Hensel, Benedikt

Die Vertauschung des Erstgeburtsegens in der
Genesis: Eine Analyse der narrativ-theologischen
Grundstruktur des ersten Buches der Tora

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Michael S. Moore
Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona

This Mainz dissertation creatively engages a fascinating question, the implications of which can hardly be exaggerated: “Why do second- and third-born sons so persistently replace first-born sons in the Israelite Verheissungslinie (‘line of promise’) in the book of Genesis?” Responding to it, part 1 begins with a brief rehearsal of the history of research on this question, mainly through critical engagement with recent scholarly monographs. For example, where Chris Heard (Dynamics of Diselection [Atlanta, 2001], 184) presumes that the election of one “son” tends to complement the diselection of another (ascribing this polarity to postexilic Jewish writers thoroughly convinced that the “will of the Achaemenid rulers” amounts to “an expression of the will of Yahweh”), Hensel registers two objections: (1) Heard does not adequately explain all twelve occurrences of the “exchange-of-the-firstborn-blessing” motif in Genesis, which, in Hensel’s mind, purposefully structures the first scroll of Torah; and (2) Heard does not prove that “diselection” is an essential component in the cases he does analyze. Where Roger Syrén (The Forsaken Firstborn [Sheffield, 1993], 144) focuses on nonchosen sons as symbolically representing for many Jewish writers “an active interest in the world around Judah” (nascent universalism), Hensel objects that the corpus of examples upon which Syrén bases this conclusion is, again, too small. Finally, where Fred Greenspahh (When Brothers Dwell Together [Oxford, 1994]) begins his analysis with a comparative study of
several non-Hebrew texts before expanding his scope to include more of the biblical material than that examined in previous studies, Hensel still criticizes it for failing to identify the theological, sociopolitical, and ethical perspectives most likely shaping the thinking of the Hebrew tradents responsible for chiseling the Vertauschung motif so deeply into the heart of Torah.

In light of these “deficiencies,” part 2 sets out to expose Genesis to a “systematic and thoroughgoing study” designed to reveal “the canonical development of this motif in its literary breadth” (19). Exhaustively engaging the MT of Genesis, Hensel produces a more comprehensive literary-historical analysis of the “exchange-of-the-firstborn-blessing” motif than any other, painstakingly examining the stories of Cain, Abel, and Seth (Gen 4–5); Ham, Japhet, and Shem (Gen 5:32; 9:18–11:26); Joktan and Peleg (Gen 10:25–29; 11:18); Elam, Assur, Arpachshad, Lud, and Aram (Gen 10:22–24); Haran, Nahor, and Abraham (Gen 11:27–25:11); Ishmael and Isaac (Gen 15–22); Esau and Jacob (Gen 25:12–36:43); Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah (Gen 29:32–49:3); Joseph and Judah (Gen 37–38); Er and Perez (Gen 38); Serach and Perez (Gen 38:27–30); Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen 48:1–22), plus the Aaron-Moses polarity scattered throughout Exodus–Deuteronomy.

In each of these “exchanges,” Hensel (like Heard, whom he earlier criticizes) argues that whenever one son “disqualifies” (often the biological firstborn), another “qualifies,” thereby creating a polarity that later tradents ascribe to one of three sources: (1) the father (Gen 9:26; 48:19–20; 49:8–12); (2) the mother (4:25); and/or (3) the deity (22:18; 32:29; 35:10). Not every Vertauschung text specifies the particular channel through which the (dis)qualification process proceeds (245), yet according to Hensel the tōlēdōt genealogies occur precisely where they do in order to validate and confirm the new direction generated by each new exchange.

Building on these insights, part 3 engages this exegetical data from three broad perspectives: (1) observations on how the Vertauschung motif helps bind together narratives in Genesis that appear to be segregated (not unlike Rolf Rendtorff’s classic iteration of “the promise of descendants” motif in the second chapter of his seminal work, Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch [Berlin, 1977]); (2) observations on how the interface linking the Vertauschung narratives with the tōlēdōt genealogies helps structure the book of Genesis as a whole (a possibility virtually ignored by Rendtorff, Problem, 116, 136); and (3) reflections on the literary, theological, and ethical functions of Vertauschung as a sociopolitical motif likely to have been batted about between Jews and Samaritans (a hypothetical discussion imagined by Hensel in order to “establish” a Sitz im Leben for the final form of Genesis). Space prohibits in-depth analysis here, but suffice it to say that each of these discussions contributes to a fuller understanding of a

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critically important biblical motif, as well as how it might contribute to the Torah’s final shape. To cite only one example, Hensel’s insistence that the Judah-Tamar story in Gen 38, far from being segregated from its surroundings, essentially contributes to the polarity structuring the larger “Joseph-Judah narrative” definitively challenges Robert Alter’s synchronically creative, yet diachronically naïve analysis of this text (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York, 2011], 1–24), not to mention von Rad’s classically dismissive remark that Gen 38 sustains “no connection at all” to its literary context (*Genesis* [Philadelphia, 1973], 356).

All in all, this is a fine dissertation, well-conceived, well-structured, well-researched, and well-written. Its prospective impact would significantly increase, however, should more concentrated attention be given to two areas of concern: First, with regard to the literary-historical context, Hensel applauds Greenspahn for attempting to situate the *Vertauschung* motif within a plausible comparative context (10, citing Greenspahn, *Brothers*, 11–83), yet truth be told, neither one of these studies delves very deeply into the “great texts” of the Great Powers Club (M. Liverani, “The Great Powers Club,” in *Amarna Diplomacy* [ed. R. Cohen and R. Westbrook; Baltimore, 2000], 15–27; E. Reiner, “Die akkadische Literatur,” in *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft: Altorientalische Literatur* [ed. W. Röllig; Wiesbaden, 1978], 1:151–210; B. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [Bethesda, 2005], 1–47). Thus each fails to produce a contextual understanding of this biblical motif and to align this understanding upon a recognizably fruitful methodological grid (T. Lemos, “‘They Have Become Women’: Judean Diaspora and Postcolonial Theories of Gender and Migration,” in *Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: Essays in Retrospect and Prospect* [ed. S. Olyan; Atlanta, 2012], 83–89). Second, Hensel follows C. Nihan (“The Torah between Samaria and Judah: Shechem and Gerizim in Deuteronomy and Joshua,” in *The Pentateuch as Torah* [ed. G. Knoppers and B. Levinson; Winona Lake, 2007], 187–223) and J. Zsengellér (“Origin or Originality of the Torah? The Historical and Text-Critical Value of the Samaritan Pentateuch,” in *From Qumran to Aleppo* [ed. J. Zsengellér et al.; Göttingen, 2009], 189–202) in asserting that the Pentateuch is a *Kompromissdokument* stitched together via innumerable concessions literally produced by postexilic tradents from Mount Gerizim *as well as* Mount Zion and, further, that the *Vertauschung* narratives in Genesis are a “key” to understanding their profoundly composite nature (305–14, “chiffre”). However, while Jews and Samaritans were no doubt aware of each other, no hard evidence exists to prove that they “compromised” on anything, much less the final shape and contents of their mutually sacred text. Thus, as with most other attempts to delimit the authorship of this literature to hypothetical editors working in academic committees, this thesis ultimately rests on yet another *argumentum e silentio*. 

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