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COVENANT PEOPLES, COVENANT JOURNEYS

ARCHETYPAL SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE NOAH, ABRAHAM, AND MOSES NARRATIVES

JEREMY MADSEN

Jeremy Madsen will graduate from Brigham Young University in April 2021 with a BA in ancient Near Eastern studies, with an emphasis in Hebrew Bible and a minor in editing. After graduation, he hopes to pursue writing and publishing on scripture-related topics.

Abstract: The stories of Noah, Abraham, and Moses display remarkable similarities. All three follow a narrative pattern where God appears in theophany to a prophet-patriarch figure, God forms a covenant with this prophet-patriarch and his people to bring them to a new land, and God guides them on a divinely-assisted journey until they reach that land. Rather than being the result of typological shaping or historical resemblance, the narrative similarities between these three stories are most likely indicative of a common narrative archetype, which this paper titles the covenant journey archetype. The thrice-fold repetition of this archetype within the Pentateuch attests to the Israelites' theological conviction that their God was a god of promises, guidance, and deliverance, who would fulfill his covenants with them as he did with their fathers.

The biblical stories of Noah, Abraham, and Moses have much in common. God, in all his terrible justice and tender mercy, dominates all three. The leading figures—Noah, Abraham, and Moses—are connected in the same genealogical chain. And all three stories play key parts in the Pentateuch, a foundational text in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Over the years, many additional parallels have been noted across these three narratives. For example, Abraham's descent into Egypt is a type of the Israelite bondage, Moses as a baby is preserved in an ark just like Noah was, and the genealogies in Genesis place Abraham as many generations after Noah as Noah is placed after Adam.¹

1. See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 375–76; Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (New York: Routledge,

The similarities between these narratives extend deeper than such surface details, however. All three stories share the same underlying narrative structure: In a time of general wickedness, God reaches out in theophany to a righteous man and his people, covenanting to deliver them and guide them to a new land. The covenant also includes promises and commandments, sacrifice at an altar, extension to future generations, and an ordinance of renewal. According to the terms of his covenant, God guides and protects the man and his people in dramatic fashion as they undertake a perilous journey. The story concludes with the death of the righteous man and the transferal of the covenant status to a successor.

The presence of these similarities begs the question of why they exist. Possible explanations include historical resemblance or deliberate typological shaping. However, historical resemblance is not an adequate criterion for explaining literary resemblance, and the nature of the similarities does not fit well with current models of typology. Instead, the deep structural resemblance between these narratives is best explained as the product of an underlying literary archetype: a set of narrative conventions that guides the stories' structures, characters, and narrative arcs. This archetype, which I will refer to as the covenant journey archetype, reflects ancient Israel's strong covenant identity and their conception of deity as a powerful and proactive divine being who regularly intervenes in history to guide, protect, and deliver his people.

DEFINING TYPOLOGICAL SHAPING

In biblical studies, a *typology* is the linking of two events in such a way that one is seen as a type—either a foreshadowing or an echo—of the other. Typologies can be divided into two categories: typological reading and typological shaping. Typological reading is a hermeneutical tactic occurring *outside* a text, while typological shaping occurs *within* a text, when the text presents a story or scene in a manner that resembles or echoes another event. Marc Brettler distinguishes two kinds of typological shaping: re-enactment and pre-enactment.² Re-enactment is when an author shapes a later event to resemble an earlier one, thereby making the earlier event a “type” of the later event. For example, some writers in the New Testament used typological shaping to depict events in Jesus's life as “re-enactments” of Old Testament scenes. Brettler also proposes that biblical authors engaged in “pre-enactment,” or the shaping of a story to be a type of a later, already-known event. For example, Brettler argues that Abraham and

1995), 51–55; Harold W. Attridge, gen. ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 86.

2. Brettler, *Creation of History*, 48–49.

Sarah's descent into Egypt in Gen 12 is deliberately shaped by its author to be a pre-enactment of the Israelites' later captivity in Egypt.³ According to Brettler, typological shaping was an intrinsic part of how ancient Israelite writers composed or redacted their narratives.⁴

DEFINING NARRATIVE ARCHETYPES

The idea of literary archetypes and conventions is well established in modern literary theory. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines an archetype as “a symbol, theme, setting, or character-type that recurs in different times and places [in literature] so frequently or prominently as to suggest . . . that it embodies some essential element of ‘universal’ human experience.”⁵ Another literary dictionary defines an archetype as “a common and recurring representation in a particular human culture, or entire human race” that “shape[s] the structure and function of a literary work.”⁶ Scholars have identified many archetypes in literature across cultures. For example, in 1949, literary theorist Joseph Campbell wrote *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, where he identified the “hero” as a stock, archetypal character.⁷ Around the same time, Carl Jung's theory of the “collective unconscious” gave rise to the idea that a set of basic archetypal patterns are intrinsic to every human society.⁸ Whether this core set of archetypes is intrinsic or not, most scholars agree that beyond these basic patterns, each society and culture has its own set of archetypal plots, stories, and symbols tailored to its environment and values.⁹ Ancient Israel was no exception.

The idea that ancient Israel had literary conventions has been explored by the literary critic Robert Alter. In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Alter argues that ancient Israelites were familiar with various literary “type-scenes”—distinctive patterns that certain scenes were expected to follow—just how modern readers

3. Brettler, *Creation of History*, 51–55. The typological similarity between these stories was previously identified by Michael Fishbane; see Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 375–76.

4. Brettler, *Creation of History*, 59.

5. Chris Baldick, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2008), s.v. “archetype.”

6. Literary Devices: Definition and Examples of Literary Terms, s.v. “archetype,” accessed May 10, 2020, <https://literarydevices.net/archetype/>.

7. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949).

8. Carl Jung, “Instinct and the Unconscious,” in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 8: Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, ed. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 129–38.

9. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* states that in recent years, narrative critics “have been wary of the reductionism involved in the application of such unverified hypotheses to literary works, and more alert to the cultural differences that the archetypal approach often overlooks in its search for universals” (Baldick, *Literary Terms*, s.v. “archetype”).

expect stories within a genre to follow certain conventions or patterns within that genre. Alter provides several examples of type-scenes in Hebrew literature, including “the annunciation . . . of the birth of the hero to his barren mother; the encounter with the future betrothed at a well; the epiphany in the field; the initiatory trial; danger in the desert and the discovery of a well or other source of sustenance; the testament of the dying hero.”¹⁰ Alter argues that by determining the conventional layout of a type-scene, we can identify how specific instances deviate from the expected pattern to create suspense or direct the reader’s focus or expectations.

In the broader field of literary studies, the concept of archetypes was applied to plots in 2004 by the journalist and author Christopher Booker. In his book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Booker argues that nearly every story across time and culture follows one of seven basic archetypal patterns.¹¹ One of those seven archetypal plots is the quest, which Booker describes as follows:

Far away, we learn, there is some priceless goal, worth any effort to achieve: a treasure; a promised land; something of infinite value. From the moment the hero learns of this prize, the need to set out on the long hazardous journey to reach it becomes the most important thing to him in the world. Whatever perils and diversions lie in wait on the way, the story is shaped by that one overriding imperative; and the story remains unresolved until the objective has been finally, triumphantly secured.¹²

The narratives of Noah, Abraham, and Moses all fit easily into Booker’s quest category. Beyond that, they represent a far more specific subset of the quest plot, an archetypal pattern specific to Israelite culture that we will call the covenant journey. This archetype can be separated into three stages: theophany, covenant, and journey.¹³

10. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 51.

11. Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (New York: Continuum, 2004). While Booker’s work has been criticized in the literary community for his oversimplification of literature and his critique of literary works that don’t follow one of the seven plots, his work still demonstrates how the majority of stories, particularly those written before the modern era, follow basic repeating plot archetypes.

12. Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots*, 69.

13. My analysis focuses on the final stage of the text as it has been preserved by the Masoretic tradition. Questions of form, source, and redaction criticism have been bracketed, partially to reduce the length and complexity of the analysis, partially because analyzing the earlier stages of the texts would require dividing each narrative into its respective sources, a division that the scholarly community has yet to reach a consensus about.

THEOPHANY

Each of the three narratives begins by introducing its main protagonist, the prophet-patriarch.¹⁴ All three prophet-patriarchs are depicted as in good standing with God (Gen 6:9; 15:6; Exod 3:4, 12). All three prophet-patriarchs are given a name etiology: Noah and Moses shortly upon being born (Gen 5:29; Exod 2:10), Abraham not until his name is changed by God (Gen 17:5). In all three cases, their name carries significance for their future mission.

The narrative also introduces a problematic setting: a widespread state of wickedness or oppression. Noah lives in a time when “the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth” (Gen 6:5).¹⁵ Abraham is introduced directly after the Tower of Babel narrative, where men attempting to build up a city and a name unto themselves are scattered and confounded for their arrogance. Moses is born amidst great oppression, when the Israelites’ lives are “bitter with hard service” and the Egyptians are enforcing widespread infanticide (Exod 1:11–22).

Each narrative revolves around ongoing theophanies between God and the prophet-patriarch. God does not simply appear once; rather, he plays an active role throughout each narrative. The Lord speaks to Noah multiple times: to tell him to build the ark (Gen 6:13), once the ark is built (Gen 7:1), after the flood subsides (Gen 8:15), and when Noah offers sacrifice (Gen 9:1). Similarly, the Lord speaks to Abraham at nearly every stage of his journey, usually after a trial or test of some kind: to tell Abram to leave Harran (Gen 12:1), at Shechem (Gen 12:7), after Abram separates from Lot (Gen 13:14), after the battle of the kings (Gen 15:1), to announce that Sarai will conceive and to initiate circumcision (Gen 17:1), to announce the destruction of Sodom (Gen 18:1), to command Abraham to slay Isaac (Gen 22:1), and to reaffirm Abraham’s righteousness afterward (Gen 22:15–16). The Lord speaks to Moses even more, first at the burning bush (Exod 3:4) and then at regular intervals throughout the rest of the exodus. The phrase “God spoke unto Moses” and its equivalents occur more than 55 times throughout the Pentateuch.

In each initial theophany, the Lord commissions the prophet-patriarch to do a great work. He commands Noah to make an ark and save his family and every animal from the flood (Gen 6:14). To Abram, he says, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make

14. This term seems the most apt for capturing their various roles. Abraham and Moses are each called a prophet, or *nābī* (Gen 20:7; Deut 18:15; Deut 34:10). Abraham and Noah each hold the patriarchal position as head of their family and household, while Moses becomes God’s appointed leader—de facto patriarch—over the whole house of Israel.

15. All scriptural quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. Versification follows the English text.

of you a great nation . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:1–3). To Moses, he directs, “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exod 3:10). In all three cases, obedience is not optional: by accepting the commission, the prophet-patriarch is binding himself and his people into a covenant with God, where both parties are bound by sacred responsibilities.

COVENANT

Central to the covenant journey archetypal pattern is the covenant (*bĕrît*) itself—the binding pact between God and man that sets the terms of the narrative. To Noah, the Lord says, “I will establish my covenant with you” (Gen 6:18). To Abraham, God says, “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen 17:7). In the exodus narrative, the covenant is not a new one, but a reaffirmation of the covenant that God had made with the Israelites’ fathers. The text states that “God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exod 2:24), and God later tells Moses, “I have remembered my covenant. . . . I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Exod 6:5–7).

In all three narratives, the covenant is renewed and expanded over the course of the covenant journey. With Noah, the Lord establishes his covenant before the flood and then renews and expands it once the flood is over. Abraham’s covenant is built promise by promise throughout his lifetime. With Moses, the covenant is first extended at the burning bush, is significantly expanded at Sinai, and then is renewed in the plains of Moab before entering the promised land.

The primary term of the covenant is the promise of a new land, a land of inheritance. After the flood, God gives Noah and his posterity dominion over the entire earth: “The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth” (Gen 9:1–3). God repeatedly promises to give Abraham the land of Canaan, stating, “Unto your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15:18; see also Gen 12:7; 13:15). The Lord tells Moses from the burning bush, “I have come down . . . to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:8). Later the Lord tells the Israelites, “I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession” (Exod 6:8).

The promise of a land of inheritance is accompanied by other divine promises. After the deluge, God pledges to never again destroy the earth with a flood (Gen 8:21; 9:11). With Abraham, the Lord promises to make of him a “great

nation” and to make his name great (Gen 12:1–3). Later he promises that Abram’s seed will be innumerable (Gen 13:14–17; 15:5) and that Abram will be the father of many nations and kings (Gen 17:4–6). With the Israelites, God vows to make them his “treasured possession” and “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation,” inasmuch as they keep his covenant (Exod 19:4–8; see also Exod 29:45).

In each case, the covenant is extended to future posterity. The Lord pledges with Noah that the covenant is for “you and your descendants after you . . . for all future generations” (Gen 9:9, 12). To Abraham, the Lord vows that the covenant will extend to “you and your offspring after you throughout their generations” (Gen 17:10, 13; see also Gen 12:7). The Lord tells the Israelites that his covenant with them shall be in force “throughout your generations . . . as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children” (Exod 12:14, 24).

These blessings and promises are not free; to qualify, the covenant people must comply with the commandments that God issues. After the flood, God forbids mankind from eating the blood of animals and from shedding each other’s blood, upon price of death (Gen 9:4–6). God commands Abram to “walk before me, and be blameless” (Gen 17:1). God gives the Israelites the Decalogue (Exod 20:3–17), the Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:22–23:19), the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26), and other ritual laws in Leviticus and Numbers.

In each case, the covenant is formalized by offering sacrifice at altars. After the flood, Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifice on it (Gen 8:20). Abram builds altars at the plain of Moreh (Gen 12:7), at Beth-el (Gen 12:8; 13:4), and at Hebron (Gen 13:18). To formalize the covenant, God has Abraham slaughter various animals and divide them into two piles, which “a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch” then passes through (Gen 15:17). Towards the end of Abraham’s life, God demands of him the ultimate sacrifice—that of his son Isaac—although he does not require Abraham to carry it out (Gen 22:1–19). With the Israelites, the sacrifice of the Passover lamb initiates their covenant journey out of Egypt; later, God commands them to erect an altar within the Tabernacle and offer sacrifices upon it regularly (Exod 29:38–42; 40:29).

The final aspect of the covenant is the establishment of an ordinance to remember and renew it perpetually. With Noah, God sets the bow in the cloud as a recurring reminder of his promise with all the flesh of the earth (Gen 9:12–17). With Abraham, God establishes circumcision as a ritual of renewal and reaffirmation of the covenant with all of Abraham’s seed (Gen 17:9–14). God commands the Israelites to keep the feast of the Passover every year as a “perpetual ordinance” and a “day of remembrance” of his bringing them out of Egypt (Exod 12:14–20; 13:3–10; 23:14–15). Later, the Day of Atonement (Lev 16) is added to the covenant as an additional annual renewal ceremony.

JOURNEY

Framed by moments of theophany and guided by the terms of the covenant, each narrative describes the journey undertaken by the prophet-patriarch and his household (or in Moses's case, his entire people). These journeys take various forms: Noah and his family sit in the ark for several months (or forty days); Abraham travels from Harran to Canaan, down to Egypt, then back to various locations in Canaan; and Moses leads the Israelites on a trek that will eventually last forty years. But in all three cases, these are not normal trips; these are divinely sanctioned and mandated journeys, where God is ever near and displays of divine favor are plentiful. Specific manifestations of this divine power include special salvation from a widespread punishment, divine guidance, deliverance from enemies, and the providing of sustenance.

In all three narratives, members of the covenant people experience protection and special deliverance from an otherwise widespread catastrophe. Noah and his family are the only humans spared from the flood (Gen 7:21–23). Moses and the Israelites are repeatedly spared from the plagues sent upon the Egyptians, culminating in their miraculous deliverance from the death of the firstborns (Exod 8:22–23; 9:4, 26; 10:23; 11:6–7; 12:23). In the middle of the Abraham cycle, Lot and his household are spared—on account of Abraham's intercession—from the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18–19). This deliverance, however, is conditional upon obedience, even for those who are part of the covenant people. Lot's wife, who breaks the messengers' injunction to not look back, is turned into a pillar of salt (Gen 19:17–26). Similarly, any Israelites who fail to perform the rites of the Passover are denied special salvation, despite their membership in the chosen people (Exod 12:23).

Noah, Abraham, and Moses all receive specific instructions and guidance from God. Noah is given the exact dimensions of the ark and is told when to enter into it (Gen 6:14–7:4). Abraham is told by God to journey into the Levant and is given specific instructions concerning his covenant offering to God (Gen 12:1; 15:9), the institution of circumcision (Gen 17:9–15), and the near-sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:1–2). Moses is given specific directions from God for nearly every step of the exodus, and the Israelites are led in the wilderness by a column of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exod 13:21).

Deliverance from enemies, while absent from Noah's account, is repeatedly emphasized in the others. Abraham gains victory over the alliance of four kings in Gen 14 and is delivered from delicate situations in the "sister-wife" doublet episodes in Gen 12 and 20. The Israelites are miraculously delivered from the Egyptians at the Red (Reed) Sea and are given divine assistance in battle against

the Amalekites (Exod 14–15; 17), the Canaanites (Num 21:1–3), the Amorites (Num 21:21–35), and the Midianites (Num 31:1–12).

The providing of sustenance is also a common theme. After the flood, the Lord tells Noah and his sons, “Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you, even as the green herb have I given you all things” (Gen 9:3). Throughout Abraham’s narrative, the Lord blesses and prospers him in everything he does. In the encounters with Pharaoh and King Abimelech, Abraham is gifted considerable wealth (Gen 12:6; 20:16), so that he is “very wealthy in livestock, silver, and gold” (Gen 13:2). The Israelites are provided with manna from heaven (Exod 16) and are given water miraculously from a rock (Exod 17).

Despite all these manifestations of God’s power and favor, some among the chosen people disobey or willfully rebel, leading to divine punishment. At the end of the Noah narrative, his son Ham behaves inappropriately, for which his posterity through Canaan is cursed (Gen 9:20–27). In the Abraham narrative, Abraham’s nephew Lot devolves from selfishness—claiming the lush valley of the plain for his portion—to carelessness, as he moves close to and then into the wicked city of Sodom (Gen 13). Then he repeatedly delays obeying the directives of the divine messengers, until eventually his fear and inability to trust in the Lord lead to his impoverishment and ignominy (Gen 19:16–38). The exodus story is replete with rebellion, disobedience, and punishment. The Israelites repeatedly murmur against Moses and against the Lord, first at the shore of the Red Sea (Exod 14:10–12), then at the bitter waters at Marah (Exod 15:23–24), then about lack of food (Exod 16:2–3), then lack of water (Exod 17:2–3). In each of these cases, the Lord patiently answers their murmuring with a blessing and miracle. Then the moment of full rebellion comes when the Israelites fashion and worship the golden calf at Mount Sinai. The Lord declares that his people “have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them” (Exod 32:7–8), and he enacts severe punishment. Later incidents of rebellion, with similarly dire punishments, play out in Leviticus and Numbers (Lev 10:1–4; Num 13, 16, 21).

In each narrative, the prophet-patriarch eventually dies, but the covenant status and the Lord’s blessing continue with a chosen successor in the next generation. Noah declares that “blessed by the Lord my God be Shem,” and it is through Shem’s line that the narrative progresses to Abraham (Gen 9:26; 11:10). After Abraham dies, his legacy passes on to Isaac, the promised son of the covenant. The Lord appears to Isaac and says, “I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham’s sake” (Gen 26:23–24). After the death of Moses, the mantle of leadership falls upon Joshua, his faithful servant. The end of

Deuteronomy declares that “Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him,” and at the beginning of Joshua, the Lord reaffirms, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you” (Deut 34:9; Josh 1:5).

EXPLAINING THE SIMILARITIES

What should we make of this pattern? What does it mean that these three narratives share so many common elements, and what does this tell us about their composition or meaning? While three explanations are possible—historical resemblance, deliberate typological shaping, and literary archetypes—only the last adequately explains the data.

Option 1: Historical Resemblance

According to this explanation, the three narratives follow the same pattern and display similar features because the events that they recount were intrinsically similar. Rather than delve into the volatile issue of the historicity of the Pentateuch, I will instead argue why historical resemblance is not an adequate explanation even if these narratives are based in historical reality.

Historical resemblance cannot fully explain literary resemblance because the process of recounting events requires interpretation and shaping. Marc Brettler states: “All history is created. Events transpire, but people tell and record, select and reshape them, creating historical texts.”¹⁶ A historical text is therefore not an objective reconstruction of events as they actually happened, but the subjective result of an author selecting from a vast sea of events to shape a coherent narrative. This process of interpretation is succinctly described by the postmodern historiographer Keith Jenkins: “Most historiography is the attempted imposition of meaningful form onto a meaningless past.”¹⁷ Thus, if two historical events are described in a similar way, it is because the people writing about them have chosen to portray the two events as being similar. For example, a modern football game and an ancient battle can be described in very similar terms, with a nearly identical narrative arc and lexical resemblances, even though there are intrinsic differences between the two. At the same time, two ancient battles (or even the same battle) can be described in very different ways, depending on the narrator’s

16. Brettler, *The Creation of History*, 1.

17. Keith Jenkins, *On ‘What Is History?’: From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 140. In the context of the quote, Jenkins is describing the ideas of post-modernist thinker Hayden White, although the quote serves to describe Jenkins’ ideas about history as well.

point of view or the author's purpose or style.¹⁸ For these reasons, the similarities between the Noah, Abraham, and Moses narratives cannot be ascribed simply to historical resemblance. Rather, their literary resemblance requires a literary solution.¹⁹

Option 2: Deliberate Typological Shaping

The next possibility is that these narratives were intentionally shaped to be types of each other. To analyze this possibility, we first need a clear methodology for identifying typologies. Such a methodology is set forth by Michael Fishbane in *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. He identifies typologies principally in two ways: (1) by phrases that explicitly draw a comparison between two events (for example, the use of *ka'asher* in Josh 3:7: "I will be with you *as* I was with Moses" [italics mine]), and (2) by passages that share specific wording (such as the use of *tôhû wābôhû*, "waste and void," in Jer 4:23, which repeats a phrase found in Gen 1:2).²⁰ Fishbane notes that typologies can occur on the level of individual motifs, pericopes, or even entire scenarios, and that typologies may be used for events, characters, or places.²¹

According to these criteria, many typological similarities between our three narratives can be found. In the Moses narrative, the Lord frequently refers to covenant language used in the Abraham narrative. Most directly, the Lord declares to Moses, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod 3:6). Similar language is also used to describe the promised land. The Lord promises Abraham, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites" (Gen 15:18–21). Almost identical wording is used when the Lord promises an inheritance to the Israelites: he promises to set their borders "from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates" (Exod 23:31) and promises

18. An excellent example of the same battle being described in very different ways is the contrasting prose and poetic accounts of Barak and Deborah's victory in Judg 4–5.

19. This intrinsic fluidity between a historical event and literary accounts of it also means that literary similarities—or differences—between two narratives cannot be used to argue for or against their historical accuracy. For example, the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah are described in very similar ways in 2 Kings (both kings follow a wicked king, they enact similar reforms, they both expand their territory and power, etc.). Some may argue that this literary similarity shows that the details of Hezekiah's reign were fabricated by the writer of Kings to give precedence to Josiah's reign and reforms. The argument in the text shows that such a conclusion is presumptuous.

20. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 352–53.

21. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 353.

to drive out “the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (Exod 23:23; see also Exod 3:8). The author of these passages in Exodus clearly wanted to typologically link the promises to the Israelites back to the promises given to their ancestor Abraham.

Many scholars have also noted the typological similarity between Abraham and Sarah’s descent into Egypt in Gen 12 and the Egyptian captivity of the Israelites.²² Some typological connections have also been suggested between the stories of Moses and Noah, most notably the use of the word *tēbâ* for both Noah’s ark and the basket in which Moses is placed as a babe.²³ The prohibitions against eating blood in Lev 17 are also similar to the commandments given to Noah in Gen 9.

However, while peripheral details such as these are evidence of typological additions, the underlying resemblance does not appear to be the result of direct and intentional typological shaping. If it was, one would expect to find more overt comparisons and similar wording of key phrases across the narratives, but they are rare. For example, after Gen 10, Noah is never mentioned again in the entire Pentateuch, and neither is the flood, the bow in the cloud, or the covenant to never again destroy the earth by flood. This lack of references suggests that the writers of the Abraham and Moses narratives either were unaware of the Noah story or didn’t concern themselves with typologically linking the Noah story to later narratives.

Option 3: Literary Archetypes and Conventions

The similarities between the Noah, Abraham, and Moses narratives are best explained as the product of a literary archetype that underlies all three stories. As mentioned above, this literary archetype can be seen as an Israelite-specific subset of Christopher Booker’s quest plot. As in the quest plot, there is a hero (the prophet-patriarch) who learns of a prize of great value (a new land of inheritance), sets out on a quest (journey) to achieve it, and overcomes perils and diversions (a global flood, the Red Sea, a lack of posterity) on the way. But the covenant journey archetype displays a number of additional features specific to it: an ongoing theophany between the hero and an all-powerful but sympathetic god; the formation of a covenant with that god, including specific promises and

22. See, for example, Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 375–76, and Brettler, *Creation of History*, 51–55.

23. Attridge, *HarperCollins Study Bible*, 86. Whether this is indeed an intentional, typologically motivated word choice is debatable. It can be argued that *tēbâ* was simply the best lexical choice available to both authors for describing a waterproof vessel without sails, oars, or rudder.

commandments, the offering of sacrifice, and terms for renewal; the dominant role of that god in guiding, protecting, and delivering the hero and his people; and the transferal of the hero's legacy to a single successor upon his death. This specific blend of features is unique to the covenant journey archetype.

By viewing these narratives through the lens of a common narrative archetype, we can explain some features that might otherwise seem to be complications. These features include the narratives' wide diversity in length, complexity, and thematic emphasis; the usage of some of the narratives' shared features in other biblical texts, and the different prominence that different narratives give to the same literary feature.

A modern analogy can help us better understand literary archetypes and why differences between narratives don't necessarily rule out archetypal similarity.²⁴ Let's say we select three books randomly from the genre of mystery. All three stories will follow a similar plot arc (a crime occurs, a detective uncovers clues, a criminal is caught), with comparable characters (the detective, the criminal, the victim, the sidekick), and scenes (the arrival of the detective, the final confrontation). Yet they may differ widely in length and complexity, from a 50-page graphic novel for children to a 700-page paperback novel for adults. The three novels might also revolve around different themes (revenge, justice, luck, love). Additionally, some of their plot elements (the sidekick, the final confrontation) may also appear in other genres, and each novel may give varying degrees of emphasis to different thematic elements. Nevertheless, all three novels still fit within, and are governed by, the same literary archetype.

This modern example helps us better understand various features in the three narratives we have examined. The first is the appearance of so many parts of the covenant journey pattern elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. For example, while God gives specific directions to Noah, Abraham, and Moses, he also gives specific directions to Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jonah. The themes of covenant creation and covenant renewal are replete throughout biblical writings. Name etiologies upon birth are ubiquitous. Miraculous deliverance over a body of water is a type-scene that occurs with Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha. But this is to be expected. As an archetypal plot structure, the covenant journey pattern is made up of various conventions, type-scenes, characters, and motifs common across all of Israelite literature. What sets the covenant journey apart is not the inclusion of these features, but the way they work in concert to create an overall narrative. Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible

24. In drawing on a modern analogy, I am walking in the footsteps of Robert Alter, who illustrated the concept of literary conventions with the example of American western movies and their quick-drawing heroes. See Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 56–57.

does God covenant with a prophet-patriarch figure and his people to preserve them through a journey and take them to a new land. Other narratives may be similar (such as Joshua's conquest or David's rise to kingship), but they do not fit the full pattern.

Similarly, these three narratives still follow the same archetype despite differing widely in length, complexity, and thematic emphasis. The Noah story is short, straightforward in its construction (focusing on the single story of the flood, with the incident of Ham's misbehavior a short anecdote at the end), and concerned with themes of wickedness, obedience, and the preservation of life. The Abraham story is much more complex, with strings of shorter narrative units strung together and multiple plot strands carried across stories, and it addresses themes of fertility, posterity, hospitality, endogamy, and upright dealings with neighbors. The exodus narrative is massive in length (spanning four books), is interspersed with long non-narrative interruptions, and deals with themes of geopolitical strife, plagues, signs, prophetic authority, priestly ritual, and purity before God. But despite these differences, all three stories adhere to the same narrative pattern of theophany, covenant, and journey.

The fluidity of archetypal similarity also allows for some elements to occur in two narratives but not the third. Noah and Abraham each are already the patriarchs of a small family unit, while Moses is called to lead a massive conglomerate of tribes that he has no natural authority over. Noah is not led to the specific land of Canaan, but rather becomes heir to the entire earth. The act of "special deliverance," so central to the Noah and Moses narratives, is found in the Abraham narrative only as a side-plot centered on Lot and not on Abraham himself. But such deviations are only to be expected. Since an archetype is a (probably subconscious) conglomeration of expectations, it provides only a rough narrative outline rather than a rigorous set of rules. Besides that basic outline, the archetype provides a bank of possible characters, tropes, and scenes that each derivative narrative can selectively draw upon to create an original blend. In fact, such mixing and matching is necessary for two plots that share the same archetype to still be new, exciting, and original stories.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NARRATIVE ARCHETYPE

An archetype both shapes and is shaped by the values and worldview of the society that creates it. It is shaped by that society because it is the product of that society; it shapes that society because once it attains the status of archetype, it becomes a paradigm for how members of that society understand their world. The existence of the covenant journey archetype—and its use in the formative stories

of the Pentateuch—has significant implications for our understanding of ancient Israelite theological identity and consciousness.

The idea that these narratives served as a pattern for later Israelite identity has been developed by many previous scholars. David Daube, an expert on ancient law, wrote about the abiding impact of the exodus—and later stories typologically linked to the exodus—on how Israelites conceived of God's relations with his covenant people:

As God had vindicated those relations in the exodus, one could be certain that he would vindicate them again, and again, unto the last. The kind of salvation portrayed in the exodus was not, by its nature, an isolated occurrence, giving rise to nebulous hopes for similar good luck in the future: it had its root in, and set the seal on, a permanent institution—hence it was something on which absolute reliance might be placed.²⁵

The feeling of “absolute reliance” that Daube attributes to the exodus is made even stronger by the repetition of the pattern with Noah and Abraham as well.

The covenant journey archetype reflects how the Israelites understood the nature of God and their relationship to him. They understood their god as a god of covenants, a god who makes promises with individuals and their posterities, who leads them safely through trials and danger, delivers them from the destruction that overtakes non-covenant peoples, guides them, gives them sustenance, and reiterates the covenant with them and their posterity. And he would do so not only once, but time and time again, with each generation of his children. This theological understanding helps explain the repetition of so many elements of these stories in later biblical texts. According to the Israelites' worldview, God was likely to commune with later prophets *because* he had done so in the past. He was likely to renew his covenant with his chosen people *because* he had done so in the past. They *expected* that God's dealings with his people in Genesis and Exodus would be repeated in later history.

The covenant journey pattern created a paradigm whereby the Israelites understood themselves as heirs of all three of these stories. As heirs of Noah, they had the inheritance of the earth and the promise to never again be wiped out by the flood; as the seed of Abraham, they had the inheritance of Canaan and the promise of prosperity; and as the followers of Moses, they had the inheritance of the law given at Sinai and the promise of protection from their enemies. This identity resounds throughout the rest of the Hebrew Bible, from the “special deliverance” of Hezekiah's Jerusalem from the Assyrians, to David's expansion of

25. David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible*, All Souls Studies 2 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 13–14.

Israel into a regional power, to Isaiah's promise of Israel's pending covenant renewal and reinstatement after exile. In other words, the stories of Noah, Abraham, and Moses were told and preserved in the form that they were because they functioned as microcosms of the story of Israel as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In ancient Israel there existed a deep, underlying conception of God's nature and role in history. One way that conception became manifest was in the covenant journey archetype, where God appeared to a righteous man and covenanted to bring him and his people to a promised land of peace and prosperity, a land where they would be God's people and he would be their God. This archetype manifested itself in three fundamental narratives of the Pentateuch—those of Noah, Abraham, and Moses—thereby cementing the Israelites' cultural and religious identity of themselves as a people of promise and their god as a mighty agent of guidance, protection, and deliverance.

Much research remains to be done about the covenant journey pattern. A similar analysis could be done on the hypothetical sources of each of these narratives to see if the covenant journey pattern is fully formed not just in the final stage of the text, but in its composite sources. Scholars could track how covenant journey themes and imagery are used in intertestamental literature and in the New Testament: for example, Paul's journey to Rome in Acts displays intriguing similarities to the covenant journey pattern, and the author of Hebrews describes Noah, Abraham, and Moses as seekers of a heavenly kingdom in his treatise on faith. Scholars could also look for parallels with the covenant journey archetype in wider ancient Near Eastern or Mediterranean literature. Virgil's *Aeneid*, for example, tells a remarkably similar story of a hero and his people being led by the gods to a new land of inheritance.²⁶

The theological understanding reflected in the covenant journey archetype has shaped not only ancient Israelite culture and religion, but the entire Judeo-Christian world for the last three millennia. In Judaism, covenant identity and the heritage of a promised land has fueled the Zionist movement and the modern

26. Leland Ryken, a professor of English, the classics, and the Bible as literature, has already identified many similarities between *The Aeneid* and the exodus: "Of all the famous epics, *The Aeneid* of Virgil is the clearest parallel to the Epic of the Exodus. . . . Both are quest stories in which a group of people travel from one geographic area to another in order to establish a stable nation in a promised land. Both stories are unified around a hero who is a leader of people and who embodies the normative values of the story. Both epics are religious epics, filled with references to the proper worship of deity." See Leland Ryken, "The Epic of the Exodus," in *Perspectives on Old Testament Literature*, ed. Woodrow Ohlsen (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 41–52, here 42.

state of Israel. In Christianity, the physical journey to the promised land has been transformed into a spiritual journey to heaven. The establishment of America was fueled in part by pious immigrants' quest for a promised land of peace, prosperity, and liberty. Whether we realize it or not, we have all been affected by the archetypal idea of covenant journeys.