

Genesis to Kings: A Canonical Overview

Scotty Williams

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Introduction

The narrative foundation of the Bible, Genesis through Kings, is best understood as two literary units, the Torah and part of the Nevi'im. The Torah, Genesis to Deuteronomy, is comprised of three movements (Gen. 1:1 – Exod. 19:2, Exod. 19:3 – Num. 10:10, Num. 10:11 – Deut. 34:12) with the covenant between Yahweh and Israel at the center. Just as God's Spirit filled creation at the beginning of the Torah, so the Torah closes with a Spirit filled moment exemplified through Joshua (Gen. 1:2, Deut. 34:9). This seems to serve a dual purpose, bringing a conclusion to the Torah while also introducing the next literary unit, the Nevi'im. Joshua – 2 Kings is the second unit and explores the practical and theological significance of humans being in covenant with the Creator in their Eden like land. Although this paper follows a literary layout of the Pentateuch, it is important to note that there is a compelling argument to be made that Genesis – Joshua serves as the first literary unit and Judges – 2 Kings is read as the second. This viewpoint, the Hexateuch, structures its argument around the literary theme of God dwelling with His creation in a chosen land. It sees its bookends as God first dwelling with creation in Eden recorded in Genesis and once again in Canaan as recorded in Joshua, with the Covenant at Sinai as the center.¹ No matter which stance one takes, it remains the same that the narrative foundation of the Hebrew Bible is written in light of its central topic: Yahweh's covenant at Sinai with a chosen seed who would bring the Eden blessing to the nations.

Genesis

¹ David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament : A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Baker Books, 2012), 47.

Genesis is an introduction to the Torah and serves as the prologue to the Suzerain-Vassal Treaty, covenant, between God and Israel at Sinai. In an Ancient Near Eastern culture, suzerains (greater, kingly party) would enter into a covenant with a vassal (lesser party). These treaties follow six basic features with the first two- a preamble that identifies the suzerain; and a historical prologue that recounts the previous relationship between the parties-creating gratitude, respect and trust on the part of the vassal toward the suzerain.² Genesis serves the similar function as it “traces past relationship between two covenant parties, Yahweh and Israel.”³ The blessing of land and seed serve as the main themes of Genesis as humanity awaits one who will be the faithful *adam* and restore the Eden place where God will once again dwell with His people. Structured around key figures annotated by the word תּוֹלְדוֹת (*tôldôt*), meaning generations or histories, the blessing of land and seed begin with God, the suzerain in Gen. 2:4-25 and continues to Adam (Gen. 5:1), Noah (Gen. 6:9), Abraham (Gen. 11:27), Isaac (Gen. 25:19), Jacob, and Joseph (Gen. 37:2). The book of Genesis concludes with a multiplied seed reining in a land. At first glance, the reader might suspect that God’s chosen people did it, could Joseph have reversed the curse from Genesis 3 as God’s people dwell in abundance in a land with Him once again?

Exodus

Exodus quickly confirms what the reader of Genesis was left wondering. No, Joseph was not the one who would restore His people as they now have become enslaved in the far-off land of Egypt. Although Exodus does not use a structured word like that of Genesis, the author makes

² Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant : A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 49.

³ David A. Dorsey, 48.

clear that only God can bring about the complete rescue of a seed through His chosen one. The early life of Moses serves as the literary structure of Exodus. Just as Moses passed through the waters, was delivered from the hand of Pharaoh and was chosen by God to be His representative (Exod. 1 – 4), so too, Israel passed through the waters after being delivered from the hand of Pharaoh and was commissioned by God to be a nation of representatives. (Exod. 5 – 40). With the structure of Exodus mirroring Moses' personal life and the journey of Israel, it comes as no surprise that two major themes of the book of Exodus are introduced in Moses' earlier life. On Mount Horeb, God revealed His name to Moses and presented him with a test at a tree, causing the reader to see the motif of Genesis 3. The rest of Exodus plays out Israel's test to trust God from the hand of Pharaoh, wandering through the desert and to come up to the Mountain of Sinai where they are to know (שָׁמָא, *shâma'*) the name of Yahweh. Knowing the name of Yahweh is best illustrated by the covenant that Yahweh enters with Israel where they are to become a kingdom of priests as He dwells amongst them. The author of Exodus spends the remainder of the book laying out how God would remain with a group of people that continue to fail the test. Ultimately, the book ends in a disappointing way. Although God is dwelling amidst His people (finally), neither Israel nor their chosen intercessor, Moses, is able to enter His presence. Again, the reader is left to ponder how can a covenant breaking people truly know the name of Yahweh even when He dwells in their midst?

Leviticus

Exodus 40 concludes with the completion of the tabernacle in the first month of the second year, on the first day of the month and Numbers 1:1 begins on the first day of the second month of the second year, which means that the book of Leviticus details what transpired in the

month between.⁴ The central theme of Leviticus is holiness. As Exodus ends with Moses not able to enter the presence of God, Numbers opens with Moses talking to God in the tent of meeting and the event that happened between was Leviticus which retells God's means to make Israel holy in order to draw near to them. Becoming holy has to do with proximity to the Holy One. His holiness is both good and dangerous. To be near Him, humanity needs guidelines. Structurally, Leviticus is at the center of the Torah. Even more specifically, Leviticus 16 is in the middle of the book, making it the center of the center of the Torah. This key section includes a description of the defilement of Yahweh's holy place and instructions for its restoration and purification on the Day of Atonement, a ritual at the heart of Israel's entire sacrificial system. Although God wanted a kingdom of priests, Israel settled for a kingdom with priests, represented by Moses, who throughout the story has gone before God and offered His life as a sacrifice on behalf of Israel's constant unfaithfulness. The reader is meant to see this pattern in Leviticus, specifically, centered around the Day of Atonement. When something blemishes communion between God and His people, a blameless representative must offer their life to cover the sins of the many (Mackie). More than just a priestly tech manual, Leviticus' sacrifices, offerings, festivals, and priestly codes are about Yahweh continuing to make a way to draw near to humanity.

Numbers

The book of Numbers (מִדְבָּר, *midbār*) means "in the wilderness" and best reflects both the physical and moral state of Israel as they continue to remain unfaithful as covenant partners to Yahweh. While the majority of the narrative follows a chronological order, there are many parts that follow a topical literary formation in order to emphasize specific themes found thus far in

⁴ John H Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Zondervan Publishing Company, 1992), 323.

the Torah. For example, Numbers 1:1 situates the events on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Exodus from Egypt, while Numbers 7:1 positions the reader back to the time of setting up the tabernacle in the first day of the first month of the second year, and Numbers 9:1 takes the reader to the time period of the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month of the second year.⁵ Structurally, Numbers is divided in three sections noted by their geographical location. The climax of the book comes in the center of these three blocks, Numbers 10:11- 21:9, where Israel fails the test to trust Yahweh on an individual level (Korah and his family, Num. 16), cooperate level (the evil report of the spies, Num. 13-14) and leadership level (Moses striking the rock, Num. 17). This narrative section might cause the reader to lose all hope for Israel as Moses, Aaron, and Meriam fail to be the one who would crush the head of the serpent and lead Israel into unblemished union with Yahweh. Amidst the tragedy, the author closes Numbers with a glimmer of hope. He introduces Joshua, a key figure that seems worthy to lead Israel and deliver them from themselves and their enemies.

Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy is thought to cover a span of one month and is broken into three sections around Moses' three speeches. It is the final book of the Torah, opposite bookend of Genesis. The book of Deuteronomy should not be thought of as a "second law" but as Moses' explanation and commentary of God's covenant codes.⁶ The reader knows that Deuteronomy closes out the Torah based on the literary parallels with Genesis. Just as the book of Genesis concludes with Jacob giving a long speech and blessing to his descendants, Deuteronomy ends with Moses giving a long speech and blessing Jacob's descents. Just as God's Spirit was

⁵ Ibid., 369-370.

⁶ Ibid., 423.

responsible for creation (Gen. 1:2, 2:6), His Spirit, inhabiting Joshua, is primed to lead God's people into Canaan, a new creation-like land. A key theme from Deuteronomy that is interlaced with Genesis is faith. Even before the commands and laws were given at Sinai, Abraham was said to have obeyed God's voice and kept His commandments, statutes, laws (Gen. 26:5). This is only possible if faith alone in Yahweh is what keeping all the commands statutes and laws are about, something Moses expresses in Deuteronomy 10:16. Ironically, God leads Moses to a mountaintop because of His lack of faith where he dies. Again, the reader is left in anticipation, waiting for the seed of the woman, a prophet like Moses, to come and lead Israel to their promised land and be a blessing to all nations (Deut. 18:15-19).

Joshua

The book of Joshua starts the Nevi'im, the prophetic writings, but is meant to be read as a continuation of the Torah (Josh. 1:8-9). In the first of four sections of the book, Joshua, the main character and new leader of Israel, is set on parallel with Moses. Similar to Moses who sent out spies into the Canaan (Num. 13), Joshua sends out spies into the land. Unlike Moses' exploration, Joshua's reconnaissance goes great and even led to a woman and her family to experience Israel's blessing. The next story draws upon the imagery of Moses leading Israel across dry land out of Egypt as Joshua leads Israel across the Jordan and into Canaan on dry ground. It is in the last chapter of the first section that we find the theme of the book. As Joshua confronts an angel of the Lord, he asks the angel, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" "Neither" the angel responds. This reveals the real question: is Joshua and Israel on God's, the faithful One, side? The conquest for the land of Canaan is much less about Israel versus the Canaanites, and more about God's battle and Israel's choice to trust the faithfulness of Yahweh. The second section, Joshua 6-12, give depictions of battles where Israel trusted God and received blessings

and victory; and times when they did not trust God and were defeated. The land is distributed to the tribes in the third section (Josh. 13-22) and the fourth section closes with Joshua reminding Israel to remain faithful to Yahweh. Unlike the anticipation at the end of Deuteronomy, the reader finishes Joshua with no future snake crushing seed in sight (Josh. 24:31).

Judges

The book of Judges is a tragedy, revealing the sobering reality of the human condition. But it also points for the need of a faithful God who will show grace and rescue His people. The first section of Judges, chapters 1-2, represents Israel's downward cycle of: disobedience and sin, oppression and curse, repentance, God's deliverance, peace and blessing. This is personified through the life of thirteen judges, who acted as political and military leaders of Israel (Judg. 13-16). The repeated line in the last section of Judges (Judg. 17-21), "In those days, Israel had no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes" stands as centerpiece of just how lost Israel has become. Yet, amid Israel's moral failures this same motif anticipates a leader (king) who will do what is right in their own eyes of Yahweh.

Samuel

The book of Samuel takes the reader from a group of tribes governed by judges to a unified kingdom under the reign of a king. It is structured around three sections annotated by three main characters: Samuel (1 Sam. 1-12), Saul (1 Sam. 13-31), and David (2 Sam. 1-24). The main themes of the book are introduced in Hannah's opening song: despite human wickedness God is at work (2:1-3), God opposes the proud and exalts the humble (2:4-9), God will raise up a messianic King (2:10). The first theme is displayed through the life of Samuel. God says that Israel's request for a king reveals they have "rejected [Yahweh] from being king over them" (1

Sam. 8:7). Despite this, God is still weaving a redemptive plan for His creation. The second theme is picked up in the life of Saul, who's pride and downfall is contrasted with that of David. For example, Saul fears the Philistine, Goliath, while David fears God and conquers the giant. Though Saul is actively attempting to kill David, David will do nothing to kill Saul. And while the Spirit of the Lord left Saul, it remained on David. The third theme is presented in the third section and is key for understanding the entire storyline of the Bible. In 2 Samuel 7, God makes a promise to David that from his royal line there will come a future king who will build God's temple on Earth and set up an eternal kingdom. The future messianic kingdom will be how God brings blessing to all nations.⁷ Unfortunately, David's life follows a trajectory similar to that of Saul's and ends with unfaithfulness and curses. Yet, despite Israel's rejection of God as their king, the reader is left with great excitement and eagerness for an eternal, messianic king from the line of David.

Kings

The Book of Kings opens with the passing of David and the introduction to the first section's (1 Kings 1-11) main character, Solomon. Despite popular opinion Solomon is depicted as a mixed bag- making multiple assassination plots with David, yet seeking to do what is right in God's eye and wisdom and constructing the new Eden Temple, but also breaking all the ordinances for kings from Deuteronomy 17 such as marrying daughters of hundreds of foreign kings for political alliances, adopting their gods, introducing the worship of other gods back into Israel, accumulating mass amount of wealth, building a huge army, getting numerous amounts horses from Egypt, and even instituting slave labor for his building projects. By the time

⁷ Kevin J Vanhoozer et al., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: Spck ; Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005), 720.

Solomon dies, he resembles Pharoah more than his father David.⁸ The book of Kings as a whole, and more specifically in the final two sections (1 Kings 12- 2 Kings 17, and 2 Kings 18- 25) structure around the theme *ויעש הרע בעיני יהיה* (*and he did evil in the eyes of YHWH*) which appears over 29 times. The book of Kings offers a few, sprinkled stories throughout the narrative of kings who put their allegiance in Yahweh and obeyed His law in order to emphatically contrast the more prominent theme of kings who abandoned the covenant with Yahweh and did evil. As the book closes, it makes abundantly clear that the expectations of the Davidic King to crush the head of the serpent and bring an eternal kingdom is still unfulfilled.

Conclusion

One of the main points of application can be taken from how Moses speaks to the new generation of Israel on the plains of Moab before entering the land of Canaan. He reminds them of their time at Sinai and cautions them to *shâma'* God. He speaks to them as if they were the generation that was present at Mount Sinai when God first gave the laws. What Moses implies is that humans of every generation, including modern students of Scripture like me and you, are the intended audience for the Torah. The Nevi'im begins with the same message, encouraging the reader of that generation to keep the book of the laws and meditate on it day and night (Josh. 1:8-9). Similarly, those who gave the final shape to the Hebrew Bible introduce the Ketuvim with the same blessing abundance to those who delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night (Ps. 1:1-3). The TaNaK is meant to bring all to a recognize there is a choice to be made every day: to choose allegiance to things of one's own desires or to choose life and wisdom by following Yahweh's commands. Another point of application for readers on this side of Jesus and

⁸ Ibid., 423.

the cross is to realize that Jesus is the true fulfillment of the TaNaK. Jesus is the one we were waiting for at the end of every story. He is the true Adam, the seed who crushed the snake's head, the greater prophet like Moses, the Messianic king from the line of David who is God's presence on earth. He has restored all who believe back to union with Him through His indwelling Spirit in our garden-like temples (our very life). Today, the Church can actually walk with Him, in the presence of the cosmic Creator, suzerain King, who has remained faithful from the very beginning. There is no need to read these stories and books in despair because Jesus is Him.

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