

CHAOS OR CHIASM? THE STRUCTURE OF ABRAHAM'S LIFE

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*Dedicated to the memory of Yehuda Nattan Yudkowsky,
beloved son, grandson and brother, on the occasion of his first yahrtzeit.*

At first glance, Abraham seems the archetype of *Arami oved avi* [a wandering Aramean was my father] (Deut. 26:5). In Genesis 12:1, God tells Abraham to leave Haran, but does not designate his final destination. The Ramban comments on this wandering, calling Abraham a "lost sheep" (Ramban on Gen. 12:1) Even when Abraham reaches Shechem, and God tells him '*Unto thy seed will I give this land*' (12:7), Abraham has not yet received the signal to stop, and continues his journeying southwards.

Abraham's story seems a disconnected patchwork of movement, challenges, and real or threatened separations. But is this in fact chaotic "wandering," or is there some structure to it? Nechama Leibovitz¹ points out the parallelism between the original command of "*Lekh Lekha*" and the Akeda – the beginning and the climax of Abraham's journeys towards God.

These parallel "bookends" bracket much of Abraham's life, and signal the inclusion of a large-scale structure contained therein. The two kinds of structures frequently found in Tanakh are parallelisms (ABC A'B'C'), and introversions or chiasmic structures (ABC C'B'A'). An example of a small-scale chiasmic structure is found in Genesis 9:6²:

- A. *Who sheds*
- B. *The blood*
- C. *Of man*
- C'. *By man*
- B'. *Shall his blood*
- A'. *Be shed*

Jacob Milgrom³ describes an example of a large-scale chiasmic structure in the narrative at Taberah (Num. 11:4-34):

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- A. People's complaint: meat (vv. 4-10a)
- B. Moses' complaint: assistance (vv. 10b-15)
- C. God's answer to both complaints (vv. 16-24a)
- B'. God authorizes elders; diminishes Moses (vv. 24b-30)
- A'. God supplies meat: punishes complainers (vv. 31-34)

Table 1: PARALLELS BETWEEN <i>LEKH LEKHA</i> AND THE AKEDA	
<i>Lekh Lekha</i> (Gen. 12:1-5)	Akeda (Gen. 22:1-19)
<p><i>“Lekh lekha”</i> [Get thee out]</p> <p>(Progressive iteration): . . . <i>of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house</i></p> <p>(Unspecified location): . . . <i>unto the land that I will show thee</i></p> <p><i>And he took Sarai, and Lot . . . and went</i></p>	<p><i>“Kakh na . . . ve'lekh lekha”</i> [Take now . . . and get thee into]</p> <p>. . . <i>thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac</i></p> <p>. . . <i>upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of</i></p> <p>. . . <i>and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son . . . and went</i></p>

In the Abrahamic narratives we find several episodes that seem to echo or repeat one another: For example, Sarah is twice taken (once in Egypt, once in Gerar); Lot is twice rescued. Keeping in mind the bookends of *Lekh Lekha* and the Akeda,⁴ these benchmarks suggest the chiasmic structure shown in Figure 1.⁵

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- A. The descendents of Terah (Gen. 11:27)
 - B. *Lekh Leckha* (12:1)
 - C. *'Unto thy seed will I give this land'* (Gen 12:7). Abraham nomadic, unknown
 - D. Sarai is taken in Egypt; Pharaoh sends them away angrily (12:10-20)
 - E. Sodom: Lot chooses to live in Sodom, is captured by and rescued from the four kings, returns to Sodom (14:1-24)
 - F. *'What wilt Thou give me, seeing I go hence childless?'* (15:2)
 - G. The Covenant Between the Pieces (15:12-21): promise of descendants and land
 - H. Birth of Ishmael (16:1-16)

- G'. The Covenant of Circumcision (17:1-27): promise of *'I will be their God'*
- F'. Sarah is informed that she will have a child (18:10)
- E'. Lot rescued from destruction of Sodom and leaves (18:16-19:38)
- D'. Sarah is taken in Gerar; Abimelech welcomes Abraham to settle where he wills (20:1-18)
- C'. Birth of Isaac, the promised seed (21:1-21); treaty with Abimelech, Abraham respected and feared (21:22-34)
- B'. Akeda (22:1-19)
- A'. Nahor's descendents (22:20-24)

FIGURE 1: CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM

What might we learn from this structure?

Generally, in Tanakh the center of a chiasm is the most important position, highlighted by events before and after.⁶ We might have expected the Covenant Between the Parts (15:1-21) and the Covenant of Circumcision (17:1-22) to be the high points of Abraham's life. To our surprise, we find that Ishmael occupies the central and pivotal position!

One possibility is that in fact Ishmael does not belong in this position, as he should never have been born. Ishmael comes into the story only because of Sarah's initiative; her wish to assure that Abraham will indeed have descendents, even if not her own. He is removed from the story on Sarah's initiative as well. If we were to remove Ishmael completely from the narrative, the chiasmic structure would appear with the covenants at the center, as expected, and be otherwise unaffected.

Another possibility is that indeed, Ishmael was at the apex of Abraham's life – from Abraham's perspective. Ishmael is born as the long-awaited son, and Abra-

ham has no reason to think there will be another. Not until Ishmael is 13 years old is Abraham informed that this is not the son God had intended. Abraham's response is telling. He pleads for Ishmael: *'Oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee!'* (17:18) – I do not need another son; let Ishmael be "the one."

This is very unusual behavior for Abraham. In all his life, this is the only time (as far as we are told) that he pleads on behalf of an individual. We do

not hear that he prayed for Sarah to have a child, or to be protected when she's taken to the palace harem in Egypt or in Gerar. We do not find that he interceded with God on behalf of Lot when he was in danger; nor even that he pleaded for Isaac when told to bring him as a sacrifice. How great must be his love for Ishmael, to impel him to such a request.

From God's perspective, however, Ishmael is not the apex – he is the pivot on which the story turns. This is not the son God intended; this is not the son with whom God can fulfill his Covenant of Circumcision: '*Ve'hayiti lahem le'elokim I will be their God*' (17:8). Perhaps, for Abraham's sake, God waits until Ishmael is 13 years old – when he can be judged as an adult – to conclude that indeed this path cannot succeed; there must be a son from Sarah.

God and Abraham must try again. In this pivoting chiasmic structure the direction changes, events are repeated, but with a difference; this time, things will be put aright. First of the corrections is telling Sarah (not just Abraham) that she will have a son. Next, the evil of Sodom is permanently removed. Lot is rescued, and this time he cannot return to the city but must make his own future. Sarah is again taken to a harem, this time in Gerar. After God intervenes to protect her, Abimelech, in contrast to Pharaoh, welcomes Abraham in his land as an honored guest.

Isaac is born at last, fulfilling the promise of step C: '*Unto thy seed will I give this land.*' This child, and only this child, is the promised seed. When the promise was given, Abraham was an unknown nomad traveling through Canaan; now he is an honored and respected prince.

Abraham rejoices in Isaac's birth, but remains understandably very attached to his firstborn, Ishmael. Perhaps Sarah senses this, and sees the need to remove Ishmael from the picture – not only to prevent his bad influence on the young

Isaac, but to prevent the distraction of Abraham. The relationship between Abraham and Isaac must solidify and flourish if Isaac is to be the bearer of Abraham's mission.

Finally, we come to the Akeda. I will not attempt to address the many difficult problems raised by the Akeda, but only to shed a small bit of light on one

aspect of it. A midrash⁷ tells of an interesting dialogue between Abraham and God at the inception of the *Akeda*:

"Take your son" – "I have two sons!"

"Your only son" – "Each is an only son to me and to his mother!"

"That you love" – "I love them both!"

"Isaac!"

What is this conversation about? At this stage Abraham has no idea what God will require of him. Most likely, he imagines that God is planning a ceremony to confirm the covenant with Abraham's descendents. Abraham wants to ensure that Ishmael is included as well. Instead, the *Akeda*, among its many other meanings, serves to emphasize quite finally that it is Isaac, and Isaac alone, who is the son of the covenant.

SUMMARY

The narrative of Abraham's life forms an elegant chiastic structure, bracketed by *Lekh Lekha* and the *Akeda* and centered on the two covenants. The unexpected appearance of Ishmael at the center of the structure acknowledges the significance of his relationship with Abraham as a firstborn and beloved son, while highlighting his unintended intrusion into God's plans for Abraham. In this pivoting chiasmus, following Ishmael's birth we see a repetition and melioration of prior events. The *Akeda* serves, in part, to reinforce the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, and to emphasize Isaac's role as the exclusive bearer of the covenants.

Structural analysis can be a powerful tool for the investigation of relationships between narrative units in the Bible. Explicating the large-scale structure of a narrative provides coherence and insight into apparently disconnected or repetitive events. The structures provide new grist for the mill of creative exegesis,

the opportunity for innovative understandings and a new appreciation of the depths of the Torah.

NOTES

1. N. Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit*, trans A. Newman. (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1973) p. 113; see also Bereishit Rabbah 55:7-8.
2. D. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999) p.30.
3. J. Milgrom: *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) p. 420; see also pp. xvii, 359, 368 and many others.
4. Interestingly, the structure extends one step beyond *Lech Lecha* and the Akeda to include all of Toldot Terah. As we see later in Genesis, each of the Toldot narratives concludes with a listing of the descendents of the "rejected" branch. Here too, naming the descendents of Abraham's brother Nahor serves to close off the portion on the line of Terah, while informing us of Rebecca's lineage and foreshadowing the merging of the two lines.
5. See Dorsey p. 56-57 for an alternative structure of the Abraham and Isaac narratives that does not take into account the parallel between *Lech Lecha* and the Akeda. See also, Y. Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative," in J. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: structures, analyses, exegesis* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981; reprinted by Research Press: Provo, 1999); Radday. p. 104, describes a chiasm roughly similar to the one proposed here, but does not note the parallel between the two covenants or the significance of Ishmael's pivotal position.
6. Dorsey, pp. 39-41; see also Radday, p. 51.
7. Bereishit Rabbah 55:7, also cited in Rashi to Genesis 22:2



WE WELCOME ARTICLES ON THE FOLLOWING BOOKS OF TANAKH: KINGS, ISAIAH, JEREMIAH, MICAH, AMOS, JOEL, HAGGAI, HABAKKUK, PSALMS, PROVERBS, CHRONICLES