sometimes defies societal conventions.<sup>197</sup> As Sternberg writes, “Jacob’s main concern is to do the proper rather than the pleasing thing by his grandchildren, in the interests of a design greater than any

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<sup>196</sup>Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 351.

<sup>197</sup>As Mathews writes, “By repeating the practice of blessing the younger over the elder, Jacob is carrying out the divine will, recognizing that the divine intention of blessing surpasses the practice of human convention.” Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 863. The reader might also wonder if Jacob truly initiates the move of his own hands or whether the force of God guides the motion.

individual and to realize a vision that rises above personalities.”<sup>198</sup> In this way, he “shows an insight into the future denied to his clear-sighted (and occasionally clairvoyant) but for once earthbound son.”<sup>199</sup> Thus, Jacob seems to prove himself worthy in this second effort at ordering his household.<sup>200</sup>

Does the embedded narrative have a political or aetiological purpose as well? Some have argued that the overarching goal of the author was to highlight the tribes of Joseph.<sup>201</sup> Indeed, Ephraim and Manasseh did play an important role in biblical history as the principal tribes of the Northern Kingdom. But the author seems concerned with something far more pressing than just establishing Ephraim’s future dominance; he is more eager to demonstrate how Jacob passes the patriarchal blessings to the next generation in accordance with God’s will. The blessings are so bountiful that they even extend to Jacob’s grandsons, whom he is able to adopt. The author mentions blessing explicitly in verses 3, 9, 15, 16, and 20. And he emphasizes several times the content of the blessing—the Promised Land (vv. 3, 4, 7, 21, 22), progeny (vv. 4, 17, 19), and divine presence (vv. 16).<sup>202</sup> Thus, here at the end of Genesis, the covenant family blessed by their covenant God, YHWH, is becoming the covenant nation of the Exodus comprised

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<sup>198</sup>Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 351. He notes, “Jacob shows true patriarchal foresight and responsibility—including the impersonal spirit that distinguishes the makers from the pawns and driftwood of biblical history.”

<sup>199</sup>*Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>200</sup>In fact, he proves himself to be like Abraham in this regard. As Sternberg writes, “In a subtile allusion to Abraham’s sexual prowess, the apparent wreck manages to increase his family, though by way of adoption rather than procreation.” *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup>Von Rad, *Genesis*, 416. Von Rad writes, “The narrative doubtless has an aetiological purpose as well.” See also E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Anchor Bible Commentary, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 360. Cf. Edwin C. Kingsbury, “He Set Ephraim before Manasseh,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 38 (1967): 129-36. Kingsbury argues that the point is Ephraim’s cultic superiority rather than its political or numerical dominance.

<sup>202</sup>Waltke, *Genesis*, 594. These blessings explicitly recall those reiterated over and over again to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob himself (e.g., Gen 12:1-3; 15:5, 7, 18-20; 17:2-8; etc.). The only difference is that these blessings are not directly revealed to the grandsons by God; instead, they are mediated by Jacob.

of the twelve tribes. This theme is developed even further in chapter 49.

**Description of putting the house in order: Final words, part 3 (49:1-28).**

The next phase of Jacob's efforts to "put his house in order" is significant not only historically, but also for the overall thematic development of the Pentateuch.<sup>203</sup> Here, we find the patriarch's well-known farewell address—a common element in other death stories (Deut 31:3-33:29; Josh 23:3-16; 1 Kgs 2:1-9; cf. Gen 27:2ff.) and the third speech in the death story of Jacob. The oration has traditionally been labeled a "blessing." Yet, some have contended that since the sayings include rebukes, censures, and historical prophecies, as well as blessings, it should be entitled, "testament."<sup>204</sup> While the narrator does indeed characterize the discourse (49:28) as "blessing," "testament" seems to reflect more precisely the overall nature and purpose of the address. In this way, the speech parallels Deuteronomy 33, Moses' last testament, which also predicts the actions and fortunes of the various tribes, as well as the entire nation.<sup>205</sup>

These final words play a transitional role within the Pentateuch itself. It moves the discussion from the present to future, from the family to the nation, from the sons of Jacob to the tribes of Israel. As Watts' states, "The poem's contents are suitable to this transitional role, with some sayings directed to Jacob's sons as individuals, others to the

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<sup>203</sup>Most critical scholars will label these verses as a later insertion with little correspondence to the surrounding plot. Joel D. Heck, "A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (1990): 19. For examples, see Noth, *A History of the Pentateuchal Traditions*, 564; and Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 365. Yet, the blessing scene presupposes certain facts already introduced, namely Jacob's condition (48:21), his position (48:2; cf. 49:33b), and his goal (the blessing of his progeny is the focus in both chaps. 48 and 49). The narrator, at least, wants the reader to understand this as an event contemporaneous with the blessing/adoption in chap. 48 and the burial instructions in 49:29-33.

<sup>204</sup>Heck, "A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33," 21. Cf. Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12-50*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 301; Sarna, *Genesis*, 331; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 468.

<sup>205</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 220. Cf. W. T. Koopmans, "The Testament of David in 1 Kings II 1-10," *Vetus Testamentum* 41 (1991): 429-49. Koopmans has done some important work showing how "poetic compositions are in numerous instances associated with the death of important figures in the Old Testament." *Ibid.*, 431.

tribes.<sup>206</sup> Some of the contents review the main characters until that point, while others provide “proleptic portraits” of the prospective tribes.<sup>207</sup> In this transitional role, Jacob’s testament functions similarly to the Joseph story itself. It bridges the gap between the patriarchal period, in which the family is a mere seventy strong (Gen 46:27), to the period of the Exodus, in which the family has multiplied to fill the land (Exod 1:17).<sup>208</sup>

The blessing begins and ends with prose, but the majority of the text is poetry, presented through a series of aphoristic statements by Jacob to each of his twelve sons.<sup>209</sup> The language itself is quite difficult and at times open for interpretation, but an overall structure is discernable.<sup>210</sup> The individual sons are addressed not in order of birth; instead, Jacob addresses them in a chiasmic pattern corresponding to their respective mothers—Leah (six sons), Bilhah, Zilpah, Zilpah, Bilhah, and Rachel (two sons).<sup>211</sup> The author introduces the poem with a common formal element, a description of the gathering of loved ones (in this case the sons) for final words.<sup>212</sup> After the various poetic sayings, the entire account is framed by the prose conclusion in verse 28. Each of the twelve sons is “blessed” in turn—usually using a comparison to some animal or by use of a word play or other poetic device. For the most part, each tribal blessing is simple, with one saying

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<sup>206</sup>James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative*, JSOT Supplement Series 139 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 171.

<sup>207</sup>*Ibid.*, 172. Watts writes that this chapter thus provides “a suitable conclusion to a story centered around promises of descendants and land.” Sarna notes that the names Jacob and Israel appear five times each, “symbolizing the dual character of the patriarch and his sons, now as individual personalities, now as the personifications of the nation with its tribal constituents.” Sarna, *Genesis*, 331.

<sup>208</sup>Heck, “A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33,” 21.

<sup>209</sup>This chapter is the first extended speech in the Pentateuch.

<sup>210</sup>For a good discussion of the many textual issues, see Sarna, *Genesis*, 331-47. The intriguing nature of the text has inspired numerous works on specific semantic and syntactical issues. For an extended bibliography of works, see Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 466-68.

<sup>211</sup>*Ibid.*, 331. Cf. Waltke, *Genesis*, 603. This pattern serves to unify the poem.

<sup>212</sup>This gathering is also implied by Jacob, after the speech begins in v. 2.

for Simeon and Levi together; one saying each for Zebulun, Issachar, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, and Benjamin; and two sayings for Reuben and Dan. Expanded sayings are reserved for Judah and Joseph. Only the first three sons—Reuben, Simeon, and Levi—receive overtly negative pronouncements, perhaps because the author is removing all other contenders for Jacob’s favor, save the fourth son, Judah, and the favorite son, Joseph. At the center of Jacob’s poetic address is a petition for YHWH’s deliverance (v. 18). This appeal could be personal in nature—that is, Jacob is crying out for his own recovery. More likely, since Jacob seems resigned to his death, he desires God’s deliverance for his descendants, due to the tempestuous future he is predicting for them.

The center of gravity of Jacob’s speech focuses on two sons—Judah and Joseph, both of whom receive explicitly positive blessings. Judah will reign as a lion among his brothers (vv. 9-10); Joseph will receive a crown distinguishing him from his brothers (v. 26). Judah will garner sibling praise (v. 8); Joseph will experience heavenly blessing from the Almighty (v. 25). Judah and Joseph will both prevail against all enemies (vv. 9, 23-24). The space allocated to the blessings for these two brothers (some five verses each) further indicates Jacob’s fondness for these future rivals. The emphasis on Judah and Joseph also has importance prophetically. As Longacre writes, here “we have a glimpse of the embryonic nation—with the Judah and Joseph tribes destined to have preeminence in the south and north respectively.”<sup>213</sup>

This emphasis has caused some to see an aetiological or political purpose for the speeches. So instead of being actual prophecies, the pronouncements arise from later authors seeking to explain the current historical situation.<sup>214</sup> But one would expect a

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<sup>213</sup>Longacre, *Joseph*, 54.

<sup>214</sup>For example, Brueggemann states that the address “intends to be political propaganda to advance some tribal claims at the expense of others.” Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 365. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 221.

political tractate to advance the cause of either Joseph or Judah, but not both. However, both brothers receive emphasis, praise, and blessing. In addition, the emphasis on the two sons is easily explainable based on the narrative in Genesis. The negative treatment of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi stems from previous actions as already reported by the narrator.<sup>215</sup> This leaves Judah as the natural and just recipient of the blessings belonging to the three older brothers.<sup>216</sup> On the other hand, Jacob demonstrated over and over again in the narrative his preference for Joseph. The patriarch considered Joseph as his firstborn, and so one is not surprised to see him receive a special blessing.

Why, then, would the narrator include such a speech?<sup>217</sup> First, the narrator offers a hint concerning the nature of this discourse in verse 33, where Jacob is said to have “charged” (from the root, צָוָה, “to command”) his sons.<sup>218</sup> In the death story genre, the term designates the charging of one’s family or kingdom and the managing of one’s interests before death (cf. Deut 3:28; 2 Sam 17:23; 2 Kgs 20:1; Isa 38:1). Thus, these words are not just any speech, but they are deathbed pronouncements and blessings from Jacob that will have the effect of ordering his household. How does this speech accomplish its goal of ordering a family? Simply, the narrator understands Jacob’s words as predictive prophecy. Thus, the words themselves determine and order the future for

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<sup>215</sup>Reuben slept with his father’s concubine (Gen 35:22). Simeon and Levi were guilty in the attack on Shechem (Gen 34:25-31). As Sarna writes, “The actions and behavior of the ancestors leave an indelible imprint on their descendents, affecting the course of history.” Sarna, *Genesis*, 331.

<sup>216</sup>This blessing is not the right of the firstborn, as confirmed by 1 Chr 5:1-2, but it is the right to “prevail” over his brothers—that is, the privilege of kingship. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 235.

<sup>217</sup>Given the early Hebrew found in this poetic portion, the poem itself could have preceded the surrounding narrative by many years. Thus, it must have been inserted by the original author for a purpose. Heck, “A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33,” 29. Heck points to the studies of Kidner and others that suggest that Gen 49 parallels second millennium Ugaritic literature, thus supporting the traditional early dating of the text.

<sup>218</sup>According to Sarna, the connection of the verb with the final desires of the dying has given rise to the postbiblical Hebrew term for last will and testament, *tsavvah’ah*. Sarna, *Genesis*, 346.

his sons.<sup>219</sup> And given that Jacob is “Israel,” the reader knows that this ordering has an impact not just on one family but on the nation as a whole.

Another reason for including the speech is to reiterate the theme of blessing.<sup>220</sup> The narrator concludes Jacob’s discourse with a brief summary (v. 28). The verse translates literally, “And he blessed them; each one he blessed according to his own blessing.” With the tri-fold mention of blessing, the narrator demonstrates that his interest in the preceding verses has been to show the transference of the patriarchal blessing to Israel.<sup>221</sup> Indeed, regardless of the specific “blessing” the individual tribes receive, they each are blessed in that they each will inherit the Promised Land and they each will be part of the nation of Israel (v. 28; “these are the twelve tribes of Israel”).<sup>222</sup>

#### **Description of putting the house in order: Final words, part 4 (49:29-32).**

Following the last will and testament of Jacob, the story moves smoothly to another deathbed speech by Jacob. In the last verses of chapter 49, the patriarch reiterates to his twelve sons the final instructions he had given earlier to Joseph (47:29-31). The speech

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<sup>219</sup>The narrator’s phrase “in days to come” (v. 1) is the same phrase used by the prophets of the “end times.” This same nuance to the phrase is evident in other poetic discourses in the Pentateuch, namely the oracles of Balaam (Num 24:14-24) and the last words of Moses (Deut 31:29). Thus, Jacob’s words have a prophetic feel to them. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 233. This provides a fitting conclusion to the book as a whole. As Sarna notes, “It is fitting that the Book of Genesis, which opened with the creative power of the divine word, closes with the notion of the effective power of the inspired predictive word of the patriarch.” Sarna, *Genesis*, 331.

<sup>220</sup>To bless (ברך) someone in the ancient world was a legal and sacral act. In particular, a deathbed blessing such as the one given by Jacob would usually represent “an irrevocable bequest of property.” F. Rachel Magdalene, “Bless, Blessing,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 192. The “property” here would have been the patriarchal promises, in particular that of land. For more detail on the theological significance of “blessing” in the Bible, see Michael L. Brown, “ברך,” in *New International Dictionary of Theology and Exegesis*, ed. William A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 757-67.

<sup>221</sup>Waltke, *Genesis*, 614. Cf. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 233, who writes, “Jacob’s last words to his sons have become the occasion for a final statement of the book’s major theme: God’s plan to restore the lost blessing through the seed of Abraham.”

<sup>222</sup>Even Jacob’s “antiblessings” actually seem to serve the interests of the nation as a whole, since they “curb the baser elements of the tribes.” Hence, even the curses may be considered a blessing for the entire nation. Waltke, *Genesis*, 615.

begins with a third announcement, this time on the part of Jacob, of his impending death—"I am about to be gathered to my people" (cf. Gen 25:8; 47:30). These words will reach a literal fulfillment shortly in verse 33. His instructions have some curious omissions and additions, as compared to his charges in chapter 47. Jacob leaves out one part of his request—not to leave his bones in Egypt. In addition, he does not make his sons swear, as he did with Joseph. Jacob restates another part of his entreaty—to bury his body in the Promised Land; however, he does so in much greater detail. In the earlier passage, Jacob had used the unadorned and nonspecific phrase, "bury me in their burial place." Here, the narrator has Jacob describing the location of burial with more than fifty words. Why does the narrator employ so much detail here, when the characters obviously knew the location?<sup>223</sup> The detailed description is an almost exact parallel to the one found in the story of Sarah's death (Gen 23:17-20). By recalling that account, the narrator reminds the reader of some obvious but crucial theological points: (1) Jacob is a descendent of Abraham, (2) Jacob is an heir to the promises given to Abraham, (3) the principal focus of those promises is the land, (4) Abraham and his progeny already have a major stake in that land, since Abraham had purchased it in Genesis 23, and (5) some of Jacob's family already dwelt with Abraham (Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah) in that location. In other words, Jacob knows and expresses faith that the future of his family is in Canaan. And his dying wish is that his sons will take him there.

**Death notice (49:33).** After charging his sons, Jacob dies. As with most death stories, the death notice is brief. Interestingly, the narrator does not describe Jacob's death in the typical fashion—with the verb, *מוֹת*, "to die."<sup>224</sup> Instead, he uses a series of

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<sup>223</sup>Berman, "Identity Politics and the Burial of Jacob," 19.

<sup>224</sup>Gen 25:8; 49:33; cf. Gen 7:21; 25:17; 35:29.

three phrases—gathering (קָטַף) his feet,<sup>225</sup> breathing his last (גִּוַע), and being gathered (קָטַף) to his people.<sup>226</sup> The last two phrases are formulaic for the death event, and they also recall earlier narratives.<sup>227</sup> However, the first phrase is unique. It is the only place in the Scriptures where an author connects death with feet. The phrase probably serves a literary purpose. In fact, the motif of feet frames Jacob's efforts to put his house in order. In 48:2, he sat up on the bed, putting his feet out; and in 49:33, he brings them back up.<sup>228</sup> The use of the root, קָטַף, could also be significant, tying the end of chapter 49 with the beginning (49:1; הִתְקַטְּפוּ; "come together").<sup>229</sup>

**Response (50:1-14).** Genesis 50:1-14 brings the story of Jacob to a close. The emphasis in the text is not masked—Jacob is about to be buried.<sup>230</sup> The response stage begins with a moving portrayal of the reaction of Joseph to the death of his father. The favored son of Jacob "falls upon his father's face"—a tender expression found only here.<sup>231</sup> Moved by grief, Joseph also weeps for and kisses his father.<sup>232</sup> These lay bare the

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<sup>225</sup>Based on comparison with the apocryphal Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Robinson suggests that it could also mean "to stretch out one's feet." Patricia Robinson, "To Stretch out the Feet: A Formula for Death in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978): 371.

<sup>226</sup>Such an omission perhaps indicates Jacob's confidence in the future—that is, he awaits in a sleeplike position the fulfillment of the promises (cf. 1 Cor 15:20; 1 Thess 4:13). Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 915.

<sup>227</sup>The verb גִּוַע, "to expire" or "to breath one's last," is used in Gen 25:8 and 35:29 (cf. Gen 7:21; 25:17), but in these other narratives it is usually used in conjunction with and always preceding מָוֹת. The phrase "to be gathered to one's people" (וַיִּקָּטֵף אֶל-עַמּוּתוֹ) also recalls the death accounts of Abraham (Gen 25:8) and Isaac (35:29). Cf. Gen 25:17; Num 20:24; Judg 2:10.

<sup>228</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 915.

<sup>229</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 347.

<sup>230</sup>The *Leitmotif* (burial) is affirmed by the *Leitwort*—the Hebrew root, קָבַר, which is used nine times, both as a verb (twice in 50:5, 14; once in 50:6, 7, 13) and a noun (50:5, 13). The word "father" is repeated ten times. Waltke, *Genesis*, 618.

<sup>231</sup>Similarly, in Gen 46:29, Joseph falls on Jacob's neck.

<sup>232</sup>The Hebrew word, בָּכָה, is common in death accounts. E.g., Gen 23:2; Num 20:29; Deut 34:8. Cf. 2 Kgs 13:14, where there is weeping before death occurs.

profound affection Joseph had for his father, which has been a principal theme in the story since chapter 37.<sup>233</sup> The mourning of Joseph soon leads to more practical matters. Joseph commands (צוה) the pharaoh's physicians to embalm Israel--a forty-day procedure in Jacob's case.<sup>234</sup> The process of mummifying was accompanied by an extended period of mourning on the part of the Egyptians.<sup>235</sup> For a total of seventy days, the Egyptians engaged in an impressive display of bewailing.<sup>236</sup> After embalming to satisfy Egyptian social mores, Joseph next moves to satisfy his father's last wish. Joseph approaches the pharaoh through intermediaries,<sup>237</sup> and petitions him for permission to take his father's bones to Canaan.<sup>238</sup> His appeal echoes Jacob's earlier request in Genesis 47:29--"do me this favor."<sup>239</sup> Pharaoh grants the desire.

The remainder of the account seems determined by Jacob's charges in 47:29-31.<sup>240</sup> In verses 7-11, we see Joseph fulfilling Jacob's desire to be brought up from Egypt

<sup>233</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 488. This verse also functions to fulfill the promise of God to Jacob in 46:4 that Joseph would put his hand on his eyes in death.

<sup>234</sup>The verb perhaps is a connection to Jacob's "commanding" of his own household (49:33). Just as Jacob had ordered his house by "commanding" his sons, Joseph now orders Jacob's burial by "commanding" the embalmers. The embalming seems to be principally a religious exercise, and thus, the physicians may have served in some sort of priestly fashion. Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 691. For an excellent illustrated and historical treatment of mummification, see John H. Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 46-91.

<sup>235</sup>Most agree that the forty days and the seventy days were coterminous.

<sup>236</sup>Mourning for the Israelites would normally last seven days (cf. Gen 50:10; 1 Sam 31:13) and sometimes thirty days (as with Moses and Aaron). Most commentators cite Diodorus, who tells the story of one Egyptian king who was mourned for seventy-two days. Von Rad states, "Mourning for the dead was formerly a very strict ritual affair; one wore a special garb of mourning, cut one's hair, and submitted to a mourning fast." Von Rad, *Genesis*, 425.

<sup>237</sup>Speiser hypothesizes that this was done perhaps to shield the Egyptian god-king from direct contact with individuals who had been exposed to a dead person. Speiser, *Genesis*, 377.

<sup>238</sup>The request looks forward to a similar request of Moses to pharaoh for them to go serve God in the wilderness. The fact that Joseph had to petition pharaoh explains why Joseph's bones were not taken to the Canaan when he died. At that point, there was no one to petition pharaoh on Joseph's behalf.

<sup>239</sup>The only difference with chap. 47 is that the words "do not bury me in Egypt" do not appear. Some have posited different traditions behind chaps. 47 and 50, but Joseph was just being tactful.

<sup>240</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 199.

(cf. 47:30b), and in verses 12-13 we witness the burial (47:30c). The description of Jacob's funeral is the most elaborate in the Bible. The funerary entourage is impressive in both size and variety—facts reinforced by the use of the word “all” (כָּל) three times and by the detailed description of the military escort and members of the pharaoh's family. In fact, the display impressed the Canaanites enough to influence the naming of the place of mourning. Following another period of bereavement, Joseph and his brothers return to Egypt.

No other death story—save perhaps that of Sarah—has a response stage as developed and as extended as the story of Jacob's death.<sup>241</sup> When a formal element is embellished like this, it is appropriate to seek the reason why. Various reasons have been given for the author's attention to detail. However, the reason for the emphasis on the response stage in this death story is discovered by examining the overarching theme in the entire narrative—that of God's faithfulness to his promises to bless his people (specifically with the land).<sup>242</sup> The body of Jacob is removed from Egypt with a great throng in hope and faith. Canaan is where Jacob and his family belong, for it is God's Promised Land. Though they are exiled in Egypt for a time, they would eventually return to their proper place.<sup>243</sup>

The Exodus is surely in mind in these verses. As Wenham points out, there are many ironical links in this chapter to the later Exodus.<sup>244</sup> Parallels to the Exodus account include the Hebrew leader's request to leave Egypt and the use of the phrase “go up” (v.

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<sup>241</sup>In comparison with Joseph, the focus on Jacob's death seems even more striking. Given his prominent position, Joseph's death would probably have prompted even more pomp and circumstance among the Egyptians. But the author describes his burial with only five Hebrew words.

<sup>242</sup>Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 239.

<sup>243</sup>Ibid.

<sup>244</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 489.

6; cf. Exod 12:31). Many of the terms used to describe the procession (“servants of Pharaoh,” “young children,” “flocks,” “herds,” “chariots,” “horsemen,” “encampment,” “very powerful”) next recur in the Exodus account (cf. especially Exod 12:34-36). So the author uses an embellished death story to speak some important truths to his own generation—that God is faithful. He will restore his people to their land.

### Genre

As with the story of Abraham’s death, most scholars interpret this conclusion to the Joseph story as a mixture of unrelated passages, stemming from different sources. And each of these disparate accounts claims a specific genre. Some of the genres are obvious—deathbed narratives (47:29-31; 49:29-32), the death notice (49:33), an adoption and blessing report (48:1-12; 13-20), a deathbed testament (49:1-28), and burial narrative (50:1-14).<sup>245</sup> The principal source of disagreement would be the identification of chapter 49—whether it is a cohesive testament or blessing or whether it is just a collection of tribal sayings.<sup>246</sup> However, the chiasmic structure of the account does indicate a purposeful construction from the start; it is not just a piecemeal collection of sayings.

As argued above, Genesis 47:28-50:14 should be classified as a death story. Some would argue that the entire account is just a report serving as a redactional frame. For instance, Westermann writes, “The whole is in essence not narrative but account, a genealogical report of Jacob’s last will, death, and burial, even though with narrative adornments and adaptations.”<sup>247</sup> The problem with this label is illustrated by Coats. He identifies both the entire narrative (47:28-50:14) and the death notice in 49:33 as death

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<sup>245</sup>Most of these classifications agree with Coats, *Genesis*, 300.

<sup>246</sup>For example, Westermann (*Genesis 37-50*, 197) opts for the former, whereas Coats (*Genesis*, 300) posits the latter.

<sup>247</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 181.

reports.<sup>248</sup> But as we noted in chapter 3 of this dissertation, the designation “death report” cannot apply to both a single verse and an entire narrative. Furthermore, the existence of plot, complications, and resolutions in these narratives indicate that more is involved here than just generic reports. Even the adoption and blessing narratives, as illustrated above, have plot, complication, and characterization. Thus, “story” is a better designation for the whole. As with the death story of Abraham, some original sources had to have been used. But as shown above, these are woven together to form a coherent storyline, moving from problem (whether Jacob will die before ordering his house) to resolution (the blessing of his sons and the securing of oaths regarding his burial) and conclusion (Jacob’s death and burial). In addition, the structural, theological, and thematic coherence of 47:28-50:14 show that it is most plausible that the death story genre governed the structure and style of the text.

### Setting

Most commentators agree that the current setting for each of the genres found in this death story is literary. The original *Sitz im Leben* of the accounts is more difficult to determine. For instance, with Genesis 49, proposed settings include a battle,<sup>249</sup> a setting during the beginnings of the Davidic kingship,<sup>250</sup> or the supposed tribal amphictyony.<sup>251</sup> The latter view seems to hold the scholarly consensus. But the original

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<sup>248</sup>Coats, *Genesis*, 300.

<sup>249</sup>Johannes Lindblom, “The Political Background of the Shiloh Oracle,” in *Congress Volume, Copenhagen, 1953*, Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1953), 78-87.

<sup>250</sup>Heck, “A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33,” 25. According to Heck, this is the view of Hans-Joachim Kittel.

<sup>251</sup>See, for example, Coats, *Genesis*, 310-11. See also A. H. J. Genneweg, “Über den Sitz im Leben der sog. Stammesprüche,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1964): 245-55; and Stanley Gevirtz, “Simeon and Levi in ‘The Blessing of Jacob’ (Gen. 49:5-7),” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 52 (1981): 93-128. Gevirtz calls it a “latter-day idealization of a pre-Judean confederation of Israelite tribes.” Westermann holds a compromise position. Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 222. Similar to Kittel, he reasons that the battle briefing was the first stage. These were preserved, and later used when tribes would come together. Only later did these secular sayings take on a theological and literary setting.

setting is very difficult to determine with certainty.<sup>252</sup> The traditional view is better, in that it sees these prophecies as actually arising in the last days of the patriarch. As Heck writes, “This view presents the fewest difficulties,” and actually takes the text’s own testimony seriously.<sup>253</sup> Indeed, one would not be surprised to see such an important speech preserved by a family. But we must admit that any assertion is speculative by nature. In addition, as with other death stories in Genesis, the original setting for some of these “sources” could be literary—that is, the sources (such as the testament in chap. 49 and the narratives in chaps. 48 and 50) were originally written to be integral parts of the death story itself.

### **Intention**

Scholars have tended to identify the intention for the account of Jacob’s death as political in nature. However, if this were the case, the text would seem self-contradictory. At one point, the story seems to elevate Joseph (e.g., Gen 47:29-31; 50:1-14), and thus the tribe of Ephraim. At other times, a “complete adaptation of the Deathbed Episode” reflects the ascendancy of the tribe of Judah (Gen 49:8-12).<sup>254</sup> One would think that a final editor would adapt it completely to his own bias, if he was politically motivated. As has been demonstrated, a better option is to see the intention as both theological and literary, both to point forward and to reflect backward.

### **Theological Conclusions**

The following will merely offer a few summary remarks regarding the theology of this death story. Perhaps the best way to explore the issue of theology is to

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<sup>252</sup>Even some critical scholars affirm this uncertainty. Coats, *Genesis*, 311.

<sup>253</sup>Heck, “A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33,” 25.

<sup>254</sup>De Hoop, “‘Then Israel Bowed Himself . . .’ (Genesis 47:31),” 468.

see what the author communicates through his use of the death story form.

An initial observation is that the length of the death story emphasizes the importance of the dying individual. The account of Jacob's death is one of the longest in the Old Testament, and indeed, the story has much to say about Jacob the man. Throughout the patriarchal narratives, the author has portrayed the patriarch with utmost candor—speaking freely of all his imperfections, his impetuosity, his passion, and his persistence.<sup>255</sup> However, in the end, the narrator seems to vindicate Jacob; the flawed father finishes his career as one who fulfilled his end-of-life responsibilities. Jacob seems a better man at the end of his life than at the beginning. As Sternberg writes, “As his career draws to an end, moreover, Jacob leaves no thread loose and no patriarchal decorum unobserved. He extracts a promise from Joseph not to inter him in Egypt; goes on to establish the appropriate hierarchy among his descendants; and despite his lifelong passion for Rachel, buried on the way to Ephrath, chooses to rest with his fathers at the side of Leah.”<sup>256</sup> Why is a positive portrayal so important to the author? Simply, the death story of Jacob concerns more than just one man or one family; it concerns the entire nation. Israel the family father is becoming Israel the founding father—the namesake of the nation.<sup>257</sup>

The author's use of the death story points to another theological emphasis. Form critical analysis should always include an examination what the author leaves out of the form and what he highlights. The story of Jacob's death has all the typical

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<sup>255</sup>Roop writes, “Jacob, who fought his way into life, departs life just as dramatically. The life of Jacob, which has stretched over half the book of Genesis, has seen the family through moments of trust and betrayal, sterility and fertility, feast and famine, separation and reunion, all within the promise and providence of God.” E. F. Roop, *Genesis* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1987), 290.

<sup>256</sup>Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 353.

<sup>257</sup>For example, when Jacob blesses his sons and grandsons, the blessing transcends just that one generation, providing “an allusive preview of the future of the tribes who are to make up that nation.” Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 459.

elements in a death story, so he leaves nothing out. However, the author draws attention to two elements—the putting the house in order stage and the response stage. The former includes four embedded narratives and speeches, while the latter is longer than any other death story, except for perhaps that of Sarah.

Both of these formal stages point out the author's main concern—the fulfillment of the promises to the patriarchal family and nation. Two of the embedded narratives (47:29-31; 49:29-33) and the response stage (50:1-14) deal with the Jacob's provisions for his bones—the concern being to show that Israel was not to stay in Egypt, but would eventually return to the blessed land promised by God. The other two embedded narratives (chaps. 48 and 49) speak of the passing of the patriarchal blessings to the sons (and thus the future tribes) of Israel. Indeed, Jacob has already experienced blessing in this narrative (48:3). He has seen his descendants, even adding to his family; he has secured burial places; he has even enjoyed accolades from the Egyptians. But as Wenham writes, "The experiences of Jacob and Joseph are merely a foretaste and pledge of the glory to come."<sup>258</sup>

#### **Exegesis of the Death Story of Joseph (Gen 50:22-26)**

The death story of Joseph is the shortest in our study, and in fact, one could argue that it is nothing more than a death report. However, it is included for several reasons. First, it possesses most of the formal elements of a stereotypical death story—lacking only two minor components, an explicit pronouncement on the life of the person and the description of the gathering of loved ones for final words. Thus, structurally, it is more developed than a typical death report. Second, while typical narrative tools—such as plot, tension, and characterization—are not developed as in some of the more extended

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<sup>258</sup>Ibid., 492.

Old Testament death stories, this story does employ these devices in a limited fashion. For instance, the author uses this passage to offer some final thoughts on the character of Joseph. In addition, tension is developed by the announcement of impending death, which leads the reader to expect Joseph's demise.<sup>259</sup> Third, the story parallels a larger death story—that of Jacob—in significant ways. For example, they have a similar structure (with a declaration of the length of life before the announcement of impending death at the beginning of the account) and a similar request for burial (removing the body to Canaan).

Finally, the account is labeled a death story and included in our study because of its significance in the literary structure of the Pentateuch. The author of the Pentateuch uses this account as a key transition—wrapping up the patriarchal narratives, but also looking ahead to the Exodus. In fact, the author may have composed the death story specifically as a literary link between the two great narratives—the accounts of the journey to Egypt and the Exodus of the sons of Israel from Egypt.

### **Historical and Literary Context**

Gordon Wenham has labeled Genesis 50 a “dramatic farewell, unparalleled anywhere else in the OT.”<sup>260</sup> In this one chapter, the reader witnesses the passing of two great patriarchs—Jacob and Joseph. Specifically, this death story occurs at the end of a section that has seen the conclusion of the story of Jacob—with his burial (vv. 1-14)—and of the story of Joseph's conflict with his brothers (vv. 15-21). However, the chapter is not only about endings, but it is also about beginnings, foreshadowing in several ways the Exodus that is to come. It functions as a literary bridge within the Pentateuchal

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<sup>259</sup>Literarily, tension is created as the reader is led through this story to anticipate the Exodus.

<sup>260</sup>Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 488.

accounts, with connections to either side of the chasm between the patriarchal and Exodus narratives.

### Form/Structure

Source critics have generally hypothesized that the text of chapter 50 represents a potpourri of J, E, and P elements. In the past, verses 1-12 and 14 were typically attributed to J, verse 13 (and sometimes v. 12) to P, and verses 15-26 to E.<sup>261</sup> Today, some scholars have posited that the final verses (vv. 15-21 and vv. 22-26) represent later expansions, which were tacked onto an otherwise unified Joseph narrative.<sup>262</sup> Thus, they argue that these accounts do not come from sources at all, but were created during a final redaction of Genesis.<sup>263</sup> The basis for this position is solid, but the conclusions are not. The reason that people trace the origin of verses 15-26 to the final redaction is that they say the verses fit too well in the context of Genesis to be part of the original Joseph story. The passage does indeed fit well in context, but this does not mean that it represents a later redaction. There is no reason why an original author could not have concluded the narrative with such a passage. Regardless, most agree that verses 22-26 form a cohesive unit.<sup>264</sup> Not only does the text possess the structural elements of a unified and purposefully-constructed death story, but as Brueggemann has shown, this final section possesses a chiastic structure:

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<sup>261</sup>However, there are many variants. Speiser, *Genesis*, 275-76. Others (like Gunkel) have come up with even more complex schemes.

<sup>262</sup>Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 314. For example, Westermann says of Joseph's speech: "The one who made the addition did not intend it as an event from Joseph's life, but wanted to create by means of this promise a link between the patriarchal story and the story of the exodus." Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 208.

<sup>263</sup>Coats, *Genesis*, 314. For discussion, see Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 922.

<sup>264</sup>On the contrary, Westermann argues that vv. 22-26 are comprised of two "entirely different concluding passages"—an account of the "evening of Joseph's life (vv. 22-23)" and one detailing his last words (vv. 24-25). Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 208. But as will be seen, the passage is purposefully composed structurally. It is not piecemeal.

- A. Full years in Egypt (v. 22)
- B. A claiming of heirs for the land (v. 23)
- C. The land of promise (v. 24)
- B'. An oath to the land (v. 25)
- A'. Embalming in Egypt (v. 26)<sup>265</sup>

With this structure, the passage is framed by an *inclusio*, which repeats in verses 22 and 26 both the location of the events (Egypt) and the years of Joseph's life (110). Thus, the text possesses very clear boundaries (vv. 22 and 26).

The general structure is determined by the stereotypical death story structure.<sup>266</sup> The account begins with a geographical note, which is followed by a declaration of the length of life. As noted above, the story of Jacob's death began similarly in 47:28. This parallel substantiates the fact that the story begins in verse 22. Following these two statements is a genealogical note in verse 23, which serves primarily to make an implied pronouncement on or evaluation of Joseph's life. All three of these clauses form the first part of the announcement of impending death formal stage of the death story. The last part of this stage is the official announcement, which comes uniquely in Joseph's final words.<sup>267</sup> The remainder of these words functions to "put the house of Joseph in order." The words are followed by a brief summary of Joseph's final deed—which is also part of the "putting the house in order" formal stage. Finally, the story closes with a death notice (death stage) and burial notice (response stage).

In total, the narrative contains seven formal elements, spanning four stages (see Table 4). The following will examine each of the elements in order of appearance.

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<sup>265</sup>Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 378.

<sup>266</sup>However, as noted above, it is embellished by literary devices like the chiasm and *inclusio*.

<sup>267</sup>Even though the words are in Joseph's final speech, because of their content, we still include them in the announcement of impending death stage. In the mind of the narrator, these words undoubtedly served to declare Joseph's imminent demise. Thus, formally, the words belong more in the announcement stage than in the "putting the house in order" stage.

Table 4. The formal structure of the death story of Joseph

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Formal Element</i>	<i>CL</i>	<i>Hebrew Text</i>	<i>English Translation</i>
ADS	Declaration of length of life, with an introductory geographical note	22a	וַיֵּשֶׁב יוֹסֵף בְּמִצְרַיִם הוּא וּבֵית אָבִיו	So Joseph dwelt in Egypt, he and his father's household, and Joseph lived one hundred and ten years.
		22b	וַיַּחֲיוּ יוֹסֵף מֵאָה וָעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים:	
ADS	Pronouncement on the life	23a	וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף לְאַפְרַיִם בְּנֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים	Joseph saw the third generation of Ephraim's sons; even the sons of Machir, the son of Manasseh, were born upon Joseph's knees.
		23b	גַּם בְּנֵי מַכִּיר בֶּן-מְנַשֶּׁה יָלְדוּ עַל-בְּרֵכֵי יוֹסֵף:	
ADS	Announcement of impending death	24a	וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אָחָיו	Joseph said to his brothers, "I am dying . . ."
		24b	אֲנֹכִי מוֹת	
POS	Description of putting the house in order	24c	וְאֱלֹהִים פֶּקֶד יִפְקֹד אֶתְכֶם	"... but God will surely visit you, and he will bring you up from this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob." Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall bear my bones up from here."
		24d	וְהָעֵלָה אֶתְכֶם מִן-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶל-הָאָרֶץ	
		24e	אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלְיַעֲקֹב:	
		25a	וַיִּשְׁבַּע יוֹסֵף אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר	
		25b	פֶּקֶד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם	
		25c	וְהָעֵלְתֶם אֶת-עַצְמוֹתַי מִזֶּה:	
DS	Death notice	26a	וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף בֶּן-מֵאָה וָעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים	So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years;
RS	Burial notice	26b	וַיַּחְנְטוּ אֹתוֹ	and they embalmed him
		26c	וַיִּשֶׂם בְּאֵרוֹן בְּמִצְרַיִם:	And he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.

CL=Clause Label    ADS=Announcement of Impending Death Stage  
 POS=Putting the House in Order Stage    DS=Death Stage    RS=Response Stage

#### Declaration of length of life, with an introductory geographical note

(50:22a, b). Like the death stories of Sarah and Jacob, the story of Joseph's death begins

with a declaration of length of life.<sup>268</sup> However, prior to this declaration, the author includes a geographical note indicating the location of the family of Joseph at the time of his death. Though the note is not an element in the stereotypical structure of a death story, the author seems to have added it for three reasons. First, it sets the stage for Joseph's final address—which is directed to his family (“his brothers”) who remained in Egypt. Indeed, Joseph did not need to travel to Canaan to deliver his last speech; his kinsmen were already in Egypt. Second, as observed above, the note also is a key structural element for the entire story. The mention of “in Egypt” in verses 22 and 26 frames the speech in verses 24 and 25, which declares that the “sons of Israel” would be brought up “from here”—that is, Egypt. Third, the note connects the story of Joseph's death with that of Jacob, which begins similarly (cf. 47:28).

After this introductory geographical note, the narrator provides information on the length of Joseph's life—110 years. Like other death stories, this signals an impending death and creates tension surrounding the timing of the death. But like the story of Abraham's death, the declaration of length of life also evaluates the life of Joseph himself. In fact, the Egyptians deemed 110 years as the ideal lifespan.<sup>269</sup> With this observation, the author shows God's abundant blessing on Joseph's life. In addition, as stated above, the declaration also serves as another structuring device—forming one part of an *inclusio* with the mention of 110 years in verse 26.

**Pronouncement on the life (50:23).** The second formal element in verse 23 reiterates the positive evaluation of Joseph's life from verse 22. Like old age, the number of his descendents is also a sign of blessing. And Joseph survives to see his children to

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<sup>268</sup>The death story of Sarah lacks an actual announcement of impending death.

<sup>269</sup>J. Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1959), 200-01.

the third generation.<sup>270</sup> Thus, this formal element testifies that Joseph was “singularly blessed with respect to age and progeny.”<sup>271</sup>

**Announcement of impending death, included in the final words (50:24a).**

With the declaration of length of life, the reader knows that death is coming. In fact, one would expect a death notice immediately following verse 23, but instead the narrator delays this report for two verses.<sup>272</sup> This not only creates tension, but it also draws attention to Joseph’s final words. This tension is only increased as Joseph utters the first words in his closing speech—“I am about to die.”<sup>273</sup> Joseph’s audience for this address is “his brothers.” Though context (vv. 15-21) might dictate that one interpret “brothers” literally, the phrase probably refers to relatives in a more general sense—particularly given the reference to “sons of Israel” in verse 25.<sup>274</sup>

**Description of putting the house in order: Final words and deeds (50:24b-**

**25).** Immediately following this announcement of impending death, the author tells of Joseph’s final instructions and a final deed. This is the last act Joseph would have “his brothers” do in order to put his house in order. Undoubtedly, Joseph’s instructions

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<sup>270</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 929. It could possibly be the fourth generation. If this is the case, it would express the same sentiment of a seventh-century Aramaic funerary inscription from Syria cited by Sarna, *Genesis*, 350. This document “airs the notion that living to see ‘children of the fourth generation’ is the reward of righteousness.” Regardless, this long life and the ability to see your progeny (even to the third generation) is a definite blessing.

<sup>271</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 350.

<sup>272</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 208. He suggests this “expansion” is based on comparison with the Jacob narrative. As in the death story of Jacob, a declaration of length of life introduces a speech on the part of the dying. In Jacob’s case, it was a series of speeches.

<sup>273</sup>While an explicit announcement in the mouth of the dying is not common, it is found in other death stories—particularly that of Jacob. Here, as in the death story of Jacob, the phrase is “behold I am dying” (Gen 48:21; 50:24; מֵת, אֲנִי מֵת). Cf. 1 Kgs 2:2; “I am going the way of all the earth”; אֲנִי הֵלֵךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ כָּל הָאָרֶץ. Sometimes this explicit announcement is even placed in the mouth of YHWH himself (“for you will die and not live”; 2 Kgs 20:1; וְלֹא תִחְיֶה, מָתָה אָתָּה וְלֹא תִחְיֶה).

<sup>274</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 351.

included some direction (even if implied) for what to do with his bones (cf. v. 25). However, Joseph's final reported words do not mention burial (unlike Jacob). Instead, Joseph's focus is on encouragement and on the promise of YHWH. His words are also prophetic. God would "come to their aid" (פָּקַד, "visit" or "take note of") in Egypt and "bring them up" from the land. Both of these phrases prophetically point to the Exodus.<sup>275</sup> The first phrase—"visit" or "come to"—implies God's special intervention and occurs in the same context in Exodus 3:16; 4:31; and 13:19.<sup>276</sup> The second phrase, "take you up out of the land," recalls Genesis 15:13-14, where God makes this same promise to Abraham.<sup>277</sup> Finally, Joseph's words also explain the reason why God will save Israel in the Exodus—the divine promises and oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>278</sup> Thus, prophecy and promise are on Joseph's lips as he dies. So convinced is Joseph of these future events that he makes the "sons of Israel" promise to treat his dead body like that of his father, Jacob—to take it up from Egypt to the Promised Land when they depart. So even though Joseph's death has an Egyptian flavor—both in the number of years lived and in his mode of burial (embalmed and placed in a coffin)—he recognizes that Egypt is not his permanent home.<sup>279</sup>

**Death notice (50:26a).** As with many other death notices, the narrator simply

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<sup>275</sup>They also hint at the fact that the Israelites will experience oppression and thus need God's "aid."

<sup>276</sup>Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 209. It can describe intervention for harm or good. Cf. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 930. In the Exodus, the intervention was against the Egyptians but for the Israelites.

<sup>277</sup>This same phrase is used some forty-two times in the Pentateuch to describe the Exodus. Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 209.

<sup>278</sup>In fact, in subsequent Pentateuchal material, the clustering of these names (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) is always in association with the divine promises of national territory (Exod 3:16; 6:3; 32:13; 33:1; Num 32:11; Deut 1:8; 6:10; 9:5, 27; 29:12; 30:20; 34:4). Sarna, *Genesis*, 351, 372.

<sup>279</sup>This is another bridge to the Exodus account. Moses fulfills the oath in Exod 13:19, and the Israelites perform the burial in Josh 24:32.

states that Joseph died—*מוֹת*.<sup>280</sup> The death notice is embellished only with a repetition of number of years that Joseph lived. As mentioned above, this reiteration of the length of life forms one part of an *inclusio* that frames the entire story.

**Description of response (50:26b).** The death story closes with a burial notice, which is particularly Egyptian in character. Unlike normal Hebrew funerals, Joseph was not interred, but placed in a casket after being embalmed as an Egyptian nobleman (as was Jacob). This characteristically Egyptian method of burial is never again cited in Scripture.<sup>281</sup> However, the focus is not on the burial itself or on the method. Instead, this last verse in the book of Genesis represents a clear look forward to the Exodus. Indeed, the verse possesses several ties to subsequent Scriptures. First, as noted above, the mention of the “coffin” being placed in Egypt looks ahead to the time when that same coffin will be taken out of the land in the Exodus (Exod 13:19). Second, Joshua lives to the same age and is buried along with Joseph upon settling in the Promised Land (Josh 24:29-32). Thus, according to Mathews, the burials of Joseph and Joshua form the “bookends of the sojourn in Egypt.”<sup>282</sup>

## Genre

Those who have classified this last story in Genesis have labeled it a death report.<sup>283</sup> However, for reasons stated in the introduction to this section, the account is more appropriately classified as a death story. Despite its brevity, it possesses the developed structure and theological consequence uncommon in death reports.

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<sup>280</sup>E.g., Gen 5:5; 7:22; 23:2; 25:8; 25:17; Num 20:1; 20:28; Deut 34:5; 1 Sam 25:1; 2 Kgs 13:20; 1 Chr 29:28.

<sup>281</sup>Sarna, *Genesis*, 351. The coffin is probably a decorated sarcophagus, such as those found in many museums today.

<sup>282</sup>Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 931.

<sup>283</sup>Coats, *Genesis*, 314.

## Setting

Coats believes the account of Joseph's death has "no independent existence."<sup>284</sup> In other words, the story was created specifically for its literary setting. It was not passed down or historical (in a strict sense); instead, it was added "in the redaction responsible for bringing a large section of narrative material together into a single whole."<sup>285</sup> His theory has its strengths. For instance, it recognizes the key role that the story plays in the Pentateuch as a whole. And it recognizes how well the passage picks up on key Pentateuchal themes—such as land, promise, and deliverance. But the fact that the passage fits so well in its literary environment does not necessarily mean the story originated with a later redactor (and thus is lacking a literary prehistory). In fact, there is no reason that an early author/editor could not have written the account and put the book of Genesis together in this way—complex from the start. In addition, the story—including Joseph's last words—could have been passed down to this original author/editor. Hebrew narrators selected and shaped material to fit their purposes.<sup>286</sup> In this case, the author/editor possibly used an existing and historical death account of Joseph (whether oral or written) and shaped it using a death story structure to function in its role in the canon.

## Intention

Coats is correct in seeing that the intention of the story as we now have it is to serve as a bridge—theologically and thematically—from the patriarchal narratives to the Exodus account. Thus, while the function of the death story originally may have been to

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<sup>284</sup>Ibid.

<sup>285</sup>Ibid., 315.

<sup>286</sup>For a good discussion of the use of shaping by Hebrew narrators, see Daniel I. Block, "Tell Me the Old, Old Story," in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts*, ed. Michael A. Grisanti and David M. Howard, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), 415-24.

preserve Joseph's final words in his family, within the overall flow of the patriarchal narratives, the death story has a greater purpose.

### Theological Conclusions

The purpose of this story is clearly to serve as a transition within the Pentateuch itself. In fact, this death story is a prime example of how an author can take a death story and use it in a larger narrative. One immediate concern for this death story is to bring the story of Joseph to a close—detailing his last words, death, and burial. But it also brings the story of Genesis to a close. Indeed, the dominant themes of Genesis are all recalled in this section—God's promises, God's gift of land, and God's faithfulness.<sup>287</sup> In addition, the account also points forward to the Exodus. As Alter explains:

The book that began with an image of God's breath moving across the vast expanses of the primordial deep to bring the world and all life into being ends with this image of a body in a box, a mummy in a coffin. . . . Out of the contraction of this moment of mortuary enclosure, a new expansion, and new births, will follow. Exodus begins with a proliferation of births, a pointed repetition of the primeval blessing to be fruitful and multiply, and just as the survival of the flood was represented as a second creation, the leader who is to forge the creation of the nation will be borne on the water in a little box—not the *'aron*, “the coffin,” of the end of Genesis but the *tevah*, “the ark,” that keeps Noah and his seed alive.<sup>288</sup>

But the death story also provides a significant insight into Hebrew thanatology. As with Abraham, Joseph's death story shows the importance and the mode of putting one's house in order. Putting one's house in order does not mean that the dying ensures his own fortunes in the afterlife (as in the ANE tales). Instead, it means that the dying ensures the well-being of his progeny and family. In this case, Joseph accomplishes this by encouraging his “brothers” and reminding them of the patriarchal promises. Even his instructions on his own burial are not driven by selfish motives. His request that the

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<sup>287</sup>Waltke, *Genesis*, 625.

<sup>288</sup>Alter, *Genesis*, 306.

people would remove his bones from Egypt had as much to do with his desire for his progeny to inherit God's Promised Land as it did with his desire to be buried in a particular location.

### **Exegesis of the Death Story of Aaron (Num 20:22-29)**

Spanning only eight verses, the death story of Aaron is the second shortest death story in the Old Testament.<sup>289</sup> However, despite its brevity, the account possesses great significance theologically and historically. Not only does it tell of the death of Israel's first high priest, but it also chronicles the continuation of the Aaronic priesthood. In addition, a study of the account reveals several significant characteristics of death stories. First, the passage demonstrates how a death story can establish a pattern for future death accounts. In this case, the present passage parallels the forthcoming death story of Moses.<sup>290</sup> Second, the story also shows that those who die do not always put their own houses in order. The author of this death story depicts YHWH as orchestrating the ordering of Aaron's house.<sup>291</sup> God does this by providing for a continuance of the priesthood through the ceremonial passing of the priestly frock to Aaron's son.<sup>292</sup> Finally, for the first time, a death story does not portray the dying individual in a strictly positive light. In this account, the narrator's final opinion of Aaron is ambiguous.

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<sup>289</sup> Aaron's death is also recalled in the recapping of the stages of the Exodus in Num 33:38-39.

<sup>290</sup> In fact, as will be explained below, many structural and theological parallels exist between the two accounts. As noted earlier, other death stories serve this same purpose. For example, Abraham's account serves as a foil for David's death story in 1 Kings.

<sup>291</sup> This emphasis on YHWH as the person responsible for putting the house in order has important interpretive implications.

<sup>292</sup> The reason for the divine intervention is undoubtedly because the house that needed ordering (the priesthood) concerned the entire house of Israel. In a similar fashion, Moses' house is ordered when YHWH ordains Joshua as the new prophetic and military leader of Israel.

## Historical and Literary Context

The death of Aaron occurs in the third and last stage of the wilderness travel narrative, which describes Israel's journey from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab. The Israelites' time at Kadesh had been characterized by rebellion against YHWH and their leaders. Indeed, their journey to the Promised Land had stalled at that location. Though the people had begun well (Num 1-10), they had regressed both spiritually and militarily since the initial census. First, the people failed to exercise faith in YHWH's provision of the Promised Land (Num 13-14), and then the spiritual leaders—the Levites—rebelled (Num 16-17). And by chapter 20, even those closest to YHWH—Moses and Aaron—had disobeyed him and incurred his judgment. In response, God would not allow any, save Joshua and Caleb, to enter into the promised rest. But as the book closes, the deaths—particularly that of the high priest, Aaron—serve as a kind of expiatory sacrifice (cf. Num 35:25). They signal to the reader that YHWH's wrath against the Israelites is abating, as the rebellious generation (including the leaders) dies off. Indeed, as YHWH passes the mantle of leadership (literally in the case of Aaron and Eleazar) to a new, more faithful generation, a new hope begins to arise for the Israelites. So, in context, this death story reflects the cleansing of Israel before their entrance into the Promised Land.

## Form/Structure

Scholars have typically viewed the account of the death of Aaron as predominantly attributable to P—which might be expected given the passage's emphasis on death and transition, the congregation (vv. 22, 27, and 29), and the high priest.<sup>293</sup> But

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<sup>293</sup>Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 5 (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 226. We will not discuss the attribution of this text to P; instead, our principal concern is the unity of the text, which is not highly disputed (though see the note on Noth below). Still, some obvious problems exist with this attribution. For instance, the text fails to mention burial, which most consider a preoccupation of P. In addition, the passage does not appear to be an addition inserted illogically into the flow of the text.

regardless of attribution, most believe the text to be a unified whole.<sup>294</sup> Such a determination is substantiated through an examination of the structure of the death story. The text possesses very clear boundaries (vv. 22 and 29), and the general progression of formal elements is determined by a modified, though stereotypical death story form. Like the death story of Joseph, this account begins with a geographical note, and it ends with a typical response element of mourning (but no burial). Also like the death story of Joseph, the announcement of impending death is included in the final words.<sup>295</sup> The remainder of the final words (uttered by YHWH) and the final deed (Moses carrying out the final commands of YHWH) both serve to put the house of Aaron (and that of the priesthood) in order. After the final words, there is a brief death notice. In total, the story contains six formal elements, spanning four formal stages. These are explained in Table 5. The following will examine each of the elements in order of appearance.

**Geographical note (20:22).** This death story begins with a geographical note that provides the setting for the account to follow. But at this point, the text gives no intimation of Aaron's impending demise—though readers may have expected such after the judgment pronounced by YHWH earlier in the chapter (20:12). The congregation sets out as one from Kadesh-Barnea—the seat of their past rebellion—to Mount Hor.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>294</sup>Others—notably Noth—have seen additions in the text. Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 152-53. He argues that vv. 23-24 inappropriately anticipate the events of the remainder of the passage. This position ignores the fact that the author of the Pentateuch has no problem showing God providentially overseeing and predicting events.

<sup>295</sup>Thus, we include it in the announcement stage.

<sup>296</sup>Num 33:38 and Deut 32:50 both affirm “Hor, the mountain” as the site of Aaron's death. Deut 10:6 locates the death at a place called “Moseroth.” The location of this mountain is uncertain, but clearly it is outside Edomite territory and represents an attempt to circumvent that nation. R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, The New American Commentary, vol. 3B (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 338. Suggestions for the modern day location include Jebel Nebi Harun, Jebel Medra, or Jebel Madurah, depending on how the route of the Exodus is defined. Cole suggests that Mt. Hor could simply mean the “summit of the mountain.” However, if “the summit of the mountain” was the intended meaning, then you would expect  $\text{רֹמֵם הַהָר}$   $\text{שָׁמָּה}$ , as in v. 28. T. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 394-95.

Table 5. The formal structure of the death story of Aaron

Stage	Formal Element	CL	Hebrew Text	English Translation
ADS	Geographical note (atypical element)	22a 22b	ויסעו מקדש ויבאו בני ישראל כל העדה הר ההר:	Then they departed Kadesh, and the sons of Israel, all the congregation, came to Mt. Hor.
ADS	Announcement of impending death	23  24a	ויאמר יהוה אל משה ואל אהרן בהר ההר על גבול ארץ אדום לאמר: יאסף אהרן אל עמיו	Then YHWH said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor on the border of the land of Edom saying, "Aaron will be gathered to his people; . . ."
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 1: final words	24b 24c 24d  25a 25b 26a 26b 26c 26d	כי לא יבא אל הארץ אשר נתתי לבני ישראל על אשר מרייתם את פי למי מריבה:  קח את אהרן ואת אלעזר בנו והעל אתם הר ההר: והפשט את אהרן את בגדיו והלבשתם את אלעזר בנו ואהרן יאסף ומת שם:	" . . . for he shall not enter the land which I have given to the sons of Israel, because you rebelled against My command at the waters of Meribah. Take Aaron and Eleazar his son and bring them up to Mt. Hor; and strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. Thus Aaron will be gathered, and will die there."
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 2: final deed	27a 27b 27c	ויעש משה כאשר צוה יהוה ויעלו אל הר ההר לעיני כל העדה:	So Moses did just as YHWH commanded, and they went up to Mt. Hor before the eyes of all the congregation.
DS	Death notice	28a 28b 28c	ויפשט משה את אהרן את בגדיו וילבש את אלעזר בנו וימת אהרן שם בראש ההר	Then Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on his son Eleazar. So Aaron died there on the mountain top.
RS	Description of response	28d 29a 29b 29c	וירד משה ואלעזר מן ההר: ויראו כל העדה כי נוע אהרן ויבכו את אהרן שלשים יום כל בית ישראל:	Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. When all the congregation saw that Aaron had expired, all the house of Israel mourned for Aaron for thirty days.

CL=Clause Label    ADS=Announcement of Impending Death Stage  
 POS=Putting the House in Order Stage    DS=Death Stage    RS=Response Stage

The inclusion of this geographical note mirrors the death stories of Joseph and Jacob. Like those stories, this element has historical and literary significance. The note informs the reader that the event to follow—Aaron’s death—would take place on a mountain, just as Moses’ death will in Deuteronomy (Deut 34:1). In the context of the book, the note also lets the reader know that the journeys of Exodus and Numbers are continuing. The wilderness narratives are not stagnant; they are moving towards a climax on the Plains of Moab. Finally, like the story of Joseph, the note also functions as part of a literary frame for the death story. In verse 22 Moses and Aaron arrive at Mount Hor, and in verse 28, they come down from the mountain.

**Announcement of impending death, included in the final words (20:23-24a).** After a reiteration of the location by the narrator, YHWH himself speaks the final reported words before Aaron’s death. Thus, the story is peculiar in that the protagonist does not give the final speech. This may be purposeful. The fact that Aaron is not granted final words could represent a somewhat negative evaluation of his life. This possibility is even more plausible given the content of YHWH’s final speech.

YHWH’s speech begins with words announcing the ultimate judgment upon Aaron—death. Indeed, the author clearly specifies the reason for Aaron’s death. He died not because of old age or sickness, but because YHWH himself had decided it was time. In this way, the death story mirrors those of Moses (Deut 31:14) and later Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:1), where YHWH is the one who pronounces the impending death. Another parallel with the death story of Moses is the phrase used to describe Aaron’s impending death—“gathered to his people.”<sup>297</sup> This idiom is restricted to the Pentateuch, being used in an announcement of impending death only two other times—in the death stories of

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<sup>297</sup>See the discussion on Gen 25:8 in the death story of Abraham for the exact connotation of this phrase.

Jacob (Gen 49:29) and Moses (Deut 32:50; cf. Num 27:13; 31:2).<sup>298</sup> In the case of the former, Jacob himself utters the words. But in the death stories of Aaron and Moses, YHWH himself announces the death—leaving little doubt whether the protagonist would die or not.

The function of this announcement is not to create tension, as tension would have been felt by the reader since YHWH's judgment in verse 12. Instead, it is to intensify the tension. Indeed, the reader—particularly a Hebrew reader—would know the significance of what was about to happen. The first high priest was about to die. It would have been similar to the death of a great leader such as Moses—which partly explains the parallels between the two accounts. Transitions of leadership in the ancient world were always times of uncertainty.

**Description of putting the house in order, part 1: Final speech by YHWH (20:24b-26).** However, the connections between the death stories of Moses and Aaron do not stop with YHWH's announcement. In both stories, YHWH gives similar instructions concerning how the deaths of these individuals will take place (Num 20:24-26; Deut 32:48-52). In both sets of instructions, after the initial announcement of impending death (described above), YHWH provides a reason for the leader's demise. And in both cases, YHWH commands them to go to a mountain to prepare for death.<sup>299</sup>

As noted in the introduction to this section, YHWH's speech has a specific function. Like other death stories, the final speech serves to put the house of the dying in

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<sup>298</sup>It normally occurs in the actual death notice.

<sup>299</sup>The account of Aaron's death is much less developed—lacking the embedded speech (Moses' blessing in Deut 33) as found in the Moses' story. Instead, the narrator takes the reader immediately into an account of the implementation of YHWH's commands.

order. However, this story is unique in that the “house” of Aaron actually affects and concerns the spiritual life of the entire people of Israel.<sup>300</sup> The immediate “house” would be the dynasty of the high priest, which had been defiled by Aaron’s disobedience.<sup>301</sup> Indeed, the only way to set this house in order and the only way for God’s relationship with his people to be restored was through the death of Aaron and the installation of a new high priest.<sup>302</sup> This manner of putting the house in order is explained in detail by YHWH himself in the remainder of speech, after the announcement of impending death. Moses, Aaron, and Eleazar are to ascend the mountain, and there, they will conduct a public transference of the priesthood. The ceremony involved Moses stripping the priestly garments (cf. Lev 8:7-9) from Aaron and placing them on his son, Eleazar.<sup>303</sup>

#### **Description of putting the house in order, part 2: Final deed by Moses**

**(20:27-28a).** Immediately following the final speech, giving instructions as to how to put the house in order, we see those instructions being carried out. In this way, the story is reminiscent of other death stories—such as that of Abraham—where there is both a final speech and an act. But again, as with the final speech, Aaron is not the executor of these final deeds. Instead, Moses carries out the command of YHWH—a fact made clearer in

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<sup>300</sup>One could argue that, in a sense, each death story possesses implications for the greater house of Israel.

<sup>301</sup>In the words of YHWH, Aaron had “rebelled” against him by claiming credit, along with Moses, for the miracle at Meribah. Such was a serious crime for the high priest. The use of this verb (from the root *מרד*) is somewhat ironic, considering the fact that Moses had accused the people of Israel of being rebels (a noun form of *מרד*) earlier in the chapter. Instead, YHWH says that it was Moses and Aaron who were truly rebelling. Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 170.

<sup>302</sup>Thus, as noted above, Aaron’s death served in a kind of expiatory role.

<sup>303</sup>*Ibid.* This sets the pattern of one being a high priest by virtue of one’s birth. Unlike Moses (Deut 34:9), when Aaron transfers his office to another, there is no mention of a transfer of Aaron’s spirit to Eleazar. George Coats, “Legendary Motifs in the Moses Death Reports,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977): 37. Perhaps this indicates that the authority lay not in the man, who was fallible, but the office itself. In the case of Moses and Joshua, the people recognized them as having the Spirit of God upon them—and therefore having God’s authority to lead the people.

the repetition of key phrases from YHWH's instructions in verses 25 and 26.<sup>304</sup> The execution of final instructions is a key theme in death stories, and the consequences are dire when final orders are not performed (see the death story of Hezekiah). However, the stakes are even higher in this death story since YHWH himself orders the final events of Aaron's life.

**Death notice (20:28b).** After the installation of Eleazar, the death of Aaron occurs as predicted and is reported without much elaboration. The death is described typically, using the Hebrew verb, *מוֹת*, "to die." The only other detail in the death notice concerns the location of the death—on the summit of the mountain (again mirroring the death of Moses). One verse later, the death is described in a different but familiar fashion—that is, Aaron has "expired" or "breathed his last" (Hebrew, *נָפַע*).<sup>305</sup>

**Response (20:28c-29).** The death story of Aaron closes with a brief response stage. Interestingly, no burial is mentioned, though Harrison hypothesizes that Moses interred him under a cairn of stones.<sup>306</sup> Instead of reporting a burial, the author describes the Israelites as mourning thirty days for Aaron. When Moses and Eleazar descend alone, the people realize immediately that their high priest has passed. The fact that the entire community bewails Aaron demonstrates the importance and possibly the popularity of the people's high priest. Once again, the author ties the death story of Aaron with that

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<sup>304</sup>The theme of Moses' obedience is seen throughout Numbers in the repetition of the phrase, "and Moses did as YHWH commanded." Cf. 1:19, 54; 2:33, 34; 3:39, 42, 51; 4:49; 8:3-4, 20, 22; 9:5, 8; 15:23, 36; 17:11; 19:2; 20:9, 27; 26:4; 27:11, 22, 23; 30:1, 2; 31:7, 21, 31, 41, 47; 36:10, 13. See Cole, *Numbers*, 341.

<sup>305</sup>Cf. Gen 7:21; 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:33.

<sup>306</sup>R. K. Harrison, *Numbers*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 273. One can only speculate as to the motivation for this omission. Perhaps the author excluded this detail in order to emphasize God's judgment on the deceased. But if this were the case, then the author probably would have not emphasized the extensive mourning for Aaron.

of Moses. In both stories, the mourning lasts for thirty days (cf. Deut 34:8), when in fact the normal observance seems to have been seven (Gen 50:10; 1 Sam 31:13).<sup>307</sup>

### **Genre**

The brevity of the account could suggest that it is a death report. However, as seen above, the passage has all the markings of a death story. Unlike death reports, it has a developed structure with six formal elements—the most important of which are the final speech and act. These two elements comprise the “putting the house in order” stage common among all death stories (except for that of Sarah). This stage also lends the story its theological consequence, which is another trait of death stories. However, it deviates from other stories by having YHWH set the house in order with his speech.

### **Setting**

The original setting in life is uncertain, but the Hebrew community would certainly have preserved a story like this. As stated above, the story concerns the entire community—not just an individual family. However, as with the other death stories, Aaron’s death account now has a particular literary setting. In this case, it is embedded in the third wilderness narrative of the book of Numbers.

### **Intention**

The death of Aaron would have had a profound impact on the Israelites. The very fact that they mourned for so long indicates that they honored their high priest.<sup>308</sup> Thus, the initial intention of such a death story could possibly have been to preserve the

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<sup>307</sup>Milgrom, *Numbers*, 171.

<sup>308</sup>In itself, mourning would not indicate high esteem. In the ancient world, subjects were often forced to mourn for their leaders after death. But this mourning seems genuine. This high esteem for Aaron is seen in the midrash of Numbers. According to Jewish tradition, the people loved Aaron because of his peace-keeping abilities. *Ibid.*, 171.

memory of a beloved leader. However, the intention of the text as we now have it is theological and historical in nature.

### **Theological Conclusions**

The following will summarize a few of the theological insights gained from the author's use of the death story form. First, as indicated above, Aaron's death story introduces the reader to the priesthood of Eleazar. This crucial institution would serve Israel throughout her history, from the time of Eleazar's sons (Zadok) even until the Maccabean period.<sup>309</sup>

Second, the account serves as a dress rehearsal for Moses' own death. Both Moses and Aaron die on a mountain and are prohibited from entering the Promised Land for the same sin, and both are replaced on mountains by their respective successors.

Third, the story provides a somewhat ambivalent evaluation of Aaron—the first death account to make such an assessment. In fact, Aaron does not speak throughout the story. This is striking when compared to the death story of Moses, where Moses offers numerous speeches to put his house in order. Here, Aaron is passive; YHWH is putting the priestly house in order. In addition, the narrator makes it clear that Aaron is dying for his rebellion against YHWH. Still, the people mourn for him at death, and Jewish tradition remembers him with high esteem.

Fourth and most importantly, the author uses the story as a literary tool to show how Israel is being purified and readied for the Promised Land. That is, just as the rebellious generation is being replaced, so also the rebellious high priest must give way to the new priesthood.

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<sup>309</sup>Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 400.

### Exegesis of the Death Story of Moses (Deut 31:1-34:12)

This study now moves to the death story of the central character of the Pentateuch—the towering figure of Moses.<sup>310</sup> From the land of Egypt to the Plains of Moab, from the early chapters of Exodus to the last verse of Deuteronomy, Moses has taken center stage in the emancipation, establishment, and exhortation of the nation of Israel.<sup>311</sup> As the Pentateuch draws to a close, this great leader has reached the point of death. But Moses' impending doom is not unexpected. Even as far back as the book of Numbers, the reader has known that Moses' time of death approached (Num 27:13; 31:2).<sup>312</sup> Nor is Moses' end without flourish and fanfare. Indeed, the entire book of Deuteronomy is cast as an elaborate series of valedictory speeches by the dying leader. But it is in Deuteronomy 31-34 that the reader encounters the last of the final speeches and the death account itself. These chapters contain the death story of Moses.

The account of Moses' mortality is significant for the current study for many reasons. First, as will be explained below, it represents the most intricately structured death story of the entire Old Testament. The flow of the formal elements is difficult to discern and atypical when compared to other death stories. Second, the story of Moses' death occupies a singular and transitional place in the canon. It not only concludes the formative period in the history of Israel as detailed in the Pentateuch, but it also prophetically outlines and anticipates the future fortunes and ultimate failure of the nation Moses helped found. Third, taken as a whole, the final speeches touch on every topic

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<sup>310</sup>David would probably represent the most significant figure in the Old Testament as a whole. Even Moses looks forward to God's anointed king (Deut 17:14-20). However, the influence of Moses cannot be understated. Indeed, the shadow cast from Moses and from the writings attributed to him extends over much of the Old Testament and Jewish and Christian tradition.

<sup>311</sup>Knierim argues that the Pentateuch is actually a biography of Moses. Rolf Knierim, "The Composition of the Pentateuch," in *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers 24*, ed. Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 393-416.

<sup>312</sup>The early chapters of Deuteronomy also hail the event with several clear declarations (Deut 1:37; 3:26; 4:21-22).

that would be important for the nation's future. Moses' final speeches deal with covenant loyalty, the naming of a successor, instructions for the observance of the Torah, and blessings concerning individual tribes. The death story also incorporates a special song that served as a "witness" in Moses' stead to keep the covenant family faithful to their covenant God, YHWH. In this way, Moses does more to prepare his people for his death than any other leader in Israel's history.

### **Historical and Literary Context**

The book of Deuteronomy provides a vivid picture of the historical context for Moses' final addresses. An entire generation of God's chosen people had perished in the wilderness, but their progeny were now poised on the edge of God's Promised Land—on the Plains of Moab. Though prohibited from crossing the Jordan River himself, Moses desired to lead this new generation vicariously through his last words. The book of Deuteronomy contains these last series of addresses by Moses in Moab.<sup>313</sup> Thus, all of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell speech—a kind of "death story."<sup>314</sup> But the book itself highlights Deuteronomy 31-34 as his "final" final words—culminating in the report of his death in chapter 34.<sup>315</sup> In these four chapters, we find Moses' last instructions concerning his successor and the Torah, his blessing of the tribes, and his mediation of the "Song of Moses" in Deuteronomy 32. These elements all indicate to the reader that the end of the

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<sup>313</sup>In them, Moses endeavors to restate and exposit the Torah. He exhorts the Israelites regarding the necessity for obedience to YHWH in response to his gracious liberation of his people in the Exodus. This compilation would last beyond the time of Moses and would thus supply a permanent standard for the new nation.

<sup>314</sup>Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 3. Olson argues that "the motif of the death of Moses casts its shadow over the entire book of Deuteronomy."

<sup>315</sup>Polzin labels these last chapters as "traditional closing formulae" as might be found in other literature and folklore. Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 71. Cf. Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 146.

book—and Moses' life—is near.

One's analysis of the form and function of Deuteronomy 31-34 depends greatly how one analyzes the literary structure of the entire book.<sup>316</sup> Of particular interest is the genre of Deuteronomy. The last half of the twentieth century provided several helpful comparisons of Deuteronomy to ANE suzerain-vassal treaties.<sup>317</sup> And the structural relationship between Deuteronomy and these treaties does offer a valuable means of discovering a general organization of the book.<sup>318</sup> In light of this parallel, the component parts of Deuteronomy would include a preamble, a historical prologue, general stipulations, specific stipulations, a document clause, blessings and cursings, a recapitulation, covenant witnesses, and an epilogue.<sup>319</sup> Some scholars argue that within the treaty form Deuteronomy 31 would serve as a document clause, detailing the "deposit of the text and provision for its future implementation."<sup>320</sup> Deuteronomy 32, the so-called

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<sup>316</sup>Since the 1800s, the rise of historical critical scholarship has colored the debate surrounding the literary study of Deuteronomy. Traditionally viewed as a nearly complete composition written by Moses, the book has been labeled by many scholars as a work of numerous authors who contributed to the book through several centuries and stages. According to the source critical consensus, Deuteronomy first began to take shape during or shortly following the reigns of either Josiah or Hezekiah in the first millennium BC. Chaps. 4 and 29-30 are often viewed as post-exilic. Other scholars have followed the tradition criticism of Martin Noth, who saw Deuteronomy as a prologue to the Former Prophets of the Hebrew canon (the Deuteronomistic History). For further discussion on the compositional history of Deuteronomy, see Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), xi-xxviii; J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 47-68; and Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 116-46.

<sup>317</sup>Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary, vol. 4 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 29.

<sup>318</sup>Such a comparison to second-millennium Hittite treaties also points to an early composition date. *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup>These component parts are based heavily on the work of G. E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954): 50-76. Weinfeld has argued instead for Assyrian parallels. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School*, 116-46; *idem*, "Traces of Assyrian Treaty Formulae in Deuteronomy," *Biblica* 46 (1965): 417-27. But Deuteronomy seems to bear a much closer resemblance to the earlier Hittite covenantal treaties. For an excellent and accessible explanation, see Gordon Wenham, "The Date of Deuteronomy: Linch-pin of Old Testament Criticism. Part One," *Themelios* 10 (1985): 15-20; *idem*, "The Date of Deuteronomy: Linch-pin of Old Testament Criticism. Part Two," *Themelios* 11 (1985): 15-18.

<sup>320</sup>Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 46.

“Song of Moses,” would function as a kind of witness to the covenant. And chapters 33 and 34 would provide an epilogue to the entire document. However, no analysis of the book as a treaty document works perfectly. Indeed, it seems that the treaty structure ends with chapter 28. In addition, one should not lose sight of the fact that Deuteronomy is paraenetic literature, though the author could have used the treaty form loosely in order to make his message understandable to his audience. The book itself is presented as a valedictory address, as a series of sermons, and not as a prose treaty.<sup>321</sup> Merrill perhaps labels the composition best as a “covenant expressed in narrative and exhortation, the whole thing comprising a farewell address.”<sup>322</sup> And if Deuteronomy is a farewell address, then chapters 31 to 34 represent the “peroration”—the dramatic recapitulation of all the discourses.<sup>323</sup>

### Form/Structure

The story of Moses’ death represents one of the most complicated and developed of all the Old Testament death stories.<sup>324</sup> In many ways, it is not a typical death story. While the general flow of the formal stages is logical, progressing from announcement of impending death to preparations for death to the death event itself, individual formal elements are scattered throughout, and some even appear in speeches, not in narrative as is customary in death stories. The text appears to jump from one address to the next, from one topic to the next, with no apparent pattern—especially in

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<sup>321</sup>As Watts writes, “The literary style of Deuteronomy as a whole is therefore better characterized as rhetoric than narrative.” Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 63.

<sup>322</sup>Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 29.

<sup>323</sup>Brian Britt, “Deuteronomy 31-32 as a Textual Memorial,” *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000): 358.

<sup>324</sup>Britt writes, “But with respect to chronology, action, structure, and the meaning of some terms, Deuteronomy 31-34 is far from clear or univocal.” *Ibid.* The uniqueness and complexity of the chapters has resulted in considerable disagreement over their composition history among scholars.

chapter 31.<sup>325</sup> In addition, the speeches of Deuteronomy 31-34 are pocked by narrative introductions and transitions, which seem to belie identification in a form critical sense. Still, the structure of Deuteronomy 31-34 seems loosely based on the death story form and is united around the theme of Moses' immediate pre-death preparations.<sup>326</sup> In order to demonstrate this formal identification, we will establish the textual boundaries of the story at 31:1 and 34:13, and we will show the correspondence of the structure of the chapters with the stereotypical death story form.

In general, commentators agree on the extremities of the hypothesized death story, as the majority of scholars group the final four chapters of Deuteronomy together.<sup>327</sup> Some separate chapters 33 and 34 from previous chapters as some type of epilogue to the book.<sup>328</sup> A few other scholars quibble over the placement of the beginning of the epilogue at 31:1.<sup>329</sup> But most identify 31:1 as the start of the unit. The conclusion

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<sup>325</sup>The entire storyline seems carried by speeches—both of Moses and YHWH. Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 63. Britt explains that a rhetorical use of the speeches is to build tension. He writes, “The poetic texts interrupt the narrative, deferring the presentation of what happens next.” Britt, “Deuteronomy 31-32 as a Textual Memorial,” 359.

<sup>326</sup>Indeed, some scholars are beginning to see that the death story has “one coherent composition on the theme: the final arrangements made by Moses before his death.” Heck, “A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33,” 22, quoting C. J. Labuschagne, “The Tribes in the Blessing of Moses,” *Old Testament Studies* 19 (1974): 98.

<sup>327</sup>Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 63. Tigay correctly states that chaps. 31-34 function as a conclusion to both Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch itself. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 288. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 271; Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 367; A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 371; Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 289.

<sup>328</sup>E.g., Britt sees chaps. 31-32 functioning separately as a textual memorial. Britt, “Deuteronomy 31-32 as a Textual Memorial,” 358-74. Still, even he argues that chaps. 31-32 must be understood in the greater context of chaps. 31-34. He labels these four chapters as a “pivotal text,” which functions as the “peroration” of Deuteronomy. *Ibid.*, 358. Cf. J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, *Apollos Old Testament Commentary*, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 436. McConville labels chaps. 31-32 as a “self-contained sub-section.” Cf. also Olson, who groups chaps. 29-32 together, stating that they unite around the theme of the “Moab covenant.” Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 157.

<sup>329</sup>For instance, Polzin translates the verse, “So Moses continued to speak,” and he thus groups vv. 1-6 with chaps. 29 and 30. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 71. But 31:1 seems to represent a key transition from chaps. 29 and 30 to chap. 31. For an explanation of the transitional role of 31:1, see Daniel I. Block, *The Gospel according to Moses: A Commentary on Deuteronomy* (forthcoming), 1046.

of the story of Moses' death is unquestionably his death and burial report in chapter 34.

More disagreement exists over the unity and cohesiveness of the materials between these two textual boundaries. Diachronic approaches to Deuteronomy 31-34 have generally classified the text as a series of originally independent units and sources inserted at times without any clear purpose. Few studies have approached the entire text in a synchronic fashion. But when analyzed synchronically, a death story structure seems apparent—but not readily apparent.

The difficulty in recognizing the death story form of Deuteronomy 31-34 stems primarily from the complexity of chapter 31. Deuteronomy 32:1-43 and 33:1-29 are clearly embedded elements not unlike the types of deathbed addresses seen in several other death stories.<sup>330</sup> And Deuteronomy 34 corresponds to other death stories, since it contains many typical formal elements like a death notice (34:5), a burial notice (34:6), a declaration of length of life (34:7), a description of the response of the bereaved (34:8), and a pronouncement on the life of the dying (34:9-13). However, Deuteronomy 31 does not seem at first to lend itself to formal classification. In fact, some debate exists over whether chapter 31 has any discernable structure at all—much less one that mirrors the stereotypical death story form. The reason for this is that the chapter is something of a hybrid. It does have some characteristics of a death story. For instance, like other death stories, the chapter contains some of the typical formal elements, like three announcements of impending death (31:2c-e [implied]; 31:14a, b; 31:16a, b), a declaration of length of life (31:2a, b), and two descriptions of the gathering of people for final words (31:14c-g; 28a).<sup>331</sup> But other factors also govern its structure.

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<sup>330</sup>E.g., cf. Gen 49:1-28 with Deut 33:1-29. Deut 32 is definitely unique in style and function, but it fits well in the general category of "putting one's house in order."

<sup>331</sup>Unlike other death stories, these elements are often part of speeches. In addition, unlike the other death stories, there is no clear embedded formal element, even though the speeches picture the dying putting his house in order.

The consensus among most critical scholars is that Deuteronomy 31 bears the marks of numerous hands working over various sources.<sup>332</sup> While this conclusion is debatable, one cannot deny the complexity of the text. The chapter contains seven different speeches by Moses and YHWH along with narrative introductions and frames. The order and subject matter of the speeches and narrative insertions are confusing. In fact, the chapter seems to switch from one topic to the next. Verses 2-8 concern primarily Joshua's succession; but verses 9-13 change the subject to the care and keeping of the Torah; verses 14-15 then revert back to the original topic; verses 16-22 are a speech by YHWH on the "Song of Moses"; verse 23 continues with the issue of succession; verses 24-27 deal with the Torah again; and finally verses 28-30 introduce the song in chapter 32.

Commentators divide over the reason for this complexity. Some argue that the text is a confusing jumble of sources that lacks any purposeful structure,<sup>333</sup> but increasingly commentators are seeing a compositional intentionality behind the text.<sup>334</sup> In

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<sup>332</sup>As Tigay writes, "More than any other chapter in Deuteronomy, it is characterized by doublets, inconsistencies, interruptions, and variations in vocabulary and concepts that scholars take as evidence of different literary sources." Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 502. For a classical view, see S. R. Driver, who divides the text into JE, D, and D2 source documents. S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), lxxvii.

<sup>333</sup>E.g., Alexander Rofé, "The Question of the Composition of Deuteronomy 31 in Light of a Conjecture about a Confusion in the Columns of the Biblical Text," *Shnaton* 3 (1978-79): 49-76. Rofé argues that the text was an accidental composition. Cf. N. Lohfink, "Zur Fabel in Dtn 31-32," in *Konsequente Traditionsgeschichte*, ed. R. Bartelmus, T. Krüger and H. Utschneider (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1993), 255-79. Lohfink restructures the text to make it coherent. Also cf. von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 187-88; and Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 15 (Sheffield, England: University of Sheffield, 1981), 34-35. Noth and von Rad approach the text from a tradition critical perspective, breaking the text into various compositional layers.

<sup>334</sup>Block, *The Gospel according to Moses*, 1044. Block argues, "Whatever the original order of the speeches and reports of these three thematic elements [successor, Torah, song], they seem to have been intentionally broken up and intertwined." Tigay agrees, stating that the pattern of chap. 31 "was more likely formed by design than by accident." He sees the central speeches forming a chiasmic arrangement based on subject matter: A. The Teaching (vv. 9-13); B. Appointment of Joshua (vv. 14-15); C. The poem (vv. 16-22); B'. Appointment of Joshua (v. 23); A'. The Teaching (vv. 24-27). Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 505. But this leaves out vv. 1-8 and vv. 28-30. Cf. Jean-Pierre Sonnet, *The Book within the Book: Writing in Deuteronomy* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 118-82. Sonnet sees a chiasmic pattern in the text based on the

fact, the speeches all have as their unifying theme the important tasks that Moses must accomplish before his death. These tasks include his commissioning of Joshua as his successor, his teaching of the “Song of Moses,” and his instructions regarding the care and administration of the Torah.<sup>335</sup> Why then does the narrator combine the speeches in the seemingly disordered manner? Perhaps the subject matter is “mixed up” because the narrator was highlighting the fact that each task was equally crucial to Moses putting his house in order.<sup>336</sup> The narrator was using a rhetorical strategy to show this great leader faithfully dispatching each of his duties at death. One sees perhaps a similar rhetorical strategy in Leviticus 19, which is part of the “Holiness Code.” There, the author deals with a myriad of issues in no particular order to demonstrate that all of life should be governed by Torah.<sup>337</sup> The lack of order communicates the comprehensiveness. Similarly, in Deuteronomy 31, the disarrangement of the speeches and subject matter communicates the comprehensiveness of Moses’ ordering of his household.

Certainly, attempting to explain the motives and method of an author or editor should always be approached with caution. But the process of arrangement of Deuteronomy 31-34 might have proceeded something like this. With several of Moses’ speeches and narrative accounts in hand, the narrator proceeded to relate the story of

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addressees of the speeches: A. The people (vv. 2-6); B. Joshua (vv. 7-8); C. Levites and elders (vv. 10-13); D. Moses (v. 14); D’. Moses (vv. 16-21); C’. Joshua (v. 23); B’. Levites and elders (vv. 26-28); A’. The people (32:1-43). But this is not a perfect chiasm. Britt, “Deuteronomy 31-32 as a Textual Memorial,” 358-74, sees two storylines (law and song) intertwining to form a coherent message (that of presenting a textual memorial along with chap. 32). Alday argues similarly for a structure around law and song. Salvador Carrillo Alday, “Conteto redaccional del Cántico de Moisés (Dt. 31:1-32:47),” *Estudios bíblicos* 26 (1967): 385.

<sup>335</sup>And if, as will be argued below, the same narrator behind chap. 34 is also behind chap. 31, then we would expect to find intentional structuring, as well as a unifying theme.

<sup>336</sup>Block, *The Gospel according to Moses*, 1044.

<sup>337</sup>Daniel I. Block, “The LORD’s Gracious Revelation of His Definition of Holiness (Leviticus 1:1-27:34)” (classroom lecture notes, 2020—*Introduction to the Old Testament, Pt. 1*, Fall 2003, photocopy), 104-05. See also Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 240ff.

Moses' death. Naturally, there would be a need to recount the events immediately surrounding the death event (chap. 34). In addition, the narrator would incorporate the speeches showing how Moses put his house in order upon death—the song (chap. 32) and the testament of Moses (chap. 33). Yet, the narrator also needed to introduce the song, explain the succession of Joshua, and give details as to how Moses provided for the reading of the Torah in future generations. These he included in chapter 31. As with any death story, the narrator desired to begin the story with an announcement of impending death. But the narrator already had this announcement in one of the speeches given by Moses (the succession speech in vv. 2-8).<sup>338</sup> Thus, the narrator began chapter 31 by placing this speech first. For the remainder of chapter 31, the narrator then switches from one topic to the next in order to show Moses comprehensively providing for the next generation of Israelites on the cusp of the Promised Land. In conclusion, this whole chapter (chap. 31) functions as an embedded element at the beginning of the death story in order to introduce the impending death of Moses and to show some of Moses' efforts to put his house in order.

After chapter 31, the death story follows a more conventional pattern. Chapter 32 contains the embedded “Song of Moses,” which functions to put the house of future generations of Israelites in order.<sup>339</sup> After this all important song (32:1-43; with 31:30 and 32:44 being a narrative frame), Moses reiterates some final instructions (32:45-47),

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<sup>338</sup>This speech begins with a clear declaration of length of life in 31:2a, b. Based on comparison with other death stories—in particular that of Jacob—this declaration implies, if not heralds, imminent death. Cf. Gen 47:28. And this forewarning of impending death is subsequently substantiated by Moses' statement that he can no longer go out and come in (31:2c-e)—an obvious reference to his declining health. In case there was any doubt, the narrator reports a more definitive announcement of impending death given by YHWH in 31:14a, b. The declaration of length of life in 31:2a, b also forms one part of an *inclusio* with the other declaration of length of life in 34:7. Together, these frame the entire death story and provide affirmation of our placement of the extremities of the story detailed above.

<sup>339</sup>In many ways, the song should be connected to chap. 31. E.g., Deut 31:16-22 and 28-30 specifically presage the song.

which serve a similar purpose. Following these commands, YHWH gives Moses orders to prepare for his immediate (not imminent anymore) death (32:48-52). With Moses' death now forthcoming, the last embedded element is placed in the story—the “blessing of Moses” (33:1-29). In his blessing of the twelve tribes, Moses engages in his final effort to order his house. Chapter 34 then provides the details of the death event itself—with a death report (vv. 1-5), a burial notice (v. 6), another declaration of length of life (v. 7), a description of the response of the bereaved (v. 8), and a two part eulogy (vv. 9, 10-13).<sup>340</sup> Thus, the death story shares many formal elements and a similar structural progression with other death stories. In other words, Deuteronomy 31-34 is a death story—though not a paradigmatic one.

In total, the story contains seventeen formal elements, spanning four formal stages (see Table 6). For simplicity in presentation, narrative transitions and insertions have been incorporated into the speeches when identifying formal elements and stages. These will be explained in the exegesis to follow. The intricacy of Deuteronomy 31-34 prevents anything more than a cursory look at the text. But many previous scholars have already accomplished this goal. The following examination of the formal elements will serve merely to demonstrate how they function in the overall death story.

One final note is in order before proceeding to the exegesis below. Combining Deuteronomy 31-34 as a unified death story may present a problem for a traditional evangelical analysis of the book. Conservative scholars have customarily ascribed the authorship of the entire Pentateuch, save perhaps Deuteronomy 34:5-12, to Moses.<sup>341</sup> However, for Deuteronomy 31-34 to have been composed as a death story, the editor who added chapter 34 (not Moses) must also have helped to compile Deuteronomy 31-33.

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<sup>340</sup>This eulogy is the most extensive of any of the death stories.

<sup>341</sup>E.g., Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 22.

Table 6. The formal structure of the death story of Moses

Stage	Formal Element	CL	Hebrew Text	English Translation
ADS	Transition (not part of the typical death story form)	31:1a 31:1b	וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:	So Moses went out and spoke these words to all Israel.
ADS	Declaration of length of life (in speech)	31:2a 31:2b	וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם בֶּן־מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה אַנְכִי הַיּוֹם	And he said to them, "I am a hundred and twenty years old today;
ADS	Announcement of impending death (implied)	31:2c 31:2d 31:2e	לֹא־אֹכֵל עוֹד לְצֵאת וּלְבוֹא וַיְהִי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי לֹא תַעֲבֹר אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה:	I am no longer able to come in and go out, and YHWH has said to me, 'You shall not cross over this Jordan.'
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 1, final words and deeds by Moses	31:3-29		Embedded speeches by Moses and YHWH with interspersed narrative, which have the effect of ordering Moses' house (that is, the nation of Israel)
	Typical formal elements:			
	Announcement of impending death (second, by YHWH)	31:14a 31:14b	וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הֵן קָרְבָּנִי יָמֶיךָ לָמוּת	Then YHWH said to Moses, "Behold, the time for you to die is drawing near;
	Description of gathering for final words	31:14c 31:14d 31:14e 31:14f 31:14g	קְרָא אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְהִתְיַצְבוּ בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶצְוֶנּוּ וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיִּתְיַצְבוּ בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד:	call Joshua, and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, In order that I may charge him." So Moses and Joshua went out and presented themselves at the tent of meeting.
	Announcement of impending death (third, by YHWH)	31:16a 31:16b	וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה שָׁכַב עִם אֲבוֹתֶיךָ	And YHWH said to Moses, "Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers."
	Description of gathering for final words	31:28a	הִקְהִילוּ אֵלַי אֶת־כָּל־ זְקֵנֵי שְׁבִטֵיכֶם וְשָׂרֵיכֶם	Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers.

CL=Clause Label ADS=Announcement of Impending Death Stage  
 POS=Putting the House in Order Stage DS=Death Stage RS=Response Stage

Table 6—Continued. The formal structure of the death story of Moses

POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 2, more final words by Moses	31:30-32:44		Embedded song, the “Song of YHWH,” with a narrative frame (31:30 and 32:44)
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 3, more final words by Moses	32:45-47		Embedded speech, detailing more of Moses’ final words to Israel
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 4, more final words by YHWH	32:48-52		Embedded speech, describing YHWH’s final instructions to Moses in preparation for death
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 5, more final words by Moses	33:1-29		Embedded speech, detailing Moses’ final blessing to twelve tribes; v. 1 is a narrative introduction
DS	Death report of Moses	34:1-5		Embedded report, describing Moses’ death
	Death notice	34:5	וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה	So Moses died there
RS	Burial notice	34:6a	וַיִּקְבֹּר אֹתוֹ בְּנֵי בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב מִן הַבַּיִת הַפְּעוּר	And he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor;
		34:6b	וְלֹא יָדַע אִישׁ אֶת-קְבֻרָתוֹ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה:	but no man knows the place of his burial to this day.
RS	Declaration of length of life	34:7a	וּמֹשֶׁה בֶּן-מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה בָּמָוֶת	And Moses was one one hundred twenty years old when he died,
		34:7b	לֹא-כָהָה עֵינָיו	but his eye was not dim,
		34:7c	וְלֹא נָס לֹחָה:	nor his vitality abated.
RS	Description of the response of the bereaved	34:8a	וַיִּבְכוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-מֹשֶׁה בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם	And the sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days;
		34:8b	וַיִּתְמַוּ יָמֵי בְכֵי אֲבֵל מֹשֶׁה:	then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were completed.
RS	Pronouncement on the life of Moses	34:9-13		Description of the narrator’s comments on the life of Moses in light of his death

CL=Clause Label ADS=Announcement of Impending Death Stage

POS=Putting the House in Order Stage DS=Death Stage RS=Response Stage

This would not be possible if Moses was solely responsible for chapters 31 to 33 as conservatives have maintained. A helpful and plausible solution to this conundrum has been proposed recently by Daniel Block.<sup>342</sup> He argues that the speeches of Deuteronomy are thoroughly Mosaic in origin, but that a later compiler (possibly the “prophet like me” that Moses talks about; cf. Deut 18:15) put the finishing touches on the book. In no way does this position deny Mosaic authorship; Moses is still seen as the predominant “author” of the book, since they are his speeches and his words (“these are the words which Moses spoke,” Deut 1:1).<sup>343</sup> But Block’s hypothesis does explain the origin of the death report in Deuteronomy 34 and the presence of the narrator’s words throughout the book. Applied to the death story, Block would argue that the same narrator behind Deuteronomy 34 is also behind Deuteronomy 31:1, the exact beginning point of our death story.<sup>344</sup> In other words, with Block’s theory of Deuteronomy’s composition, a later narrator could have collected several final speeches of Moses and appended them as a kind of concluding epilogue to the book. This epilogue could have been based on the traditional and typical form of a death story found in other parts of the Pentateuch.

**Transitional element (31:1a, b).** The death story of Moses begins with a transitional element added by the narrator. By beginning the death story with a speech containing the declaration of length of life and announcement of impending death, the narrator needed to add some sort of transition from the hortatory addresses of chapters 29 and 30. As noted above, the translation of verse 1 is disputed, but most scholars agree

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<sup>342</sup>Daniel I. Block, “Recovering the Voice of Moses: The Genesis of Deuteronomy,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001): 385-408.

<sup>343</sup>*Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>344</sup>*Ibid.*, 392.

that a new section begins here.<sup>345</sup>

**Declaration of length of life (31:2a, b).** The first of Moses' final speeches begins with his own declaration of his failing health and advancing age. Along with the narrator's reiteration of the declaration in 34:7, this declaration forms an *inclusio* around all of Moses' final speeches. The first declaration here signals the beginning of the death story, whereas the second signals the end. The use of a declaration of length of life to begin a death story is not uncommon. In particular, Jacob's death story (to which Moses' death story has close affinities) begins in a similar fashion (Gen 47:28). However, uniquely, the narrator places the words of this declaration in the mouth of Moses.<sup>346</sup>

**Announcement of impending death (implied; 31:2c-e).** Moses quickly confirms the reader's suspicions about his impending death with an assertion that he can no longer go out and come in. These two phrases—"go out" and "come in"—form a merism and articulate the fact that physically Moses has lost his ability to lead.<sup>347</sup> In particular, the figure of speech speaks of his diminished capacity to command the nation militarily.<sup>348</sup> The declaration of length of life and this announcement mutually explain one another. The former clarifies why Moses cannot go and come—i.e., Moses is old. The latter accounts for why Moses would declare his age—he was losing his ability to

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<sup>345</sup>Block, *The Gospel according to Moses*, 1038, 1046-47.

<sup>346</sup>While declarations of length of life rarely occur in speech, it is not uncommon to place the announcement of impending death element in the mouths of individuals other than the narrator. Cf. Gen 48:21b; 49:29b, where Jacob announces his own death; Num 20:23a, 26b, c, where YHWH announces Aaron's death; Josh 23:2c, where Joshua announces his own death; 1 Kgs 2.2a, where David announces his own death; and 2 Kgs 20:1, where YHWH through Isaiah announces Hezekiah's impending demise. Also cf. later in this death story, where YHWH announces Moses' death (Deut 31:14a, b; 16a, b). Block states that the placement of the declaration on Moses' own lips continues the "autobiographical tone" of the book of Deuteronomy. Block, *The Gospel according to Moses*, 1047.

<sup>347</sup>Ibid. But cf. with the narrator's description of Moses in 34:7b, c.

<sup>348</sup>Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 289. Cf. Num 27:17; Deut 28:6.

function in the role God had given him and thus he was close to death. After his self-description, Moses then reminds the audience of YHWH's previous prohibition against his entering the Promised Land.<sup>349</sup> This prohibition carries with it an obvious and ominous implication. Like the wilderness generation itself, Moses will experience the alternative to entering the land—death.<sup>350</sup> With this announcement of Moses' impending death, the need for continuing leadership becomes pressing—a topic dealt with in the remainder of his first speech (vv. 3-8).

**Description of putting the house in order, part 1: Final words and deeds by Moses (31:3-29) with formal elements embedded in speeches.** With the first words of Moses' initial speech, the reader now expects that he will begin his efforts to put his house in order. And that is exactly what we find. This "putting the house in order" is done primarily through the medium of speech.<sup>351</sup> As mentioned above, the speeches of chapter 31 are deliberately structured to demonstrate the effectiveness of Moses' efforts to put his house in order. They alternate, addressing three separate issues—his commissioning of Joshua as his successor (vv. 2-8; 14-15; 23); his transcription of the Torah and his instructions regarding the recitation and placement of it (vv. 9-13; 24-27); and his mediation and teaching of the "Song of Moses" (vv. 16-22; 28-29). Interspersed among these speeches are comments from the narrator. YHWH takes the central role behind all the events, coordinating and officiating the commissioning and delivering the song to Moses and Joshua. For ease in presentation, the following will consider each of

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<sup>349</sup>Deut 3:27; cf. Deut 1:37; 4:21-22.

<sup>350</sup>Deut 4:22; cf. Num 27:12.

<sup>351</sup>This is not unexpected, given the paraenetic and hortatory nature of Deuteronomy. As Watts writes, "The book has a narrative frame, but its contents are dominated by speeches." Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 63.

the three issues concerning Moses' efforts to order his house in turn. As noted above, throughout the speeches, we find several formal elements typical of death stories. We will describe these elements as they appear in the speeches.

The first issue then is the succession of Joshua. As noted above, this matter is dealt with in three places in Deuteronomy 31—verses 2-8; 14-15; 23. The first passage is a speech by Moses that is properly divided into two sections—verses 2-6 and 7-8. The initial verses comprise an address on the part of Moses to the people identifying Joshua as his successor, while the latter is a commissioning speech delivered directly to Joshua but still in the presence of the people. Both speeches are filled with words of encouragement and promises of divine assistance.<sup>352</sup> But they do not start out very heartening. As noted above, Moses' first words concerning his own impending death begin the speeches on a fairly ominous note—especially considering the monumental task awaiting the Israelites. As Brueggemann states, “The crossing is dangerous enough; it is even more so without Moses, upon whom Israel has relied so heavily.”<sup>353</sup> But Moses explains to the people that they need not fear his passing because YHWH would cross over before them. Joshua would serve as a captain leading the charge, but YHWH was the general who ultimately gave victory and ensured inheritance of the land. YHWH would be the Hebrews' banner and consuming fire in the conquest of the land (Deut 1:30; 3:18-21; 7:1-2, 17-24; 9:3; 12:10; 20:1-4).<sup>354</sup> In fact, it was YHWH who was leading

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<sup>352</sup>For a discussion of encouragement and assistance formulae, see Dennis McCarthy, “An Installment Genre?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90 (1971): 31-41. Cf. N. Lohfink, “Die deuteronomische Darstellung des Übergangs der Führung Israels von Moses auf Josue,” *Scholastik* 37 (1962): 32-44. Lohfink argues that the form of the speech in vv. 2-6 includes an encouragement formula (“be strong and courageous”), a description of Joshua's role, and an assistance formula (“he will be with you”). Cf. v. 23; Josh 1:6, 9.

<sup>353</sup>Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 271.

<sup>354</sup>As Brueggemann writes, “YHWH will be, in time to come, whom YHWH has been for Israel in times past. YHWH is reliable and will not fail or forsake. . . . YHWH intends the land to belong to Israel and will forcefully act to secure it for Israel.” *Ibid.*, 272. For a good discussion of the concept of YHWH as a warrior in Deuteronomy, see Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 430.

them in battle all along, personally granting victory over Egypt (Deut 1:30; 7:18-19) and over Sihon and Og, kings of the Amorites (cf. Deut 2:26-3:11). Though the people still had the responsibility of fighting and the obligation to follow Joshua, they needed to realize that numbers, might, and leadership ultimately did not matter if YHWH was not with them. Thus, before his death, Moses reminds the people not to trust solely in leaders; for leaders, like Moses, pass away and in the end do not ensure victory anyway.

But still an earthly leader was necessary in Moses' absence, and in verses 7-8, Moses turns his attention specifically to the one who would assume leadership after him. With ANE kings, this may have represented the most important act of their reign; and the consequences for not ensuring proper succession were often dire.<sup>355</sup> The appointment of Joshua was no different. Of course, the selection of Joshua is not wholly unexpected for the Israelites, as Moses had already identified Joshua as his successor (cf. Deut 1:38; Num 27:18-23).<sup>356</sup> But Moses makes sure Joshua is commissioned in the presence of the congregation of Israel (v. 7) in order to emphasize Joshua's authority publicly.<sup>357</sup> Speaking to Joshua, Moses reiterates many of the same encouragements given to the nation itself in verses 3-6. Moses tells Joshua to be strong and courageous (cf. 31:23; Josh 1:6-9, 18; 10:25). He reminds him of YHWH's presence and leadership (v. 8). And Moses reminds Joshua of his primary responsibility—to divide the inheritance for the people. Given the success described in the book of Joshua, this speech seems to have been effective in fortifying Joshua for his task.

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<sup>355</sup>See the death story of David. The succession controversy as detailed in 1 Kgs 1 is wholly the result of David's neglect of naming and publicly acclaiming his successor. For this reason, Israelite and other ANE kings often appointed coregents, who served alongside the king until his death. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 375-76, 402-04.

<sup>356</sup>Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 290.

<sup>357</sup>If David had performed this public commissioning for Solomon, would Adonijah have made his power play?

The narrative of the commissioning ceremony conducted by YHWH commences in verse 14 with another announcement of impending death and a description of the gathering for final words. Both are typical formal elements of death stories, and both occur in the context of reported speech. The first of these elements is a blunt pronouncement by YHWH that the day of Moses' death is drawing near (31:14a, b).<sup>358</sup> With this divine declaration, the impending death expected from verse 2 becomes all the more assured and looming. This fact adds urgency to the commissioning that was about to take place. Indeed, the only other time in the Pentateuch that YHWH had given a similar proclamation was in the life of Aaron (Num 20:23a; 26b, c), where death had followed almost immediately after the announcement.

The second part of YHWH's initial speech in verse 14 contains another embedded formal element—a description of gathering for final words (v. 14c-g). This gathering is a common formal element, and in most death stories it is either implied or directly stated.<sup>359</sup> Usually, the dying individual is the one gathering loved ones. But in an interesting twist, in this case, YHWH is commanding Moses (and Joshua) to be gathered to him. The purpose of this change in protocol is clear: YHWH, not Moses, was about to commission (צוה) Joshua.<sup>360</sup> Moses would not accomplish this transfer of authority himself. Thus, the inclusion of this formal element communicates a very important theological truth. The leaders of the new nation should be ordained and commissioned not by the outgoing ruler, but by the true ruler of Israel, YHWH himself.

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<sup>358</sup>The phrase, “the time drew near for X to die,” is a common one in death accounts and is used in the death stories of Jacob (Gen 47:29a) and David (1 Kgs 2:1a). But only here is such a statement placed in the mouth of YHWH—adding to its certainty.

<sup>359</sup>E.g., see Gen 24:2; 47:29b; 48:1b; 49:1a; Josh 23:2; 1 Kgs 2:1 (implied); 1 Chr 23:2.

<sup>360</sup>Interestingly, this word (צוה) is the same one used in other death stories to speak of “charging” one's house (Gen 49:29; 1 Kgs 2:1a; 2 Kgs 20:1e; cf. Deut 3:28; 2 Sam 17:23; Isa 38:1). The commissioning of Joshua is one aspect of Moses' job of ordering his house that YHWH will do for him.

In verse 15, YHWH actually appears to the men in the tent in a pillar of cloud to perform the commissioning.<sup>361</sup> Verse 23 then resumes the action of verse 15, and there YHWH gives his charge<sup>362</sup> to Joshua. Interestingly, this is done in the privacy of the tent, rather than publicly, as was Moses' charge in verses 7-8.<sup>363</sup> Still, the words of the speeches are similar. In fact, in verse 23, YHWH reiterates most of the encouragement formulae of verses 7-8, which had previously been uttered by Moses. As Block writes, "Apparently, YHWH added his words to those of Moses to reassure Joshua that he was in fact the divinely appointed successor to Moses."<sup>364</sup> So, with the supervision of YHWH, Moses completes his first task in putting his house in order.

Within the context of Deuteronomy, Moses' second undertaking before his death—that of instructing the Levites and elders concerning the Torah (vv. 9-13; 24-27)—is just as important as commissioning Joshua. No matter who led the Hebrews after Moses' passing, the key to the people's existence and continuance in the Promised Land was obedience to YHWH's revealed instruction (Deut 30:15-20; 32:47). Moses had spent the majority of the Deuteronomy orally delivering this key message; now in verses 9-13 and 24-27, he makes certain that those words would not be forgotten. He does this in three ways. First, he writes down "this Torah" that he had been expounding—probably referring specifically to the covenant document found in Deuteronomy 5-28.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>361</sup>The cloud was one of God's mediums of appearing on earth (cf. Ps 68:5). Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 293.

<sup>362</sup>Again  $\text{וַיִּצַו}$  is used.

<sup>363</sup>Block, *The Gospel according to Moses*, 1052. This perhaps reflects the mediatory role of Moses. YHWH charges Joshua privately, but the public charging is handled by Moses.

<sup>364</sup>*Ibid.*, 1069.

<sup>365</sup>Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 398. V. 9 represents the first reference in Deuteronomy to Moses writing the Torah. Cf. Deut 29:19, 20, 26; 30:10. Block, "Recovering the Voice of Moses," 398. The existence of a written Torah had been assumed since Deut 17:18. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 439. In this way, these final speeches function as "a text about texts," or in other words, they are "self-referential." Britt, "Deuteronomy 31-32 as a Textual Memorial," 364.

This normative text would serve as a guide to life in the covenant community in lieu of the original expositor—Moses.<sup>366</sup> Second, Moses instructs the Levites and the elders of the community to oversee and ensure the ritual recitation of the Torah at the Festival of Booths to be held every seven years.<sup>367</sup> The wisdom in this prescription is evident. The Feast of Booths was the lengthiest and best attended of all the Jewish festivals.<sup>368</sup> Thus, in future years, it would provide an ample, assorted, and attentive audience for the Torah reading.<sup>369</sup> Third, in verses 28-29, Moses instructs the Levites to deposit the Torah beside the Ark of the Covenant of YHWH. By placing the Torah beside the Ark—which already contained the Decalogue—Moses visibly connects the two documents. Both have a divine author; both were covenant documents; and both were binding on the Israelites.<sup>370</sup> The placement here has another function. Placing the document beside rather than inside the Ark made it more accessible. In this way, the document itself—especially its covenant curses—would provide an enduring and ever-present witness against Israel when they would undoubtedly apostatize in Moses' absence (v. 27).

The last and final issue concerning the ordering of Moses' house in chapter 31 involves the dictation of the "Song of Moses." The texts dealing with the song include an explanatory speech on the part of YHWH in verses 16-21, an account of Moses writing down and teaching the song in verse 22, and a speech by Moses requesting that the

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<sup>366</sup>Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 135. Britt suggests that "the abrupt transition from 31:8 to 31:9 could suggest that Joshua and the text both substitute for the authority of Moses." Britt, "Deuteronomy 31-32 as a Textual Memorial," 364.

<sup>367</sup>Only here do the Scriptures connect this specific festival with the reading of the Torah. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 374. For the significance of the inclusion of both the Levites and elders, see Block, *The Gospel according to Moses*, 1057-059.

<sup>368</sup>Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 291. Tigay also notes that since the festival was after harvest, the audience would be able to focus more on the reading itself.

<sup>369</sup>Moses' prescription also demonstrates that obedience to the Torah was for all Israel (v. 11). Men, women, children, and even aliens (v. 12) were all to be present.

<sup>370</sup>Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 297.

leaders gather to hear the song in verses 28-29.<sup>371</sup> For this event—as with Joshua’s succession—YHWH takes center stage. YHWH’s first speech concerning the song in verses 16-21 can be divided into two sections—the justification for the song (vv. 16-18) and the instructions for writing the song (vv. 19-21). The first basis for giving the song is Moses’ own death. In verse 16, we find a third announcement of impending death for Moses (v. 16a, b)—emphatically proclaimed by YHWH.<sup>372</sup> A second basis is the people’s inevitable apostasy—characterized in a personal and shocking manner as spiritual adultery.<sup>373</sup> The people will forsake the covenant, and as a result the covenant curses described in Deuteronomy 28 and 29 (and later in the song itself) will come upon them. Moreover, God will abandon them and hide his face from them (vv. 17-18). In preparation for this apostasy, YHWH commands Moses and Joshua (as his successor) to write the song (vv. 19-21). And in verse 22, they obey. This song would be taught to the Israelites and serve as a witness (עֵד) in Moses’ stead.<sup>374</sup> Just as Moses as the prophet *par excellence* served as a covenant watchdog, so this song would perform a similar function in his absence. Finally, in verses 28-29, Moses gathers the leaders of Israel to hear the song. This is the second time this type of formal element has been used in chapter 31. This element prepares the way for the song to be declared to the people in chapter 32.

Thus, with these three issues settled, Moses now has provided for his house—

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<sup>371</sup>These speeches not only show Moses putting his house in order, but they also foreshadow and introduce the song in chap. 32.

<sup>372</sup>God describes Moses’ death in one idiomatic statement—“You are about to lie down with your fathers.” The idiom differs from other death stories and even from Deut 32:50, which speak of being “gathered to his fathers” or being “gathered to his people.” Nevertheless, it is a typical description. Cf. Gen 47:30, “when I lie down with my fathers.”

<sup>373</sup>This theme plays a prominent role in the prophets—particularly in Ezekiel and Hosea. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 440.

<sup>374</sup>The Israelites were not only to learn it but also memorize it; Moses was to “put it in their mouths.” Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 295.

the nation of Israel—in three key ways. He had given them an enduring prophetic witness, a smooth transition of leadership, and a normative text to instruct them concerning their future life in the Promised Land.

**Description of putting the house in order, part 2: Final words by Moses, Song of YHWH (31:30-32:44).** The speeches of Deuteronomy 31 pave the way for the first extended oration by Moses in his series of farewell addresses—the famous “Song of Moses.”<sup>375</sup> The song’s appearance in the death story at this point is not a surprise. It is anticipated in key ways in chapter 31 (31:16-21; 28-30).<sup>376</sup> In fact, this song is the only poem in Scripture that is overtly anticipated in prior narratives.<sup>377</sup> The reason seems to be to demonstrate its central role in the death story and in putting Moses’ house in order.

The complexity of the song is well-known, and it has attracted interest regarding its poetic features, prehistory, and its potential genre.<sup>378</sup> The latter issue is perhaps most crucial to the following exegesis and thus will be considered here rather than in the genre section below. Based on the work of G. Ernest Wright, most scholars today argue that the song is a covenant lawsuit or *rib*.<sup>379</sup> In this way, the Song of Moses

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<sup>375</sup>However, as Block argues, the song is more appropriately titled “Song of YHWH”—for although Moses delivers the discourse, YHWH is the composer (cf. 31:19). Block, “Recovering the Voice of Moses,” 398-99.

<sup>376</sup>In addition, it is reflected upon immediately after its recitation in a narrative epilogue (32:44-52).

<sup>377</sup>Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 64-65.

<sup>378</sup>A detailed discussion of these issues is outside the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>379</sup>The view was classically formulated by G. Ernest Wright, “The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 26-67. See also M. G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 138-39. Cf. Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 373; B. Gemser, “The *Rib*- or Controversy-Pattern in Hebrew Mentality,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 3, ed. Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 120-37; H. B. Huffmon, “The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959): 285-95; Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1966), 96-97; Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 380-81; Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 409; Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 296-97; Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, *New International Biblical Commentary*, vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 297-98.

would function as a witness, in place of the typical divine witnesses in an ANE treaty form. While the structure of the song does mirror a *riḅ* in some ways<sup>380</sup> and while Deuteronomy resembles a covenant document, this view fails on several counts. First, the song is poetic in form, but the witness section of a treaty document is usually prose.<sup>381</sup> Neither does the use of poetry suit a formal legal document, like that of a *riḅ*. Second, covenant is not stressed in the document—though it undoubtedly underlies the relationship described in the song.<sup>382</sup> Third, with a *riḅ*, one would not expect to see promises of hope for Israel and of judgment against nations other than the vassal nation (as found in vv. 26-42). Fourth, one would expect that a witness document in the treaty structure would be placed with the other witnesses mentioned earlier in Deuteronomy (cf. 30:19). Similarly, the *riḅ* interpretation does not sufficiently answer the question of why the song is placed where it is—right before the death of Moses.<sup>383</sup>

Several alternative interpretations have been offered. Some have argued that the song is a wisdom composition.<sup>384</sup> And Weitzman suggests that the song mirrors the Assyrian Words of Ahiqar.<sup>385</sup> But neither of these views explains all the features of the song. In fact, the text truly defies formal identification, having qualities of various

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<sup>380</sup>There are some key correspondences in formal elements, such as a listing of the suzerain's past blessings to the vassal, a statement of the vassal's faithlessness, and a call for witnesses against the vassal.

<sup>381</sup>Watts writes, "Although hymnic prologues and epilogues are common features of various kinds of ancient Near Eastern texts, they do not appear in treaties, either as the witness section or in any other role." In this way, Deut 33 also does not fit the treaty form. Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 76.

<sup>382</sup>Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 30.

<sup>383</sup>Watts offers a helpful caution. He writes that treaty themes can help us understand Deut 31-32. For instance, the psalm does have a law-suit pattern at the beginning. And it helps us to understand the invocation of heaven and earth. Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 76.

<sup>384</sup>James R. Boston, "The Wisdom Influence upon the Song of Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1968): 198-202.

<sup>385</sup>Steven Weitzman, "Lessons from the Dying: The Role of Deuteronomy 32 in its Narrative Setting," *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 377-93.

genres.<sup>386</sup> Thiessen acknowledges this fact, contending that the genre is best described as a hymn that contains a covenant *rit*. This position seems to capture both the poetic and legal aspects of the song.<sup>387</sup> But this still does not explain its literary context. Britt's argument that the text functions as an *עֵד* or "textual memorial" deserves serious consideration.<sup>388</sup> He points out that the "semantic valences" of the Hebrew word, *עֵד*, cover many of the functions of the song: "repetition, witness, artifact, and covenantal text."<sup>389</sup>

While the exact genre of the song may resist precise identification, one may obtain an idea of its function by examining its placement in the death story. Why does the narrator anticipate and then give such a prominent role to a hymn right before the death of Moses?<sup>390</sup> The answer is that the hymn performs a role that Moses would no longer be able to upon his death—that of a prophet.<sup>391</sup> Block explains that "the song is presented as Israel's nation anthem. It is to stand in for Moses after his death, as a permanent witness to the grace of God and a perpetual challenge to Israel's covenant fidelity."<sup>392</sup> As noted in our discussion on chapter 31, the poem represents the enduring prophetic voice of Moses, through the means of the "oral transmission and popular

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<sup>386</sup>Tigay states correctly that the song is "a psalm and, like many biblical psalms, it displays features of several different genres." Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 509.

<sup>387</sup>Matthew Thiessen, "The Form and Function of the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1-43)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004): 401-24.

<sup>388</sup>Britt, "Deuteronomy 31-32 as a Textual Memorial," 369-70.

<sup>389</sup>Ibid.

<sup>390</sup>Watts states correctly that the narrator carefully weaved the song into the narrative as a climax to the book. Watts, *Psalms and Story*, 78.

<sup>391</sup>Moses' responsibility as a dying leader and overseer of a nation was to secure the well-being for the nation once he is gone.

<sup>392</sup>Block, "Recovering the Voice of Moses," 399. Cf. Olson (*Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 135), who classifies it as a "foundational song or catechetical anthem."

recital” of the song.<sup>393</sup> And this prophetic word would reverberate in the ears of the Israelites throughout their history as a nation.

This prophetic role is confirmed by the speeches of YHWH (31:16-21) and Moses (31:28-29) in the previous chapter. The narrator uses these texts both as an introduction to and explanation of the song. Both passages proclaim that when Israel came into the land of promise and apostatized and broke the covenant, even though YHWH had blessed them, then this song would serve as a witness against the nation. The prophetic function is also clear from the text of Deuteronomy 32. Indeed, each section of the song itself fulfills a prophetic role and recalls prophetic themes derived from Moses’ earlier addresses.<sup>394</sup> For instance, verses 1-3 proclaim to the hearer the power of God’s words.<sup>395</sup> Verses 4-18 serve as a perpetual reminder of the goodness of YHWH in choosing Israel out of all the other nations and granting them prosperity even though they did not deserve it.<sup>396</sup> Verses 15-18 speak of the future apostasy of the Israelites, who will turn their backs on their benefactor in favor of the gods of the nations.<sup>397</sup> Verses 19-25 forewarn of the covenant curses, which would not only punish the nation but would also draw the Israelites’ attention to the reason for that punishment—their violation of the covenant.<sup>398</sup> However, the song also hails God’s

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<sup>393</sup>Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 80.

<sup>394</sup>The song also contains many themes that reappear in prophetic literature. It is especially influential in Jeremiah. For a discussion of the parallels between Deut 32 and Jeremiah, see William L. Holladay, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 26-52*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 53-56.

<sup>395</sup>E.g., Deut 5:4-5; 8:3. For other well-known examples of this concept in Hebrew prophetic literature, see Isa 40:8; 55:11; Jer 1:12; Ezek 37:4; Amos 1:2.

<sup>396</sup>E.g., Deut 7:7-9; 9:6. For an example of this concept in prophetic literature, see Ezek 16.

<sup>397</sup>E.g., Deut 8:11-20. The prime illustration of this concept is the sign act of Hosea.

<sup>398</sup>E.g., Deut 28:15-68. For a good discussion of covenant curses in the prophets, see Douglas K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 31 (Waco: Word Books, 1987): xxxii. For a more comprehensive and classical treatment, see D. R. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964).

desire to limit the punishment due Israel (vv. 26-31), and instead to punish Israel's enemies (vv. 32-42).<sup>399</sup> The song ends with a call for all the nations to praise God (v. 43) and a narrative conclusion (v. 44). But with such a song, Moses' prophetic voice will not end. The song will continue to fulfill his role as a prophet to future generations.

**Description of putting the house in order, part 3: More final words by Moses (32:45-47).** The next speech follows immediately after the recitation of the "Song of Moses" to the people, and it could probably be considered part of that formal element. As if to reiterate what he just said, Moses issues a brief exhortation in verses 45-47. He encourages the people to place the words that he just spoke on their hearts—a common theme throughout Deuteronomy.<sup>400</sup> But Moses' concern is not just the words of the song, but the words of the Torah (v. 46). According to Moses, obedience to both is a matter of life or death (cf. Deut 30:15, 19). These three verses represent the last words of exhortation on the part of Moses—the last time Moses as the preacher will address his congregation before his death. By contrast, Deuteronomy 33 is decidedly positive, lacking this type of paraenetic quality. Thus, verses 45-47 are the words that would be ringing in the ears of the Israelites as the death knell tolled for Moses.

**Description of putting the house in order, part 4: More final words by YHWH (32:48-52).** Following Moses' exhortation regarding the "Song of Moses" in verses 45-47, the narrator reports another divine speech by YHWH. These are YHWH's final instructions to Moses in preparation for death. The words seem to repeat (with

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<sup>399</sup>E. g., Deut 30:1-10. Many of the prophetic books follow a similar progression of thought as the song. For instance, in Ezekiel, the book begins with messages of judgment against Israel (chaps. 1-24), but it ends with messages of judgment against the nations (chaps. 25-33) and messages of hope for Israel itself (chaps. 34-48).

<sup>400</sup>Cf. Deut 4:29, 39; 6:5, 6; 8:5, 14; 9:5; 10:12, 16; 11:13, 16, 18; 13:4; 15:7, 9, 10; 17:17, 20; 20:3; 26:16; 28:67; 29:17; 30:1, 2, 6, 10, 17.

some elaboration) the instructions given in Numbers 27:12-14—causing some interpreters to see 32:48-52 as a later insertion into the narrative by the Priestly editor.<sup>401</sup> But there is no reason to exclude the speech from the death story. In fact, the story of Aaron's death includes a similar speech on the part of YHWH (Num 20:23-26).

In the present story, the narrator's report of YHWH's words causes the reader to look backward and forward. It reiterates to the reader why Moses is dying—for his lack of faithfulness at the waters of Meribah Kadesh.<sup>402</sup> The account also prefigures the events of Deuteronomy 34:1-5, forming a literary frame around the Moses' last will and testament in Deuteronomy 33:1-29.<sup>403</sup> Finally, YHWH's speech teaches an important theological truth about death. The dying must do all they can to provide for the next generation, but YHWH provides for the dying at death. In this case, YHWH accomplishes this by telling Moses how, when, and why his death will occur. Thus, YHWH controls the circumstances of death. He has charge over the gates of Sheol—a fact stated bluntly in the preceding song (32:39).

**Description of putting the house in order, part 5: Moses' final blessing to the twelve tribes (33:1-29).** Following these ominous words of YHWH, the narrator embeds the so-called "blessing of Moses" of the twelve tribes of Israel. This blessing represents the second long embedded speech in the death story, and it is different from any of Moses' orations in Deuteronomy. Instead of admonishing and instructing, Moses

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<sup>401</sup>Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 316.

<sup>402</sup>Merrill has a good discussion of the seriousness of this sin by Moses as a leader of the covenant community. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 429. He writes, "In other words, he did not fail to enter Canaan because he died, but he died because he failed to enter Canaan." *Ibid.*, 454.

<sup>403</sup>It also adds an ironic touch to the death story. One of the literary tools that the book of Deuteronomy uses throughout is a citation of the reported word of God, followed by a report of the fulfillment of that word. Here that literary device is used against Moses himself. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 71.

now expresses his prayerful hopes for the people's happiness and peace.<sup>404</sup> In this way, the blessing balances the comparatively dark parting words of the "Song of Moses" in Deuteronomy 32. Like a diamond on black felt, the optimism expressed here shines all the more against the bleak resignation that permeates chapter 32.<sup>405</sup> The narrator also places the blessing here to emphasize its function as Moses' last will and testament.<sup>406</sup> In fact, its location in the death story, its poetic structure,<sup>407</sup> and its title<sup>408</sup> all connect Moses' words to Jacob's testament in Genesis 49.<sup>409</sup> But clear differences do exist between these passages. Not surprisingly, compared to Genesis 49, Deuteronomy 33 has a profoundly theological and "religious tone"—particularly in the introduction and conclusion.<sup>410</sup> In addition, the text focuses much more on actual blessing than Genesis 49, which exhibits an explicitly prophetic perspective.<sup>411</sup> Finally, as will be explained below, Moses' blessing emphasizes different tribes than does Genesis 49.

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<sup>404</sup>Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 317.

<sup>405</sup>Watts points out that the juxtaposition of the two chapters is a common rhetorical tool in Deuteronomy. Often, the author places blessings and cursings (chaps. 27-28) and hope and judgment (chaps. 29-30) together in a rhetorical fashion. Watts, *Psalms and Story*, 70-71.

<sup>406</sup>Moses probably delivered this address at an earlier time.

<sup>407</sup>On the poetic structure, see D. L. Christensen, "Two Stanzas of a Hymn in Deuteronomy 33," *Biblica* 65 (1984): 382-89; F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 97-122; D. N. Freedman, "The Poetic Structure of the Framework of Deuteronomy 33," in *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon*, ed. Gary Rendsburg and Cyrus H. Gordon (New York: KTAV, 1980), 25-47.

<sup>408</sup>V. 1 entitles it "blessing." Cf. Gen 49:28.

<sup>409</sup>As with Jacob's testament in Gen 49, most critical scholars characterize Deut 33 as a late insertion that lacks clear connections with its literary context. Heck, "A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33," 18. However, when viewed within the context of the death story, the placement of the blessing makes perfect sense. Indeed, these types of poetic blessings represent typical elements in the accounts of the deaths of significant biblical characters. Koopmans, "The Testament of David in 1 Kings II 1-10," 431. As Mayes writes, "Its place, however, is in no way incongruous, for the custom of a father imparting his blessing shortly before death is well known from the Old Testament." Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 396.

<sup>410</sup>Heck, "A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33," 22.

<sup>411</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

Moses' last will and testament begins with a narrative heading in verse 1— which identifies the speaker (“Moses, the man of God”) and the content (“blessing”) of what is to follow. The actual tribal blessings are found in verses 6-25, which are framed by a psalm-like introduction (vv. 2-5) and summary (vv. 26-29).<sup>412</sup> Though some have seen this frame as a later insertion,<sup>413</sup> it is indispensable to the blessing as it is currently constructed.

The psalm (vv. 2-5) introduces the blessing by reiterating the history of YHWH's relationship with his people. Verses 2-5 acclaim the great “love” that YHWH has demonstrated for the sons of Israel.<sup>414</sup> YHWH not only came to his people and fought for them (v. 2-3),<sup>415</sup> but he also revealed his Torah to them (v. 4) and served as king over them (v. 5). Throughout Deuteronomy, Moses has been eager to ground his message in history (cf. Deut 1:6-4:40; 9:6-10:11).<sup>416</sup> And here that history forms the basis of Moses'

<sup>412</sup>Freedman, “The Poetic Structure of the Framework of Deuteronomy 33,” 32-34.

<sup>413</sup>Many scholars assume this “psalm” to have enjoyed an independent existence before being incorporated into the context of the blessing itself. E.g., see von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 205. While this is possible, there is no reason why Moses could not have used such a psalm to frame his own blessing.

<sup>414</sup>Though the verb *אָהַב* (“to love”) in v. 3 does not occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the notion that God loves (*אָהַב*, the more common term) his people is common in the Old Testament. In the Hebrew Scriptures, of the 203 occurrences of *אָהַב* listed in *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, twenty-seven of these describe God's love for man. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, ed. David J. A. Clines (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 1:137-42. Indeed, fourteen times YHWH is said to have demonstrated great love specifically for Israel, which motivates him both to punish and to preserve them. Such expressions of divine love are accompanied by key juxtaposed phrases that yield insight into the nature of this love. So, for instance, YHWH's freely and unconditionally given love (Hos 14:5) is connected with his keeping of an oath (Deut 7:8), his blessing and increase (Deut 7:13), honor bestowed by him (Isa 43:14), his everlasting love and his election (Jer 31:3), his adoption of Israel as a son from the beginning (Hos 11:1), and the selection of a king for Israel (Solomon in 2 Chr 2:10; 9:8). The theme of YHWH's unconditional choice is also linked with his love towards the forefathers of Israel (Deut 4:37, 10:15) and its many leaders, such as Jacob (Mal 1:2), Judah (Ps 78:68), and Solomon (2 Sam 12:24; Neh 13:26). So, YHWH could definitely be classified as a God of love in the Old Testament. But Deuteronomy is especially a book of love. Yet, YHWH's is not just any love—it is deeply devoted, forgiving, patient, covenantal commitment.

<sup>415</sup>For an explanation of the divine warrior motif in this passage, see Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 434-35.

<sup>416</sup>*Ibid.*, 433. Merrill correctly points out that an understanding of the history of a relationship is necessary for a successful covenant bond.

appeals for blessings in verses 6-25. Because the God of Jeshurun (vv. 5, 26) has acted on behalf of his people in the past, Moses prays that he will do the same for the individual tribes in the future.<sup>417</sup> In fact, their future is dependent on YHWH's proactive intervention.

With the basis of his last will and testament now established, Moses then moves to the actual blessings in verses 6-25. The narrator usually introduces the blessings with a brief statement, identifying who is being blessed, but the blessings themselves are poetic.<sup>418</sup> Each of the tribes is blessed in order of geography (as opposed to birth mothers in Gen 49),<sup>419</sup> and each blessing anticipates what the tribes will encounter once they enter the Promised Land. And it will all be positive. Whatever the needs of the tribes in their inheritance, YHWH will provide for them in abundance. As Olson writes, "The blessings given here involved down-to-earth realities in the life of the community: survival, family, security, land, fertility, vocation, government, economics, worship, and the teaching of torah."<sup>420</sup>

Several key aspects of the blessing deserve notice. First, Moses leaves out the tribe of Simeon, thus keeping the number of tribes blessed at twelve. He does this by adding the two sons of Joseph to the list of recipients.<sup>421</sup> By maintaining the number of tribes at twelve, Moses shows his intention to bless the entire nation as a unified whole.<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>417</sup>Jeshurun is a "pet name" for Israel, designating the special relationship YHWH had with his people. Cf. Deut 32:15; Isa 44:2.

<sup>418</sup>Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 318. The translation difficulties of the poem are well-known.

<sup>419</sup>*Ibid.*, 521.

<sup>420</sup>Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 161.

<sup>421</sup>Keeping the number at twelve is typical of tribal lists in the Old Testament. Cf. Gen 49:1-28; Num 1:5-15; 26:1-65. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 467. Simeon could also have been left out because of its eventual absorption into Judah.

<sup>422</sup>Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 477. The poetic frame of the blessing in vv. 2-5 and 26-29 also demonstrates "the ideal unity of the tribes." Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 318.

Second, each of the tribes receives a positive blessing—even Reuben, who obtained a decidedly negative pronouncement in Genesis 49. Thus, Moses is attempting here to intercede for benefits for all the tribes. Third, Moses focuses on the tribes of Levi and Joseph—unlike Genesis 49, which highlighted Judah and Joseph.<sup>423</sup> But this emphasis is understandable in context. Levi plays the privileged role of leading the Israelites in worship and teaching Torah—an important theme in Deuteronomy (and most recently in Deut 31). And the exorbitant gifts given to the tribes of Joseph exemplify the blessings that God would give the entire land.<sup>424</sup>

Moses' testament closes in verses 26-29 with a reiteration of many of the same themes from the poetic introduction in verses 2-5. YHWH is a divine warrior who comes to the aid of Jeshurun (v. 26). He provides a refuge and supports his people with his everlasting arms (v. 27). Because of YHWH's efforts, Israel already dwells in safety (v. 28). Indeed, the nation is blessed of God and unique among all the peoples (v. 29). With these words, Moses' final words are completed. He could not have left his people with any better encouragement. When they faced the enemies of Canaan, they had a God who would protect as a shield and win victories as a sword (v. 29).

What is the purpose of Deuteronomy 33 in the death story of Moses? As with Genesis 49, some scholars believe the chapters advance the political cause of one tribe or another. In particular, Moses' blessing seems to elevate the tribes of Joseph to the status enjoyed by Judah in Genesis 49.<sup>425</sup> But this interpretation encounters the same difficulties

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<sup>423</sup>Much is made of the lack of emphasis given to Judah, with many explaining this as demonstrating an early date to this material as opposed to Gen 49 (which supposedly reflected the time of the monarchy). But other explanations may be proffered. Merrill suggests, "It is best to understand that Moses (who, after all, composed both lists) assumed the priority of the Genesis material and its familiarity to his own and later readers, and, therefore, viewed his present composition as complementary and/or elucidative." Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 437.

<sup>424</sup>The Joseph tribes receive the dew of heaven (33:13), which would have been a great blessing in an agrarian society that depended upon such a source of water.

<sup>425</sup>Heck, "A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33," 23.

as the political interpretation of Genesis 49. Namely, one would expect an overtly political document to praise one or possibly two tribes and denigrate the rest. But here, all the tribes are treated positively—even though Judah receives just a single verse.<sup>426</sup>

Rather than political, the purpose of the blessing seems prophetic. Moses is predicting the future of his “children”—the tribes of Israel—in the same way that Jacob “blessed” his sons (the ancestors of the tribes) in Genesis 49.<sup>427</sup> Though Deuteronomy 33 is less overtly predictive than Genesis 49, Moses definitely has his eyes directed toward the future of the twelve tribes.<sup>428</sup> In fact, this prophetic tone is established in the first verse, which identifies Moses as “the man of God”—another term for prophet.<sup>429</sup> So just as the testament of Jacob, Moses’ blessing provides “an anticipatory and efficacious willing of the future of Israel.”<sup>430</sup> In this way, it functions as a “properly executed will”—that is, the blessing “intends not only to anticipate but to create Israel’s future as a gift from YHWH.”<sup>431</sup> So this blessing is not just an encouragement on the part of Moses to make his people feel good before he dies. As von Rad asserts, “The blessing by such a mighty man is more than merely an empty wish.”<sup>432</sup> It is a real and effective means of ordering his house—the entire nation of Israel.

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<sup>426</sup>Heck puts forward a good explanation for the similarities between the two testaments. He writes that the author of Deut 33 deliberately harkens back to Jacob’s blessing to portray Moses as “a patriarchal figure.” In other words, “The chapter is cast like Genesis 49 in order to connect the present circumstances [of Moses] with the promise to Jacob of a land.” Ibid.

<sup>427</sup>Craigie points out correctly that by blessing the tribes, Moses “is assuming the role of a father . . . for though the tribes were not literally his sons, he had acted as a father to them.” Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 393.

<sup>428</sup>Merrill describes the blessing as “prayerful intercession.” Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 432. But intercession from such a great man as Moses surely is the “effective prayer of righteous man” that will accomplish much for the future of Israel. Cf. Jas 5:13.

<sup>429</sup>Von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 205.

<sup>430</sup>Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 284.

<sup>431</sup>Ibid.

<sup>432</sup>Von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, 205.

**Death report of Moses (34:1-5).** As Moses finishes his testament, his farewell addresses—and his efforts at ordering his house—draw to a conclusion. His voice fades into the background as the voice of the narrator takes over.<sup>433</sup> In 34:1-5, the narrator gives an account of the death of Moses, though the actual death notice is not given until 34:5. Unique among all the death stories and reports, the story of Moses' demise has an extended and somewhat detailed account of his death. In most cases, the narrator gives limited information—so and so died, expired, or was gathered to his fathers.<sup>434</sup> The embellishment of the circumstances of Moses' death is undoubtedly for theological purposes.<sup>435</sup>

In the report, the narrator relates the fulfillment of YHWH's promise to Moses that he would see the Promised Land before his death (Deut 3:27; 4:22). Through miraculous intervention, Moses is allowed to view the entire Promised Land—that is, “the land of Gilead unto Dan, and all of Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah unto the western sea, and the Negev and the plain in the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, unto Zoar” (34:1-3; cf. Gen 15:18).<sup>436</sup> By including this account, the narrator shows YHWH is faithful to his word to Moses, just as he has been faithful to deliver that which he “swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’” (34:4). He also shows the divine favor that Moses enjoyed.

After his miraculous vision, Moses dies outside the Promised Land, literally,

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<sup>433</sup>As Polzin writes, “The words of Moses are ended; the words of the narrator now take center stage in the history.” Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 72.

<sup>434</sup>E.g., Gen 23:2a; 25:8; 49:33; 50:26a; Josh 24:29a; 1 Kgs 2:10a; 2 Kgs 20:21a; though cf. Aaron's more extended death notice in Num 20:27-28.

<sup>435</sup>In fact, YHWH takes center stage in the entire death report. As Olson writes, “After Moses ‘went up’ to Mount Nebo, Yahweh takes over the action of the verbs—showing, speaking, commanding, and burying.” Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 167.

<sup>436</sup>This vision is miraculous in that the mountains would have obstructed views of some of the areas listed. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 336. But “God enabled Moses to see” them.

“according to the mouth of YHWH” (34:5). This is a unique statement in Hebrew Scripture, but it probably refers to YHWH fulfilling his own judgment concerning Moses (32:48-52).<sup>437</sup> At the point of death, Moses’ role in the ordering of his household ceases. His fate—like that of Israel—is now in the hands of YHWH.

**Burial notice (34:6).** After the death report, the narrator immediately places a brief burial notice. The narrator notes that Moses is buried in the valley of the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor.<sup>438</sup> The intriguing aspect of the notice is the narrator’s comment that the exact location is unknown because YHWH himself buried him.<sup>439</sup> This act probably should be interpreted as a grace and demonstration of honor from God. As Tigay writes, “The severity of God’s decree banning Moses from the land is also somewhat softened by His caring act of personally burying Moses.”<sup>440</sup> In addition, the hiding of the location might also have been a gracious provision for the Israelites, keeping them from the practice of ancestor worship, which Moses himself had warned against earlier in Deuteronomy (Deut 14:1; 18:11; 26:14).<sup>441</sup>

**Declaration of length of life (34:7).** Following the burial notice, we find a

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<sup>437</sup>According to Tigay, this phrase gave rise to the Hebrew idiom, “death by a kiss,” signifying a “sudden, painless death in old age.” Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 338. Interestingly, the narrator does not mention the reason why Moses cannot enter and must only view from afar the Promised Land. Coats suggests that the narrator is intent on portraying Moses in a heroic fashion and thus does not provide an explanation. Coats, “Legendary Motifs in the Moses Death Reports,” 38-40. But the narrator has already reiterated the reason behind Moses’ exclusion from the Promised Land by including YHWH’s speech in 32:48-52. There is no reason to repeat it at this point. That the same narrator is behind 34:1-5 and the inclusion of 32:48-52 is clear from the parallels in theme, setting, and vocabulary.

<sup>438</sup>This is perhaps the general location where Moses delivered his final speeches. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 319.

<sup>439</sup>The verb is somewhat confusing, but should probably be translated actively, “He (that is, YHWH) buried him (Moses).”

<sup>440</sup>Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 336.

<sup>441</sup>Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 167. Cf. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 338.

second declaration of length of life. This statement, now from the pen of the narrator, does not indicate the beginning of the death story, as Moses' own declaration of length of life did in 31:2. Instead, it signals the end of the story.<sup>442</sup> The narrator reports that Moses died at the hoary age of 120, forty years after the Exodus.<sup>443</sup>

Unique among death stories, the story of Moses' death also includes a pronouncement on the life of Moses with the declaration of length of life. In fact, the narrator makes clear that at death, Moses had not declined physically—"his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated." Indeed, Moses surpasses even some of the patriarchs in his vitality at death. In other words, while Moses is nearly as old at death as some of the patriarchal figures, he seems quite spry physically by contrast. In fact, the vitality and clear eyes of Moses offers a subtle comparison with Isaac and Jacob, who were blind and feeble at death.<sup>444</sup>

This description also contrasts with Moses' own description of himself in Deuteronomy 31:2, when he states that he is not able to go out or come in. Coats argues that the narrator's description in verse 7 is an example of a heroic motif typical of legends.<sup>445</sup> But if the same narrator is behind the inclusion of Deuteronomy 31:2 as 34:7, then an alternate explanation is needed. Coats is correct in that the narrator is demonstrating a high view of Moses in verse 7. But the narrator mentions Moses' continued vigor not so much to extol him, though it does show Moses in a very positive light. However, Moses' vitality at death primarily demonstrates the divine causation

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<sup>442</sup>Cf. Gen 23:1; 25:7; Josh 24:29c.

<sup>443</sup>Coats states that the age "must be seen as a complete and full period." Coats, "Legendary Motifs in the Moses Death Reports," 35.

<sup>444</sup>The same verb (כָּהָה), used negatively, depicts the weakness of Isaac's sight near his own death (cf. Isa 42:4; Zech 11:17). Ibid.

<sup>445</sup>Ibid.

behind his death. It was not sickness or lack of strength that leads to Moses' demise; YHWH takes him. As Auerbach writes, "Moses died, not because of the enormous vitality of this giant was exhausted; he appeared to be almost immortal. He died a special death; the deity summoned the loved one to it. God ordered him to die, and die he did in full vigor."<sup>446</sup> In this way, Moses is like Abraham, who had vitality enough to father more children late in life (Gen 25:1-4).<sup>447</sup>

**Description of the response of the bereaved (34:8).** In response to Moses' death, the people weep (the verb, בכה) for the standard thirty days.<sup>448</sup> Compared to Jacob, the description of the people's response is brief and to the point. But the narrator more than makes up for what is lacking in the Israelites' praise of Moses in his concluding eulogy in verses 9-12.

**Pronouncement on the life of Moses (34:9-12).** The narrator had earlier given his evaluation of Moses by bestowing upon Moses the honorific title, "servant of YHWH" (עֶבֶד־יְהוָה).<sup>449</sup> But in these last four verses of Deuteronomy, the narrator provides the most detailed and glowing pronouncement on the life of the dying found in any death story in the Old Testament.<sup>450</sup> The eulogy can be divided into two sections—

<sup>446</sup>Elias Auerbach, *Moses*, trans. Robert A. Barclay and Israel O. Lehman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 170-71.

<sup>447</sup>Both Moses and Abraham had received guidance from YHWH their entire lives. YHWH had led them from far countries, and they had faithfully followed. And at death, they continued to be guided by YHWH into the next life.

<sup>448</sup>Both Moses and Aaron receive the same amount of grieving (Num 20:29). Tigay points out that thirty days of grieving is still standard Jewish practice. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 194. Cf. Deut 21:13.

<sup>449</sup>P. D. Miller, Jr., "Moses My Servant: The Deuteronomistic Portrait of Moses," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 245-55. Merrill points out that very few have earned this designation. Cf. Josh 24:29; Judg 2:8; 2 Sam 3:18; 7:5, 8; 1 Kgs 11:13; 14:8; 2 Kgs 18:12; 19:34; 21:8; Job 1:8; 42:8; Isa 20:3; 41:8-9; 42:1; 44:1; 52:13; 53:11. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 453. For an excellent discussion of Moses' role as servant theologically, see McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 478-79.

<sup>450</sup>In fact, the narrator's expansion of the formal element itself speaks as loudly as his words in praise of Moses.

verse 9 and verses 10-12. In verse 9, the narrator speaks of the categorical success of Moses' transferal of leadership to Joshua. In obedience to an earlier command (cf. Num 11:17; 27:18-21), Moses had transmitted a portion of his spirit to his successor, Joshua.<sup>451</sup> This portion "filled" (מִלֵּא) Joshua with wisdom (cf. Isa 1:13) and authority to lead in a way reminiscent of his predecessor. The gesture of the laying on of hands by Moses also ensured that the people would know that they had to obey Joshua just as they had obeyed all that "YHWH had commanded Moses." With this one verse, the narrator confirms that Moses had put this aspect of his house in order successfully.

In verses 10-12, the narrator broadens his focus from the deeds of Moses in ordering his house to the deeds of Moses throughout his life. These last three verses are an archetypal eulogy. The narrator extols Moses as a prophet who enjoyed a face to face relationship (cf. Num 12:6-8) with YHWH.<sup>452</sup> The narrator also purposefully mentions the greatest deed by Moses in his life—his leadership in the Exodus. By referring to this event, the narrator recalls the important Pentateuchal themes of land, promises, and deliverance by YHWH for his chosen nation.<sup>453</sup> Thus, with this narrative eulogy, the Pentateuch ends in an appropriate fashion.

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<sup>451</sup>Coats, "Legendary Motifs in the Moses Death Reports," 37. Coats writes, "The partitive *min* seems to me to be significant, for Joshua cannot carry all of Moses' authority, Moses' vigor and strength. Nonetheless, the explicit consequence of the transferal is that the congregation will now obey Joshua as they had obeyed Moses." Coats again argues that this statement is adding to the legend of Moses. But the emphasis seems not so much on the spirit of the legendary Moses, but on the Spirit of God who empowered the heroic figure. Moses and Joshua—just as so many other figures in the Old Testament—are able to do God's work because God's Spirit enables them. E.g., Joseph in Gen 41:37 and Bezalel in Exod 31:3. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 478.

<sup>452</sup>As Coats writes, "That kind of intimacy had not been known previously and would not be known again." Coats, "Legendary Motifs in the Moses Death Reports," 37. The face to face relationship speaks of God's election of Moses (cf. Hos 13:5; Amos 3:2) and his willingness to speak personally with Moses (Exod 33:11). Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 414.

<sup>453</sup>Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 289. Cf. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 478.

## Genre

The above form critical exegesis has already explained the genre classification of Deuteronomy 31-34. As stated above, the account does not correspond exactly to the stereotypical death story form, but the typical death story structure seems to be the driving force behind the composition of these four chapters. The genres of the individual units that comprise the death story are more difficult to identify. The genre of chapter 32 was discussed at length above. Most critical scholars view the testament of Deuteronomy 33 as a collection of disorganized tribal sayings and after-the-fact prophecies, similar and possibly even related to those in Genesis 49.<sup>454</sup> A better view is that they are in fact traditional deathbed blessings, which seems to have been an important part of the deaths of individuals in Hebrew society. Chapter 31 includes several genres and formulae known to form critics, such as encouragement and assistance formulae. And chapter 34 is best classified as a death report. But taken as a whole, these elements function and flow together well as a death story.

## Setting

The setting in life of the individual genres obviously will depend on one's identification of the genres themselves, as well as one's view of the literary character and development of Deuteronomy itself. The original setting of each of the genres is perhaps too speculative to explore here. However, the primary setting is a literary one. The speeches were selected, collected, and structured specifically to communicate within the death story form as a conclusion to the book of Deuteronomy, and thereby bringing the entire Pentateuchal narrative to a close.

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<sup>454</sup>Heck, "A History of Interpretation of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33," 16. Cf. Cross and Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, 77. Most argue that they are not original to the Pentateuchal narratives. Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 185.

## **Intention**

As will be noted below, the intention of the death story is clearly theological and also paraenetic. In this way, the death story functions in the same manner as the rest of Deuteronomy. It is meant to change the behavior of the audience and to change their perception of God.

## **Theological Conclusions**

The theological richness of Moses' death story in Deuteronomy 31-34 cannot be understated. The following will summarize some of the key theological insights gained from the form critical exegesis. We will focus on the story's portrayal and characterization of Moses, the narrator's view of YHWH, and finally, the overall theological message of the story.

**Characterization.** Initially, we may note that the narrator portrays Moses in extraordinarily positive terms—extolling his virtue, stature, and legacy. The high esteem enjoyed by Moses is most evident in the actual death account in chapter 34. There the narrator issues the longest and most positive pronouncement on the life of an individual of any of the death stories. The narrator's way of telling the entire death story in Deuteronomy 31-34 also has implications for the stature of Moses. Throughout the story, the narrator has pulled back and let the characters (principally Moses and YHWH) carry the story through speeches. This happens nowhere else. Indeed, it is almost as if the narrator does not want his words to detract from those of this towering figure.

But the most telling judgments regarding the character of Moses are communicated through the use of the death story form itself. This death account is one of the longest in the Old Testament, covering four full chapters. The majority of those chapters are spent detailing one formal stage—putting the house in order. In fact, the death story of Moses shows an individual selflessly caring for future generations in a manner unparalleled in the Old Testament. Moses ensures that each of the four roles that

he had filled for the nation continues after his death. He had been a prophet to Israel—bringing God’s message to the people and instructing the people on their covenant obligations. He had been a priest to the nation—serving as a mediator for the people before God and leading their cultic activities. He had been a kind of “king”—leading the people under the sovereign hand of YHWH out of Egypt through the wilderness. And Moses had also been a surrogate father to the nation—caring for the sons of Israel as God the Father’s representative here on earth.<sup>455</sup> Throughout chapters 31 to 33, Moses ensures that his leadership in each of these areas continues for the next generation. His commissioning of Joshua (under the direction of YHWH) as his successor in chapter 31 ensures that Israel has a new “king” and military leader. Moses’ charge to the Levites in chapter 31 makes certain that the people have priests who will lead them in cultic ceremonies and in obedience to the Torah, just as he and his brother had done. Moses’ giving of the song in chapter 32 guarantees that Israel will have a prophetic witness to the covenant in future generations. And Moses’ testament in chapter 33 shows this leader playing the fatherly role—pronouncing a prophetic blessing on his children. So, Moses is portrayed as one who put his house in order in a comprehensive and effective manner.

**The narrator’s view of YHWH.** Yet, the one who plays the central role in the ordering of Moses’ house is YHWH himself. Remarkably, the death story of Moses is the only place in Deuteronomy, God’s Torah, where YHWH’s voice is heard directly (31:14b; 31:16b-21; 31:23b; 32:49-52; 34:4b).<sup>456</sup> The narrator hereby shows that YHWH is not only sovereign over death itself; he also sovereignly cares for his nation through their bereavement of their leader. As Olson writes, “Moses has done all that he can do,

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<sup>455</sup>YHWH is portrayed as a father in Deut 1:31; 14:1; and 32:6, 19-20.

<sup>456</sup>Block, “Recovering the Voice of Moses,” 391. Cf. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 135.

and he must finally lay down his life and trust God to carry on with the future.”<sup>457</sup> It is YHWH who commissions Joshua. It is YHWH who gives the song to the people. It is YHWH who gave the Torah, which the priests and elders would continue to read and expound to the people. And it is YHWH who would ultimately lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Above and beyond the greatness of Moses, the narrator celebrates the greatness of YHWH.

**Overall theological message.** Finally, the death story makes an important contribution to the overall theological message of the book of Deuteronomy. The author’s purpose in the death story is obviously not just to extol Moses. If this were the case, he would have used straightforward prose accounts, such as those used to praise the virtues of ANE kings. Instead, his purpose for the death story is same as it been for the entire book—to encourage the nation of Israel to be faithful to YHWH and his covenant. Indeed, the narrator uses this death story at the end of the book to capture the reader’s interest in a particularly effective manner.<sup>458</sup> In particular, the death story draws attention to the speeches, song, and blessing in Deuteronomy 31-33. Of all the words spoken by Moses in his life, these orations would have been most memorable to future generations of Israelites.

In this way, future generations of Israelites would hear of the commissioning of Joshua and be inspired to follow God’s chosen leaders. They would hear of the instructions to the priests and be encouraged to keep the Torah more faithfully as a community. They would sing the song and be reminded of their covenant infidelity as a nation and YHWH’s faithfulness to forgive. They would hear the blessing and know that

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<sup>457</sup>Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 160.

<sup>458</sup>In a similar way, the Gospel authors dedicated much time and space to explaining the last deeds and speeches of Jesus during his final week before death.

YHWH had specifically chosen all the tribes as his Jeshurun. Later readers would perhaps even read of the death of Moses as a former prophet, priest, and king, and anticipate another who would fulfill those roles for Israel.

### **Exegesis of the Death Story of Joshua (Josh 23:1-24:30)**

The death story of Joshua is the first in the Former Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet, structurally and thematically, it mirrors the last death story of the Pentateuch—the death story of Moses.<sup>459</sup> But as is typical of the Former Prophets, the gaze of the author is not just backward but forward. The story of Joshua's death is told with a prophetic purpose. In this way, it parallels many other death stories and becomes a convenient medium through which the author encourages modifications in the behavior, beliefs, and attitudes of current and future generations. In particular, the embedded speeches and, in this case, an embedded account of covenant renewal (in chap. 24), carry the weight of this prophetic message.

### **Historical and Literary Context**

Much has occurred in the life of Israel since the death of Moses as recounted in Deuteronomy. By the end of the book of Joshua, the primary issue facing the people has changed from one of conquest to one of settlement. The Canaanites have been defeated (chaps. 1-12), and the land has been divided (chaps. 13-21) and debated (chap. 22). Instead of Moses, an aged Joshua now leads the people. The setting has moved from the Plains of Moab within view of the Promised Land to the land of the Israel's inheritance itself. The status of the Hebrews has changed from a wandering people to a burgeoning

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<sup>459</sup>House writes, "His account intersects with that of Moses at many points, yet he clearly shapes the implications and details of the story to the situation at hand." Paul House, "Examining the Narratives of Old Testament Narrative: An Exploration in Biblical Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 67 (2005): 235.

nation. And the promise of land is no longer a future prediction but a present reality.

Still, the principal threat to the people's well-being remains the same—their own faithlessness. In the wilderness and in Egypt, that infidelity manifested itself in murmuring because of hardship. In the Promised Land, the temptation will not stem from privation but prosperity (cf. Deut 8). They will not doubt God because of fear of the Canaanites; they will be tempted to forsake God because of their attraction to the Canaanites. The death story of Joshua represents a prophetic challenge to renounce the religion and riches of the pagan inhabitants of Palestine and to affirm and embrace a covenant relationship with YHWH.

### Form/Structure

Few passages in the Hebrew Scriptures have attracted as much attention from scholars as Joshua 23-24.<sup>460</sup> Not surprisingly, literary analyses of these two chapters have focused on the farewell speech contained in 23:2b-16 and the covenant renewal ceremony detailed in 24:1-28.<sup>461</sup> In particular, scholars have been preoccupied with the latter, which most view as a later insertion, since it seems at variance with the rest of Joshua.<sup>462</sup> What

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<sup>460</sup>For a somewhat dated, but still extensive bibliography of the most relevant materials, see Trent C. Bulter, *Joshua*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 7 (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 250-51, 258-61.

<sup>461</sup>The resources on Josh 24 are vast. See the bibliography in William Koopmans, *Joshua 24 as Poetic Narrative*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 93 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 469-88. Koopmans has also organized the various interpretations of chap. 24 into helpful categories, based on methodology (rather than chronology). His first chapter offers this history of interpretation. See pp. 1-95. Our categorization below is based on Koopmans' work.

<sup>462</sup>Thus, the majority of the studies on Josh 24 are diachronic, usually hypothesizing the extensive traditions and/or source material behind the text. C. Brekelmans, "Joshua XXIV: Its Place and Function," in *Congress Volume: Leuven 1989*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, ed. J. A. Emerton (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 1. The source critical position is classically stated in J. Wellhausen's *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957). The classic tradition critical views are set out in M. Noth, *Das Buch Josua*, Handbuch zum Alten Testament 7 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1938); and G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. T. Dicken (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966). The work of von Rad (credo) and Noth (amphictyony) on chap. 24 drew wide-ranging historical conclusions based on the ancient covenant ceremony detailed in this text. These and subsequent works were focused on the significance of Shechem as a cultic center. For a full analysis of these and other representative positions, see Koopmans, *Joshua 24 as Poetic Narrative*, 7-49. Other scholars have and still do argue that the passage parallels ANE treaty forms. For two prominent evangelical presentations of this view, see Richard Hess, *Joshua*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 6 (Downers Grove, IL:

many of these studies have recognized is the marked dissimilarities between Joshua 23 and 24. Butler outlines five key differences: (1) Joshua 23 has a temporal setting, whereas the setting in Joshua 24 is geographical (Shechem); (2) Joshua 23 focuses on the land, whereas Joshua 24 concentrates on the salvific deeds of YHWH; (3) Joshua 23 stresses obedience to Torah, whereas Joshua 24 accentuates service to YHWH; (4) Joshua 23 discourages “marriage entanglements with the peoples left in the land,” whereas Joshua 24 condemns the worship of ancestral gods; and (5) Joshua 23 takes the form of a farewell address, whereas Joshua 24 is a “ceremonial dialogue.”<sup>463</sup> The conclusions based on these differences have been predictable. As Brekelmans writes, “No wonder then that scholars have considered Josh. xxiv as an independent literary unit and have studied the chapter as such!”<sup>464</sup> Thus, very few scholars have analyzed the two chapters synchronically as a cohesive unit.

But the question remains, Why would a narrator include both embedded accounts in his story of Joshua’s death? It seems that, while the death story form may not explain the historical background and origins of the embedded accounts themselves (23:2b-16 and 24:1-28), it does explain the present state of the text. That is, Joshua 23-24 as we now have it bears all the marks of a typical death story. In order to demonstrate this, the following will establish the borders of the textual unit and then show that the material within those borders corresponds to the stereotypical death story structure.

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InterVarsity Press, 1996), 298-308; and Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament*, 89-111. Again, for an analysis of the form critical approaches, see Koopmans, *Joshua 24 as Poetic Narrative*, 49-62. More recent studies have revived the view that 24:1-28 is primarily a product of Deuteronomistic redactors. In addition, many other scholars have focused on the sundry text critical problems, as well as archaeological questions, particular those involving Shechem. Finally, some have even engaged in a structural analysis of the text. This is Koopmans’ method, as set forth in the above work, pp. 165-270.

<sup>463</sup>Butler, *Joshua*, 265-66.

<sup>464</sup>Brekelmans, “Joshua XXIV,” 2.

First, the borders of the death story are clear. In terms of subject, the final two chapters of Joshua are obviously distinct from the previous chapters, which deal with the division of the land (Josh 13-21) and the Transjordan tribal controversy (Josh 22). The death story is also separated chronologically from the events of previous chapters. The events of Joshua 23-24 occur “after many days” (23:1a).<sup>465</sup> In addition, the beginning of the death story is clearly marked by two typical formal elements—an announcement of impending death (23:1a-c) and a description of the gathering for final words (23:2a).

The concluding boundary marker for the death story is not as obvious because of atypical narrative additions concerning the burials of individuals other than Joshua (Joseph in 24:32 and Eleazar in v. 33). But whether these verses are part of the original death story or not, their existence does not preclude the death story genre from being behind the majority of the text. In fact, verses 29-31 exhibit four elements typical of conclusions to other death stories (see below).

By including characteristic formal elements at the beginning and end of the account, the narrator intentionally frames the two embedded accounts (23:2b-16; 24:1-28). This fact is reinforced by the grammatical correspondence between 23:2a and 24:1. Both serve as descriptions of the gathering for final words.<sup>466</sup> In each case, the same four groups are “called” (קרא) together for the final words of Joshua—the elders of Israel (זקני ישראל), the heads (ראשי), the judges (שפטים), and the officers (שטרים).<sup>467</sup> The

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<sup>465</sup>Butler notes that this temporal clause “clearly marks the beginning of a new narrative.” Butler, *Joshua*, 253.

<sup>466</sup>Butler also adds that the addresses themselves, though clearly different in focus, do have some parallel features. Each has an indicative (a “survey of history”) followed by an imperative (how to respond to that history). Each demands exclusive obedience to YHWH. And each describes the penalties for disobedience. He writes, “Syntax and content thus tie chaps. 23 and 24 tightly together.” *Ibid.*

<sup>467</sup>Cf. Koopmans, *Joshua 24 as Poetic Narrative*, 397-99. Koopmans argues that “Josh. 23:1-16 is composed in such a way that it combines with Josh. 24:1-28 to provide a literary transition from Joshua to Judges.” In other words, he argues that Josh 24 is a late addition to the text. *Ibid.*, 399.

similar introductions to the accounts indicate that the narrator viewed the embedded speeches as having a similar literary and formal function—to show how Joshua put his house in order.

However, the strongest evidence for the existence of a unitary death story in Joshua 23-24 is the obvious structural correspondence with other death stories. As with other stories, Joshua 23-24 begins with an announcement of impending death (23:1a-c).<sup>468</sup> Then, the death story contains two embedded elements—a farewell speech (23:2b-16) and a covenant renewal ceremony (24:2-28), each being introduced by a description of gathering for final words (23:2a; 24:1). As has been observed, these types of embedded accounts are found in most death stories. The first speech is a typical deathbed testament that contains two reiterations of the announcement of impending death (23:2c, 14a) by Joshua himself. The second account uniquely involves a dialogue between Joshua and the people. Both embedded elements serve the purpose of ordering Joshua's house. The death story then closes with a straightforward and classic death notice (24:29a, b), a declaration of length of life (24:29c), a burial notice (24:30a, b), and a pronouncement on the life of Joshua (24:31).<sup>469</sup> Finally, as noted above, chapter 24 ends with two burial notices (regarding the interment of Joseph and Eleazar). However, we do not consider these notices to be part of the original death story. Thus, Joshua 23-24 seems to contain all the formal elements and characteristics of an emblematic death story.

In total, the story contains eleven formal elements, including two embedded texts and spanning four formal stages. These are described in Table 7. The following will examine each of these elements in more detail.

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<sup>468</sup>This announcement is implied, but confirmed in comparison with other death stories.

<sup>469</sup>That these are missing from chap. 23 indicates that the accounts were purposefully joined.

Table 7. The formal structure of the death story of Joshua

Stage	Formal Element	CL	Hebrew Text	English Translation
ADS	Announcement of impending death	23:1a 23:1b 23:1c	ויהי מימים רבים אחרי אשר הניח יהוה לישראל מכל איביהם מסביב ויהושע זקן בא בימים:	After many days, when YHWH had given Israel rest from all their enemies surrounding them, and Joshua was old, advanced in years,
POS	Description of gathering for final words	23:2a	ויקרא יהושע לכל ישראל לזקניו ולראשיו ולשפטי ולשטריו	Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders and their chiefs and their judges and their officers,
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 1, with two more announcements of impending death	23:2b -16 23:2c 23:14a	אני זקנתי באתי בימים: והנה אנכי הולך היום בדרך כל הארץ	Embedded speech, detailing Joshua's valedictory address "I am old, advanced in years." "Behold, today I am going the way of all the earth, . . ."
POS	Description of gathering for final words, part 2	24:1a 24:1b 24:1c	ויאסף יהושע את כל שבטי ישראל שכמה ויקרא לזקני ישראל ולראשיו ולשפטי ולשטריו ויתיצבו לפני האלהים:	Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, and he called for the elders of Israel and for their heads and judges and officers; and they presented themselves before God.
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 2	24:2- 28		Embedded narrative, detailing the covenant renewal ceremony and dialogue
DS	Death notice	24:29a 24:29b	ויהי אחרי הדברים האלה וימת יהושע בן-נון עבר יהוה	And after these things Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of YHWH, died,
DS	Declaration of length of life	24:29c	בן-מאה ועשר שנים:	being one hundred and ten years old.
RS	Burial notice	24:30a 24:30b	ויקברו אתו בנביל נחלתו בתמנת-סרח אשר בהר אפרים מצפון להר געש:	They buried him in his inheritance in Timnath- serah, in hills of Ephraim, north of Mt. Gaash.
RS	Pronouncement on the life	24:31	ויעבר ישראל את יהוה כל ימי יהושע וכל ימי הזקנים אשר האריכו ימים אחרי יהושע ואשר ידעו את כל מעשה יהוה אשר עשה לישראל:	Israel served YHWH all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who came after Joshua, and who had known all the acts of YHWH which he had done on behalf of Israel.

CL=Clause Label    ADS=Announcement of Impending Death Stage  
 POS=Putting the House in Order Stage    DS=Death Stage    RS=Response Stage

**Announcement of impending death (23:1).** The death story begins with three clauses indicating the passage of considerable time since the division of the land in chapters 13 to 21 and the events of chapter 22: (1) “After many days”; (2) “when YHWH had given rest to Israel from all their enemies surrounding them”; and (3) “and Joshua was old, advanced in years.”<sup>470</sup> The exact length of this intermission is difficult to determine, but chronological specifics are not the concern of the narrator in including these three clauses.<sup>471</sup> Instead, his point is that a crucial period of transition in Israel’s history was about to occur. Joshua is about to die and the end of his era—the time of the conquest--was near.<sup>472</sup> Each clause clearly confirms this impression. First, the phrase “after many days” raises the issue of the age and possible mortality of Joshua, the leader of the conquest. Joshua was old already at the time of his entrance into the Promised Land, and so he does not have “many days” to spare. The next clause explains that Joshua’s role in salvation history—to lead the people in the conquest and division of the land (cf. Deut 31:7)—had been fulfilled.<sup>473</sup> He is ready to step out of the story. Finally, based on comparison with other death stories, the last clause functions as an implied announcement of impending death. In fact, this statement parallels exactly the one used of Abraham in Genesis 24:1a (cf. also 1 Kgs 1:1a).<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>470</sup>David M. Howard, Jr., *Joshua*, The New American Commentary, vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 419.

<sup>471</sup>Ibid. Howard suggests that if the division of the tribes took place when Joshua was eighty-five (if he was near in age to Caleb), then twenty-five years have passed since the time of chaps. 13-21.

<sup>472</sup>As Polzin points out, the inclusion of the farewell speeches themselves is evidence enough of Joshua’s impending doom. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 141.

<sup>473</sup>L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 248. He writes, “Joshua’s advanced age, along with the rest the land enjoys, marks the completion of his charge.”

<sup>474</sup>Cf. Josh 13:1, where the exact phrase occurs. Chap. 13 is too removed from Josh 23 to be considered part of the death story. However, the narrator’s use of the phrase in 13:1 may be deliberate. By using a phrase typical of an “announcement of impending death” element, the narrator may be giving insight into the nature of Joshua’s actions in chaps. 13-21. That is, the tribal division was a way of ordering his house. Cf. Deut 31:7, where Moses charges Joshua to accomplish this very task.

The narrator uses this flashback to the original patriarch purposefully. First, it confirms the reader's suspicion from the first two clauses that Joshua was close to death.<sup>475</sup> If Abraham was close to death when he is described in this manner, then Joshua must be as well. Second, the parallel provides a clue regarding the events to follow. In other words, the narrator is pointing out that the speech in 23:2b-16 and the dialogue in 24:1-28 will serve a similar purpose as the words that Abraham uttered in Genesis 24—the ordering of the house of the dying before death. Third, this clause raises the expectations of the reader for what is to follow. Will Joshua be as successful in providing for the next generation as Abraham was?

**Description of the gathering for final words (23:2).** The narrator follows the announcement of impending death with an introduction to the first speech of Joshua. This introduction is in the form of a description of the gathering for final words—a typical formal element in death stories.<sup>476</sup> This element depicts the dying leader calling “all Israel” to hear his farewell speech. As mentioned above, the narrator specifically lists four key groups who are invited to hear Joshua's words—elders, heads, judges, and officers.<sup>477</sup> That Joshua addresses the civic leaders indicates that these are the people who would be responsible for the ordering of the house of Israel after his death.<sup>478</sup> In Joshua's

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<sup>475</sup>Cf. with Joshua's own announcements in vv. 2c and 14a.

<sup>476</sup>This formal element should be considered part of the actual “putting the house in order” formal stage, since it is attached to the actual speech of Joshua.

<sup>477</sup>Again, this formal element serves to tie the two embedded accounts together, since both contain speeches that are given to these four key groups of leaders.

<sup>478</sup>In a family situation, such an address—as in the case of Jacob—would be delivered by a father to his sons. The reason is that the sons had the capability to order the father's house. Here, Joshua addresses the civic leaders of Israel for the same reason. Each of these groups had the authority to lead and order the house of Israel. This explains why the list excludes the common people. Interestingly, the narrator also excludes the priests from the list. Butler hypothesizes that the priests are excluded because the secular leaders are the ones who lead the nation in covenant obedience. Butler, *Joshua*, 254. Cf. Deut 29:10, where three of these groups are mentioned as representing the nation in a covenant ceremony. Hess, *Joshua*, 295. Priests might also have been excluded because Joshua never performed priestly duties, as Moses had. Thus, Joshua did not need to order this aspect of Israel's house.

stead, they would have the responsibility of leading the people in covenant obedience.

**Description of putting the house in order, part 1: Joshua's final words (23:2b-16).** After the description of the gathering for final words, the narrator begins Joshua's farewell speech. Joshua's first words to the civic leaders reiterate the announcement of impending death (23:2c) from verse 1. This repetition functions rhetorically to increase the urgency of the speech to follow by solidifying in the mind of the audience the certainty of Joshua's death. Indeed, the death is all the more certain when the words are in the mouth of the dying.<sup>479</sup>

The address following this announcement represents a farewell speech typical of those found in other death stories. However, unlike some of these other accounts (cf. Gen 49, Deut 33), Joshua 23 is not a "blessing." Instead, Joshua's words are final admonitions. In this way, Joshua's speech recalls the major speeches of Deuteronomy (e.g., chaps. 1-4, 5-26, 28) and perhaps David's instructions in 1 Kings 2:1-9.<sup>480</sup> But the hortatory style is particularly Mosaic—drawing as Moses did in Deuteronomy on historical facts to make prophetic admonitions.<sup>481</sup> Both Moses and Joshua review YHWH's past faithfulness to the people and then call for the Israelites to choose a life of

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<sup>479</sup>E.g., Gen 48:21b; 49:29b, where Jacob announces his own death; and 1 Kgs 2:2a, where David announces his own death. There are also several occasions when YHWH or his representatives announce death, as opposed to the narrator. Cf. Num 20:23a, 26b, c, where YHWH announces Aaron's death; Deut 31:14a, b; 16a, b, where YHWH announces Moses' death; and 2 Kgs 20:1, where Isaiah announces Hezekiah's impending demise.

<sup>480</sup>As Koopmans has effectively demonstrated, Josh 23 has a poetic character like these other blessings. William Koopmans, "The Poetic Prose of Joshua 23," in *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, ed. W. van der Meer and J. C. de Moor, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 74 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1988), 83-118. Koopmans labels Josh 23 and 24 "narrative poetry." Cf. idem, "The Testament of David in 1 Kings II 1-10," 431. Nelson argues that 23:2b-16 is a paraenetic speech "composed along the lines of a farewell testament, correlating Joshua with both Moses (Deut. 31:1-8, 24-29) and royalty (1 Kings 2:1-9)." Richard Nelson, *Joshua*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 255.

<sup>481</sup>Howard, *Joshua*, 416.

covenant obedience.<sup>482</sup>

The overall structure of the poem is governed by the two announcements of impending death—in verses 2c and 14a. Both reminders from Joshua regarding his imminent demise introduce separate sections of the speech—verses 3-13 and 14b-16.<sup>483</sup> The initial section moves back and forth between two indicative statements (vv. 3-5, 9-10) and two imperative exhortations (vv. 6-8, 11-13). Each indicative serves as the basis for the subsequent exhortation.<sup>484</sup> The concluding section (vv. 14b-16) contains only one indicative statement, followed by several rather ominous prophetic warnings.<sup>485</sup> Thus, the tone and rhetoric of the speech grow more severe as it draws to a close, climaxing in the final two verses.<sup>486</sup>

Joshua's first indicative statement reminds the people that YHWH has fought for them in the past and will continue to wage war against the enemies of Israel, driving out the nations before them and then giving the land to the Hebrews as their inheritance (vv. 3-5). The exhortation to the people based on this declaration is to "be strong."<sup>487</sup> However, the concern is not so much for Israel to be tough in terms of military doggedness; instead, the admonition regards the spiritual resolve of the budding nation.

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<sup>482</sup>As Hess writes, "All of these occasions [i.e., the farewell addresses in the Old Testament] allow the leader to describe the future of Israel. Only in the cases of Moses and Joshua is there a choice as to what that fate will be." Hess, *Joshua*, 294.

<sup>483</sup>Nelson, *Joshua*, 255.

<sup>484</sup>Thus, the historical background will serve as a kind of text for Joshua's farewell sermon.

<sup>485</sup>These two verses are very reminiscent of the "Song of Moses" in Deut 32. Polzin rightly identifies this passage as "a harsh prophecy of the future that awaits Israel." Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 141.

<sup>486</sup>Nelson, *Joshua*, 256.

<sup>487</sup>This recalls the similar admonition given to Joshua by YHWH earlier in the book. See Josh 1:6, 7, 9, 18; cf. 10:25. Hawk writes, "By evoking the themes of YHWH's speech to Joshua, now presented as Joshua's words to Israel, the address functions as a hinge between Israel's past under Joshua and its future without him. The promises and admonitions made initially to Joshua are now extended to the entire nation." Hawk, *Joshua*, 248.

YHWH's victories will create a circumstance for the Israelites—being in the land of the pagan Canaanites—that will require spiritual discipline. The key to this discipline will be adherence to the Torah (v. 5).

The second indicative statement reiterates the message from the first—that YHWH has been faithful to his promise to drive out the nations and to fight for Israel (vv. 9-10). Again the proper response to this statement of fact is spiritual in nature. The desired reaction this time is to be careful to “love” (אהב) YHWH—which in the Old Testament is demonstrated in covenant obedience and faithfulness (v. 11).<sup>488</sup> However, the corollary to this admonition is that, if the Israelites do not “love” YHWH and instead “love” and intermarry with the inhabitants of the land (cf. Deut 7:3), then YHWH will send the covenant curses upon them. In particular, the people will “perish” from the land of their inheritance—perhaps the most terrible and telling of all the covenant curses (Lev 26:31-35; Deut 28:63).

The final admonition (vv. 14b-16) begins with a second announcement of impending death from the mouth of Joshua (v. 14a). He states that he is “going the way of all the earth”—the same phrase David uses to introduce his speech to Solomon in 1 Kings 2:2.<sup>485</sup> Following this announcement, Joshua provides another indicative statement

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<sup>488</sup>In the Old Testament, love (אהב) is clearly connected with keeping YHWH's commandments (Exod 20:6; Deut 5:10; 7:9; 11:1; Neh 1:5; Dan 9:4), with service to YHWH (Deut 10:12; 11:3; Ps 69:36), and with walking in his ways and clinging to him (Deut 11:22; 19:9; 30:16, 20). Thus, the unequivocal implication here is that love is intimately tied to covenant obedience. To love means to serve and minister to God (Isa 56:6), observe his commandments, and follow his selected path—that is, his covenant. Such deeds should not be taken lightly, but one should strive after these goals with all one's heart, soul, and might (Deut 6:5; 10:12; Josh 22:5). The words utilized here express the complete and total obedience and love required. Thus, far from any absolute legalism or external observance of the Torah, this love for God must engage one's entire being. Indeed, the prophets spoke against the outward and superficial expressions of obedience (cf. Isa 1:10-15; Ezek 33:10-20; Hos 6:6) that people had substituted for genuine covenantal piety. The subsequent promises from YHWH in response to proper “love” include his continued lovingkindness and covenantal grace (Exod 20:6; Deut 5:10; 7:9; Neh 1:5; Ps 119:132; Dan 9:4), his gift of the Promised Land (Deut 11:13; Ps 63:36), his protection (Ps 145:20), and his guarantees of victory and blessing in the Promised Land (Deut 11:22; 19:9). These blessings flow to the thousandth generation (Deut 7:9) and to thousands (Exod 20:6; Deut 5:10) whom God deems as “loving” him.

<sup>489</sup>These are the only two occurrences of this idiom in the Hebrew Scriptures. Howard, *Joshua*, 424.

regarding the faithfulness of YHWH—that none of the good promises of God had failed (v. 14c).<sup>490</sup> But this time, the exhortation stemming from this statement of fact is not an imperative, but a warning.<sup>491</sup> The people should know that just as YHWH is faithful to his covenant for their good, he is also faithful to the covenant curses as well (vv. 15-16). With this rather unpromising promise, Joshua ends his speech.

The key to understanding this speech is its role as a farewell address and its purpose of putting the house of Israel in order before Joshua's death. Like Moses before him, Joshua knew that the most important task to complete before death was to offer one last exhortation to the Israelites to remain faithful to YHWH. The importance of these instructions become evident in light of the destructive "Canaanization" that occurred only several decades later in the book of Judges.<sup>492</sup> Of course, with both the indicative statements and the imperative exhortations, Joshua is not telling the people things they do not already know. In fact, most of the speech is merely reiterating themes expressed throughout the book.<sup>493</sup> But more than any other person since Moses, Joshua had seen the capacity of the Hebrew people to forget YHWH, his Torah, and his salvific work.<sup>494</sup> He knew that the people's future faithfulness to YHWH was dependent on remembering the past actions of YHWH on their behalf. To remind the Israelites of YHWH's lovingkindness was thus Joshua's primary goal in this farewell speech.

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<sup>490</sup>Cf. the narrator's own statement of this fact in Josh 21:45.

<sup>491</sup>The imperative apparently would be implied.

<sup>492</sup>Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 57-59. Cf. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 141

<sup>493</sup>As House has pointed out, the speech draws heavily from earlier material from the book and from Deuteronomy. He writes, "Because God has fought for Israel (23:1-5; cf. chs. 1-12), which has brought to pass all Yahweh's promises (23:14; cf. 1:1-18), the people must obey 'the book of the law of Moses' (23:6; cf. 1:1-9) by rejecting other gods and eschewing marriage to their adherents (23:7-13; cf. Dt 6:13-15). Failure to obey will result in loss of land (23:16; cf. Dt 4:25-26, 28:15-68)." Paul House, "The God Who Gives Rest in the Land: Joshua," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 3 (1998): 29.

<sup>494</sup>House writes, "He knows what can happen in the future, for he has seen the past." House, "Examining the Narratives of Old Testament Narrative," 236.

**Description of the gathering for final words, part 2 (24:1).** Interestingly, after the initial speech in chapter 23, the narrator never has Joshua dismiss the people.<sup>495</sup> However, they are gathered again for another speech—this time at Shechem, a significant location associated several times in Deuteronomy and Joshua with the theme of covenant.<sup>496</sup> The same four groups are gathered for this speech as for the previous one in chapter 23, though this speech also addresses “all the tribes of Israel.” The inclusion of all the people in the covenant renewal ceremony is theologically significant. Though the narrator highlights the responsibilities of the elders, heads, judges, and officers, he wants the reader to understand that “all the tribes of Israel” still needed to accept the covenant obligations (as in Exod 19 and 24). Another difference between this description of the gathering for final words and the one in chapter 23 is the narrator’s addition that the people “presented themselves before God.” Based on previous occurrences of the phrase, Hess points out two important implications of its use here: (1) as in Exodus 19:17, the phrase indicates that a covenant ceremony was about to occur; and (2) as in Deuteronomy 31:14, the phrase portends a change of leadership—Joshua was about to step down.<sup>497</sup>

**Description of putting the house in order, part 2: Joshua’s final dialogue with the people (24:2-28).** After the narrator’s introduction, another set of final words is embedded into the death story. This time the words are in the form of a dialogue—a

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<sup>495</sup>Nor does the narrator offer another announcement of impending death. This seemingly renewed vitality of Joshua has caused some to view this chapter as a later insertion. Cf. Brekelmans, “Joshua XXIV,” 1. But for the narrator’s part, the death has already been announced in 23:1; the reader does not need a repetition of the announcement in order to know Joshua was dying. In addition, Joshua’s being close to death does not mean that he has lost vitality. Both Moses and Abraham are described as vigorous even at death.

<sup>496</sup>See Deut 11:29-32; 27:1-26; Josh 8:30-35. Also cf. Judg 2:1-5; 6:8-10; 10:10-16; 1 Sam 7:3-4; 10:17-25.

<sup>497</sup>Hess, *Joshua*, 300.

series of speeches/exhortations by Joshua and of responses by the people. In some ways, the form of the speech mirrors ANE treaty forms, but one must remember that the account is merely a narrative reporting a covenant ceremony, not the treaty itself.<sup>498</sup> Still, the treaty structure helps in understanding some of the elements and topics found in the speech.

The overall account is framed with a narrative introduction (the gathering in v. 1) and conclusion (the dismissal in v. 28).<sup>499</sup> However, the narrator moves quickly to report a speech on the part of Joshua—a speech that is actually the reported words of YHWH himself (vv. 2-13). This initial address is overtly positive,<sup>500</sup> and presents a recounting of salvation history unrivaled in the Scriptures to this point.<sup>501</sup> Such a review of the history of a relationship is typical of suzerain-vassal texts, where the lord would list his past blessings to the servants. In this case, YHWH begins his review by going all the way back to Terah and the election of Terah's son Abraham (vv. 2-3). For the first time in the Scriptures, the patriarchs are here identified as having served (עבד) other gods before their election by YHWH (v. 2d)—an important *Leitmotif* for the remainder of the speech.<sup>502</sup> So Terah and his paganism represent the starting point for Israel. The implication is that they can always choose to go back to that type of existence “beyond the Euphrates.” Or they can decide today to serve (עבד) YHWH as Abraham and Joshua

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<sup>498</sup>See the discussion in the “Genre” section below.

<sup>499</sup>For a discussion of the colometric and poetic structure of this account, see the detailed treatment in Koopmans, *Joshua 24 as Poetic Narrative*, 165-270. In addition, Koopmans argues for the literary unity of vv. 1-28, based on the fact that it is a carefully structured poetic narrative.

<sup>500</sup>Polzin points out a seeming discrepancy in focus between the speech of YHWH (vv. 2-13) and dialogue between Joshua and the people (vv. 15-24). The first speech is optimistic, with no mention of legal obligations or retributive justice, whereas retributive implications pepper the dialogue. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 141-42.

<sup>501</sup>Brekelmans writes, “Up to this point, we do not find such detailed surveys of salvation history either in the Pentateuch or in Joshua.” Brekelmans, “Joshua XXIV,” 5.

<sup>502</sup>House, “Examining the Narratives of Old Testament Narrative,” 236.

had done.<sup>503</sup>

The remainder of the initial speech jumps from one event to the other, dealing with key moments in salvation history, such as the birth of Isaac and the multiplication of Abraham's descendents (v. 3), the births of Jacob and Esau (v. 4), the deliverance of the people from Egypt through the plagues (v. 5) and through the crossing of the sea (vv. 6-7), the defeat of the Transjordanian nations (vv. 8-10), the victory over the city of Jericho and the two kings of the Amorites (vv. 11-12), and the finally the gift of the land (v. 13). Some have pointed out the selective nature of the speech, which leaves out significant events such as the Mosaic covenant.<sup>504</sup> However, Joshua's intent is not to be exhaustive, but to make a point by focusing on the salvific (rather than revelatory) actions of YHWH. Joshua's question to the people is: In remembering YHWH's unmerited favor in salvation and his gift of the land, will you worship him rather than the false gods of Mesopotamia?<sup>505</sup>

Joshua's concern to exact a response from the people is seen immediately in verse 14 with the words, "Now, therefore." Based on the review of salvation history in verses 2-13, Joshua presses the people to act—recalling the indicative/imperative pattern of Joshua 23.<sup>506</sup> Joshua asks for three specific actions by the people: fear YHWH, serve him, and reject the gods of their ancestors across the river (vv. 14-15).<sup>507</sup> In response to

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<sup>503</sup>House explains, 'In effect, Joshua has shaped this narrative of Israel's past as a journey from a foreign land to a land of promise by the descendants of persons who worshiped other gods. Just as Abram made that journey from idolatry to faith in one God so Israel must make the same journey at this point in time. Israel's future depends on the acceptance of this journey as their own.' Ibid.

<sup>504</sup>E.g., Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 142.

<sup>505</sup>Brekelmans, "Joshua XXIV," 2. Cf. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 143.

<sup>506</sup>One sees the fact that covenant renewal and relationship are always based on the previous actions on the part of the divine Suzerain.

<sup>507</sup>House, "Examining the Narratives of Old Testament Narrative," 236. The response desired recalls the covenant ceremony in Exod 24.

this charge and in acknowledgement of YHWH's prior salvific deeds of deliverance (vv. 17-18), the people declare three times (vv. 18, 21, 24) their commitment to serving (עבד) and being vassals of YHWH to the exclusion of the gods of the nations. They assent to the charge despite Joshua's doubts (v. 19) and warnings (v. 20) about the people's ability to serve YHWH. In fact, they will be witnesses against themselves (v. 22) in the covenant relationship—an ominous commitment, considering the future history of Israel.

Finally, in verses 25-28, the covenant is “cut” (v. 25; lit., ratified or sealed), and the significance of the preceding dialogue is revealed.<sup>508</sup> The people had renewed their commitment to their relationship with YHWH in preparation for living in the Promised Land. The words of the covenant and the people's commitment to it are then written in the book of the Torah of God (v. 26). And to conclude the ceremony, Joshua erects a standing stone as a permanent witness to everything that has occurred in the ceremony (vv. 26-27). As a final act, Joshua sends the people away to their inheritance with the knowledge of their covenant commitment at the forefront of their minds (v. 28).

The purpose of this speech has been disputed, but it is illumined by an examination of the speech's place in the literary context of Joshua and its role as a part of the death story itself.<sup>509</sup> The narrator included this account of covenant renewal in the death story of Joshua because he (and Joshua) deemed covenant commitment to be an absolute necessity for survival in the Promised Land. In order for the Israelites to maintain an ordered house in the land, they needed to have a constant reminder of their obligations and pledges to YHWH. As House writes, “Covenant fidelity to the only God, the one who delivered their ancestors from idolatry and slavery remains the most vital

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<sup>508</sup>Here, the narrator refers to “the covenant” for the first time in the chapter. Howard, *Joshua*, 439.

<sup>509</sup>Brekelmans writes that the question of the literary placement of Josh 24 is a question that has been largely ignored among scholars. Brekelmans, “Joshua XXIV,” 4.

issue in their lives.”<sup>510</sup> So, as with Joshua’s speech in chapter 23, this account of covenant renewal is not just an amusing history lecture.<sup>511</sup> The reported words are prophetic; they are meant to change behavior—“to bring Israel to a decision.”<sup>512</sup>

However, as with Moses’ farewell speeches, the words of Joshua have an abiding effect on new readers/hearers. The narrative itself encourages future Israelites to make the same decision that the present Israelites make in the chapter. As House states, “The story continues to be told; it continues to be written; it continues to be applied to new audiences.”<sup>513</sup> This purpose is witnessed particularly in the three-fold repetition of the Israelites’ commitment, which, as Nelson writes, “impels the reader to go along with assembled Israel and to concur with the text’s agenda.”<sup>514</sup>

**Death notice (24:29a, b).** Like his predecessor Moses, as soon as Joshua’s words are ended, he dies.<sup>515</sup> The narrator introduces the death notice with a generic temporal clause—“after these things.” But again, the duration of time is not important to the narrator; his concern is the sequence of events. After Joshua secures the order of his house (the nation) by charging the people, leading them in covenant renewal, and sending

<sup>510</sup>House, “Examining the Narratives of Old Testament Narrative,” 236.

<sup>511</sup>As Brekelmans writes, “The chapter not only looks back at all that precedes, but at the very crossroads it sets out what Israel has to do in the future.” Brekelmans, “Joshua XXIV,” 7.

<sup>512</sup>Ibid. The prophetic nature of 24:1-28 is clearly indicated from the start. In v. 1, Joshua begins his address with the traditional prophetic phrase, “Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel.” Cf. Josh 7:13.

<sup>513</sup>House, “Examining the Narratives of Old Testament Narrative,” 237. Brekelmans cites a dissertation by Kreuzer that demonstrates the difference between creeds used as confessions of faith and creeds that inspire changes of behavior. Brekelmans, “Joshua XXIV,” 2. Cf. S. Kreuzer, *Die Frühgeschichte Israels in Bekenntnis und Verkündigung des Alten Testaments*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 178 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 183-213.

<sup>514</sup>Nelson, *Joshua*, 268.

<sup>515</sup>Compared to Moses, the description of Joshua’s death is brief. But this says less about Joshua and more about the narrator’s high opinion of Moses in Deut 34.

them to their inheritance, the one act that remains is to die. The notice itself is typically brief; Joshua's death is described with the usual verb, "to die" (מוֹת). The only extra details involve the identification of Joshua as the "son of Nun" and "the servant of YHWH." Implicit in this second designation is an evaluation of Joshua. This honorific title was given earlier to Moses at his death in Deuteronomy 34 and in the first chapter of the book of Joshua.<sup>516</sup> So at death, Joshua finally achieves the status enjoyed by his esteemed predecessor. Formerly in the book, Joshua was only an aide and minister to Moses (1:1).

**Declaration of length of life (24:29c).** A declaration of length of life accompanies the death notice, and it is typically direct. The narrator states that Joshua dies at age 110. Like other death stories, the element functions to make some evaluations on the life of the dying. Some have argued that the declaration is somewhat negative—comparing Joshua to Moses, who died at a more hoary age of 120.<sup>517</sup> However, the length of years should probably be taken more positively. As Nelson writes, Joshua represents the "last of those foundational figures whose piety and significance are symbolized by extraordinary life spans."<sup>518</sup> In fact, this is the same age at which Joseph, the hero of Genesis 37-50, dies.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>516</sup>Cf. Deut 34:5. Moses is called the "servant of YHWH" many times in the book of Joshua. Cf. 1:1, 2, 7, 13, 15; 8:31, 33; 9:24; 11:12, 15; 12:6; 13:8; 14:7; 18:7; 22:2, 4, 5. As noted in the analysis on Deut 34:5, very few people have earned this designation. Cf. Judg 2:8; 2 Sam 3:18; 7:5, 8; 1 Kgs 11:13; 14:8; 2 Kgs 18:12; 19:34; 21:8; Job 1:8; 42:8; Isa 20:3; 41:8-9; 42:1; 44:1; 52:13; 53:11. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 453. See also Miller, "Moses My Servant," 245-55, McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 478-79.

<sup>517</sup>Butler, *Joshua*, 283. But there is only ten years difference.

<sup>518</sup>Nelson, *Joshua*, 279

<sup>519</sup>The age for Joseph was interpreted as positive, as the Egyptians considered 110 to be an ideal lifespan. The connection with Joseph may be even more purposeful on the part of the narrator. He may be indicating that the events of Joseph's life that led God's people away from the Promised Land are now coming to a close with the return to the Promised Land. In fact, Joshua was the only Israelite remaining who had a connection with Egypt. In addition, Hess notes that the verse functions to anticipate the mention of Joseph in v. 32. Hess, *Joshua*, 310.

**Burial notice (24:30).** Two formal elements comprise the response stage—the burial notice and a pronouncement on the life of Joshua. Like the death notice, the burial notice is short, providing only information on the action taken (“they buried” from the Hebrew verb, קבר)<sup>520</sup> and the location of the burial (in the territory of Joshua’s inheritance in Timnath-serah, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, on the north of Mount Gaash, cf. Josh 19:50). While the notice may seem a formality by the narrator, it plays an important role in the death story and in the book of Joshua as a whole.<sup>521</sup> With the burial of Joshua in his inheritance in his own territory, the territorial division is now complete.<sup>522</sup> Joshua has indeed found the rest promised to the nation of Israel. His task in apportioning the land is complete.

**Pronouncement on the life (24:31).** Absent from the narrator’s response to Joshua’s death is any mention of mourning, as in the story of Moses’ death. But the narrator makes up for this omission with a glowing pronouncement on the life of Joshua. Joshua’s primary concern at death had been for the Israelites to “serve” YHWH upon his passing. And the narrator reports that Joshua was an unquestioned success in accomplishing this goal—at least as it concerns the immediate generation. But the narrator’s statement also leaves open to question what will happen with future generations.

The burial traditions of verses 32-33 are separate from the death story form and may have been added by a later editor. However, they do serve a purpose. As Nelson

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<sup>520</sup>This verb is the most typical for this formal element, occurring in Gen 23:19; 25:9-10; 50:13; Deut 34:6; and 1 Kgs 2:10. Cf. Gen 35:29b; Judg 8:32; 16:31; 1 Sam 25:1; 1 Kgs 11:43; 2 Kgs 13:20.

<sup>521</sup>As is often the case, the burial location itself makes a theological statement. For instance, in the death stories of Sarah, Abraham, and Jacob, the burial location of Machpelah symbolized their permanent stake in the Promised Land.

<sup>522</sup>Hess, *Joshua*, 310.

writes, the verses “extend the horizon of canonical associations back to YHWH’s promises to the patriarchs in the Pentateuch and to priestly concerns,” and thus “they are not alien to the book’s purpose and spirit.”<sup>523</sup>

## Genre

As argued above, the overall structure of Joshua 23-24 seems to be governed by the death story genre. However, greater debate exists over the genres of the embedded accounts. Many have maintained that the speech in Joshua 23 is based on the treaty form.<sup>524</sup> However, Koopmans has argued convincingly that the poetic structure of Joshua 23 does not allow for such a treaty parallel.<sup>525</sup> Instead, the genre of the chapter is more appropriately labeled an *Abschiedspredigt*—a “farewell sermon.”<sup>526</sup> The genre of chapter 24 is more difficult to discern. Similar to chapter 23, the most popular form critical designation is a treaty document.<sup>527</sup> Though some parallels are obvious, chapter 24 lacks some of the typical formal elements of a treaty, such as an oath, stipulations, and blessings and cursings.<sup>528</sup> Most importantly, Joshua 24 is merely a report of a covenant ceremony and not a treaty text.<sup>529</sup> Howard offers a mediating position: “Joshua 24 is best

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<sup>523</sup>Nelson, *Joshua*, 279. The verses are also united with Josh 23-24 thematically. Hawk, *Joshua*, 279.

<sup>524</sup>E.g., J. A. Thompson, *The Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1964), 31; M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 55.

<sup>525</sup>Koopmans, “The Poetic Prose of Joshua 23,” 117.

<sup>526</sup>*Ibid.*, 117-18.

<sup>527</sup>The comparison was originally made by Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” 50-76. Cf. Hess, *Joshua*, 300; Howard, *Joshua*, 426-28; K. A. Kitchen, “The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21 (1995): 52-56. Nelson is probably correct that “theorizing about this chapter has tended to outstrip the available evidence.” Nelson, *Joshua*, 266.

<sup>528</sup>Nelson, *Joshua*, 266. Cf. also Koopmans, *Joshua 24 as Poetic Narrative*, 152-54.

<sup>529</sup>Nelson, *Joshua*, 267. Cf. Polzin, who labels it a “liturgical narrative.” Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 141.

understood against the backdrop of the covenant treaty forms but with an eye to the differences as well as the similarities.<sup>530</sup>

### **Setting**

As with other death stories, the primary and current setting of the various elements is literary. Indeed, the farewell speech of chapter 23, the report of the covenant renewal in chapter 24, and the death report at the end of chapter 24 probably all have independent origins. And the original *Sitz im Leben* for each account is uncertain. However, as the text is currently constructed, they each serve a purpose within the death story structure as formal elements.

### **Intention**

Also mirroring other death stories, the intention of the story of Joshua's death is theological. In particular, as illustrated in the two embedded accounts, the purpose is prophetic—to encourage the people's commitment to the God who has acted in past history on behalf of them.

### **Theological Conclusions**

The following will summarize a few theological insights arising from the form critical exegesis above. The focus will be on how the death story characterizes Joshua and on how the account functions within the canon.

**Characterization of Joshua.** First, the death story functions to characterize Joshua as a Moses-type figure. Like Moses, Joshua's life ends with an inspiring and prophetic farewell speech to the people.<sup>531</sup> Like Moses, he leads the people in a covenant

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<sup>530</sup>Howard, *Joshua*, 428.

<sup>531</sup>As Howard notes, "The fact that Joshua gave such speeches to the nation places him on a level with Moses as God's anointed leader over the nation." *Ibid.*, 416.

renewal ceremony. Like Moses, he is called a “servant of YHWH.” Like Moses, his life exceeds 100 years. And like Moses, Joshua dies having completed the mission that YHWH had appointed to him—in Joshua’s case, the division of the land. So in general, the death story portrays Joshua in a positive light.

However, a comparison of the death stories of Moses and Joshua reveals a key difference between the two leaders. One action that was strategic to Moses’ end-of-life efforts is not mentioned in the death story of Joshua—the appointment of a specific person to succeed him. Based on comparison with other death stories, this perhaps should have been one of the actions taken by Joshua. Abraham, Jacob, Aaron, Moses, and David all name successors.

But in Joshua’s case, the question of who would continue to lead the people in occupying the land is left unanswered (cf. Judg 1:1). In addition, there is doubt as to who would continue to encourage the people’s covenant faithfulness to God in a land of prosperity and paganism. Would it be the four groups of leaders whom Joshua addresses in his final speeches? If so, did he train these men in what they were supposed to do? These questions remain unanswered as the book of Joshua ends and the period of the judges begins.

The book of Judges tells of the disastrous history of the nation without the guidance of Moses and Joshua. While the leaders surviving Joshua remained true to their commitments to YHWH made in Joshua 24 (Judg 2:6-7), the subsequent generation failed miserably—committing spiritual adultery with the Baals (Judg 2:10-13). Might this falling away have been averted if Joshua had appointed a specific successor? Perhaps not. The Israelites had proved themselves perfectly capable of rebelling, even with great leaders like Moses and Joshua. But knowing the rebellious nature of the people (as revealed in chap. 24), should Joshua have not appointed a visible mediator, guide, and covenant leader?

Why did Joshua not appoint a specific man to succeed him? Probably Joshua

hoped that the people would consider YHWH as their divine king—making Israel a true theocracy.<sup>532</sup> This is an admirable desire. If this was the case, Joshua should not be judged harshly for his oversight.<sup>533</sup> More than likely, the author is not using this omission from the death story to indict Joshua. Instead, by not showing Joshua putting this aspect of his house in order, the author is perhaps merely communicating a degree of uncertainty about the future of Israel. The people had proved themselves unfaithful with a visible leader like Moses constantly caring for them. Could the now leaderless nation be expected to follow a God who they could not see?

**Joshua's death story as a "canonical pause."** Second, the death story demonstrates how an author can use a death story in a larger narrative complex. The story of Joshua's death functions as a transition—concluding the narratives from the Pentateuch and Joshua 1-22,<sup>534</sup> but also introducing the remainder of the history of Israel as found in the Former Prophets. The author uses this "canonical pause" to reflect on many of the events that led up to Israel's possession of the Promised Land. Indeed, a major purpose behind the inclusion of the speeches in Joshua 23-24 is to remind the reader of YHWH's past faithfulness to his people and his promises.

But as a transitional element, the story also looks forward. The indicative/imperative pattern of the speeches communicates clearly that the people cannot dwell in the past. Israel's work in occupying the land is not yet complete,<sup>535</sup> and internal and

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<sup>532</sup>This seems to be the indication in Judg 1:1, which describes the people as inquiring of YHWH who would go up for them. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 86.

<sup>533</sup>Indeed, Joshua had succeeded in his primary role—to divide the land. *Ibid.*

<sup>534</sup>The burial of Joshua—who was the last survivor from the Egyptian sojourn—serves as a fitting conclusion to this period in Israel's history. Joseph's burial only reaffirms this notion that a changing of eras is occurring.

<sup>535</sup>Hawk writes, "This sense of incompleteness hints that the story does not end here." Hawk, *Joshua*, 280.

external threats still exist that may imperil the success of the mission.<sup>536</sup> To succeed, the people must remain faithful to the covenant. But the speeches also portend problems for the Israelites. Joshua's reservations regarding the people's future faithfulness seems to indicate that the people would soon fall back to their old ways. Butler correctly observes that the speeches create an "arc of tension" that culminates in the fulfillment of the covenant curses in the exile of God's people. He writes, "It foreshadows the remainder of the history of Israel, placing that history under the dark shadow of curse from its very inception."<sup>537</sup>

### Exegesis of the Death Story of David (1 Kgs 1:1-2:12)

The Old Testament presents no character more conflicted or complicated than David, Israel's anointed king and the man after God's own heart. Romanticized and revered by both Jewish and Christian tradition, David has won acclaim as sovereign and soldier, psalmist and sage, meek shepherd and messianic forerunner. However, in recent years, several scholars have revisited and revised these positive appraisals, yielding a more critical picture of the king.<sup>538</sup> Some of these recent biographies have depicted David as a typical ANE "tyrant," who was only later rendered heroic and unblemished by scriptural apologists.<sup>539</sup> The biblical representation of David is not to be read as a true

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<sup>536</sup>In fact, the peoples of the land are perhaps less of a menace than Israel's own lack of faithfulness.

<sup>537</sup>Butler, *Joshua*, 253. Cf. L. Peritt, *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament*, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 36 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969), 19-22.

<sup>538</sup>In particular, see the important works of Bruce Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); and Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Unlike those of the minimalist camp, these scholars see a literal and real David. But in order to reach this real David, readers must peel away the apologetic layers. For instance, Halpern presents David from the point of view of his apologists and of his enemies, and then merges these. In other words, he believes that the real Davidic character is an amalgamation of these two portrayals.

<sup>539</sup>McKenzie, *King David*, 188.

historical picture, but a “distorted” one.<sup>540</sup>

But a closer look at the Scriptures—particularly the accounts found in the Former Prophets—places the real David somewhere in between. The books of Samuel and Kings honestly reveal David’s flaws, and even present these imperfections as a foretaste of future royal (mis)behavior.<sup>541</sup> Still, the biblical authors believe David to be God’s anointed, who had been anticipated since Israel’s beginnings (Deut 17:14-20). They understand him to be the nation’s covenantal representative, dynastic head, and the symbol of her messianic hope. These facts alone set him apart as someone special in history and tradition. So the character of David is complex. But it is perhaps the account of his death in 1 Kings 1:1-2:12 that shows the king at his best and worst. Indeed, the author of the account of David’s demise seems intent on characterizing the king as shrewd politician, pious theologian, and even impotent and deteriorating potentate.

### **Historical and Literary Context**

Historically, 1 Kings 1:1-2:12 describes one of the most crucial times in the life of Israel. The king was dying, and questions abounded. Would the prosperity and triumphs of the outgoing administration continue in the new? Would the excesses abate, or would they persist and even increase? Would new threats to the nation arise after David “lay with his fathers”? Such apprehension is not a surprise. Indeed, royal deaths and successions in the ancient Near East normally produced such anxiety among the populace.<sup>542</sup> But the impending death in 1 Kings 1:1-2:12 involved not just any king; it

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<sup>540</sup>Ibid., 186. Or as Halpern writes, “In contrast, the biblical version [of David’s life], in the books of Samuel, presents a man who never did exist, a ruler altogether too good to be true.” Halpern, *David’s Secret Demons*, xvi. Our purpose is not to argue for or against apologetic interpretations; instead, the following will discern what a form critical exegesis of the death story of David says about the king.

<sup>541</sup>An “apology” should hide these flaws, but that does not happen in Samuel-Kings.

<sup>542</sup>For instance, see the description of the turmoil caused by Hittite royal deaths in chap. 2, p. 37. As stated in that section, Hittite literature labels royal deaths as a great “sin.”

was King David, God's chosen, who was dying. Moreover, this widespread unease was fueled by David's well-known frailty and by his failure to name a successor. Two of David's sons were poised for the takeover—violent or otherwise. Thus, the story and the historical situation covered in the story have it all—tension, intrigue, family infighting, and death.

The story of David's death is placed at the crucial nexus between two immense canonical books—Samuel and Kings—which are generally considered part of the Deuteronomistic History (written by the hypothesized Deuteronomistic historian). Regardless of one's position on this theory, the whole of Joshua-Kings is clearly written from the point of view of Deuteronomy. Additionally, in Jewish canonical tradition, the book has been identified as one of the Former Prophets. As this name suggests, the Former Prophets relate not just history, but history told with paraenetic and prophetic motives. The authors aim to change beliefs and behaviors through the message of these books. What is that message? In the words of DeVries, these books demonstrate "Israel's tragic progress through repeated apostasy, wearing out, in the end, the patience of Yahweh."<sup>543</sup> So the author is presenting and critically evaluating the past so that the people in the present might learn from it.

In the theological presentation of the history of Israel found in the Former Prophets, 1 Kings 1:1-2:12 plays a decisive theological role. At this significant moment in history, the narrator casts a critical glance backward and forward. He looks backward to judge past actions. And he looks forward, identifying the first seeds of the future trouble—both political and theological. The narrator relates coups, countercoups, weak kings, political intrigue, and planned murders. And in so doing, he offers subtle and not-

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<sup>543</sup>Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 12 (Waco: Word Books, 1985), xxxiv. So, the narratives are not always affirming in relating the history of Israel and Judah. On the contrary, the narrator rarely praises these nations, but rather tends to denounce them and their kings.

so-subtle evaluations of the nation and its leadership. But through it all, two theological emphases—YHWH’s covenantal devotion to David and YHWH’s sovereignty over history—are displayed for all to see.

Scholars have also proposed a more immediate context for the death story of David found in 1 Kings 1:1-2:12. Most agree that the passage brings to a climax and resolution the so-called “succession narrative,”<sup>544</sup> which extends from 2 Samuel 9 to 1 Kings 2.<sup>545</sup> This narrative describes in detail the pivotal royal transition from David to Solomon and the events leading up to it. In addition, scholars have typically understood the succession narrative as political propaganda, written perhaps by an eyewitness to legitimize Solomon’s accession to the throne over and against more “legitimate” successors.<sup>546</sup> Whether this evaluation is true or false, the focus of the chapters seems to

<sup>544</sup>Ibid., 8. DeVries writes, “1 Kgs 1-2 is a severed trunk, to be sure, and can never be adequately appreciated except as the continuation of 2 Sam 9-20.” However, some have doubted the exact relationship of 1 Kgs 1-2 to the succession narrative. See J. W. Flanagan, “Court History or Succession Document? A Study of 2 Samuel 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 172-81; D. M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield, England: University of Sheffield Press, 1978). Still, as Koopmans writes, “Whatever one’s conclusion regarding the relationship of 1 Kings 1-2 to 2 Sam. 9-20, it is clear that 1 Kings 1-2 occupies a key literary position with respect to the succession of Solomon.” Koopmans, “The Testament of David in 1 Kings II 1-10,” 430. Thus, we will continue to refer to it as the “succession narrative.”

<sup>545</sup>The resources on these chapters are legion. General works written on the succession narrative include P. R. Ackroyd, “The Succession Narrative (so-called),” *Interpretation* 35 (1981): 383-96; Leonard Rost, *The Succession to the Throne of David*, *Historic Texts and Interpreters in Biblical Scholarship*, vol. 1 (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1981); J. A. Wharton, “A Plausible Tale: Story and Theology in II Samuel 9-20, I Kings 1-2,” *Interpretation* 35 (1981): 341-54; and R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative: A Study of II Samuel 9-20, I Kings 1-2*, *Studies in Biblical Theology II*, 9 (Naperville, IL: A. R. Allenson, 1968). Works that deal with specific issues in the narrative include George G. Nicol, “The Death of Joab and the Accession of Solomon: Some Observations on the Narrative of 1 Kings 1-2,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 7 (1993): 135-51; J. W. Wesselius, “Joab’s Death and the Central Theme of the Succession Narrative (2 Samuel 9-1 Kings 2),” *Vetus Testamentum* 40 (1990): 336-51; John Van Seters, “Love and Death in the Court History of David,” in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope*, ed. John H. Marks and Robert M. Good (Guilford, CT: Four Quarters Publishing Company, 1987), 121-24; Douglas A. Knight, “Moral Values and Literary Traditions: The Case of the Succession Narrative (2 Samuel 9-20; 1 Kings 1-2),” *Semeia* 34 (1985): 7-23; P. K. McCarter, Jr., “‘Plots, True or False’: The Succession Narrative as Court Apologetic,” *Interpretation* 35 (1981): 355-67; Walter Brueggemann, “On Trust and Freedom: A Study of Faith in the Succession Narrative,” *Interpretation* 36 (1972): 3-19; and George P. Ridout, “Prose and Compositional Techniques in the Succession Narrative” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1971).

<sup>546</sup>Rost (in *The Succession to the Throne of David*) is credited with this insight. But this viewpoint is not without its own flaws, as Solomon is not always portrayed in the narrative in such a positive light.

be primarily on the questions of when and to whom the covenant promises outlined in 2 Samuel 7 would be given.

In relating these dramatic events, the author repeatedly demonstrates remarkable literary skill. In fact, some have compared the succession narrative to a modern-day novel.<sup>547</sup> It flows smoothly from start to finish, interlacing accounts of events with few disruptions. The author develops these scenes by creating tension and crafting an intricate plot. Furthermore, the narrator portrays the characters realistically with inimitable candor.<sup>548</sup> The story of David's death closes and culminates this work of literary art.

### Form/Structure

Concerning 1 Kings 1:1-2:12 specifically, most believe the account to be the union of a fairly intact narrative in 1 Kings 1:1-53 and a somewhat fragmented narrative in 1 Kings 2:1-12. Therefore, critical scholars have customarily viewed the text as an amalgamation of various insertions and sources.<sup>549</sup> However, recent opinion has increasingly maintained that 1 Kings 1:1-2:12 is a nearly complete literary whole.<sup>550</sup> Yet, few studies have engaged the text based on this assumption of literary unity. As Provan

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<sup>547</sup>Whybray, *The Succession Narrative*, 47. Cf. Wharton, "A Plausible Tale," 34. He writes, "Whatever one makes of the genre of this material, the sheer depth and brilliance of the narrative must not be lost from view." Also cf. Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, 133. He calls the succession narrative the "most brilliant historical narrative of antiquity."

<sup>548</sup>This last characteristic will prove crucial theologically.

<sup>549</sup>See especially Martin Noth, *Könige* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1964), and Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *King and Messiah: The Civil and Sacral Legitimation of the Israelite Kings*, Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 8 (Lund: LiberLäromedel/Gleerup, 1976). A typical opinion is that of Leroy Waterman, "Some Historical and Literary Consequences of Probable Displacement in 1 Kings 1-2," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 60 (1940): 383-90. He writes, "It is plain that they [the two chapters] have clearly been freely worked over by a later hand." Cf. Jeffrey S. Rogers, "Narrative Stock and Deuteronomistic Elaboration in 1 Kings 2," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 398-413.

<sup>550</sup>DeVries, *1 Kings*, 9-11. See especially J. P. Fokkelman's detailed explanation in *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1981).

writes, “Of analysis of bits and pieces [of the books of Kings] there has been (and continues to be) no end. . . . But of reading the book as it stands as a complete story in its Hebrew form (or for that matter its Greek form), there has been, until recently, scarcely any.”<sup>551</sup>

Along with these few recent scholars, we will pursue this more synchronic approach. In fact, in order to perform a proper form critical examination of the text, exegesis and research should begin with the text as a whole.<sup>552</sup> Then, if the structure leads one to see insertions and sources, so be it. However, excluding portions of text compromises both the literary and form critical process. In addition, viewing the text as a whole allows the reader to comprehend the true literary genius and purpose in the composition of the final narrative.

An initial overview reveals that 1 Kings 1:1-2:12 possesses most of the key formal elements of the stereotypical death story. The borders of the textual unit are clearly delimited. The story begins with an initial implied announcement of impending death (1:1a) and ends with a closing regnal succession formula (2:10-12), which also acts as a transition element to the subsequent narratives in Kings.<sup>553</sup> That verse 1:1a commences the death story is reinforced by comparison with other death stories that are

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<sup>551</sup>Iain W. Provan, “Why Barzillai of Gilead (1 Kings 2:7)? Narrative Art and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion in 1 Kings 1-2,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 46 (1995): 104. Provan adds, “Is not the problem, in fact, largely that Old Testament scholars, often lacking general competence in matters literary, and approaching the text with inherited presuppositions about its incoherent nature (among other things), have largely found what they expected to find.”

<sup>552</sup>See chap. 1, pp. 7-9, of this dissertation for further discussion. There, we argued that responsible form critical studies must be synchronic and begin with the final form of the text.

<sup>553</sup>One could argue that the death story should also include the speeches and census narrative of 2 Sam 23:1-24:25. In fact, this section of Scripture does contain David’s “last words” (2 Sam 23:1-7). However, if this song was intended to be part of the death story, it would have been included after the announcement of impending death element/stage, which uniformly signals the beginning of the death story. See especially the comparison with the death story of Abraham (Table 9). These last words are also separated from the death story by the census narrative and a register of David’s mighty men. These accounts have little in common with any other death story and thus do not function as formal elements in our death story.

introduced by similar statements (Gen 24:1a; Josh 23:1c; cf. 1 Chr 23:1a). This announcement is followed by a statement that could be construed as an initial evaluation of or pronouncement on David's life (1:1b, c). Both of these initial elements are actually part of the embedded narrative (1:1-53) describing Solomon's succession.<sup>554</sup> They are dealt with separately in the exegesis below because they function as significant preparatory formal elements for the death story as a whole.<sup>555</sup> The remainder of the embedded narrative (1:2-53) serves as the first part of the "putting the house in order" stage in David's life, as he struggles to ensure the proper succession of Solomon, in the face of Adonijah's coup attempt.

The narrative then proceeds to the final elements and the final events of King David's life. Another announcement of impending death (2:1a) introduces the farewell address of David to his son Solomon (2:1b-9). This speech serves as part two of the putting the house in order stage. This speech is divided into two sections (2:1b-4; 5-9), each with different emphases. Following David's last words are a brief death notice (death stage; 2:10a), a burial notice (response stage; 2:10b), a formulaic declaration of the length of reign (response stage; 2:11), and finally a summary of Solomon's succession (response stage; 2:12). The structure is represented graphically in Table 8. In total, the story possesses eight formal elements (including an embedded narrative and final speech), spanning four formal stages. The following will examine these elements more closely.

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<sup>554</sup>This section is intimately tied to the embedded narrative to follow, and in fact, it serves well as a prelude to the succession controversy.

<sup>555</sup>The same structure is seen in Abraham's death story. There, the story of the wooing of Rebekah is introduced by an announcement of impending death (Gen 24:1a) and a pronouncement on the life of Abraham (Gen 24:1b). Each of these elements is part of the embedded narrative, but they also function as important structural elements in the death story as a whole. See Table 9.

Table 8. The formal structure of the death story of David

Stage	Formal Element	CL	Hebrew Text	English Translation
ADS	Announcement of impending death	1:1a	והמלך דוד זקן בא בימים	Part of embedded narrative, 1:1-53, but functioning as a formal element in the death story as a whole  Now King David was old, advanced in age;
ADS	Pronouncement on David's life	1:1b 1:1c	ויכסוהו בבגדים ולא יחם לו:	Part of embedded narrative, 1:1-53, but functioning as a formal element in the death story as a whole  and they covered him with clothes, but he could not warm himself.
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 1	1:2-53		Embedded narrative, telling the story of the succession of Solomon as king
ADS	Second announcement of impending death	2:1a	ויקרבו ימי-דוד למותו	David's time to die drew near,
POS	Description of putting the house in order, part 2	2:1b-9		Embedded speech, with two parts, theological and political instructions
DS	Death notice	2:10a	וישכב דוד עם-אבותיו	And David lay with his fathers,
RS	Response (burial notice)	2:10b	ויקבר בעיר דוד:	and he was buried in the city of David.
RS	Declaration of length of reign and succession	2:11a 2:11b 2:11c 2:12a 2:12b	והימים אשר מלך דוד על-ישראל ארבעים שנה מלך שבע שנים בחברון ובירושלם מלך שלשים ושלש שנים: ושלמה ישב על-כסא דוד אביו ותחנן מלכותו מאד:	The days that David reigned over Israel were forty years:  he reigned seven years in Hebron and he reigned thirty-three years in Jerusalem. Thus Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his kingdom was firmly established.

CL=Clause Label    ADS=Announcement of Impending Death Stage  
 POS=Putting the House in Order Stage    DS=Death Stage    RS=Response Stage

**Announcement of impending death (1:1a).** The initial element—the announcement of impending death—uses a simple circumstantial statement, “Now King David was old, advanced in age.” The imminent loss of life is stated implicitly. But the king’s death seems inevitable and impending based on two factors. First, the mention of old age automatically raises the issue of David’s health and vitality. Second, as stated above, the author’s use of the phrase (בְּיָמָיו אָבָה וְקָדַם) recalls other death stories, each of which begin with a similar statement.<sup>556</sup> Given this parallel, the reader likely anticipates a death to occur soon.

Like the other death stories, this subtle announcement of impending death accomplishes several narrative goals. First, the statement creates tension, as the reader begins to wonder when an aged David will die and what will become of his house and throne. Second, the statement identifies the principal character and focus in the subsequent narrative—David.<sup>557</sup> While the subject of the narrative may be Solomon’s rise to power, the narrator’s primary attention is on David and his efforts (or lack thereof) to settle the succession issue. Finally, the repetition of an announcement of impending death used in previous death stories invites a comparison between David and those other dying characters. The author seems specifically to be contrasting Abraham and David.<sup>558</sup> In fact, the death stories parallel each other structurally and thematically (see Table 9 for an analysis).

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<sup>556</sup>The only other occurrences of this phrase are in Gen 18:11; 24:1; Josh 13:1; 23:1.

<sup>557</sup>See Walsh’s structure of the embedded narrative provided below for substantiation of this point.

<sup>558</sup>To use Sternberg’s terms, Abraham is the “typal precedent” to whom David is being compared. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 349. In fact, the words seem to represent “a deliberate lexical choice.” Sean McDonough, “‘And David Was Old, Advanced in Years’: 2 Samuel XXIV 18-25, 1 Kings I 1, and Genesis XXIII-XXIV,” *Vetus Testamentum* 49 (1999): 128. McDonough rightly points out the thematic parallel of what precedes this announcement. Just as Abraham’s purchase of Machpelah represents the “down payment” on the Promised Land, David’s purchase of the threshing floor is the “final installment” (as the place where the temple would be built). *Ibid.* However, McDonough does not go further and point out the structural and thematic parallels in what follows the announcement.

Table 9. A formal comparison between the death stories of Abraham and David

<i>Abraham Verse</i>	<i>Abraham Formal Element</i>		<i>David Formal Element</i>	<i>David Verse</i>
Gen 24:1a	Announcement of impending death	✓	Announcement of impending death	1 Kgs 1:1a
Gen 24:1b	Pronouncement on the life	✓	Pronouncement on the life	1 Kgs 1:1b, c
Gen 24:2-67	Description of putting the house in order: part 1, embedded narrative describing final deeds	✓	Description of putting the house in order: part 1, embedded narrative describing final deeds	1 Kgs 1:5-53
		✗	Second announcement of impending death introducing a second effort to put the house in order	1 Kgs 2:1a
Gen 25:1-6	Description of putting the house in order: part 2, text describing the marriage to Keturah and the giving of inheritance	✓	Description of putting the house in order: part 2, text describing David's final words, embedded speech	1 Kgs 2:1b-9
Gen 25:7a	Declaration of length of life	✗		
Gen 25:8	Death notice	✓	Death notice	1 Kgs 2:10a
Gen 25:9-10	Burial notice	✓	Burial notice	1 Kgs 2:10b
Gen 25:11	Transition (not part of the typical death story form)	✓	Declaration of length of reign and succession; a transitional element	1 Kgs 2:11a-12

**Implied pronouncement on David's life (1:1b, c).** One could construe the narrator's words immediately following the announcement of impending death as an evaluation of David's life. This conclusion is reinforced when 1 Kings 1:1b, c is compared with Genesis 24:1b, which functions similarly as a pronouncement on the life of Abraham.<sup>559</sup> Unlike the Abraham account in which the assessment of the dying is positive ("and YHWH had blessed him [Abraham] in all things"; Gen 24:1b), the

<sup>559</sup>If Abraham is the type, v. 1 immediately establishes David as an antithesis to that type.

evaluation of David is not favorable. Instead of an affirmation of God's blessing, the narrator relates: "They covered him [David] with clothes, and he could not keep warm." This statement probably indicates infirmity,<sup>560</sup> as well as sexual impotence, thereby contrasting David with a blessed and virile Abraham.<sup>561</sup> Thus, David would not be considered blessed as Abraham was at this point in his life. Moreover, subsequent verses in 1 Kings 1 demonstrate David had also lost his virility as a ruler.<sup>562</sup> Politically speaking, in his last years, David seems to have been inactive at best and powerless to act at worst.<sup>563</sup> This implied pronouncement on the life of David by the narrator sets the tone for the following embedded narrative. Indeed, even as the story of succession starts, the reader begins to worry if the failing and feeble monarch will be able to put his house in order.

**Description of putting the house in order, part 1 (1:2-53).** With the narrator's pronouncement on the life of David, the stage is now set for the actual story of succession. The ordering of David's royal house is described by means of an embedded narrative, which functions as the first part of the putting the house in order stage in the

<sup>560</sup>He is possibly afflicted with arteriosclerosis. DeVries, *1 Kings*, 12.

<sup>561</sup>The fact that David "did not know" (in a sexual connotation) Abishag probably indicates the king's sexual impotence. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 346. By comparison Abraham is quite virile. In fact, in the story of his death, the patriarch goes on to marry again and have more children (Gen 25:1-6), even after his death is announced. This is not to say that David was not blessed of God. Rather, at this point, the narrator is not portraying him as blessed.

<sup>562</sup>Cf. McKenzie, *King David*, 177. McKenzie states that this impotence is ironic given David's history both as the father of many children who had "allowed his lust to control him" and as "the powerful sovereign who had built and directed a nation." See also Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>563</sup>Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 345-46. Fokkelman states, "The very first word tells us that he is formally still in command, but all that follows demonstrates his helplessness." Fokkelman points to the fact that in this first section David is one to whom action is done. David is the indirect object eight times in 1 Kgs 1:1-4. And the times that he is the subject, he is certainly not active.

death story structure.<sup>564</sup> The importance of this royal transition should not be understated. Indeed, ever since 2 Samuel 7, God has had a special relationship with his king. YHWH had promised him blessing and lovingkindness, “sonship” and parental guidance, a settled house and an everlasting dynasty. But David himself was mortal. So, who would the successor be? Through whom would the promises to David (and the nation itself) be passed? The following will briefly consider the embedded narrative in order to determine what it says about David’s effort to put his house in order.<sup>565</sup>

Walsh has suggested that the embedded narrative unfolds chiasmically as follows:

- A. King David is dying (1:1-4)
- B. Adonijah exalts himself (1:5-8)
- C. Adonijah holds a feast (1:9-10)
- D. Nathan conspires to make Solomon king (1:11-14)
- E. Four scenes in David’s chambers (1:15-37)
- D'. Nathan and others make Solomon king (1:38-40)
- C'. Adonijah’s feast is disrupted (1:41-50)
- B'. Adonijah abases himself (1:51-53)
- A'. King David dies (2:1-12a)<sup>566</sup>

This structure reveals three important points. First, this pattern demonstrates how well the death story structure frames the entire narrative. There is an announcement of impending death at the beginning and a death report at the end. Second, the fact that the person of David is the focus of the beginning and end of the narrative confirms that the

<sup>564</sup>This structure again mirrors the account of Abraham’s death. In the Genesis account, an embedded narrative told the story of how Abraham endeavored to ensure an orderly house by finding a wife for Isaac. In the current narrative, after much prodding, David ultimately ordered his house by naming Solomon as his successor. Both efforts at ordering their houses were successful in the end. However, the means of achieving the ends are quite different.

<sup>565</sup>The text and content of the narrative have been treated exhaustively in other studies. See especially Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (for literary and structural issues), Walsh, *1 Kings* (for thematic and theological issues), and DeVries, *1 Kings* (for semantic and history of interpretation issues).

<sup>566</sup>Walsh, *1 Kings*, 3.

concern of 1 Kings 1 is the dying king.<sup>567</sup> Third, the intricacy of this account of succession contrasts sharply with the simplicity of the Chronicles version—“and he made his son Solomon king over Israel” (1 Chr 23:1b). Obviously, unlike the Chronicler, the author of the succession narrative does not suppress David’s struggles.<sup>568</sup>

After the initial formal elements in verse 1, the embedded narrative proceeds as follows. As the rivals for the throne became aware of the king’s impending death and his powerlessness, they began to position themselves strategically.<sup>569</sup> The first to “put himself forward” to fill the power vacuum is Adonijah—David’s fourth and oldest surviving son (v. 5). Based on his primogeniture, good looks, and popularity, Adonijah’s aspirations to succeed the king seem reasonable.<sup>570</sup> However, the narrator clearly indicates that Adonijah himself, rather YHWH or his prophets, initiates this power-grab (complete with a portentous parade, v. 5). Only afterwards does the upstart obtain the support of some of David’s well-known political and spiritual advisors. In addition, the narrator states frankly that Adonijah’s capriciousness is due primarily to his father’s leniency in discipline (v. 6). These types of statements show that the narrator’s focus is not so much on others’ actions, but on David’s inaction.

Adonijah’s attempt to gain the throne divides the major characters into two factions—Joab, Abiathar, and many of the king’s sons and royal officials with Adonijah

<sup>567</sup>McKenzie argues that the “apology” in 1 Kgs 1-2 is on behalf of Solomon. McKenzie, *King David*, 176. But the author’s gaze seems to remain on David. Indeed, the use of the death story form shows that Solomon’s succession is all part of David’s story.

<sup>568</sup>The Chronicler fails to report negative aspects of David’s reign for his own theological purposes. For a brief excursus on the Chronicler’s account of David’s death, see the following section in this dissertation.

<sup>569</sup>In fact, even the finding of Abishag was probably politically motivated. As McKenzie writes, “The intent of the servants was not really to keep the old king warm but to test his virility. . . . At the news that David failed the test, Adonijah declared himself king.” *Ibid.*, 177

<sup>570</sup>But as House points out, “Good looks and favored status, coupled with parental indulgence, rarely build strong character.” Paul House, *1, 2 Kings*, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 88.

on the one side, and Zadok, Benaiah, Nathan, and David's special guard with Solomon on the other. With powerful supporters in hand, Adonijah quickly convenes his own self-coronation ceremony (v. 9). The odds now seem to favor David's eldest. So Adonijah makes the first move, and it is now up to the Solomonic party to respond with a countermove.

Like Adonijah, who had taken advantage of David's debilities, Solomon and his supporters seem to exploit David's deteriorating mental acuity. Nathan the prophet conceives a plan to influence the king to name Solomon as successor. Bathsheba is to approach the king, who is still ignorant of the succession controversy, and she is to remind David of his previous commitment to Solomon's succession. This claim that David had made a pledge to his younger son may be fabricated, but even if it is not, David is portrayed as a weak figure. Either he is easily manipulated (if the claim is false), or he is senile and forgetful (if the claim is true).<sup>571</sup> Bathsheba enters the throne room, only to find Abishag attending David—perhaps another reminder by the narrator of the king's frailty. Solomon's mother duly informs her husband of Adonijah's presumptive actions (vv. 17-21), and her accusations are seconded by Nathan who enters shortly after (vv. 24-27). The motives of these Solomonic supporters are readily apparent; both are afraid for their own lives (vv. 21).

Unable to dispute the claims of these trusted advisors, "David springs, creaking, into action."<sup>572</sup> At this point, the conflicting portrait of David comes to the forefront. Though feeble, David seems to act authoritatively at need.<sup>573</sup> He calls in the

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<sup>571</sup>McKenzie argues for the former. He states that such a promise would have been widely known (and is not reported in Scripture), and moreover a commitment like that would not have been made to a younger son. McKenzie, *King David*, 178. But of course, this neglects the testimony of Scripture that often elevates the younger over the older (e.g., Jacob over Esau, Ephraim over Manasseh, etc.).

<sup>572</sup>Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, 393.

<sup>573</sup>McKenzie argues that this is all part of an apology for Solomon. David needs to be shown as authoritative, or else his orders have no weight. McKenzie, *King David*, 178.

members of the Solomonic faction and swears to them that Solomon will sit on his throne. Seizing on this opportunity, Solomon and his supporters proceed quickly to stage an official coronation ceremony. The news soon reaches Adonijah and his party, and they disperse in fear (v. 49). Solomon grants clemency initially—though a bloodbath would soon follow.

What is the narrator's evaluation of David and of his efforts to establish an orderly house for the kingdom? The assessment seems ambivalent. Negatively, the narrator purposely portrays David as a poor parent. In fact, the narrator indicts the king by connecting his past fatherly failures (i.e., with Absalom) with his current situation (i.e., with Adonijah).<sup>574</sup> In the same breath, the narrator mentions Absalom and then states that David had never disciplined Adonijah (1:6). Second, the narrator deliberately depicts David as passive and ignorant. David obviously does not know what is happening in and to his kingdom. He even has to be informed of Adonijah's plot by Bathsheba and Nathan (1:11; 18).<sup>575</sup> As Brueggemann observes, "Remarkably, the Bible does not flinch from reporting on the charade of a strategy by which David the old man is deceived and exploited."<sup>576</sup> Third, the narrator shows that David has been negligent in putting his house in order. Indeed, the whole of Israel had been waiting expectantly for David to name his successor, but until this point he had not acted (1:20). Fourth, even

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<sup>574</sup>In addition, Adonijah's attractiveness also implies a connection with Absalom. As Halpern writes, "The implied connection with Absalom is deliberately forefronted. Adonijah is staging a coup." *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>575</sup>Again, one can see how the narrator ties David's physical impotence with his political impotence. Just as David could not know (עָרַךְ) Abishag, so also he did not know (עָרַךְ) of Adonijah's plot. Also, at the time Bathsheba enters the king's chamber to tell him of the plot, the narrator refers back to the earlier narrative of 1:1-4 by repeating the fact that David was old and being cared for by Abishag. So again, the narrator connects the physical inability with political powerlessness.

<sup>576</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *1 Kings* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 5. This fact would seem to argue against the view that this chapter functions as a Solomonic apology. Would an apologist portray Solomon and his supporters taking advantage of the renowned king in such a way?

when David does act, he does so by substituting kingly counsel for divine inquiry.<sup>577</sup> A comparison with Abraham's efforts to order his house renders this error even more striking. In the embedded narrative describing the search for Isaac's wife, the servant repeatedly prays for (Gen 24:12-14, 42-44) and receives (Gen 24:21, 27, 48, 56) divine guidance in his quest. Yet, prayers and petitions are strangely absent from the narrative in 1 Kings 1, even though the stakes in ensuring an ordered house are just as high.

However, David also receives some positive evaluations. For example, when David does act, he acts decisively—albeit at the behest of Bathsheba and Nathan. And the end result is that “the kingdom was firmly established” (1 Kgs 2:12b). Thus, the narrator judges David and his efforts to put his house in order both positively and negatively. This puzzling portrayal will be picked up again in 1 Kings 2:1-12.

**Second announcement of impending death (2:1a).** Unlike the first announcement of impending death in 1 Kgs 1:1a, this statement is explicit. The narrator declares that David's time to die is approaching. While the first announcement introduced the initial effort by David to put his house in order, this statement of impending death paves the way for more specific instructions and the traditional farewell speech.<sup>578</sup> Like his predecessors (Jacob, Moses, Joshua), David is set to give his final charge and last wishes. In fact, one finds the exact parallel to this announcement in the death stories of Jacob and Moses (Gen 47:29; Deut 31:14b). The latter parallel may be purposeful on the narrator's part, as David's words in verses 2-4 will recall in many ways

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<sup>577</sup>Robert Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 177-78. Polzin states that the Deuteronomist is concerned to show that David and his descendants erred “first by substituting the king's counselor for the LORD's prophet, and then by treating the LORD's prophet [Nathan] as if he were the king's counselor.” This is an error repeated by Rehoboam after the death of Solomon and by Ahab and Jehoshaphat in 1 Kgs 22 (when the prophet Micaiah is foolishly treated as a counselor instead of a mediator of divine inquiry).

<sup>578</sup>This announcement probably occurred not long after the events of 1 Kgs 1—all of which occurred in one day. Walsh, *1 Kings*, 34.

the words of Moses in Deuteronomy.

**Final words (2:1b-9).** The final farewell speech of King David may represent the most important part of this narrative.<sup>579</sup> The narrator introduces the speech by stating that the dying king “charged” Solomon.<sup>580</sup> The word for “charge” (צוה) is used in other death stories—most notably in the story describing Hezekiah’s death, where YHWH instructs him to “put his house in order.”<sup>581</sup> The actual speech is perplexing. It divides into two sections, but these sections could scarcely be more different. In the speech, David combines classic Deuteronomistic rhetoric (2:2-4) with Machiavellian political counsel (2:5-9), leading most scholars to believe that verses 2-4 were inserted by the Deuteronomist. However, one should not be so quick to discount the speech’s original unity.<sup>582</sup> Indeed, to a great extent the confusing passage mirrors the perplexing and complex picture of David found throughout the Former Prophets, the succession narrative, and especially 1 Kings 1. David was undoubtedly a man of deep religious

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<sup>579</sup>David is unique among the kings in having this formal element. As Robert Cohn writes, “None [of the kings] after David is given a deathbed testament, and most have but formulaic epitaphs.” Robert L. Cohn, “Convention and Creativity in the Book of Kings: The Case of the Dying Monarch,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985): 603.

<sup>580</sup>The presence of only Solomon here is striking in light of the Chronicles account of David’s final words. There, the Chronicler takes great pains to describe the various personages gathering for David’s final charges and for his coronation of Solomon.

<sup>581</sup>1 Kgs 20:1e. Most translations render the phrase in Hezekiah’s narrative as “put your house in order.”

<sup>582</sup>Even some of these recent synchronic studies see Deuteronomistic insertions. So Fokkelman concludes the vv. 3-4 “in no way attains to the artistic level of its surroundings.” Like other scholars, he has trouble reconciling the Deuteronomistic rhetoric there with the “seething rancor” of vv. 5-9. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 385. However, see below for an explanation of how the author’s understanding of David throughout the succession narrative helps to explain this speech. In addition, Koopmans has shown how David’s last speech could have been an original unity. Koopmans, “The Testament of David in 1 Kings II 1-10,” 429-49. On the basis of the colometric structure of the passage and the “intricately intertwined literary devices” between vv. 2-4 and 5-9, he argues that the speech is really a unified narrative poem similar to Josh 23. It is certainly more than just “Deuteronomistic clichés” or an “inferior patchwork by later historians.” *Ibid.*, 430, 445. It mirrors many of the valedictory addresses of previous Old Testament characters, such as those of Jacob (Gen 49) and Moses (Deut 33).

conviction. However, he had also committed murder, adultery, and acts of vengeance.<sup>583</sup> Thus, it is not out of the question that David could have delivered the baffling speech in its entirety.

David opens his speech by reiterating that he is about to die. This declaration sets the stage for the important address to his son and successor. Any Israelite reader would have sensed the anticipation of this moment. The euphemistic expression David employs—"going the way of all the earth"—is the same one Joshua uses in his own farewell speech in Joshua 23:14a. In fact, the phrase only occurs in these two passages in the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, the reader would possibly connect the two characters and would thus have high expectations for David's words to follow. And David does not disappoint, uttering words that vividly recall both the vocabulary and content of the farewell addresses by Joshua and by Moses.<sup>584</sup> In fact, David begins with an admonition to Solomon to "be strong"—the exact command given to Joshua by Moses (Deut 31:6, 7) and YHWH (Deut 31:23) in Joshua's commissioning ceremony.<sup>585</sup> The message is clear. Just as Joshua needed fortitude to lead the people of Israel into Canaan, so Solomon would require similar strength. But also like Joshua, Solomon needed strength not only for confronting enemies, but especially for keeping Torah.<sup>586</sup> David charges Solomon to "be strong" so that he might follow God's Sinai covenant comprehensively—including

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<sup>583</sup>Walsh points out that Solomon exhibits the same character traits. Walsh, *1 Kings*, 34.

<sup>584</sup>Koopmans demonstrates how the content of 1 Kgs 2:2-4 finds many parallels with Josh 23:3, 6, 14, and 16. Koopmans, "The Testament of David in 1 Kings II 1-10," 432. Fokkelman has divided 2:2-4 into command (from father to son, vv. 2b-3b), purpose (God to son, success and fulfillment of covenant promise, vv. 3c-4a), and promise (God to father, no doubt referring to 2 Sam 7:12-16, v. 4b, c). Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 385.

<sup>585</sup>YHWH also commands Joshua in this way before he leads the Israelites into Canaan (Josh 1:6, 7, 9, 18).

<sup>586</sup>Cf. Josh 1:7; "Be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the Torah."

keeping his commandments, ordinances, judgments, and testimonies (v. 3). Why was this obedience important? This would be the way that Solomon would “succeed in all that he does” (v. 3). The idea that keeping Torah is the key for royal success is not a new idea. When Moses looked forward to future kings of Israel in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, he asserted the same thing. Thus, in order for Solomon—or any other Israelite king—to have an ordered house, a long reign, rest, or peace, he must follow the Deuteronomic Torah.

David defines that success further in verse 4. Recalling the covenant YHWH made with him in 2 Samuel 7, David tells Solomon to be careful how he walks (i.e., lives); if he does this, then YHWH will maintain a king on the Davidic throne. The importance of maintaining the dynastic line cannot be understated; successful succession was the key characteristic of an ordered royal house.<sup>587</sup> In this speech, David makes clear that the way for Solomon to accomplish this ordered house is by faithfulness to YHWH’s covenant. Thus, the first part of David’s speech serves as a perfect beginning to David’s efforts to put his house in order. And it could have stood alone.

But David is not through. He continues to advise Solomon, giving another way to order his house and establish his rule. This counsel exhibits the political ruthlessness and pride that sometimes characterized David’s rule.<sup>588</sup> In no other farewell speech does the aged person talk so much about himself. First person pronouns abound, and “God” language is noticeably absent. In this second part of the speech, David gives instructions on how to handle three individuals—Joab (2:5-6), Barzillai (2:7), and Shimei (2:8-9)—with whom he was unable to deal because of his sickness and impending death.

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<sup>587</sup>For any king, “ordering your house” at death means primarily ensuring succession.

<sup>588</sup>For a perceptive discussion of this section, see Provan, “Why Barzillai of Gilead (1 Kings 2:7),” 108-16.

The first and the last persons Solomon is to punish harshly; and the middle individual Solomon is to reward. Interestingly, each one receives his recompense based primarily on how he treated David himself. Accordingly, in one sense the call for revenge appears to involve a personal vendetta. However, these charges also represent pragmatic instructions on how to “establish” Solomon’s kingship (2:12)—especially by getting rid of the current political enemy (but once faithful friend) Joab.<sup>589</sup>

Ironically, David associates these political actions with “wisdom.” In each of David’s vengeful instructions, Solomon is told to act in accordance with wisdom (חָכְמָה). These statements represent the first allusions to Solomon’s defining trait. But David’s use of “wisdom” here does not establish a particularly positive prototype for Solomon’s future “wisdom,” which may be precisely the point intended by the author.

Thus, the issue of whether this speech truly “puts David’s house in order” is debatable. David does give Solomon two ways to order his house. But the two methods could not be more different. The first—based on the prescriptions of Deuteronomy 17 and the promises 2 Samuel 7 (vv. 2-4)—is clearly the path of success. But while the latter instructions (vv. 5-9) may have been successful, the narrator is unclear whether they had the stamp of divine approval.

**Description of death (2:10a).** With these words, David is now ready for death. As with other death stories, the description of David’s death is brief, and this death notice seems even blunter than others.<sup>590</sup> The narrator describes the death in one idiomatic statement—“David lay with his fathers.” The euphemism differs from other death stories, which speak of being “gathered to his fathers” or being “gathered to his

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<sup>589</sup>Halpern, *David’s Secret Demons*, 394.

<sup>590</sup>Other narratives tend to use the term, מוֹרָת, even when an idiom is used.

people.” Nevertheless, it is typical for regnal succession formulae in 1 Kings.<sup>591</sup> As Alexander has shown, this idiom does not speak of being entombed in his fathers’ graves.<sup>592</sup> Instead, it refers to dying in peace.<sup>593</sup>

**Burial notice (2:10b).** The response recalls the typical regnal succession formula. Unlike previous death stories (such as those of Aaron, Moses, and Jacob), there is no mourning—only a simple statement of burial.<sup>594</sup> The author adds only one detail to the burial notice—the location of the burial in the city of David. The fact that the narrator describes David as being buried in the city of David (as opposed to his birthplace of Bethlehem) shows the prominence of and significance of the capital city in the mind of the author.

**Declaration of length of reign and a summary of Solomon’s succession (2:11-12).** The final element is a declaration of the length of David’s reign (v. 11) and a summary of Solomon’s succession (v. 12). These are also part of the standard regnal succession formula found in Kings. However, this account exhibits one notable difference. The formulae usually report, “X reigned so many years, and Y succeeded him.” In this case, the narrator elaborates—stating that David reigned forty years, “and Solomon sat on the throne of David his father, and his kingdom was firmly established.” This expansion in the formula is noteworthy. As Walsh writes, “The words ‘sat on the

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<sup>591</sup>But it is not exclusive to the Deuteronomistic History. Cf. Gen 47:30, “when I lie down with my fathers.”

<sup>592</sup>T. D. Alexander, “The Old Testament View of Life after Death,” *Themelios* 11 (1986): 45. In fact, David is not buried in the tomb of his fathers, which would be in Bethlehem.

<sup>593</sup>Walsh, *1 Kings*, 35. It may even speak optimistically about life after death. Alexander, “The Old Testament View of Life after Death,” 45.

<sup>594</sup>In the Chronicles account of David’s death, the author describes no response. But the Chronicles does give a rather extended “eulogy” to David.

throne of David his father' . . . answer, finally, the question Bathsheba voiced in 1:20 and bring the whole drama of chapter 1 to an appropriate conclusion."<sup>595</sup> Perhaps it also offers a final observation about David. Despite his failures and weaknesses in the death story, the end result is a stable and ordered house.<sup>596</sup>

### Genre

Because of the redactional work of the author, 1 Kings 1:1-2:12 seems to be more of an amalgamation of different genres.<sup>597</sup> However, one could argue that a major structuring device of and frame for the entire composition is the death story form.<sup>598</sup> In this way, the story of David's death parallels other death stories, such as those of Abraham and Moses. Since this account contains all the formal elements of the ideal death story, it is possible the author could have used a stereotypical form of a death story as the editorial skeleton, on the basis of which he composed the conclusion of the succession narrative.

### Setting

The current setting of the death story of David is literary. The author took the components of the death story from their original settings and adapted them for use in a greater compositional account—the death story of David. The *Sitz im Leben* for the individual genres filling out the death story skeleton vary. For instance, the death and burial notices and the declaration of the length of David's reign probably derive from

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<sup>595</sup>Walsh, *1 Kings*, 36.

<sup>596</sup>His house was in order, but the narrator leaves in doubt whether it was to David's credit.

<sup>597</sup>Burke O. Long, *1 Kings with an Introduction to Historical Literature*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 34. It is preferable to think of this redaction as the work of the original author of the succession narrative.

<sup>598</sup>A similar argument could be made for the Abraham account

royal court records.

### **Intention**

On the surface, the most observable intention for this account is to speak about the issue of succession. The narrative stands at the climax of the so-called “succession narrative”; and all that came before (2 Sam 9-20) anticipates the event described in 1 Kings 1-2. The question is, Why does the author describe this climax in the way he does? As stated above, current scholarship tends to view it as political propaganda. It may indeed be propaganda, but it is not completely positive propaganda. At best, the narrator portrays David and Solomon in a neutral light. At worst, the narrative believes the two leaders foreshadow a troubling future for Israel. In addition, the use of a death story itself is meant to demonstrate the significance—positively and negatively—of David among all the kings. David is one of the few figures in the Former Prophets for whom an extended death story exists. But the primary intention of this death story is expressed in the farewell speech. As Long states, “They [farewell speeches in general] mean to bring to a close an epoch, a life, a period of history, and to cite a definitive theological perspective on such an era; usually they also look ahead to further episodes in the canon.”<sup>599</sup> David’s farewell speech and his entire death story certainly fit this description.

### **Theological Conclusions**

The death story of David has much to communicate theologically. The following summary has divided the theological insights into two categories—those insights into the Hebrew theology of death itself (thanatology) and those insights into the

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<sup>599</sup>Long, *1 Kings with an Introduction to Historical Literature*, 45.

important character of David.

**Thanatology.** First, the narrator reflects the Jewish belief that death in most cases comes gradually, is predictable, and is often preceded by sickness and weakness.<sup>600</sup> The idea is observable in the narrator's second announcement of impending death—"David's days to die drew near" (2:1a).<sup>601</sup> Second, the narrator demonstrates that burial location has theological significance. This is not surprising since several other death stories (notably those of Sarah, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph) elaborate on the burial location. Third, the narrator seems ambivalent in his assessment of David's death. Hebrew thanatology distinguished between a "bad" death—if one's death was premature or violent or if there were no surviving heirs—and a "good" death—if one experienced long life with many children.<sup>602</sup> According to this definition, David's death seems like a "good" death.<sup>603</sup> The narrator's final description of David's death—"he lay with his fathers"—also seems positive. However, the description is also blunt, especially when compared to other death stories. Other stories—including the Chronicles account of David's death—assert that the person died at a "ripe, old age" and "full of years" (1 Chr 29:28; cf. Gen 25:8; 35:29).<sup>604</sup> In this account, the narrator's description has no embellishment; it consists of a simple death notice. Thus, while most indicators suggest David had a good death, some doubt remains. Finally, David's concern to give final

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<sup>600</sup>DeVries, *1 Kings*, 34.

<sup>601</sup>The author uses the infinitive to express the purpose of those "days." This idea is also seen in the narrator's descriptions of David's old age and sickness (1:1, 15).

<sup>602</sup>DeVries, *1 Kings*, 42.

<sup>603</sup>Indeed, in his life, he survived many attempts by Saul and others to give him a violent, immature death; but by surviving, he seems to have ensured himself a "good" death.

<sup>604</sup>Of course, this latter statement does not always accompany a positive death event (cf. Judg 8:32).

blessings/charges/instructions mirrors a common Hebrew desire to ensure a stable house for future generations.<sup>605</sup> Indeed, David seems to view his own experience of death as relatively unimportant; his greatest concern was not his own mortality. In the end (after some prompting), he demonstrates a concern that his son Solomon sits on a well-established throne.

**Characterization.** Perhaps the most profound theological statements made in David's death story concern David himself, God's anointed king. As discussed at length above, this death story is primarily about David—not Solomon; not succession; but the dying king.<sup>606</sup> However, the fact that David is the focus of the narrative is not as surprising as the way he is presented. And indeed, the author presents an enigmatic portrait. In the succession narrative, David's clemency, piety, and even his greatness remain open to interpretation.<sup>607</sup>

Rather than reiterating all that was said about David in the analysis above, the following will offer several summary statements about David's characterization. First, David is dying, but he is failing to perform the normal duty of a dying king. The author portrays the king as weak and passive. In using the death story form, the author in effect cries out for David to act to "put his house in order." However, David remains on his bed—impotent and babied and unaware of the turmoil in his kingdom.<sup>608</sup>

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<sup>605</sup>Such instructions also reflect the belief that in some sense individuals lived on through their progeny.

<sup>606</sup>Fokkeman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 345. Of course, the form and structure demonstrates this fact. But the narrator also shows this interest through other means. For example, David is mentioned in all but fifteen of the sentences in 1 Kgs 1.

<sup>607</sup>Whybray, *The Succession Narrative*, 36.

<sup>608</sup>One could attribute this deathbed ineptitude to David's age and failing health. But David has previously shown himself capable of being ignorant of threats to his throne (cf. 2 Sam 19.1-8). Whybray writes, "It can hardly be accidental that it is only when he is old and feeble and a mere puppet in the hands of others that the succession to the throne can be settled by others who see, as he had never been able to do, the dangers into which the State has been thrown by his refusal to name a successor." *Ibid.*, 37.

Second, the author shows that in his old age David is no Abraham. The author seems to compare the two characters directly throughout the death story. For example, Abraham receives a blessing at his death (Gen 24:1b); David receives a virgin nurse (1 Kgs 1:1-4). Abraham is still virile at death (Gen 25:1-4); David is impotent (1 Kgs 1:1-4). Abraham takes care of his successor decisively by finding a wife for his son (Gen 24:2-67); David's wife must prod him to install his son as a successor (1 Kgs 1:2-53). Abraham dies full of years and satisfied (Gen 25:8b, c); David merely lies down with his fathers (1 Kgs 2:10a).

Third, in the death story, the author portrays David as a flawed parent--similar to Eli and Samuel. An important task for any father to complete before his death is to make sure his sons knew who the successor was. But in David's case, his sons are battling over the role of successor because David had failed to make the identity of the next king clear. The author also portrays the sons' misbehavior as a culmination of years of faulty parenting on David's part. In particular, the historian recalls David's failure with Absalom. Just as with Absalom, the king has failed to exercise fatherly discipline and control with Adonijah. Consequently, like Absalom, Adonijah moves to take over the kingdom without David's knowledge.

Fourth, the author shows that despite David's pious rhetoric, he can still be vindictive, vengeful, and prideful. As pointed out above, David's farewell speech is filled with Machiavellian rhetoric and with "me"- rather than "God"-language. In addition, through allusions to earlier narratives, the author shows that David's negative character traits are not necessarily new.<sup>609</sup> Even in death, David persisted in his old habits of violence, political shrewdness, and poor parenting.

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<sup>609</sup>Ibid., 48. In fact, Whybray writes that the author goes out of his way "to emphasize that David was not only a murderer and adulterer, but also a man who had brought the nation to the brink of disaster by sacrificing its security to his personal feelings."

However, the picture of David is not all negative. First, the author believes that, despite all David's faults, he remained the king chosen by YHWH. Second, when David finally acts to order his house, the author portrays him as doing so with conviction. Third, the speech of David contains some positive elements, referring to Deuteronomistic and covenantal ideals. Indeed, the Deuteronomistic words of David in his farewell speech perhaps allude to his role as the ideal king of Deuteronomy 17, who exhibits and embodies covenant fidelity.

In summary, the author's portrayal of David communicates much theologically.<sup>610</sup> First, the author highlights the theological significance of David in Old Testament history. In fact, David and Joshua are the only characters in the Former Prophets to receive such an extended death story. Second, the author's characterization of David prophetically foreshadows the weaknesses of Solomon and other Davidic kings. Like David, future kings exhibited contradictory actions (weak and strong), and they spoke contradictory words (Deuteronomistic and Machiavellian). Like David, his successors would give lip service to orthodox Yahwism, but they also dabbled in political intrigue and violence. Ironically, David's Deuteronomistic farewell speech proves most damning to future kings. As stated above, the author may be purposefully evoking images of the ideal king of Deuteronomy 17. If so, the inclusion of his Deuteronomistic farewell speech could be the author's cry of protest against the non-Deuteronomistic leaders of Israel. As he looked on the history of Israel, he saw king after king who failed to follow Torah. Because of this, the royal house of David remained in disorder. The narrator clearly indicates his belief that the way to restore order to the house of Israel is for the Jewish kings to return to the Sinai (and Davidic) covenant.

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<sup>610</sup>Because of his status and importance in the history of Israel and Christianity, views of David are of utmost importance theologically. So, there is much to be gained in this question.

Finally, the author's characterization of David speaks most eloquently and profoundly about YHWH. The Former Prophets are filled with characters who, like David, are flawed as leaders. Gideon, Samson, Samuel, and others. The overriding theme of this "history" is that Israel prospers despite the leaders and because of YHWH. Wharton writes, "The decisive actor in all these human machinations is the Lord who holds these persons and events in closest intimacy to the purposes of his heart."<sup>61</sup> The same theme is found in 1 Kings 1-2. For example, in the narrative concerning David's death, the prophet of YHWH urges David to put his house in order. The narrative affirms that YHWH is acting to fulfill the Davidic covenant (1 Kgs 1:47-48; 2:4). Though sometimes furtively, the events of the narrative all occur according to the will of YHWH.<sup>62</sup> Thus, it is YHWH who reigns in this theocracy and who rules sovereignly over history.

#### **Excursus on the Chronicler's Presentation of David's Death**

In analyzing the Chronicler's account of David's death (1 Chr 23:1-29:30), one quickly notes that the account is not cast as a typical death story. The entire account is an intricately structured narrative dealing specifically with the transfer of kingship—complete with an introductory title (23:1), a comprehensive collection of registries of the clergy and civic leaders (23:2-27:34), an equally extensive series of reports regarding the investiture of Solomon (28:1-29:25), and a final concluding regnal resume (29:26-30).<sup>63</sup> However, upon closer examination, the Chronicler seems at least familiar with other Old

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<sup>61</sup>Wharton, "A Plausible Tale," 347.

<sup>62</sup>Long, *1 Kings with an Introduction to Historical Literature*, 40.

<sup>63</sup>Simon J. DeVries, *1 and 2 Chronicles, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 186-87.

Testament death stories and with the death story form. The Chronicler appears to use formal elements and a narrative progression typical of death stories to communicate his message. The following will briefly summarize the structure of the Chronicles account of David's death with the death story form in mind. Then, we will comment on how the Chronicler's presentation illumines his theological interests.

**The structure of the Chronicler's account of David's death.** Several aspects in the Chronicler's account function as typical formal elements in a death story. He begins his narrative with an implied announcement of impending death (1 Chr 23:1a; "David was old and full of days"; וְדָוִד זָקֵן וְשָׂבַע יָמָיו) that recalls the earlier account of David's death (1 Kgs 1:1a), as well as that of Abraham (Gen 24:1a; cf. 25:8).<sup>614</sup> Besides this announcement, the Chronicler includes a pronouncement on the life of David (23:1b; "he made his son Solomon king over Israel"; וַיִּמְלֹךְ אֶת־שְׁלֹמֹה בְּנוֹ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל) and two descriptions of the gathering of individuals for David's final words in 23:2 ("And he gathered together all the leaders of Israel as well as all the priests and the Levites"; וַיִּאָסֶף אֶת־כָּל־שָׂרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהַכֹּהֲנִים וְהַלְוִיִּם); and in 28:1 ("Now David assembled . . ."; וַיִּקְהַל דָּוִד). The Chronicler also incorporates several end-of-life addresses by the king: two charging Solomon and the people regarding the building of the temple and their need to be faithful to YHWH (28:2-10, 19-21); one encouraging the assembly to donate to the construction effort (29:1-5); one offering a prayer to God (29:10-19); and a final one commanding the people to bless YHWH (29:20b; "Bless now YHWH your God"; בְּרַכּוּ־נָא אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם). The final regnal resume also has several typical formal elements, including a description of the length of reign (29:27) and a concluding death notice (29:28; "Then he died in a good old age, full of days, riches

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<sup>614</sup>See below.

and honor”); (וַיָּמָת בְּשִׁיבָה טוֹבָה שִׁבְעַ יָמִים עֲשָׂר וְכָבוֹד).

But the Chronicler also includes many elements not found in a typical death story: the various registries of Levites and priests (23:2-24:31), musicians (25:1-31), gatekeepers (26:1-32), and commanders/heads of the people (27:1-34); a brief narrative describing David giving the plans for the temple to Solomon (28:11-18); a report concerning the response of the people to David’s request for temple funds (29:6-9); a description of the sacrifices and celebrations of the people and their subsequent coronation of Solomon (29:20-22); an account detailing the ease of transition to Solomon and his initial success as king (29:23-25); and finally a rather comprehensive regnal resume (29:26-30). The account is far too intricate and involved to be a death story. But this has not prevented the genre from influencing how the Chronicler composed the account of David’s death.

If the Chronicler wrote his account with a death story in the background, this could explain how he understood the various events that went on in the account in between the announcement of impending death (23:1a) and the regnal resume (29:26-30). In particular, each of these events serves in some way to order the house of David. From his provision for a smooth transition of leadership, to his registering of the leaders of Israel, to his preparation for the construction of the temple itself, David is one who masterfully provides for his house—the kingdom itself—in preparation for his death.

**Theological emphasis: Davidic kingship.** Based on the preceding form critical discussion, a few general observations about the theological emphases of the Chronicler are evident.<sup>615</sup> First and most obviously, the Chronicler is focused upon David

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<sup>615</sup>For a helpful summary of the theological themes in Chronicles, see David M. Howard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 253-69.

and Davidic kingship.<sup>616</sup> This is most apparent when we compare the account of David's death from Chronicles with that of Kings. The Chronicler appears to have been familiar with the Deuteronomistic historian's death story and was writing his version of David's death with 1 Kings in mind. The Chronicler may have purposefully altered the historian's version to highlight his own theological emphases.

Upon closer inspection, this theory is confirmed. In fact, the Chronicler seems to contrast the two accounts from the beginning. In the Kings version, the narrator starts David's death story with the circumstantial clause, "Now King David was old, advanced in age" (1 Kgs 1:1a; וְהַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד זָקֵן בָּא בְיָמָיו). The Chronicler begins similarly: "Now David was old and full of days" (1 Chr 23:1a; וְדָוִד זָקֵן וְשָׂבַע יָמָיו).<sup>617</sup> However, the second clauses in the respective verses are obviously different. These describe the initial pronouncement on the life of the dying (1 Kgs 1:1b, c; 1 Chr 23:1b). In the Kings account, David is described as old and unable to keep himself warm (i.e., he was sick and weak, both physically and politically); in the Chronicles account, David is old, but he is said to have successfully made his son Solomon king over Israel. Thus, the Chronicler sums up the whole account of 1 Kings 1 with this one phrase and does not mention David's frailty at the end of life, his loss of control over his kingdom, and the entire succession controversy.<sup>618</sup>

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<sup>616</sup>That this is a major theme of the book of Chronicles is widely recognized. For example, see David Noel Freedman, "The Chronicler's Purpose," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 23 (1961): 436-42; Howard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, 256-60; R. North, "Theology of the Chronicler," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963): 369-81; J. A. Thompson, *1, 2 Chronicles*, The New American Commentary, vol. 9 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 36-37.

<sup>617</sup>Japhet suggests that the change in wording from "advanced in years" in 1 Kgs 1:1 to "full of years" in 1 Chr 23:1 is purposeful, "removing the negative tone which accompanies David's old age in I Kings 1-2." Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 411.

<sup>618</sup>In addition, the Chronicler does not refer to the Machiavellian politics of David's final speech in 1 Kgs 2:1-9.

On the contrary, the Chronicler describes David as a king, who despite his old age, orders his kingdom rightly. Each element in 1 Chronicles 23:1-29:30 reinforces this impression. In particular, the Chronicler's inclusion of the registries (23:2-27:34) makes a clear statement regarding the orderly nature of David's departure. The king assigns all the prominent members of society—priests, musicians, commanders, heads of households—their appropriate place in the kingdom.<sup>619</sup> By contrast, the Kings account depicts chaos and infighting even among the members of the king's own court. As noted above, other events cited in 1 Chronicles 23:1-29:30 also show David ordering his household well. He makes certain that the temple is well provisioned. He offers encouragement to his successor with words reminiscent of Moses' charges to Joshua (1 Chr 28:10, 20; cf. Deut 31:2-8). But most important for an ordered house, in Chronicles David ensures an orderly succession. The Chronicler summarizes Solomon's succession by portraying him as sitting and prospering on the "throne of YHWH," with the devoted obedience of the officials, the mighty men, and also all the sons of King David (1 Chr 29:23-25). He is silent as to Solomon's seditious sibling Adonijah or Joab or any of the other rebels against Solomon's reign of 1 Kings 1.<sup>620</sup>

Finally, perhaps a more subtle evaluation of David in the Chronicles account is made by comparing the king with Abraham. However, this rhetorical strategy was also used by the historian of 1 Kings, but for opposite purposes. As noted above, the Chronicler seems to make a clear reference to Abraham's death story in the announcement of impending death (1 Chr 23:1a; cf. Gen 24:1a). But unlike the portrayal

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<sup>619</sup>By gathering, registering, and charging these officials, Tuell writes that David "prepared for Solomon's assumption of power by assembling a reliable bureaucracy." Steven S. Tuell, *First and Second Chronicles, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 94.

<sup>620</sup>Most of the accounts in 1 Chr 23-29 represent new material provided by the Chronicler. Howard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, 258.

of David in 1 Kings 1, the picture in 1 Chronicles 23-29 depicts a David who is very much like the patriarch. Just as Abraham is blessed by God in all things (Gen 24:1b) and is successful in providing for his successor Isaac (Gen 24:2-67), so the Chronicler's David sets his successor Solomon securely on his throne (1 Chr 23:1b) and provides for an orderly transition (1 Chr 23:2-29:25). That Abraham is in the Chronicler's mind as he writes is confirmed by comparing the death notices found in the respective stories. The death notice in 1 Chronicles 29:1 ("Then he died in a good old age, full of days, riches and honor"; וַיָּמָת בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה שְׁבַע יָמִים עֶשְׂרִי וְכַבֹּד) clearly parallels the notice describing Abraham's death ("Abraham breathed his last and died in a good hoary age, an old man and satisfied with life"; וַיָּגֹעַ וַיָּמָת אֲבָרָהֶם בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן וְשָׂבַע). Thus, the image of David found in 1 Chronicles 23-29 is one of a king who is like Abraham. He is in control in his old age, orders his house well, and provides for his successor/son successfully.

**Theological emphasis: Temple, worship, and the priesthood.** Second, based on the form critical examination of the Chronicler's account, one can see an emphasis on the temple, worship, and the priesthood.<sup>621</sup> Interestingly, much of David's efforts in ordering his house are devoted to the building of the temple and the ordering of YHWH's house (raising funds, transferring the plans to Solomon, and charging the priests and Levites). In fact, of all the leaders of Israel registered after the announcement of impending death in 23:1, the Chronicler mentions the Levites and priests first. The Chronicler seems to believe that the king's primary responsibility prior to death is more than just naming a successor. He must also ensure that the cultic life of the nation was in order. This is the "theological" house of David. This concept is somewhat unique in the

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<sup>621</sup>Ibid., 261-63.

ANE context. Both Israelite and ANE authors employed “house of X” to refer to a dynasty and to the nation as a political entity.<sup>622</sup> But the Chronicler seems to be thinking of “house” in broader terms.

**Theological emphasis: A unified Israel and prayer.** Two final emphases are also seen in the Chronicler’s account in 1 Chronicles 23:1-29:30—that of a unified Israel and prayer.<sup>623</sup> Regarding the latter, one of David’s last acts is to pray (29:10-19). Regarding the former, the Chronicler portrays all Israel unified at David’s death. For instance, all the leaders of Israel are gathered (23:2) and then registered (23:3-27:34). All the leaders of Israel then gather for David’s final acts (28:1). All the leaders of Israel participate in the financing of the temple (29:6-9). All Israel hears David’s final blessing and prayer (29:10-20). All Israel participates in the nationwide celebration (29:20-22) of Solomon’s coronation. All Israel and its leaders obeyed Solomon (29:23-24). Finally, YHWH then exalts Solomon in the sight of all Israel (29:25).

#### **Exegesis of the Death Story of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:1-21)**

The last death story in the Old Testament describes the death of Hezekiah, Judah’s best documented king.<sup>624</sup> This story shows considerable development in the rhetorical and theological use of the genre. Authors of previous death stories modified the story form in significant ways, but the skilled historian behind the books of Kings is the first to exploit the omission of a key structural element to communicate his message. This message is both prophetic and theological.

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<sup>622</sup>E.g., the Tel Dan inscription refers to the nation as “the house of David” (בֵּית דָּוִד).

<sup>623</sup>Howard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, 253-56 and 266-68.

<sup>624</sup>Arnold writes that biblical and extrabiblical material gives more insight on Hezekiah personally and politically than any other king in the history of Judah or Israel. Bill T. Arnold, “Hezekiah,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 408.

## Historical and Literary Context

The reign of Hezekiah is recounted in 2 Kings 18-20. Both historically and within the context of Kings, these chapters mark the beginning of the end for the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The previous two chapters had provided an account of the Northern Kingdom's disintegration (2 Kgs 16-17), and blatantly stated the reasons for its fall. Judah now stood alone, but only for a time, for it had also exhibited some of the same waywardness that led to the exile of the North.<sup>625</sup> The God who had decimated Samaria, would soon judge Jerusalem. Furthermore, the instrument of God's wrath upon the North—the brutal and imperialistic Assyrian empire—still remained a threat to all nations in the region, including Judah. So, 2 Kings 18-20 is filled with doubt and fear. Would God use Assyria to judge Judah as well? Would the Southern Kingdom survive? Into this tumultuous time stepped one of the most virtuous and faithful kings in the history of Judah—Hezekiah.

Hezekiah's rule (714-687 BC)<sup>626</sup> represented a period of short-lived hope for the Jews. According to 2 Kings 18-19, this righteous monarch led the nation both religiously and politically through a chaotic period. He accomplished this principally by returning to the YHWH-centered faith of his forefather David. In fact, Hezekiah began his reign with religious reformations not seen in the history of Israel since David.<sup>627</sup> The

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<sup>625</sup>The Southern Kingdom had not escaped prophetic condemnation. And national spiritual rebellion—"walking after other gods" (Jer 7:9)—would only get worse under the leadership of later Jewish kings like Manasseh.

<sup>626</sup>The chronology of Hezekiah's reign is a subject of much debate. In particular, disagreement exists as to the exact date of the events in 2 Kings 20. House, *1, 2 Kings*, 352. Evidence seems to point to his last fifteen years as being 701-687/6 BC. K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 31. Hezekiah became coregent in 727 BC, but his first year as sole ruler was not until 714 or 715. Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 270-74. Merrill dates his first year as coregent to 729 BC, but he keeps the date of Hezekiah's death at 686. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 410.

<sup>627</sup>Only David and Hezekiah merit the commendation from the historian, "YHWH was with him." Cf. 1 Sam 16:18; 18:12, 14; 2 Sam 5:10; 2 Kgs 18:7. Iain Provan, *Hezekiah and the Books of Kings: A Contribution to the Debate about the Composition of the Deuteronomistic History* (New York: de Gruyter, 1988), 117. But as Polzin explains, "The narrator extols Hezekiah in terms that excel even those used to describe David." Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 89.

king rejected the idolatry of his father Ahaz, reaffirmed the Torah, removed the high places, led his people in covenant renewal, encouraged his kingdom and the remnants of the Northern Kingdom to reaffirm the Passover as a national holiday, and destroyed the sacred stones, Asherah poles, and the bronze snake of Moses (2 Kgs 18:3-7).<sup>628</sup> In addition, he proved himself faithful to YHWH even with Sennacherib and the seemingly invincible Assyrians laying siege to the holy city (2 Kgs 18:13-19:37).<sup>629</sup> Because of Hezekiah's faith, YHWH brought about a remarkable deliverance for the city of Jerusalem, killing thousands of Assyrians in one night and sending Sennacherib back to his homeland humbled. Thus, spiritually, militarily, and politically, Hezekiah seems to be a "hero" thus far in 2 Kings.<sup>630</sup>

At the end of 2 Kings 19, it seemed that Judah might avoid the exile experienced by Samaria. The historian gives no reason for a lack of confidence, nor does he give reason to believe that these might be the last days of Judah. But what would happen when this great leader Hezekiah died? Would the next king follow in his footsteps? Would Hezekiah ensure an ordered house and therefore an ordered Judah?

These questions are answered in the story of Hezekiah's death, told in 2 Kings 20. The story consists of two principal narrative elements—the story of the king's illness (vv. 1-11) and the story of the Babylonian envoys (vv. 12-19). Interestingly, these narratives in 2 Kings 20 are both paratactic; the events are out of chronological order. Since both probably occur before the invasion and siege by Sennacherib, they represent

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<sup>628</sup>The failure of all previous kings to remove the high places has been a constant complaint on the part of the historian (cf. 1 Kgs 15:14; 22:43; 2 Kgs 12:3; 14:4; 15:4, 35). Iain Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, New International Biblical Commentary, vol. 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 252.

<sup>629</sup>Arnold writes, "It is precisely his devotion to Yahweh that is at stake in the conflict with Sennacherib." Arnold, "Hezekiah," 408. For an excellent survey of the history behind 2 Kgs 18-19, see Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 410-17; House, *1, 2 Kings*, 352-72.

<sup>630</sup>Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 252.

“narrative flashbacks.”<sup>631</sup> But the narrator places them in the death story of Hezekiah for rhetorical and theological purposes. The reasons why will be explored below.

### Form/Structure

The two key episodes of the death story (vv. 1-11, 12-19) are generally believed to represent separate traditions. Some have suggested that verses 8-11 are even distinct from verses 1-7.<sup>632</sup> But regardless of composition history, the historian seems to have weaved the traditions together to form a coherent death story in 2 Kings 20.<sup>633</sup> In fact, the account has many of the formal elements characteristic of other death stories. The narrator introduces the death story with a stereotypical announcement of impending death in verse 1a. This announcement is reiterated in Isaiah’s prophetic pronouncement in verse 1b.<sup>634</sup> Based on comparison with other death stories, an effort by Hezekiah to put his house in order should have followed these announcements. For instance, the reader might expect a farewell speech or perhaps an embedded narrative describing how Hezekiah established the throne of his successor. But instead of this anticipated formal element, the historian relates the account of the king’s mortal illness and subsequent recovery (vv. 2-11) and the report of the visit by the Babylonian envoys (vv. 12-19). Both of these episodes actually have the ironic effect of placing his house in a state of

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<sup>631</sup>Burke O. Long, *2 Kings*, *The Forms of Old Testament Literature*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 191-92. For an explanation of the paratactic style, see also Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 417.

<sup>632</sup>For example, see John Gray, *I & II Kings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., *The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 698. Tradition critics have further subdivided the text into two or three redactional layers, involving a pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic Deuteronomist. For a thorough discussion of the issues of composition history, see Provan, *Hezekiah and the Books of Kings*, 113-43; and Christopher T. Begg, “2 Kings 20:12-19 as an Element of the Deuteronomistic History,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (1986): 27-38.

<sup>633</sup>Though different in focus, the two narratives share a similar character—Isaiah—and theme—Hezekiah’s illness. Of course, the illness itself is the occasion for the visit by the envoys in vv. 12-19. Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, *Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 243.

<sup>634</sup>This is part of the embedded narrative in vv. 2-11.

disorder. This will be explained further below. The death story closes with a typical regnal resume formula (vv. 20-21), containing a regnal summary, a death notice, and a succession notice.

The narrative contains seven formal elements, including two embedded narratives, spanning four formal stages (see Table 10). The following will examine each of the elements in order of their appearance.

Table 10. The formal structure of the death story of Hezekiah

Stage	Formal Element	CL	Hebrew Text	English Translation
ADS	Announcement of impending death (by narrator)	1a	בַּיָּמִים הֵהֵם הָלָה חִזְקִיָּהוּ לְמוֹת	In those days Hezekiah became ill and near death.
POS	Announcement of impending death (by YHWH through his prophet): part of the embedded narrative to follow	1b	וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיו יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ בֶן־אֲמוֹץ הַנָּבִיא	And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and he said to him,
		1c	וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו	“Thus says YHWH,
		1d	כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה	‘Put your house in
		1e	צוּ לְבֵיתְךָ	order,
		1f	כִּי מֵת אַתָּה	for you shall surely die
		1g	וְלֹא תַחִיָּה:	and not live.”
POS	Description of putting the house in order: final words and deeds, part 1	2-11		Embedded narrative describing Hezekiah’s pleading for his life and subsequent healing
POS	Description of putting the house in order: final words and deeds, part 2	12-19		Embedded narrative describing the visit of Babylonian envoys and Isaiah’s confrontation of the king
DS	Summary of reign	20		Part of the normal succession formula
DS	Death notice	21a	וַיִּשְׁכַּב חִזְקִיָּהוּ עִם־אֲבוֹתָיו	Thus Hezekiah slept with his fathers,
RS	Succession notice	21b	וַיִּמְלֹךְ מְנַשֶּׁה בְּנוֹ תַחְתָּיו:	and Manasseh his son reigned in his place.

CL=Clause Label ADS=Announcement of Impending Death Stage

POS=Putting the House in Order Stage DS=Death Stage RS=Response Stage

**Announcement of impending death, by narrator (20:1a).** Hezekiah's death story begins typically, with the narrator announcing the king's impending death.

Hezekiah has become ill (חלה) with a sickness leading to death (לְמוֹת).<sup>635</sup> The timing of the illness is debatable; "in those days" provides an ambiguous context. It most likely occurred about the same time as or shortly before the siege of Jerusalem.<sup>636</sup> However, by placing the account at the end of the narration of Hezekiah's reign, the historian clearly wants the events of 2 Kings 20 to be understood as the final and perhaps most-revealing events in Hezekiah's life. This narrative will pave the way for the downfall of Judah.

**Announcement of impending death, by YHWH through Isaiah (20:1b).**

This first announcement of impending death is followed immediately by a second one by YHWH through the prophet Isaiah. In previous death stories (like Jacob and Moses), a repetition of this formal element always occurs later in the death story, and it usually introduces a second or third effort to put the house in order. Only here is an announcement of impending death reiterated in the same verse. This adaptation of the form highlights the certainty of the prophetic pronouncement; the king's death seems unavoidable and imminent. Isaiah reports the words of YHWH in both a positive and negative fashion—Hezekiah will die; he will not recover. With this divine decree, everything seems settled.<sup>637</sup>

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<sup>635</sup>Cf. 1 Kgs 15:23; 2 Kgs 13:14. Harrison, "חלה," 2:140-42.

<sup>636</sup>Donald Wiseman, *1 & 2 Kings*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 9 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 287.

<sup>637</sup>This announcement is reminiscent of earlier episodes in the historian's work. In fact, the story of Hezekiah's illness and recovery has been labeled a "type scene," mirroring three other narratives in which a king receives a prophetic pronouncement about his future death. These kings include Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14), Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1), and Ben-hadad (2 Kgs 8:7-15). Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 140. However, Hezekiah's account differs from these others in some significant ways. Whereas in the other accounts, the dying king sends for a prophet, here Isaiah comes with the message uninvited. In the other type scenes, the divine sentence (and the death) occurs at the end of the scene; here, the account opens with the announcement of doom. The narrator's strategy in the death story of Hezekiah seems to be to focus not on the prophetic announcement, but on the royal response.

Hezekiah's sickness does not seem to be an act of divine judgment. The king does not ask for forgiveness; in fact, in 2 Kings 18-19, he has proven himself consistently to be righteous in God's eyes. Instead, such a message from Isaiah should be considered gracious. By knowing of his impending death, Hezekiah is given time to make preparations for a secure and stable monarchy in his absence.<sup>638</sup>

The exact meaning of the verb "charge" (צויה) is debatable. But based on comparison with the death stories of David and Jacob (1 Kgs 2:1a; Gen 49:29), the word refers to verbal actions by which one takes care of one's interests before death (cf. Deut 3:28; 2 Sam 17:23; Isa 38:1).<sup>639</sup> For Jacob, the word described his giving a final testament. For David, "charging" included giving final political and religious orders to his successor and son Solomon. In both cases, the words or "charges" have the effect of ordering the house of the dying—sometimes by finding a successor, sometimes by giving important instructions, sometimes by making sure that the words and promises of God are made clear to the next generation.

In Hezekiah's case, all may have been implied. Indeed, the narrator may have been deliberately recalling the previous death stories of Jacob and David in order to demonstrate what Hezekiah should have done. As a dying king in the Davidic line and in the tradition of the patriarchs, he should have named his successor to lessen the inevitable political turmoil stemming from the death of a monarch.<sup>640</sup> As a dying king in the

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<sup>638</sup>Cohn calls it "a forewarning so that Hezekiah could set his house in order." Cohn, "Convention and Creativity in the Book of Kings," 613.

<sup>639</sup>Tyler F. Williams, "צויה," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:779. Williams suggests that this nuance to the word parallels the Arabic verb *wasy*, meaning "to enjoin," "to make a last testament," or "to give parting charges." *Ibid.*, 776.

<sup>640</sup>Ensuring "successors" was accomplished in the death stories of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David. It is perhaps because Hezekiah has failed to name one as yet that he reacts with such anxiety in response to Isaiah's announcement of his impending death. For an example of the turmoil created by the death of a king, cf. the tension Isaiah seems to express in Isa 6:1.

Davidic line and in the tradition of the patriarchs, he should have instructed his son in the way he should rule, by giving both political and theological counsel. And as a dying king in the Davidic line and in the tradition of the patriarchs, he should have made sure the future king is made aware of the covenant promises and responsibilities. In short, Hezekiah should not worry about his own life, but should focus his efforts on ordering his household before death. This principle is illustrated in other death stories, where the dying always showed this type of selfless concern for future generations. For instance, Abraham provided a wife for Isaac; Jacob blessed all his sons; Moses chose a successor and mediated Torah to the people; and David provided a secure throne for Solomon. Hezekiah should have followed these examples; he should have set his house in order.

**Description of putting the house in order, part 1 (20:2-11).** Thus, the story should have told of one or more actions by Hezekiah to put his house in order, after which he would die. Instead, the narrator unexpectedly describes a plea by Hezekiah to postpone death. The final charging did not occur; the final testament was not given; the choosing and proper training of a successor did not happen; instead, Hezekiah prayed to YHWH to spare his life. Hezekiah turned “his face to the wall” in an appeal for divine deliverance.<sup>641</sup> The exact nature of Hezekiah’s request is unclear. Did he ask for just a temporary deliverance, or for longer life, or for simply enough time to put his house in order? All we know is the rationale; the king implored God to spare him because of his own character. And Hezekiah describes his own faithfulness in glowing terms.<sup>642</sup> On the

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<sup>641</sup>Gray states Hezekiah is turning from the world to God. Gray, *I & II Kings*, 697. However, such a gesture could be interpreted as a nonverbal expression of stubborn resistance. Cf. 1 Kgs 21:4, where a similar phrase is used to describe Ahab’s sulking when he learns that Naboth will not give him his property. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 263.

<sup>642</sup>Long, *2 Kings*, 237. Long notes that the three phrases describing Hezekiah are used to recall earlier examples of faithfulness in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History. For example, “walked before you with faithfulness” recalls David’s speech to Solomon (1 Kgs 2:4; cf. 1 Kgs 3:6; Josh 24:14); “done what is good in your sight” recalls the “Deuteronomic idea of obedience” (Deut 6:18; cf. 2 Kgs 12:2; 14:3; 18:3; 22:2); and “with a whole heart” recalls Deuteronomic prescriptions as well (Deut 6:5).

surface, the reasoning is thoroughly orthodox and in line with the historian's evaluation in 18:1-6, as well as with many of the lament psalms, where the petitioner claims his own righteousness as the basis for his deliverance.<sup>643</sup> However, this prayer seems strangely self-interested—as Provan writes, perhaps providing “for the first time a suggestion that Hezekiah has an attitude problem.”<sup>644</sup>

Hezekiah's reaction is even more suspect when compared to actions of Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh. As discussed above in chapter 3, the Epic of Gilgamesh tells how Enkidu learns via a dream that the gods had chosen him to die instead of Gilgamesh.<sup>645</sup> Upon hearing of his doom, at first he bewails and curses those whom he deems responsible for his fate. Unrequited, he presents his grievances before Shamash, the god of justice. At this point, the storyline seems somewhat similar to the death story of Hezekiah—both Hezekiah and Enkidu appeal to the justice of God/the gods for their deliverance. However, the storylines soon diverge. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Shamash reminds Enkidu of his full and blessed life, thereby convincing Enkidu to accept his destiny and relent from his curses. Hezekiah does not curse anyone for his fate, but he does not accept his destiny as Enkidu does. Remarkably, the account of Enkidu seems more in line with the biblical tradition of death stories, where the one dying always consents to his impending death.

Regardless of the legitimacy of his prayer, Hezekiah soon received an answer.

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<sup>643</sup>E.g., Pss 17:3-5; 26:1-5. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 244. In addition, it recalls Hezekiah's pious prayer for national deliverance from Assyria (2 Kgs 19:15-19). As Cohn writes, the logic of the supplication “would make any red-blooded Deuteronomist proud.” Cohn, *2 Kings*, 141.

<sup>644</sup>Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 263. Brueggemann calls the prayer a “healthy self-assertion,” which is “close to bargaining, very much as Job might have prayed.” Walter Brueggemann, *2 Kings* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 83. On the contrary, House states that since everything Hezekiah says about himself is true, then it is not arrogance. House, *1, 2 Kings*, 373.

<sup>645</sup>*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. and ed. Benjamin R. Foster (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 53-65. See Tablets 7-8.

Before Isaiah had left the middle court between the temple and the palace, the word of God came to him.<sup>646</sup> God had heard Hezekiah's petitions and seen his tears, and thus he would act on behalf of the king. He would also act on behalf of Jerusalem, delivering them from the hand of the Assyrians.<sup>647</sup> God's grounds for his actions are curious. God responded favorably to the prayer because of David and for his own glory (v. 4), but not because of Hezekiah or his righteousness. The historian clearly indicates that God had something more important in mind than just Hezekiah's recovery. In fact, Hezekiah's rescue from death seems to be an illustration of what God would soon accomplish for Zion itself.<sup>648</sup> But the king would benefit personally from God's deliverance—gaining a reprieve of not just a few more years, but instead fifteen more.<sup>649</sup> In order to bring about the physical healing, Isaiah performed a physical sign; he applied a poultice of figs to the king's boil.<sup>650</sup>

The king then asked for a sign that the healing would be accomplished and that he would be able to return to the temple in three days. Some have argued that this request is unnecessary, and thus the account is redundant.<sup>651</sup> Hezekiah had already been healed, so why did he ask for a sign? House offers an explanation. Verse 7 provides an

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<sup>646</sup>Unlike the other type scenes in 2 Kings mentioned above (which all ended in immediate death), this episode speaks of YHWH's answer to prayer. Cohn, *2 Kings*, 141.

<sup>647</sup>The five first person verbs speak of YHWH's direct and purposeful action in bringing about a reversal of the original pronouncement. *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>648</sup>In 2 Kgs 18-19, YHWH had already accomplished this deliverance.

<sup>649</sup>Interestingly, Hezekiah is the only king in the four type scenes to recover. Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14), Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1), and Ben-hadad (2 Kgs 8:7-15) all die. Cohn, "Convention and Creativity in the Book of Kings," 612.

<sup>650</sup>Barker suggests that the boil was the result of the bubonic plague. This plague spread to the Assyrians and explains their death. But Hezekiah recovered from the boil. Margaret Barker, "Hezekiah's Boil," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 95 (2001): 31-42. However, this speculation goes beyond the text, and a natural explanation detracts from the text's obvious emphasis on the miraculous. On the medical uses of figs, see Gray, *I & II Kings*, 698.

<sup>651</sup>The sign narrative does fit naturally as part of the "story-telling pattern." Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 244.

account of physical healing, whereas verses 8-11 tell how Hezekiah is healed psychologically.<sup>652</sup> One should note that this request for a sign does not mean that Hezekiah lacked faith. Indeed, his father Ahaz had been reprimanded for not requesting a sign (Isa 7:11-17).<sup>653</sup> Instead, Isaiah was perfectly willing to honor his request.

What then is the purpose of this embedded narrative in verses 1-11? The historian's purpose is subtle. He obviously approves of much of Hezekiah's reign. However, there are hints that the historian is not altogether pleased with Hezekiah's actions in this passage. The plea for healing and the request for a sign are not necessarily wrong. But the narrator's opinion of Hezekiah's prayer may be shaped by what happened during the fifteen years granted as a result of the prayer. While the specifics of what occurred during Hezekiah's final years are unclear,<sup>654</sup> we do know that some tragic events did occur. First, during this time, Manasseh was chosen as a Hezekiah's coregent at the age of twelve.<sup>655</sup> This choice gave Hezekiah ten years to "train" his son as his successor.<sup>656</sup> Hezekiah's efforts obviously were not effective. Manasseh is recognized by the historian as the most wicked king in Jewish history. Indeed, the author of Kings ultimately blames Manasseh for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile itself (2 Kgs 23:26; 24:3). As Merrill writes, he was "the antithesis of everything for which Hezekiah stood."<sup>657</sup> So Hezekiah failed to order his house properly, even with the extra fifteen

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<sup>652</sup>Cohn, "Convention and Creativity in the Book of Kings," 613.

<sup>653</sup>House, *1, 2 Kings*, 373.

<sup>654</sup>Cohn, *2 Kings*, 145. He writes, "The fifteen years of Hezekiah's life after his illness are nearly a blank. No dramatized scenes or even reports fill in the time."

<sup>655</sup>Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 433. Merrill states that this happened in 696 BC. He suggests that Hezekiah's illness prompted him "to take measures insuring dynastic succession."

<sup>656</sup>Wiseman, *1&2 Kings*, 286.

<sup>657</sup>Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 433.

years, with disastrous consequences. In a way, his naming and “training” of Manasseh as coregent and successor put the house of Judah in a state of disorder. The other major event that occurred during the last fifteen years of Hezekiah’s life was the visit from the Babylonian envoys described in verses 12-19. As will be described below, this event also had some ruinous ramifications for Judah. Given these two episodes, one wonders whether the historian might have desired that Hezekiah would have done as many pillars of the Hebrew faith had before him. He should have accepted his fate, set his house in order properly, and died a peaceful death, being “gathered to his fathers.”

**Description of putting the house in order, part 2 (20:12-19).** The second embedded account also features the prophet Isaiah and the king. This embedded narrative is more overtly negative towards Hezekiah than the first episode in the death story. The narrator tells of a visit of envoys from Merodach-Baladan (Marduk-apla-iddina II) of Babylon, a rival of the Assyrian kings, who in 703-02 BC had led a revolt against Sennacherib.<sup>658</sup> Ostensibly, the occasion for the visit was to congratulate Hezekiah on his recent recovery; but the visit was probably also motivated by political reasons. The Babylonians may have been investigating the possibility of an alliance. Hezekiah responded to the visit by displaying for the envoys all the gold, jewels, and wealth of the kingdom.<sup>659</sup> Certainly, the exilic reader (and the historian) would have viewed the event as an ominous precursor to the exile itself. The irony here is tangible. As Cohn writes, “It is ironic that just after Hezekiah is assured by YHWH that Jerusalem will not fall, the king of the nation that ultimately conquers Jerusalem appears bearing

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<sup>658</sup>Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 273. The timing of this account is also debatable. The amount of the treasures described in the account suggests that the visit was before Hezekiah paid tribute to Assyria in 701 BC.

<sup>659</sup>Hezekiah did this perhaps to show evidence of the kingdom’s power. Wiseman, *1 & 2 Kings*, 288.

gifts.”<sup>660</sup>

After the visit, the prophet Isaiah confronted Hezekiah and questioned the king about the envoys. He asked two pointed questions, “What did the men say?” and “From where did they come?” Hezekiah did not answer the first question. But in response to the second question, he actually provided more information than needed.<sup>661</sup> Instead of saying simply “from Babylon,” Hezekiah added “from a far country.” Some disagreement exists over what is meant by the last phrase.<sup>662</sup> However, the prophetic denunciation to follow suggests that the inclusion of the phrase probably foreshadows the exile.<sup>663</sup> The reference to the items being carried to Babylon confirms that the exile is in mind. In verses 16-18, Isaiah proceeded to explain to Hezekiah exactly what his actions portended. The same nation who sent envoys to the king and marveled over the wealth of Israel would soon plunder the nation of its gold and jewels and would even take the king’s sons as eunuchs.<sup>664</sup>

Hezekiah responded to the prophecy by calling the word Isaiah had just delivered “good.” One could interpret Hezekiah’s response several ways. It could

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<sup>660</sup>Cohn, *2 Kings*, 144.

<sup>661</sup>Christopher Begg, “The Deuteronomistic Retouching of the Portrait of Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 20, 12-19,” *Biblische Notizen* 38/39 (1987): 7.

<sup>662</sup>Is it an attempt to deflect Isaiah’s probing by dismissing the envoys as inconsequential visitors? Or perhaps it is a way of legitimizing Hezekiah’s exhibition of his wealth? More likely, it is an ironic way of pointing to the land of the future exile? *Ibid.*, 8-10. Begg suggests that it is an attempt to “mitigate the strongly negative impression of Hezekiah’s deed” by recalling earlier harmless accounts in the Deuteronomistic History, such as the visit from a far country by the Queen of Sheeba. In response to Begg’s position, there may indeed be an analogy with the Queen of Sheeba’s visit (1 Kgs 10:1-10); but if so, as Nelson writes, “Hezekiah’s hospitality represents folly instead of wisdom.” Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 245.

<sup>663</sup>Peter Ackroyd, “An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile: A Study of 2 Kings 20, Isaiah 36-39,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27 (1974): 329-52.

<sup>664</sup>According to Provan, “References to plunder (v. 17) have an air of finality about them when read in light of 2 Kings 17:20, and references to royal eunuchs (v. 18) do not encourage confidence in the enduring nature of the Davidic line.” Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 265.

indicate his submissiveness to the judgment.<sup>665</sup> But Hezekiah does not seem meek here. Especially in light of 2 Chronicles 32:25, Hezekiah seems more self-serving, proud, and even glad that he will be spared such evil times.<sup>666</sup> But the “dark night of exile” will come soon enough,<sup>667</sup> and this visit represented one the historian’s first intimations of this sad future.<sup>668</sup>

**Summary of reign (20:20).** The death story closes with a regnal resume. Following convention, the resume includes a summary of the reign of the king, a death notice, and a succession notice. Hezekiah’s resume exhibits minimal embellishment. The only closing commendation from the author involves a reference to Hezekiah’s building of the Siloam Tunnel. Given the accolades granted earlier to the king in 2 Kings 18-19, the silence regarding Hezekiah’s religious reforms and military victories is striking. As Brueggemann writes, “The editorial comment in vv. 20-21 is a marvel of understatement. . . . [The historian] may be disappointed in his own major character!”<sup>669</sup>

**Death notice (20:21a).** The death notice itself is typically brief. As with other kings who died peacefully, the closing death formula describes Hezekiah as lying with

<sup>665</sup>Per Wiseman, *1&2 Kings*, 289; House, *1, 2 Kings*, 375. Cf. Ackroyd, “An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile,” 335-38.

<sup>666</sup>The Chronicler writes that Hezekiah did not respond properly to his healing, because his heart was proud. As Provan writes, “Hezekiah is surprisingly unmoved by this news. A man recently rescued from death, he is content simply to have peace and security in his lifetime (v. 19), a Solomon-like existence for a little while longer (cf. 1 Kgs 5:4).” Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 265.

<sup>667</sup>Brueggemann, *2 Kings*, 84. He writes, “Even this healed man of faith is less than fully faithful. Even he hedges his bets. The line has been clearly drawn by the prophet against the Assyrian danger. But the king will not leave it there. He negotiates with the enemy. He discloses state secrets. He shares family treasures. He makes an alliance with the very mockers of the living God (v. 13).” Why? Brueggemann answers, “Because he takes a very short-term view of life.”

<sup>668</sup>Perhaps we can understand the historian’s view of this event in light of what follows next in the narrative in 2 Kgs 21—the reign of Manasseh, the king whose blatant apostasy precipitated the ultimate judgment upon Judah.

<sup>669</sup>Brueggemann, *2 Kings*, 85.

his fathers.<sup>670</sup> The death notice differs from others in Kings in that it omits the location of burial.<sup>671</sup> But there is probably no theological significance in this death notice. It merely serves to conclude the death story. The author's point has already been made.

**Succession notice (20:21b).** The account ends with a notice about the successor to Hezekiah. This is typical of regnal resumes. Like the death notice, the succession notice is simple, even understated: "Manasseh his son succeeded him as king." But of all the statements in the death story an exilic reader would perhaps find this one the most regretful and tragic. The great and faithful king Hezekiah was passing the responsibility of leadership to the faithless apostate Manasseh.

### Genre

As a whole, the story of Hezekiah resembles other "regnal epochs" in 1 and 2 Kings.<sup>672</sup> The Hezekiah story (2 Kgs 18-20) is framed by a regnal resume (18:1-6; 20:20-21), though the concluding resume also functions as a close to the death story. Long labels the two embedded accounts in the death story as legend (20:1-11) and report (20:12-19).<sup>673</sup> The latter seems an appropriate classification, since it is "a brief self-contained narrative."<sup>674</sup> Legend—defined by Long as an account "which is concerned primarily with the wondrous and exemplary"—is not as appropriate, since it connotes

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<sup>670</sup>Nadav Na'aman, "Death Formulae and the Burial Place of the King of the House of David," *Biblica* 85 (2004): 245. He explains, "When the king was murdered, or otherwise died a violent death, or was deported and died in exile, the 'slept with his ancestors' formula is left out."

<sup>671</sup>*Ibid.*, 245-54. Na'aman speculates that the omission is actually favorable for Hezekiah. Previous kings in the book of Kings had all been buried "in the city of David," and later kings (starting with Manasseh) are buried in the garden of Uzza. Na'aman states that Hezekiah actually moved the burial place of the kings outside the city gates, mirroring the practice of the citizens of the city, in order to avoid defiling the city itself and specifically the temple with a dead body. But none of this is for certain.

<sup>672</sup>Long, *2 Kings*, 192.

<sup>673</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>674</sup>*Ibid.*

something unhistorical. But the healing of Hezekiah is portrayed as something that actually happened. So perhaps, our definition of “story” given in chapter 2 might fit this account better. In essence, 2 Kings 20 is an amalgamation of different genres, all weaved expertly into a death story, modified for rhetorical purposes.

### **Setting**

Some of the formal elements employed in the death story probably originated in the royal court. For instance, the regnal resume, death notice, and description of succession would have come from royal records. The setting of the embedded episodes is less certain, though they may also have arisen from the king’s records. However, the current setting of the episodes is literary; they function as formal elements in a death story. The death story itself may have originated in an exilic context. If this is the case, it would explain the focus on the exile and the inclusion of the account of the Babylonian envoys. Visits from foreign dignitaries were a common occurrence in the royal court, and probably occurred many times during Hezekiah’s reign. Why did the historian choose to include this specific account? The historian saw it as foreshadowing the exile.

### **Intention**

As will be demonstrated below, the intention of the exilic historian is theological and prophetic—to show how the nation of Judah slipped slowly towards God’s judgment.

### **Theological Conclusions**

We may make several observations both on the author’s theological message and on his opinion of Hezekiah. A helpful place to start is to ask why the historian adjusted the death story from the way he did. Why did he employ a death story containing two paratactic episodes? Long posits that the historian included the two accounts at the end of the Hezekiah narrative and out of chronological order because of

“thematic analogy and structural continuities” with the earlier accounts.<sup>675</sup> This assessment is partially true. The author does invite a comparison between the deliverance from utter destruction experienced by Jerusalem (2 Kgs 18-19) and the deliverance of Hezekiah from his mortal illness.<sup>676</sup> Indeed, both Hezekiah and Jerusalem had experienced a prophetic word of impending death; both had seen prophetic intervention on the part of Isaiah; both were providentially delivered and spared death for a time; and finally, God based his salvific acts for both on the same rationale (2 Kgs 19:34; 20:6). But if the historian’s only purpose was comparison, why did he not include these accounts earlier and in proper chronological order?

Writing from an exilic point of view, the historian responsible for editing these accounts seems to have had another purpose. The author seems to use the death story to point forward to the ultimate fate of Judah. In fact, Hezekiah’s last days mirror those of Judah. Despite the pleas of the faithful to extend the life of the nation, God would only withhold death from Jerusalem for so long. God did grant salvation for a period of time in order that Judah might order its house. But just like Hezekiah, Judah would commit serious errors during these “extra years” before it ultimately suffered the promised demise in 586 BC with the Babylonian exile. Despite God rescuing the nation from death many times over, like Hezekiah Judah would ultimately die. However, the author does not predict the demise of Judah unambiguously. The use of the death story is a somewhat furtive method of communicating his message. According to Nelson, “The narrator refuses to let the cat out of the bag prematurely.”<sup>677</sup> But the historian is letting the reader

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<sup>675</sup>Ibid.

<sup>676</sup>Provan, *Hezekiah and the Books of Kings*, 118.

<sup>677</sup>Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 246. But it is, as he writes, “a vital corrective to any overly-optimistic reading of chapters 18-19.”

know that all is not well with Judah. As exhibited in these events in Hezekiah's life, the nation has a spiritual problem.<sup>678</sup>

The author also uses the death story to characterize Hezekiah.<sup>679</sup> In 2 Kings 18-19, the king is portrayed as someone who sought after God, who led God's people well, and who could claim righteousness before him; that is, Hezekiah is portrayed as another David.<sup>680</sup> But in 2 Kings 20, the historian portrays Hezekiah as being like David in other, less admirable, ways. Like David, Hezekiah was a man of faith, but also a man with faults. He is a man of pride. He is a man who perhaps loved his own life too much.<sup>681</sup> And most importantly, he is a man who did not order his house well.

A final brief note on the theology of this account involves the characterization of YHWH himself. The real "hero" of the story of Hezekiah is YHWH himself. YHWH intervenes against the unassailable Assyrians; YHWH graciously extends Hezekiah's life; YHWH inspires Hezekiah's reforms; and YHWH brings Isaiah to counsel the king in time of need.

### **Brief Excursus on the Chronicler's Presentation**

The death story of Hezekiah is missing in the book of Chronicles. However, in comparing the accounts of the king's reign in Kings and Chronicles, the overall message

<sup>678</sup> Another way that this is indicated is in the author's use of "trust" in the narratives. References to trust in YHWH pepper previous passages in the Hezekiah narrative (18:5, 19, 20, 21 (2x), 22, 24, 30; 19:10). Arnold, "Hezekiah," 412. However, they are missing in the death story itself—which features an illness that should have evoked the same trust.

<sup>679</sup> As is often the case, one evaluates the spiritual health of God's chosen nation by evaluating the spiritual well-being of God's chosen leaders. In this way, the characterization of Hezekiah serves a crucial role in the narrative.

<sup>680</sup> The narrator's early theological evaluations tie the king to his predecessor. For instance, Wiseman thinks that the title in 2:4—"the God of your father David"—is a purposeful link with David (1 Kgs 1:35). Wiseman, *1&2 Kings*, 286.

<sup>681</sup> Comparatively speaking, David did order his house—but he had to be prompted to do so.

seems similar. Both the Chronicler and the author of Kings begin by extolling the virtues of Hezekiah. The historian of 2 Kings praises Hezekiah's Davidic devotion to YHWH. The Chronicler extols Hezekiah for his cultic achievements and reforms. When it comes to the illness of Hezekiah, however, both see this event as a major defect.<sup>682</sup> In fact, though the Chronicler presents the illness in a scant two verses (2 Chr 32:24-25), he is much more specific in his accusations of Hezekiah, expressly indicting the king for having a proud heart after his healing (2 Chr 32:25). Though Hezekiah later humbled himself (perhaps during the Assyrian siege; 2 Chr 32:26), God's wrath still came upon him and Judah. While the historian in 2 Kings is not as specific about Hezekiah's pride, his way of telling the story indicates that he feels similarly about the king. Thus, the historian's characterization of Hezekiah is substantiated by the Chronicler's presentation.

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<sup>682</sup>Interestingly, of the four type-scenes involving the illnesses of kings, the Chronicler deals only with the illness of Hezekiah. Cohn, "Convention and Creativity in the Book of Kings," 604.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

Most people have sat in the ophthalmologist's seat—an eye chart with blurry letters in the distance, an unwieldy spider-eyed contraption perched on one's nose, and a doctor peppering the patient with questions with each new lens, providing tissues to wipe away the tears. But by the end of the exam, one should experience visual clarity. The process of discovering the theology of biblical texts is similar. For exegetes to discern clearly the often elusive theological message of the Scriptures, they must often switch and combine different “lenses”—or methods of analysis. The different theological “lenses” include tasks like analyzing the grammar and syntax, ascertaining the structure, considering the context, and identifying the genre. And at the end of the process, the message should be clearer. The methodology and results of this study have hopefully provided another set of lenses to discern the message of the Scriptures.

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this study has been two-fold. The first objective was to establish that a definable and distinct genre of “death story” is present in the Old Testament. The second goal was to show that form critical exegesis of the death stories can yield significant theological insights. In this concluding chapter, we will not repeat the content and arguments in the first four chapters. Instead, the following attempts to synthesize our results and discuss our success in achieving the project's stated aims. In so doing, we will demonstrate the significance of this study for Old Testament studies in general and the field of form criticism in particular.

#### **Success and Significance of the Study's First Objective**

Regarding the first objective, chapters 3 and 4 provided substantial support for

the existence of the genre of “death story,” which hitherto had not been identified or analyzed by form critics. After a comparative study of ANE death accounts and an inductive study of all the death accounts in the Hebrew Scriptures, we identified nine death stories in the Old Testament. Each of these stories possesses common features, such as conventional vocabulary/formulae, characteristic formal elements/structures, and typical settings and functions. Thus, we established the genre based on the standard form critical criteria.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, we distinguished these death stories from simple death reports in that the former possess narrative characteristics such as tension and characterization and they have developed structures and plots. Most importantly, death stories in the Old Testament exhibit compositional intentionality and theological consequence. Through the form critical exegesis of chapter 4, these distinctive features became even more evident.

The identification of a new genre is significant in and of itself. But the most enduring contribution of this study may be its modification of traditional form critical methodology in a synchronic direction. These modifications include: (1) identifying the genre inductively, based on clues found within the text; (2) assuming the final form of the text in the exegetical process; and (3) focusing on the historical and particularly the literary context of the text. Thus, we paid little attention to *Formgeschichte* or the history of the form—including the prehistory of the text. Instead, this project recognized the paradigm shifts that have occurred in biblical studies over the past four decades away from such diachronic concerns. The older form criticism of Gunkel has been shown to be outmoded and speculative. But this study has demonstrated that, if appropriately modified, form criticism still has much to contribute to our understanding of biblical texts. In particular, significant insights may be gained by comparing the structures of

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<sup>1</sup>Our emphasis was obviously on the first two criteria.

various accounts to the stereotypical structure of the genre—exploring in particular the deviations, modifications, and expansions of the conventional form.

We hope that our adaptation of traditional form critical methodology may inspire future synchronic studies in the area of form criticism. Other as-yet-identified genres may exist in the Old Testament that could possibly yield exegetical fruit similar to that of death stories. Perhaps a similar methodology could even be used in the study of New Testament narratives. For instance, might the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death be understood and analyzed as death stories similar to those found in the Old Testament? In the Gospel narratives, Jesus announces his impending death (e.g., Mk 8:31; 9:30; 10:32). He brings his disciples to himself for final words and actions—especially during the final week before his crucifixion. Like the Old Testament characters, Jesus puts his house in order. And like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and others, Jesus commits his life into God's hands and selflessly shows concern for those who follow him—his church.

#### **Success and Significance of the Study's Second Objective**

Regarding our second objective, our modified form critical methodology has proven remarkably fruitful in revealing the theological message of these death stories. When this study commenced, the expectation was that the exegesis would principally provide information about ancient Hebrew thanatology. After all, the subject of this dissertation is “death” stories.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, we were not disappointed, as our research did corroborate as well as enhance our understanding of Hebrew thanatology. The surprising aspect of this project is how expertly the authors of Scripture used death stories to communicate their respective theological messages—messages not necessarily dealing with death itself. The following will summarize both the thanatological and more general

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<sup>2</sup>So, just as stories about Israelite monarchs should demonstrate a Hebrew theology of kingship, a story about someone on the brink of Sheol should convey something about the Hebrew conceptions and perceptions of the death event.

theological insights gained from our form critical exegesis.<sup>3</sup>

### **Thanatological Insights**

As indicated in chapter 2, scholars in recent years have provided numerous surveys of Hebrew thanatology. In that chapter, we summarized the findings of these studies, dividing the information into four categories—conceptions of death, dispositions toward death, preparations for death, and responses to death. The following will reexamine each of these categories, pointing out how our exegesis confirmed, corrected, or clarified previously held notions of Hebrew thanatology.<sup>4</sup>

**Hebrew conceptions of death.** First, our exegesis of the death stories seemed to corroborate much of what has been asserted about Hebrew conceptions of death. For instance, in death stories, the characters believed death to be universal and unavoidable. This belief is displayed poignantly in those stories where the dying individual announces his own death (e.g., Gen 48:21; 49:29; 50:24; 1 Kgs 2:2). In fact, this belief in the inevitability of death makes the death stories themselves powerful literature. When the protagonist or the narrator announces the death, the reader knows that the event is only a matter of time, and thus, setting one's house in order becomes a pressing need.

In addition, death stories demonstrated that the monotheism of the Israelites pervaded their view of death. In many of the stories, YHWH ordains and oversees the death event. In several stories, YHWH himself announces death to the dying (Num 20:24; Deut 31:14, 16; 2 Kgs 20:1). In addition, some of the protagonists of these stories

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<sup>3</sup>Much of this material is based on the “theological conclusions” sections at the end of each death story in chap. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Many of our findings were based on Crouch's methodology. Crouch suggests that views on death in any narrative are revealed in the narrator's comments on death (“direct definition”), the characters' comments on death (“indirect presentation,” via actions and speech), and the presentation of death as compared to the presentation of life (“analogy”). To this we added one category: the views of death as presented in YHWH's comments. Walter B. Crouch, *Death and Closure in Biblical Narrative*, Studies in Biblical Literature, vol. 7 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000), 38.

die even though they are still vigorous. Abraham has more children after his impending death is announced (Gen 25:1-4); Moses' vitality has not abated nor have his eyes dimmed (Deut 34:7); an aged Joshua is able to set a large stone under an oak tree (Josh 24:27); Aaron is able to climb Mount Hor (Num 20:27-28). The implication is obvious: these individuals did not die primarily because they were old or sick or weak; they die because YHWH had ordained their passing. Like Moses, they die "according to the word of YHWH" (Deut 34:5).

Interestingly, the death stories say nothing about what happens to a person after death. Sheol and the afterlife are never mentioned. In addition, no one in the death stories "prepares" for the afterlife.<sup>5</sup> This silence regarding Sheol is striking when compared to ANE accounts. For example, Gilgamesh is consumed with avoiding death and making the most of the afterlife (when death itself becomes inevitable). By contrast, biblical death stories reveal that the dying individuals cared more about what happened to their loved ones after death.<sup>6</sup>

**Hebrew dispositions toward death.** As revealed in our exegesis, Hebrew dispositions toward death in the death stories recall much of what is found in the rest of the Old Testament. Death is not anticipated with joy. But neither do the dying cry out with fear and panic—except in the case of Hezekiah. Instead, death is viewed with a certain amount of resignation, as an inevitable event in life. And it could be considered "good"—if, as in the death stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and David, the protagonist dies in old age with his house in order.<sup>7</sup> Death is also portrayed by the

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<sup>5</sup>One could say that Hezekiah "prepares" for it by trying to avoid it—in a fashion very similar to ANE kings. See chap. 2, p. 36, for discussion of the ANE practice.

<sup>6</sup>See below for elaboration.

<sup>7</sup>For instance, Abraham and David are described as dying at a good, hoary age (Gen 15:15; 25:8; 1 Chr 29:28).

scriptural authors as an opportunity. The anticipation of the death event instigated and inspired the necessary process of ensuring proper succession and of passing down to the next generation final instructions and charges.

**Hebrew preparation for death.** Of all the issues concerning death, the form critical exegesis of death stories yielded the most insight into Hebrew preparations for death. As noted in chapter 2, few scholars have considered this topic in their treatments of Hebrew thanatology, but it seems to be of primary interest for the authors of the death stories. Indeed, the authors seem to have little concern with what happens to the deceased after death. Instead, they emphasize how the characters “set their houses in order” before death. In almost every death story, this formal stage is expanded, demonstrating what the author believed to be most important in the stories.

Within the broader world of the ancient Near East, this perspective is unique. The ANE accounts of death seem focused on the fate of the main characters. They answer questions: What happens to the protagonist in the afterlife, or will the fame of the protagonist endure, or will they be memorialized in death? In the Hebrew Scriptures, ideally preparation for death is in no way self-centered. “Setting one’s house in order” is all about providing for subsequent generations.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Abraham finds a wife for Isaac. Jacob prophesies and provides final blessings to his children. Joseph promises his family God’s future aid. Aaron bequeaths his high priestly frock to his son.<sup>9</sup> Moses and Joshua give final instructions to the children of Israel as the nation is forming. David ensures Solomon’s succession and offers concluding political and theological instructions. With only two exceptions—Sarah and Hezekiah—in every death story the principal character

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<sup>8</sup>How should we account for this other-centered focus? While death stories do not reveal the rationale of these individuals, one might suspect the reason. It seems they did not worry about the afterlife because, as described above, they knew who held the keys of death and Sheol—YHWH himself.

<sup>9</sup>But this transfer was not initiated by Aaron.

provides for someone other than himself.<sup>10</sup>

The tradition reflected in these stories may explain why the kings of Israel and Judah left no known monumental or inscriptional witnesses to their reigns (unlike the ANE kings). Could it be that the idea of “putting one’s house in order” was so deeply entrenched that they did not have a desire to set up physical memorials? They were more concerned about the well-being for the people who remained behind than about commemorating their own personal and official achievements. Was this desire so ingrained that even the syncretistic kings of the Northern Kingdom resisted the urge to memorialize themselves like their Egyptian and Mesopotamian counterparts? This demands further investigation.

Finally, on a more negative note, death stories show the consequences of not putting one’s house in order. Perhaps the most poignant example is Hezekiah. As noted in chapter 4, Hezekiah failed to respond normally to YHWH’s announcement that he would soon die. This announcement was actually gracious; God was giving Hezekiah time to get his house in order. Instead, Hezekiah pleaded for his life, which resulted in YHWH granting him an extra fifteen years of life. However, the king failed to use these additional years properly with disastrous results—results that in the author’s mind foreshadowed the exile itself.

**Hebrew physical and emotional responses to death.** Our exegesis of the death stories also substantiates much of what is known about Hebrew responses to death.<sup>11</sup> First, not surprisingly, many death stories contain a response element that

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<sup>10</sup>Sarah’s death story does not have a “putting the house in order” stage. Hezekiah misses out on his opportunity to put his house in order.

<sup>11</sup>The response stage of the death stories is usually brief and unadorned, but we still may glean some important insights from them. Three exceptions would be Sarah, Jacob, and Moses. In each of these cases, the expansion is for rhetorical purposes. The emphasis in the first two stories is on the location of death—in the Promised Land, which in the author’s view is where all the people of Israel belong. The last individual receives an embellished response stage to point to his prominence in the history of Israel.

describes passionate mourning. Abraham weeps intensely for his wife (Gen 23:2), and her son experiences persistent anguish at her passing (Gen 24:67). The entire nation mourns for Aaron (Num 20:29) and Moses (Deut 34:8). Even the Egyptians lament with a great lamentation for Jacob (Gen 50:3, 10). Often the characters are described as manifesting their emotions physically. So Joseph falls upon and kisses his dead father (50:1). The inclusion of such descriptions in the death stories displays the great reverence that the survivors (and the authors) had for the departed.<sup>12</sup> But interestingly, this respect never degenerates into ancestor worship. Even though the Israelites had a concern for proper burial,<sup>13</sup> the death stories never mention the building of memorials, the provisioning of the tomb, and sacrifices to the dead—things associated with ancestor worship in other nations.

### **General Theological Insights**

The most remarkable aspect of this study concerns the assistance the form critical exegesis provided in establishing the overall theological message of the death stories. In each story, our analysis showed how the authors of these accounts expertly employed, adapted, and expanded the death story form to communicate theologically. The following will summarize the three principal theological uses of death stories, as demonstrated by the previous study.

**The use of the death stories to characterize the dying.** In virtually every death story, the author exploits the death of the principal figure to add to his characterization of the person. In most cases, the characterization would not be evident

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<sup>12</sup>This respect was about “honoring father and mother”—not worship.

<sup>13</sup>Except for those of Aaron and Hezekiah, each of the death stories mentions a burial location. The author of the patriarchal death stories seems particularly concerned to emphasize that Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph were properly buried in the Promised Land.

without an understanding of the author's manipulation of the death story form. Through the author's use of the death story form, the reader's conceptions of the dying are often reaffirmed. For example, scriptural authors often eulogize dying individuals by showing their success in putting their houses in order. This is the case in the death stories of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Joshua. The death story of Moses is perhaps the best example. The editor shows Israel's quintessential leader ensuring that each of the four roles that he had filled for the nation (as prophet, priest, father, and general) continues after his death.

However, death stories can also adjust the reader's conception of the dying individual, as in the story of Hezekiah's death. This king, who is otherwise portrayed by the author very positively in 2 Kings 18-19, shows his imperfections and weaknesses when he is confronted with his own mortality by Isaiah the prophet in 2 Kings 20. The normal pattern of death stories has led the reader to expect that Hezekiah will put his house in order. Instead, the king leaves his house in a state of disorder. The historian uses these character flaws to presage the future failure and fall of the kingdom of Judah. In this way, our analysis of death stories as a genre provides an important clue to the proper interpretation of 2 Kings 20.

**The use of death stories to contribute to the theological messages of entire narrative blocks.** In many cases, the death stories not only communicate poignantly as stand-alone units, but they also contribute to the theological message of the larger literary blocks surrounding the death stories. This is particularly true of the death stories in Genesis—i.e., those of Sarah, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. Each of these accounts furthers the principal purpose of the author of Genesis—that is, to describe how the patriarchal promises are passed down from generation to generation and finally realized. In most cases, the author's emphasis on this theological theme is demonstrated by the inclusion of an embedded narrative functioning as a formal element. For instance, in the

story of Sarah's death, the author expands the response element with an embedded narrative showing how Abraham gains a permanent stake in the Promised Land. In the death story of Abraham, the author embeds a narrative that functions as 'putting this house in order' formal stage. This narrative describes the "wooing of Rebekah." The obvious concern of this account is not just for Isaac to have a happy marriage; instead, the marriage is necessary in order to allow the patriarchal promises to pass to an heir. In the story of Jacob's death, the author expands both the putting the house in order stage, as well as the response stage. Both of these formal stages point out the author's main concern—the fulfillment of the promises to the patriarchal family and nation. Two of the embedded narratives (47:29-31; 49:29-33) and the response stage (50:1-14) deal with Jacob's provisions for his bones—the concern being to show that Israel would stay in Egypt, but would eventually return to the Promised Land. The other two embedded narratives (chaps. 48 and 49) speak of the passing of the patriarchal blessings to Jacob's sons and grandsons. Finally, though smaller than the previous three accounts, the story of Joseph's death also has an expanded "putting the house in order" stage. In this stage, the author uses a final speech to recall and reiterate the dominate themes Genesis—God's promises, God's gift of land, and God's faithfulness. In addition, the speech also points forward to the Exodus by speaking of YHWH's future "visitation" upon his people.

**The use of the death stories to speak prophetically.** A final way in which the authors of Scripture employ death stories is in making prophetic pronouncements. This happens most prominently in the appropriately named Former Prophets. In these books, the historians employ the death stories of Joshua, David, and Hezekiah to make judgments about the current spiritual state of Israel and her kings. For instance, by including a farewell speech that recalls Deuteronomy 17, the Deuteronomistic author of David's death story delivers a stinging indictment against the kings of Judah. The historian also indicates his belief that the way to restore order to the house of David is for

the Jewish kings to return to principles outlined in Deuteronomy. In the case of Hezekiah, the author uses the king's last years to point forward prophetically to the ultimate fate of Judah.

**The development in the theological use of death stories in the canon.** We may make one final observation concerning the theological use of death stories. Interestingly, we are able to trace an evolution in the way death stories are crafted and employed in the canon itself. In the Pentateuch, the stories are usually used to house important narratives and speeches. While these communicate theologically in a powerful way, the message is usually straightforward and “on the surface” of the text.<sup>14</sup> Later death stories—like those of David and Hezekiah in 1 and 2 Kings—are used to offer more subtle commentary of the reigns and legacies of these individuals. By the time the reader gets to the most recent accounts in the books of Chronicles, the death story genre seems to have developed (or perhaps disintegrated) to a point that the stereotypical form is hardly recognizable. But some key elements of the convention are still visible, and these elements help us to gain a better understanding of the Chronicler's theological message.

### Conclusion

We close with one final insight arising from our examination of death stories. These death stories truly illustrate the literary mastery of the writers and redactors of the Old Testament. Scholars tend to underestimate the literary skill of Old Testament authors. For example, source and form critics will argue that scriptural redactors simply pieced together fragments of tradition without attempting to correct obvious contradictions or smooth out problems. In addition, critical scholars often maintain that

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<sup>14</sup>The death story of Joshua is manipulated in a similar manner.

these ancient authors inserted texts into larger accounts for all kinds of reasons— aetiological, political, or cultic—often to further the interests of a particular group.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the passages are frequently viewed as a hodgepodge of textual fragments, and the final compositions are seen as having no unity or overarching message. On the contrary, our synchronic study of the death stories reveals that the authors of these intricate accounts were more purposeful and skillful in their composition. The hope is that this study has contributed to our knowledge and appreciation of their literary artistry.

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<sup>15</sup>Thus, a P source fragment might be inserted to further the interests of the priesthood.

APPENDIX

DEATH ACCOUNTS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The following table lists and categorizes all the death accounts in the Old Testament as notices, reports, or stories.

Table A1. Death accounts in the Old Testament

<i>Text</i>	<i>Deceased</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Formal Elements</i>	
Gen 4:8	Abel	Notice	4:8	Death notice
Gen 4:23	Lamech's victims	Notice	4:23	Death notice
Gen 5:5	Adam	Report	5:5a 5:5b	Declaration of length of life Death notice
Gen 5:8	Seth	Report	5:8a 5:8b	Declaration of length of life Death notice
Gen 5:11	Enosh	Report	5:11a 5:11b	Declaration of length of life Death notice
Gen 5:14	Kenan	Report	5:14a 5:14b	Declaration of length of life Death notice
Gen 5:17	Mahalalel	Report	5:17a 5:17b	Declaration of length of life Death notice
Gen 5:20	Jared	Report	5:20a 5:20b	Declaration of length of life Death notice
Gen 5:23-24	Enoch	Report	5:23 5:24a 5:24b, c	Declaration of length of life Pronouncement on the life Notice of "non-death"
Gen 5:27	Methuselah	Report	5:27a 5:27b	Declaration of length of life Death notice
Gen 5:31	Lamech	Report	5:31a 5:31b	Declaration of length of life Death notice
Gen 7:21-23a	All life	Notice	7:21-23	Extended death notice
Gen 9:29	Noah	Report	9:29a 9:29b	Declaration of length of life Death notice
Gen 11:28	Haran	Report	11:28	Death notice
Gen 11:32	Terah	Report	11:32a 11:32b	Declaration of length of life Death notice

Table A1—Continued. Death accounts in the Old Testament

<i>Text</i>	<i>Deceased</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Structural Elements</i>	
Gen 19:26	Lot's Wife	Notice	19:26	Death notice
Gen 23:1-20	Sarah	Story	23:1	Declaration of length of life
			23:2a, b	Death notice
			23:2c	Description of response, part 1 (mourning)
			23:3-20	Embedded narrative, describing response, part 2 (burial)
Gen 24:1a-25:11	Abraham	Story	24:1a	Announcement of impending death
			24:1b	Pronouncement on the life
			24:2-67	Embedded narrative, first attempt to put house in order
			25:1-6	Embedded element, describing Abraham's second effort to order his house
			25:7	Declaration of length of life
			25:8	Death notice
			25:9-10	Burial notice
			25:11	Transition element
Gen 25:17	Ishmael	Report	25:17a	Declaration of length of life
			25:17b	Death notice
Gen 35:8	Deborah	Report	35:8a	Death notice
			35:8b	Burial notice
Gen 35:19-20 (cf. Gen 48:7)	Rachel	Report	35:19a	Death notice
			35:19b	Burial notice
			35:20	Description of memorial
Gen 35:28-29	Isaac	Report	35:28	Declaration of length of life
			35:29a-c	Death notice
			35:29d	Burial notice
Gen 36:33a	Bela	Notice	36:33a	Death notice
Gen 36:34a	Jobab	Notice	36:34a	Death notice
Gen 36:35a	Husham	Notice	36:35a	Death notice
Gen 36:36a	Hadad	Notice	36:36a	Death notice
Gen 36:37a	Samlah	Notice	36:37a	Death notice
Gen 36:38a	Shaul	Notice	36:38a	Death notice
Gen 36:39a	Baal-hanan	Notice	36:39a	Death notice
Gen 38:7 (cf. Gen 46:12; Num 26:19)	Er	Report	38:7a	Pronouncement on the life
			38:7b	Death notice
Gen 38:10 (cf. Gen 46:12; Num 26:19)	Onan	Report	38:10a	Pronouncement on the life
			38:10b	Death notice
Gen 38:12a	Judah's wife	Notice	38:12a	Death notice

Table A1—Continued. Death accounts in the Old Testament

<i>Text</i>	<i>Deceased</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Structural Elements</i>	
Gen 47:28-50:14	Jacob	Story	47:28	Declaration of length of life, with an introductory geographical note
			47:29a	Announcement of impending death
			47:29b	Gathering for final words
			47:29c-31	Embedded speech, Jacob's instructions to Joseph
			48:1	Announcement of impending death
			48:2-22	Embedded narrative, Jacob's adoption and blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh
			49:1a	Gathering for final words
			49:1b-28	Embedded speech, Jacob's final testament
			49:29-32	Embedded speech, Jacob's final burial request
			49:33	Death notice
			50:1-14	Response to death (weeping, embalming, burial)
Gen 50:22-26 (cf. Exod 1:6)	Joseph	Story	50:22	Declaration of length of life, with an introductory geographical note
			50:23	Pronouncement on the life
			50:24a, b	Announcement of impending death
			50:24c-25	Joseph's final words to his family
			5:26a	Death notice
			5:26b, c	Burial notice
Exod 1:6	Joseph, the other sons of Israel, and their generation	Notice	1:6	Death notice
Exod 2:12	The Egyptian beating a Hebrew	Notice	2:12	Death notice
Exod 2:23a	Pharaoh	Notice	2:23a	Death notice
Lev 10:2 (cf. Num 3:4; 26:61; 1 Chr 24:2)	Nadab and Abihu	Notice	10:2	Death notice

Table A1—Continued. Death accounts in the Old Testament

<i>Text</i>	<i>Deceased</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Structural Elements</i>	
Num 20:1c-d	Miriam	Report	20:1c 20:1d	Death notice Burial notice
Num 20:23-29	Aaron	Story	20:22 23-24a  20:24b-26 20:27 20:28 20:29	Geographical note Announcement of impending death Final words (by YHWH) Final deed by Moses Death notice Description of response
Num 25:7-8	Two people by Phinehas	Notice	25:7-8	Death notice
Num 31:8b	Balam	Notice	31:8b	Death notice
Deut 31:1-34:12	Moses	Story	31:1 31:2a, b 31:2c-e  31:3-29  31:30-32:44 32:45-47 32:48-52 33:1-29 34:1-5 34:6 34:7 34:8 34:9-12	Transition Declaration of length of life Announcement of impending death (implied) Embedded speeches by Moses and YHWH Embedded song, the “Song of YHWH,” with frame Embedded speech, more of Moses’ final words to Israel Embedded speech, YHWH’s final instructions Embedded speech, Moses’ final blessing Death report (notice in v. 5) Burial notice Declaration of length of life Description of response Pronouncement on life
Josh 23:1-24:30 (Cf. Judg 2:6-9)	Joshua		23:1  23:2a 23:3-16  24:1 24:2-28  24:29a, b 24:29c 24:30 24:31	Announcement of impending death Gathering for final words Embedded speech, detailing Joshua’s valedictory address Gathering for final words Embedded narrative, the covenant renewal ceremony Death notice Declaration of length of life Burial notice Pronouncement on the life

Table A1—Continued. Death accounts in the Old Testament

<i>Text</i>	<i>Deceased</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Structural Elements</i>	
Josh 24:33 (cf. 2 Chr 23:22)	Eleazar	Report	24:33a 24:33b	Death notice Burial notice
Judg 1:7	Adoni-bezek	Notice	1:7	Death notice
Judg 3:11b	Othniel	Notice	3:11b	Death notice
Judg 3:21-22	Eglon	Notice	3:21-22	Description of death
Judg 4:1	Ehud	Notice	4:1b	Death notice
Judg 4:21	Sisera	Notice	4:21	Description of death
Judg 7:25	Oreb and Zeeb	Notice	7:25	Death notice
Judg 8:32	Gideon	Report	8:32a 8:32b	Death notice Burial notice
Judg 9:53-56	Abimelech	Report	9:53-54 9:55 9:56	Death notice Description of response Pronouncement on the life
Judg 10:2	Tola	Report	10:2b 10:2c	Death notice Burial notice
Judg 10:5	Jair	Report	10:5a 10:5b	Death notice Burial notice
Judg 12:7	Jephthah	Report	12:7b 12:7c	Death notice Burial notice
Judg 12:10	Ibzan	Report	12:10a 12:10b	Death notice Burial notice
Judg 12:12	Elon	Report	12:12a 12:12b	Death notice Burial notice
Judg 12:15	Abdon	Report	12:15a 12:15b	Death notice Burial notice
Judg 16:23-31	Samson	Report	16:23-30 16:30 16:31	Narrative describing circumstances of death, including, Death notice and pronouncement on life Burial notice
Ruth 1:3a	Elimelech	Notice	1:3a	Death notice
Ruth 1:5a	Mahlon and Chilion	Notice	1:5a	Death notice
1 Sam 4:11b	Hophni and Phinehas	Notice	4:11b	Death notice
1 Sam 4:18	Eli	Report	4:18a-e 4:18f	Death notice Length of reign statement
1 Sam 25:1 (cf. 28:3)	Samuel	Report	25:1a 25:1b, c 25:1d	Death notice Description of response Burial notice
1 Sam 25:37-38	Nabal	Notice	25:37-38	Description of death

Table A1—Continued. Death accounts in the Old Testament

<i>Text</i>	<i>Deceased</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Structural Elements</i>	
1 Sam 31:1- 2 Sam 1:27 (cf. 1 Chr 10:1-5)	Saul (and his sons and armor bearer)	Report	31:1 31:2 31:3-4 31:5 31:6 31:7-13	Circumstances of death Death notice for Jonathan and Abinadab Description of Saul's death Notice of Armor-bearer's death Notice of all the deaths Description of response of Israelites and Philistines
2 Sam 2:23	Asahel	Notice	2:23	Death notice
2 Sam 3:27	Abner	Notice	3:27	Death notice
2 Sam 4:7	Ishbosheth	Notice	4:7	Death notice
2 Sam 6:7 (cf. 2 Chr 13:9)	Uzzah	Notice	6:7	Death notice
2 Sam 10:1	King of the Ammonites	Notice	10:1	Death notice
2 Sam 10:18	Shobach	Notice	10:18	Death notice
2 Sam 11:17b	Uriah	Notice	11:17b	Death notice
2 Sam 12:18-23	David's first child of Bathsheba	Report	12:18 12:19-23	Death notice Description of David's response
2 Sam 17:23	Ahithophel	Report	17:23e, f 17:23g	Death notice Burial notice
2 Sam 18:15	Absalom	Notice	18:15	Death notice
2 Sam 20:12	Amasa	Notice	20:10	Death notice
1 Kgs 1:1-2:12 (cf. 1 Chr 23:1- 29:30)	David	Story	1:1a 1:1b, c 1:2-53 2:1a 2:1b-9 2:10a 2:10b 2:11-12	Announcement of impending death Pronouncement on David's life Embedded narrative, story of the succession of Solomon Announcement of impending death Embedded speech Death notice Burial notice Declaration of length of reign and succession
1 Kgs 2:25	Adonijah	Notice	2:25	Death notice
1 Kgs 2:34	Joab	Report	2:34a-c 2:34d	Death notice Burial notice
1 Kgs 2:46a	Shimei	Notice	2:46a	Death notice
1 Kgs 11:42-43 (cf. 2 Chr 9:30- 31)	Solomon	Report	11:42 11:43a 11:43b	Declaration of length of reign Death notice Burial notice

Table A1—Continued. Death accounts in the Old Testament

<i>Text</i>	<i>Deceased</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Structural Elements</i>	
1 Kgs 13:24	A prophet	Notice	13:24	Death notice
1 Kgs 14:17c-18b	Jeroboam's child	Report	14:17c 14:18a 14:18b	Death notice Burial notice Description of response (mourning)
1 Kgs 14:20 (cf. 2 Chr 13:20)	Jeroboam	Report	14:20a 14:20b	Declaration of length of reign Death notice
1 Kgs 14:31 (cf. 2 Chr 12:16)	Rehoboam	Report	14:31a 14:31b	Death notice Burial notice
1 Kgs 15:8 (cf. 2 Chr 14:1)	Abijam (Abijah)	Report	15:8a 15:8b	Death notice Burial notice
1 Kgs 15:24 (cf. 2 Chr 16:13-14)	Asa	Report	15:24a 15:24b	Death notice Burial notice
1 Kgs 15:28a	Nadab	Notice	15:28a	Death notice
1 Kgs 16:6	Baasha	Report	16:6a 16:6b	Death notice Burial notice
1 Kgs 16:18	Zimri	Notice	16:18	Description of death
1 Kgs 16:22b	Tibni	Notice	16:22b	Death notice
1 Kgs 16:28	Omri	Report	16:28a 16:28b	Death notice Burial notice
1 Kgs 21:13-14	Naboth	Notice	21:13-14	Description of death
1 Kgs 22:40a (cf. 2 Chr 18:28-34)	Ahab	Notice	22:40a	Death notice
1 Kgs 22:50 (2 Chr 21:1)	Jehoshaphat	Report	22:50a 22:50b	Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 1:17a	Ahaziah	Notice	1:17a	Death notice
2 Kgs 4:20	Shunammite child	Notice	4:20	Description of death
2 Kgs 8:15	Ben-hadad	Notice	8:15	Description of death
2 Kgs 8:24	Joram	Report	8:24a 8:24b	Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 9:24	Joram	Notice	9:24	Description of death
2 Kgs 9:27-28 (cf. 2 Chr 22:9)	Ahaziah	Report	9:27 9:28	Description of death Burial notice
2 Kgs 9:33	Jezebel	Notice	9:33	Description of death
2 Kgs 10:35	Jehu	Report	10:35a 10:35b	Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 11:16 (cf. 2 Chr 23:15)	Athaliah	Notice	11:16	Description of death
2 Kgs 12:21 (cf. 2 Chr 24:25)	Joash	Report	12:21a, b 12:21c	Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 13:9	Jehoahaz	Report	13:9a 13:9b	Death notice Burial notice

Table A1—Continued. Death accounts in the Old Testament

<i>Text</i>	<i>Deceased</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Structural Elements</i>	
2 Kgs 13:13	Joash	Report	13:13a 13:13c	Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 13:14-20	Elisha	Report	13:14a 13:20a 13:20b	Announcement of impending death Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 14:16	Jehoash	Report	14:16a 14:16b	Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 14:19-20 (cf. 2 Chr 25:27)	Amaziah	Report	14:19 14:20	Description of death Burial notice
2 Kgs 14:29	Jeroboam	Notice	14:29a	Death notice
2 Kgs 15:7 (cf. 2 Chr 26:23)	Azariah (Uzziah)	Report	15:7a 15:7b	Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 15:10	Zechariah	Notice	15:10	Description of death
2 Kgs 15:14	Shallum	Notice	15:14	Description of death
2 Kgs 15:22	Menahem	Notice	15:22a	Death notice
2 Kgs 15:25	Pekahiah	Notice	15:25	Description of death
2 Kgs 15:30	Pekah	Notice	15:30	Description of death
2 Kgs 15:38 (cf. 2 Chr 27:9)	Jotham	Report	15:38a 15:38b	Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 16:20 (cf. 2 Chr 28:27)	Ahaz	Report	16:20a 16:20b	Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 20:1-21 (cf. 2 Chr 32:24-33)	Hezekiah	Story	20:1a 20:1b 20:2-11 20:12-20 20:20 20:21a 20:21b	Announcement of impending death (by narrator) Announcement of impending death (by Isaiah) Embedded narrative describing Hezekiah's pleading for his life and subsequent healing Embedded narrative describing the visit of Babylonian envoys Summary of reign Death notice Succession notice
2 Kgs 21:18 (cf. 2 Chr 33:20)	Manasseh	Report	21:18a 21:18b	Death notice Burial notice
2 Kgs 21:23 (cf. 2 Chr 33:24)	Amon	Notice	21:23	Death notice
2 Kgs 23:29-30c (cf. 2 Chr 35:23-24)	Josiah	Report	23:29 23:30a-c	Description of death Burial notice
2 Kgs 24:6a	Jehoiakim	Notice	24:6a	Death notice
2 Kgs 25:25	Gedaliah	Notice	25:25	Description of death

Table A1—Continued. Death accounts in the Old Testament

<i>Text</i>	<i>Deceased</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Structural Elements</i>	
1 Chr 1:44-51	Bela, Jobab, Husham, Hadad, Samlah, Shaul, Baal- hanan, Hadad	Notice	All notices of death, part of a genealogy	
1 Chr 2:30b	Selah	Notice	2:30b	Death notice
1 Chr 2:32b	Jether	Notice	2:32b	Death notice
1 Chr 19:1b	Nahash	Notice	19:1b	Death notice
2 Chr 21:19-20	Jehoram	Report	19:19a, b	Death notice
			19:19c	Description of the lack of response
			19:20a, b	Declaration of length of reign
			19:20c	Pronouncement on the life
			19:20d	Burial notice
2 Chr 24:15-16	Jehoiada	Report	24:15a	Death notice
			24:15b	Declaration of length of life
			24:16a	Burial notice
			24:16b	Pronouncement on the life
2 Chr 24:22	Jehoiada's son	Notice	24:22	Description of death
Esth 7:10	Haman	Notice	7:10	Description of death
Job 42:16-17	Job	Report	42:16a	Declaration of length of life
			42:16b	Pronouncement on life
			42:17a, b	Death notice
Jer 28:17	Hananiah	Notice	28:17	Death notice
Ezek 11:13b	Pelathiah son of Benaiah	Notice	11:13b	Death notice
Ezek 24:18b	Ezekiel's wife	Notice	24:18b	Death notice

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Ridout, George P. "Prose and Compositional Techniques in the Succession Narrative." Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1971.

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## ABSTRACT

### SPEAKING ON THE BRINK OF SHEOL: FORM AND THEOLOGY OF OLD TESTAMENT DEATH STORIES

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This dissertation argues that a definable and distinct genre of death story does exist in the Old Testament and that form critical analyses of these stories can yield significant theological insights. Chapter 1 establishes the methodology and principles that govern the study.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of death in the ancient Near East and Israel. The information in this chapter introduces the reader to the topic of death in the ancient world, and it provides a basis for comparison with the thanatology derived from the death stories.

Chapter 3 surveys death accounts in the ancient Near East and in the Old Testament and classifies the various death accounts in the Hebrew Scriptures as notices, reports, or stories. In addition, this chapter justifies the classification of some accounts as stories instead of reports, and it establishes and describes the typical “death story.”

Chapter 4 engages in a form critical exegesis of the death stories in the Old Testament. Nine stories are analyzed. These include the death stories of Sarah (Gen 23:1-20), Abraham (Gen 24:1-25:11), Jacob (Gen 47:28-50:14), Joseph (Gen 50:22-26), Aaron (Num 20:22-29), Moses (Deut 31:1-34:12), Joshua (Josh 23:1-24:30), David (1 Kgs 1:1-2:12; 1 Chr 23:1-29:20), and Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:1-21).

The method of analysis follows the generally accepted form critical process—

which involves an investigation of the form/structure, genre, setting, and intention of the text. To this list of four, this study adds an introduction to the literary and historical context of the texts. Each story investigated includes a section detailing some initial theological conclusions.

Chapter 5 serves as the conclusion of the dissertation. It determines the success of the study in achieving its stated aims. In addition, it summarizes and synthesizes the various theological and thanatological conclusions based on the form critical analyses of chapter 4. Finally, it offers some concluding thoughts on the significance of the study for biblical form critical exegesis.

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