



Literary Analysis of Genesis 50:1-26

In characteristic fashion of the Joseph Narrative, Genesis 50:1-26 forms a tight chiastic structure, displaying as its literary center (X) the deep and profound mourning over Jacob/Israel's death. Genesis 50 contains a number of word and thematic chiastic elements building to a climax, which then follows a series where matching units in reverse order bringing the entire Joseph Narrative to resolution and fulfillment. The following chiastic structure of Genesis 50:1-26 is an excellent example of Moses' artistic literary ability.

- A Burial arrangements for Israel (1-3)
- B Joseph's petition to Pharaoh (4-6)
- C Preparation to bury Israel (7-9)
- X MOURNING OVER ISRAEL'S DEATH (10-12)**
- C' Burial of Israel (13-14)
- B' Brothers' petition to Joseph (15-21)
- A' Burial arrangements and death of Joseph (22-26)

Panels A through C have been structured to underscore Joseph's faithfulness to his father; just as he was always faithful to his father in life (cf. Gen. 37:2, 13), so he is now also faithful to him in death (cf. Gen. 47:29-31 compared to Gen. 50:4-8). Panels C' through A' is a final resolution, not only to this episode, but also to the entire Joseph Narrative. Israel is buried in the ancestral burial plot, Joseph brothers' petition, and finally, the embalment of Joseph himself.

Each panel in this episode is chiastically structured to underscore the importance of this episode. A and A' act as the introduction and conclusion to Genesis 50 and are framed in the context of death and promises. After Jacob had blessed his twelve sons, he told them that he was about to join his ancestors in death. He made Joseph and his other sons swear to bury him in the cave of Machpelah where the other patriarchs and their wives (Gen. 47:27-31), as well as his own wife Leah (but notably not Rachel) had been buried (Gen. 49:29-32). Having given his sons his final command, Jacob died at the ripe old age of 147 years old (Gen. 47:28).

The action of A is repeated in A' in two significant ways. In both panels the process of embalment is mentioned; first with Jacob and then with Joseph. Also in A and A', there is a point-counterpoint: Joseph prepares to keep his promise to his father by preparing for the long journey to Canaan by having him embalmed; then we

have Joseph extracting a promise from his brothers (their progeny) to carry his bones up from Egypt and into Canaan when God will deliver them, and thus they embalm his body for safe keeping until such time (otherwise, the bones would have turned to dust).

Before continuing with the remaining panels, observe the internal structure of each panel:

- A Burial arrangements for Israel (1-3)
 - a Joseph weeps (1)
 - x Joseph's command (2-3a)**
 - a' Egyptians weep (3b)

 - B Joseph's petition to Pharaoh (4-6)
 - a Joseph petitions Pharaoh's court (4a)
 - x Joseph's petition (4b-5)**
 - a' Pharaoh grants Joseph's petition (6)

 - C Preparation to bury Israel (7-9)
 - a Joseph's entourage assent to Canaan (7a-8)
 - x The people who stayed behind in Egypt (8b)**
 - a' Additional details of entourage to Canaan (9)

 - X MOURNING OVER ISRAEL'S DEATH (10-12)**
 - a Place and duration of mourning (10)
 - x The Canaanites observe the lamentation (11a-b)**
 - a' Place renamed to reflect the duration of mourning (11c)

 - C' Burial of Israel (12-14)
 - a Descent to Canaan (12-13a)
 - x Israel is buried in Canaan (13b-c)**
 - a' Ascent to Egypt (14)

 - B' Joseph brothers' petition (15-21)
 - a Joseph's brothers fear (15)
 - x Joseph's brothers petition and dream fulfilled (16-18)**
 - a' Joseph reassures his brothers (19-21)

 - A' Burial arrangements and death of Joseph (22-26)
 - a Joseph's age (22)
 - x Promises remembered and made (23-25)**
 - a' Joseph's age (26)
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B and B' function to unite several thematic concepts in the Joseph Narrative. Joseph petitions Pharaoh to bury his father, but only indirectly (v. 4). Likewise, Joseph's brothers petition him indirectly concerning their past guilt (v. 16).

A large entourage of relatives and dignitaries, including Jacob's household and many prominent Egyptians, make the trip in C (vv. 7-9). The specific purpose of this entourage was to bury Jacob (v. 7a); however, it is not until C' (vv. 13-14) that Jacob is actually buried.

The pivotal point of the chiasmic structure comes in X (vv. 10-12), which describe at length the people's mourning over Jacob's death. This in itself is ironic because it was Jacob who was going to mourn (cf. Gen. 37:33-35; 42:36; 43:14); however now, Jacob dies in peace because Joseph is alive (cf. Gen. 46:30) and those around him mourn!

Over half of Genesis 50:1-26 is occupied with a description of the mourning and burial of Jacob. Joseph himself mourned (v. 1), and then the Egyptians (v. 3). Great preparations were made by both Joseph and the Egyptians (v. 2). A special request was granted by Pharaoh to bury Jacob in his homeland (vv. 4-5), and a large entourage (lit. "a very large company") was provided by Pharaoh as a burial processional to carry Jacob's body back to Canaan. "All Pharaoh's officials . . . and all the dignitaries of Egypt" (v. 7), along with Pharaoh's chariots and horsemen, accompanied Joseph on his journey back to Canaan. Even the Canaanites recognized this as "a very large ceremony of mourning" (v. 11). Our author seems to go out of his way to emphasize in detail the magnitude of the ceremony of mourning.

The Age of Joseph's Death

The Joseph Narrative concludes with the account of Joseph's death. Twice within the span of five verses we are told that he was 110 years old when he died (vv. 22, 26). Significant? Absolutely!

Joseph's age may be a play on the life spans of Abraham (175 years; Gen. 25:7), Isaac (180 years; Gen. 35:28), and Jacob (147 years; Gen. 47:28). The pattern of the patriarchs' ages strikingly follows a succession of square numbers:

Abraham	$175 = 7 \times 5^2$ or $7 \times 5 \times 5$ (sum of factors = 17)
Isaac	$180 = 5 \times 6^2$ or $5 \times 6 \times 6$ (sum of factors = 17)
Jacob	$147 = 3 \times 7^2$ or $3 \times 7 \times 7$ (sum of factors = 17)

110 = sum of the succession of squared #s (5, 6, 7)

The above numerical pattern could be coincidence, but the data when analyzed has cumulative weight.

In each case, the squared number increases by one, while the coefficient decreases by two. In addition, in each instance the sum of the factors is 17, thus forming a *inclusio* with Genesis 37:2 where Joseph is introduced at the age of 17!

Incidentally, although the English versions translate Genesis 50:22 and 50:26 identically, the idiomatic “son-of-such and such age” is reserved until Genesis 50:26 (with verse 22 literally reading as “Joseph [was] one-hundred and-ten years”), thus finding an exact correspondence with Genesis 37:2.

Whether by coincidence or not, 110 is the sum of the succession of the squared numbers ($5^2 + 6^2 + 7^2 = 110$). Because Joseph’s age can be factored as $1 \times 5^2 + 6^2 + 7^2$, it is perhaps the intention of our narrator to underscore Joseph’s age of death in order to express his significance at the end of the Genesis Narrative. Joseph is not only the **successor** in the pattern (7 – 5 – 3 – 1), but also the **sum** of his predecessors ($5^2 + 6^2 + 7^2 = 110$). Moreover, it can be demonstrated that Jacob was 110 when Joseph was born in Padan-aram.

Thus, at the end of Genesis, the life span of Joseph symbolically brings the ancestral narratives to a completion. In this way, Joseph embodies the coincidence of opposites and points to the archetype, the Coming One who is the Successor and the Sum of all things, Jesus, the Messiah (Col. 1:15-19; 2:2-3). This is reflected in the above factorial patterns, making the patriarchal chronologies constituting a rhetorical device expressing the profound biblical conviction that Israel’s formative age was not a concatenation of haphazard incidents, but a series of events ordered according to God’s sovereign design to reflect the coming Messiah (cf. Gen. 47:28).

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