Chapter 2

WHAT HAPPENS IN GENESIS[*]

What happens in Genesis? Genesis looks like a narrative book, with events being told in roughly chronological order and characters remaining reasonably recognizable throughout their appearances. So it is a proper question, when opening the book, to ask, What happens in this narrative? That is to say, plot is the subject of this enquiry. Of the

[*] The first version of this Chapter was read as a paper to the Society of Biblical Literature, International Meeting, Heidelberg, August 10, 1987. Some parts of the paper in its present form, especially the footnotes and a number of the observations on the Jacob story, are the work of my former PhD student, Laurence A. Turner, whose thesis, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, will be published in the JSOT Supplement Series in 1990. Since the ideas in the present paper were discussed over many months by both of us, it is impossible now to identify their origin entirely fairly; I can only acknowledge with thanks the many stimulating conversations with Dr Turner which enabled my own thoughts to develop further. The reader will find in the monograph referred to a much more thoroughgoing treatment of points sketched in this paper and many other original observations besides. See also his 'Lot as Jekyll and Hyde", in *The Bible in Three Dimensions. Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J.A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley E. Porter (JSOTSup, 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 85-98.

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author or sources of Genesis I confess (or allege, it is the same thing) that I know nothing, and so I assume nothing. But, like most readers everywhere, I expect narratives to have plots. Only after I have tried hard to discern a plot, and failed, will I decide that this book as a whole is no plotted story, but merely a chronicle or merely some incoherent collection of episodes.

But if I go looking for plot in Genesis, is there not perhaps a danger of inventing a plot where none exists? A possibility, perhaps, but not a danger. I have decided not to wince at the possibility of being caught out in the act of thinking something about a work that its author never thought. If such boldness may be forgiven, I would even ask, What could be a more appreciative reading of a text than to find a coherence never before discerned, not even by its original author? It is being seen these days more clearly than ever before that we readers always have a goodly share in creating meaning out of texts—though not, if we are wise, arbitrarily or individualistically or completely subjectively. The words on the page are an objective reality that we must always measure up to, take account of, fall in with. But they do not wear their meanings or the way they hang together—their coherence—on their face or on their sleeve. Making meaning, making sense, making coherence, is our task, not theirs.

Texts of course do not always leave everything up to the reader; they have ways of dropping clues about plot or meaning. This text of Genesis uses three such ways at least. One is the Headline. 'After these things God tested Abraham' (22.1) signals how we are to read the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, not as a Hitchcockian suspense thriller, nor as one of Phyllis Trible's texts of terror, nor as an aetiological legend, but as a test of Abraham's reflexes—not just whether he will obey the insane command to slaughter the promised son, but also whether he will be ready to stay his hand when a voice from the sky announces that the previous command is now inoperative.

Second is the Punchline, as when Joseph tells his brothers in 45.8 that it was not they but God who sent him into Egypt, or in 50.20 that while they were devising an evil plot against him, God was devising a plot of blessing for the ancestral family and many others. Another punchline was 3.24 where we learned only in the very last phrase of the Eden story what the purpose of the expulsion was: to guard the way to the tree of life.

Third among the text's clues to plot is the Announcement of how the story may be expected to develop. The Announcements may in

principle be made by the narrator or by the characters, but in Genesis they are all put in the mouths of characters in the narrative. They take the form of a divine command or prediction, a father's birth oracle, and a boyhood dream. They contain either a reversal of the prevailing situation or an inversion of what might reasonably be expected. So in ch. 1 the Announcement is that the human species are to be fruitful and multiply and also to 'subdue' the earth and take the mastery over the animals. In ch. 12 it is that a childless octogenarian will become the father of many descendants. In ch. 25 it is that the elder son will be servant to the younger. In ch. 37 it is that the second-youngest son is to be lord over his eleven brothers and his parents.

I shall be concentrating on these four Announcements in this quest for plot, asking, Do things turn out as the Announcement leads us to believe? And if not, In what way not? These are indeed not entirely novel questions to ask, but no one seems previously to have identified these Announcements as markers against which the development of the plot of Genesis is to be measured.[1]

1. *The First Announcement (1.26-28)*

Then God said:
Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness;
and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea,

[1] Others have indeed noted from time to time the programmatic nature of the texts we have identified as 'Announcements'. On 1.28 Walter Brueggemann, 'The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers', *ZAW* 84 (1972), pp. 397-414 (400), suggests that 'the formidable blessing declaration of Gen 12.8 provides a focus for understanding the kerygma of the entire tradition'. However, Brueggemann limits his discussion to the so-called P tradition. On 12.1-3, John C.L. Gibson, *Genesis* (DSB; Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1982), vol. 2, p. 12, comments: 'Everything he does following his call and everything that happens to him are either directly related to them [i.e. the promises of 12.1-3] in the narratives or may be brought into connection with them by the exercise of a little imagination ... the working out of the promises supplies both the main element of tension in the plot of the stories and the primary key to their interpretation.' On 25.21-28, Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (OTL; tr. John H. Marks; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, revised edition, 1972), p. 265, sees these verses as 'form[ing] an expository preface to the whole [Jacob story]' and 'acquaint[ing] the reader with those facts which are important for understanding the following stories'. On the Joseph story, Walter Brueggemann writes: 'The power and validity of the dream in 37.5-9 emerge as a main issue. The dream functions in the Joseph narrative as the oracle does for the Jacob materials'; ' ... the dream of chapter 37 governs all that follows' (*Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982], pp. 290, 296).

> and over the birds of the air,
> and over the cattle,
> and over all the earth,
> and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the
> earth …
>
> And God blessed them, and God said to them:
> Be fruitful and multiply,
> and fill the earth and subdue it;
> and have dominion over the fish of the sea,
> and over the birds of the air,
> and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

In this first Announcement of how the plot of Genesis may be expected to develop, three elements come to the fore:

1. Be fruitful
2. Subdue the earth
3. Have dominion over the animals.

Reader-responsively, that is, reading as if for the first time, we are bound to ask, So, do these divine injunctions get fulfilled? Do they form the framework for the plot of Genesis? For—must we not suppose?—if those are the three things that God tells humans to do on the first page of Genesis, the rest of the pages ought to be telling us how the humans carried out the commands, or—at the very least—how they failed to carry out the commands.

Now the one thing that the humans of the early chapters of Genesis seem to be quite successful at is multiplying. By ch. 6 they have begun to multiply on the earth (6.1), and the genealogies of chs. 4, 5, 10, and 11 testify to the quantity of begetting that has been going on. In fact, the only obstacles in the path of the fulfilling of this command are those put there by God himself. For, first, he makes childbearing painful (3.16), then he determines to 'blot out' the whole of the human race with a flood (6.7), and then in ch. 12 he more or less turns a blind eye to the majority of the human race who since the flood have been doing their utmost all over again to be fruitful and multiply (ch. 10), and focuses an almost exclusive attention on one man, as if the whole process has to start afresh from the very beginning.

What this goes to show for the plot of Genesis is that God's commands, even when accompanied by a blessing, do not easily shape themselves into reality, especially because one can never be sure that God himself is not going to sabotage them. The reader can hardly be

expected to blame the human race or the patriarchal family for the fact that Genesis ends up with no more than 70 humans who really count for the narrative (46.27), a birthrate of less than one and a half per chapter. It does seem somewhat thoughtless, not to say perverse, to insist on the command to fruitfulness being executed by a family with so many old men and barren women in it.

How does the expectation of subduing the earth fare, then? Adam in Eden no doubt thinks himself master of all he surveys, but the readers know, even if Adam has not yet realized it, that he is to be the 'servant' of the soil, that he has been put in the garden to עבד ('till', 'serve', 'work') it and שמר ('keep') it.[1] So that we wonder who exactly is the master, the poor lonely naked ape himself, or the tropical garden that threatens to run rank if the earth-creature does not solicitously tend it with whatever energy he can muster on his rigorous fruitarian diet. Nothing very masterful happens thereafter, either. East of Eden the earth will yield its produce to hungry humans only if the said humans have sweated over eradicating thorns and thistles from it. And when it comes to the flood story, who is the master then? The humans or the earth they have been supposed to be subduing but which now floods the breath of life from them (6.17)? No doubt the humans bear a fair share of responsibility for what happens to them; but it is hard to deny that the primary reason why the humans do not manage to subdue the earth is because God is constantly making the earth more ferocious and less tameable.

Reading on, then, through the ancestral narratives, we fail to find very much about the humans subduing the earth. They seem to live a fairly precarious and marginal existence, what with famines and the problem of finding water and the perpetual movement in search of more hospitable environments. The only time nature comes near to being tamed is when Joseph forestalls the effect of the famine in Egypt by warehousing grain for seven years. Was this 'subduing of the earth' the kind of thing God had in mind in ch. 1, or did he not foresee the social or economic or ecological consequences of Joseph's control of the environment? What is to happen, for example, in the next famine, when the peasants of Egypt have no more land to sell to the pharaoh (47.19)?

Having dominion over the animals, the third element in the primal agenda, also proves to have some nasty surprises in store. Who would

[1] What danger will it run if it is not 'kept'?, we wonder.

have thought, innocently reading Genesis 1, that on the next page, after its undoubtedly impressive demonstration of linguistic skills (2.19), the very first animal in the Bible who does anything very decisively has dominion over the humans. This does not seem to be what was intended.

In this case, though, God himself is not too happy about the way the agenda is developing. So first he makes the snake slide on the ground so that the dust will get into its mouth every time it tries to start another theological conversation (3.14). Then, a little later, he decrees that the form the human dominion over animals will take is that humans will cut animals up into little bits and proceed to masticate them (9.3). This surprising turn of events is almost as bad for the humans as it is for the animals, who having only recently been saved from a watery doom by Noah have reason to think affectionately of the humans. From the humans' point of view as well, this provision of protein has its drawback: for who wants to walk through the world with every living thing being 'in fear and dread of you', quite apart from the nausea that comes of knowing that 'every moving thing will be food for you' (9.3). Slugs?

Thereafter dominion over the animals does not figure very prominently in Genesis, aside from occasional sacrifices or feasts. The form it generally takes in the tales about the Hebrew ancestors is the ownership of a very few species of animals by the protagonists: mainly sheep, oxen, asses and camels (e.g. 12.16). And the execution of this element of the first Announcement is not entirely straightforward. For in fact having dominion over animals can be something of a liability when famines hit the land of Canaan and the ancestors have more than their family's empty stomachs to worry about. And by the end of Genesis, being encumbered with flocks of sheep proves to be even worse than a constant source of anxiety; for on arrival in Egypt the sheep-herding patriarch Jacob suddenly discovers that 'every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians' (46.34) and finds himself installed in lonely apartheid in Goshen some way from his favourite son.

What all this means to say is that the initial programme of Genesis is very inefficiently executed. And it is not all the fault of the humans, either.

2. *The Second Announcement (12.1-2)*

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house

to the land that I will show you.
And I will make of you a great nation,
and I will bless you, and make your name great.
And be a blessing!

With this second Announcement of how the plot of Genesis may be expected to develop the first Announcement is not set on one side but, apparently, added to. The reproduction element is turned from a command (1.28) into a prediction (12.2) and two further expectations are introduced.

The three elements of this Announcement take three different forms. There is the prediction ('I will make of you a great nation'), the command ('Be a blessing') and a combination of command and prediction ('Go to the land I will show you'). I will discuss them in this order:

1. Go to the land I will show you
2. Be a blessing
3. I will make of you a great nation.

The first item on this agenda gets off to a shaky start, but before long seems to be realized firmly enough. The cryptic command, 'Go to the land I will show you', obviously takes some decipherment on Abram's part. For though everyone knows the way to the land of Canaan, what is the way to the land the Lord will show you? Abram will only know which is the land when he gets there and the Lord 'shows' him that it *is* the land. In fact, the first time Abram arrives in the land of Canaan he walks right through it and out the other side (12.5, 9, 10), presumably because God has not yet said, 'This is the land!' What God does say when Abram reaches Canaan is, actually, 'This is the land I am going to give to your descendants' (12.7)—which Abram can only take to mean, 'But not to you'. Not until the end of ch. 13, after Abram has been deported from Egypt, and is back at Bethel, does God actually 'show' him the land. This time God actually does say, 'to you' as well as 'to your descendants' (13.15), so Abram at last knows he has arrived.

The second agendum is, Be a blessing (we note the imperative in 12.2).[1] This blessing that Abram and his descendants are to spread

[1] Most scholars evade the force of the imperative with proposals which usually necessitate revocalization. Cf. various proposals by: John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2nd

around is obviously destined for 'all the families of the earth' (12.3); whether they are to find blessing streaming to them through the Abrahamic family (as the niphal would suggest in 12.3; 18.18; 28.14) or count themselves fortunate in being associated with the family (as the hithpael would suggest in 22.18; 26.4) is not perhaps very important to settle; either way it amounts to much the same thing.

Given this agendum, we are bound to ask, So do the families of the earth in fact find the Abrahamic family a blessing? We observe that the first foreigners to be met with in the narrative are the Canaanites. In two successive sentences we read: 'At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord ... said to Abram, To your descendants I will give this land' (12.7-8). This promise can only be described as good news for Hebrews but bad news for Canaanites. With blessings like this, who needs curses? Things do not improve a great deal when Abram and Sarai reach Egypt, and encounter their next set of blessable foreigners. The blessing the Egyptians get through the ancestral family are 'great plagues' from the Lord on the Pharaoh and his household. In a cordial exchange of blessings Abram for his part gets, not plagues, but sheep, oxen, he-asses, men-servants, maid-servants, she-asses and camels (12.16), the Egyptian men-servants and maid-servants no doubt reckoning themselves to be greatly blessed being chattels of Abram even though ranking somewhere between he-asses and she-asses.

In the next chapter we find Abram extending his blessing to the four kings who have been reckless enough to include Lot in their booty from Sodom. As if to spread the blessing as widely as possible, Abram pursues the kings as far north as Hobah, beyond Damascus (14.15), routing among others 'Tidal, king of nations' (גּוֹיִם, 14.9), a neat symbolic gesture of the ancestral family's relation to the wider world. One does not need to be a particularly jaundiced reader of Genesis to observe that the best way to receive this famous Abrahamic blessing is to keep out of the way of the Abrahamic family as far as possible. We have only to think of the fate of the Egyptian Hagar, or of the divine pronouncement to Abimelech king of Gerar, 'You are a dead man

edn, 1930), p. 244; E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB, 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), pp. 85, 86; George W. Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (FOTL, 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 107-108; Theodorus C. Vriezen, 'Bemerkungen zu Genesis 12.1-7', in M.A. Beek *et al.* (eds.), *Symbolae biblicae et Mesopotamiae F.M.T. de Liagre Böhl dedicatae* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973), p. 387; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (tr. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), p. 144.

because of the woman ... she is a man's wife' (20.3), to be reminded of the effect upon foreigners of the family of Abram and Sarai.

From this perspective the story of Isaac in Gerar takes on fresh meaning. Nothing so drastic happens as when his father had attempted to pass off his wife as his sister, though Isaac has indeed exposed the whole town to the risk of sleeping with Rebekah. 'One of the people might easily have lain with your wife', Abimelech says, none too gallantly, but with understandable trepidation. The worst effect of Isaac's presence in the town is that the perfectly innocuous Philistines have to witness Isaac 'sowing in that land', their land, and 'reaping in the same year a hundredfold' (26.12)—which makes the Philistines realize how fortunate they are to be host to a man so singularly 'blessed of the Lord' (26.12, 29) even though they are not personally having any of the action and the bottom has fallen out of the wheat market. We are saddened to read that they 'became envious' (26.14).

The only item on the other pan of the scale is the undoubted benefit the opportunistic Joseph does to the Egyptians and, for that matter, to 'all the earth' (41.57) by averting the worst effects of the famine. Joseph's plan is of course a blessing only if one would rather be a live slave than a dead peasant. The narrative makes no bones about it, though the Masoretic text is understandably squeamish: the narrative is no doubt meant to say that Joseph 'made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other' (47.21) (העביד אתו לעבדים). It is the Samaritan text that preserves the unpleasant truth which the Masoretes could only attempt to palliate when they chose as their text העביר אתו לערים, 'removed them to the cities'—itself a less than brilliant solution to the problems of a food shortage.

The third element of the Announcement, 'I will make of you a great nation', does not lead to total disappointment, but neither can there be said to be a truly adequate success in fulfilling it. There should be, since the execution of this element, is very largely if not entirely up to God. There would no doubt be rather more success if the Lord did not persist in making things so difficult for himself, engineering matriarchal barrennesses, famines, and murderous feuds between brothers.

The only progress that has been made by the end of Genesis towards establishing a great nation is that there are seventy persons of the house of Jacob in 46.26, admittedly not including Jacob's sons' wives, or, presumably, Jacob's sons' wives' maidservants. Considering the difficulties, we could perhaps allow that a promising start has been

made. The fact that they are now all in the wrong country hardly seems to matter.

What then can we say happens to the Abrahamic Announcement of ch. 12 by the end of Genesis? The first element ('Go to the land I will show you') has, near enough, been fulfilled, both the going and the showing. The fact that the ancestral family ends up out of the land is not an insurmountable problem, because they are very conscious that they are headed back toward the land in the near future, Joseph solemnly promising his older brothers as he dies at the advanced age of 110 that they will return to Canaan, carrying Joseph's bones (50.25). No record is given of how his centenarian brothers responded to this parting shot by Joseph who is evidently still intent on wreaking his revenge on them for getting him to Egypt in the first place. Fortunately, from their point of view, Joseph was wrong by a factor of 430 years, according to Exod. 12.40, and this little announcement of the future on Joseph's part is not translated into reality in just the way it might have been expected to be.

The second element, 'Be a blessing', is an almost complete disaster, the one foreigner to benefit unambiguously from the patriarchal family's existence being the pharaoh who now rules a nation of slaves. It comes as a disappointment to readers anxious for the fulfilment of the announcements of plot to learn, when they get into Exodus 1, that there has arisen a pharaoh who does not know Joseph. For this implies that the one blessing the Hebrew ancestors ever did for any of the 'families of the earth' is now completely forgotten.

The third element, 'I will make of you a great nation', is at least on the road to execution by the time Genesis ends. It is a little disconcerting, all the same, to find, when the family does re-appear in Canaan in ch. 50 for the burial of Jacob in a proleptic mini-exodus, that 'all the servants of Pharaoh ... and all the elders of the land of Egypt' accompany them (50.7), and the gawping Canaanites remark on what an impression these 'Egyptians' are making (50.11). This cannot be an entirely satisfactory episode for a family expecting to become a 'great nation' in its own right.

3. *The Third Announcement (25.23; 27.27-29, 39-40)*

Two peoples, born of you, shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger (25.23).

May God give you [Jacob] of the dew of heaven,
and of the fatness of the earth
and plenty of grain and wine.
Let peoples serve you,
and nations bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
and may your mother's sons bow down to you (27.28-29).

Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be [Esau]
and away from the dew of heaven on high.
By your sword you shall live,
and you shall serve your brother (27.39-40).

The Announcement relating to Jacob and Esau is contained in three passages. The first is the birth oracle (25.23) which predicts that the two twins will be divided from one another and the elder son will serve the younger. The second and third are Isaac's blessings on the two sons. A large number of motifs are deployed in these blessings; for convenience' sake we may group the principal motifs under three headings:

1. service
2. fertility
3. division.

The first element, service, is the idea that Esau should serve Jacob, the verb עבד occurring in each of the three passages to indicate this. We are therefore expecting the narrative to tell us of this serving. The fact is, however, that apart from passages that promise or desire that Esau should serve Jacob, all the 'serving' that gets done in the Jacob story is by Jacob. The seventeen occurrences of עֶבֶד, עָבַד or עֲבֹדָה are in reference to Jacob's serving, none to Esau's.[1] Jacob serves his uncle Laban (29.15), not only for money but even for his wives, even though they are of the same family (29.20, 30). He even gets himself 'hired out' as a serving man to satisfy Leah's sexual appetites (30.16). Much more significant, though, is the way he projects himself, in his meeting with Esau. 'When my brother Esau meets you', he says to his retainers, 'you shall say, These belong to your servant Jacob' (32.17, 18). No matter that this is Jacob at his most obsequious; his words in fact amount to an inversion of the blessing he had earlier risked so

[1] עֶבֶד: 32.4, 11, 19, 20; 33.14; עָבַד: 29.15, 18, 20, 25, 27, 30; 30.26 (2x), 29; 31.6; עֲבֹדָה: 29.27; 30.26.

much to gain. And whereas in 27.29 Isaac had hoped that nations would bow down (הִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה) to Jacob, the only bowing down in the whole Jacob cycle is done by Jacob and his family, in a comic surfeit of prostration, himself seven times, then the secondary wives and their children, then Leah and her children, then Joseph and Rachel (33.3, 6-7). Jacob serves everyone; no one serves Jacob. So much for the blessing.

The second element in what is wished for Jacob is fertility—with corresponding infertility for Esau (27.28, 39). Now it is true that this is realized for him: he becomes 'exceedingly rich, with large flocks, maidservants and manservants, and camels and asses' (30.43, the servants ranking this time after the flocks and before the camels). There is the slight difficulty that his favourite wife is barren, but otherwise fertility is the rule of the house. What is surprising about the outworking of the fertility wishes is that Esau, who by all expectation ought to be getting a negative blessing, is also prospering quite satisfactorily. Being without the birthright and the first son's blessing has not obviously done him much harm, not if he can bring to the meeting with Jacob a band of 400 men (32.6; 33.1) which are obviously so many more than Jacob's company that Jacob is frightened out of his wits (32.7). And when Jacob gingerly invites Esau to accept his 'present', calling it with unimaginable insensitivity his 'blessing' (בִּרְכָה), Esau can say with equal truth and equanimity, 'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself' (33.9). The brother with the blessing is more needy than the one without.

The third element is division, the implication of the birth oracle being that the division between the brothers will signify hostility and dissension. This is indeed what happens throughout the greater part of the narrative. But the surprise the story has in store for us is that after what seems like a lifetime of division, including murderous plans by Esau (27.41) and physical separation, the narrative moves towards an effectual reconciliation. Esau holds nothing against Jacob any longer, but runs to meet him, falls on his neck and kisses him, and they both weep (33.4). They separate physically again but not emotionally. The official explanation given by the narrator in 36.6-8 for why the brothers do not live together is that they simply do not have enough room for their cattle, Esau no less wealthy than Jacob. The scene reminds us of the separation of Abram and Lot, a separation that was equally amicable and equally constructive for the growth of the ancestral family. The primal birth oracle is not exactly overturned,

because it was somewhat Delphic in its wording anyway. But, following on the uterine conflict of the twins, it led us to imagine the worst for the relationship of the brothers. In that respect we were not deceived—not, that is, till the close of the story where a quite different nuance was laid upon the term 'divide', and we discovered that it meant mere physical separation without any emotional dissension.

In sum, the Announcements that preface the Jacob story are on the whole misleading about the course that the action of the narrative will take.[1]

4. *The Fourth Announcement (37.5-10)*

Now Joseph had a dream...
Hear this dream, which I have dreamed:
behold, we were binding sheaves in the field,
and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright;
and behold your sheaves gathered around it,
and bowed down to my sheaf... (37.5-7).

Then he dreamed another dream ...
Behold, I have dreamed another dream;
and behold, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars were bowing down to me (37.9).

The fourth Announcement of Genesis takes the form of two dreams of Joseph purporting to foretell the future. They predict, according to the interpretations of them proffered in vv. 8 and 10, that:

1. Joseph's brothers will bow down to him
2. The brothers, and the father and mother, will bow down to him.

What happens to this Announcement, in brief, is that the first element comes true, and the second does not. The brothers bow down before him four times in Egypt (42.6; 43.26, 28; 44.14). But his father never does. In fact it is Joseph who bows before Jacob (48.12).[2] And

[1] This view differs from that of most commentators; e.g. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 208: 'Without a very explicit statement, the narrative [33.1-17] affirms that the initial oracle of 25.23 has come to fruition'.

[2] Commentators regularly fail to see this point; cf., for example, von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 352, 383. Robert Alter, commenting on 42.6 in 'Joseph and His Brothers', *Commentary* (November, 1980), pp. 59-69 (62) (= *The Art of Biblical Narrative* [London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981], p. 163), states, 'Joseph's two dreams are here literally fulfilled'. Yet, to reach this conclusion he

his mother of course cannot. For Rachel has already died in 35.16-19 in childbirth with Benjamin, as Jacob will remind us in 48.7. Benjamin is certainly alive in ch. 37 because there are eleven stars bowing down to him. But his mother is dead. So Jacob knows that Joseph's dream cannot be fulfilled. Well, not exactly. But he is pious, or superstitious, enough to wonder whether there may not be some truth in it even so. So he keeps his options open, or as the Hebrew has it, 'kept the matter' (שָׁמַר אֶת הַדָּבָר). But he makes not the slightest effort to fulfil his part in bringing it to pass.

Conclusion

Joseph's dreams may be taken as a paradigm for how Announcements function in Genesis. Because they have been spoken by someone with authority, like God or a patriarch or a dreamer, the reader must reckon

is compelled to interpret the imagery of the sun, moon and stars as foreshadowing Joseph's role as Egyptian vizier—which is certainly not how Jacob understands the dream! (cf. further Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 169). Eric I. Lowenthal, in *Commentary* (February, 1981), pp. 17-18 (18), responding to Alter, rightly takes him to task by pointing out that, whereas the dream spoke of eleven stars, only ten brothers bow down in 42.6. Unfortunately, he does not develop this insight. Gibson, *Genesis*, vol. 2, p. 273, writes: 'We are left in no doubt that this was a fulfilment, partial maybe but real, of the dreams in chapter 37'. It would be closer to the truth to say that the first dream is eventually fulfilled (with Benjamin's bowing down in 43.26), but that only one of the three elements of the second dream (obeisance of the eleven brothers) has been fulfilled. Donald A. Seybold, 'Paradox and Symmetry in the Joseph Narrative', in Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, with James S. Ackerman and Thayer S. Warshaw (eds.), *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 69, points out that in 42.6 'the second dream remains unfulfilled,' but he is very vague on any actual fulfilment of it (cf. p. 72). Wolfgang Richter, 'Traum und Traumdeutung im AT: Ihre Form und Verwendung', *Biblische Zeitschrift* 7 (1963), pp. 202-20 (208), believes that the fulfilment of the first dream (42.6ff.) prepares the way for the fulfilment of the second, which is achieved, though not literally (*wörtlich*), in ch. 47. He too remains vague on how the second dream works out. We may ask, If it is not fulfilled literally, how can it be said to have been fulfilled at all, when all other dreams in the Joseph story are fulfilled literally? Apparently the only scholar to read 48.12 in the light of 37.5-11 is Gibson, *Genesis*, vol. 2, pp. 230-31, who comments on Joseph's prostration before Jacob: 'It is not so commonly pointed out however, that the second dream is not fulfilled in the epic ... Joseph's dream of the sun and moon and stars must have been a false one, suggested by his own arrogance and ambition, and not at all by God's prompting.'

with the possibility that they may be executed. But only the possibility. Reality as it develops in Genesis has a rather unpredictable connection with the Announcements disclosing how it is supposed to develop.

If we are trying to guess the likelihood of an announcement becoming reality, we cannot proceed by distinguishing between what God says and what humans say, as though divine words were bound to be more reliable predictors of coming events.[1] Nor do we have any more success if we discriminate between what is commanded, what is promised, and what is wished for. Nor is it always very clear whether a particular thing announced has actually come about or not.

Perhaps there is a basic flaw in the approach I have adopted. Was I right in supposing that what is announced in Genesis should be expected to be fulfilled in Genesis? It seemed to be a reasonable assumption, but let us allow that it might be more apt to regard Genesis as simply the first volume in a larger sequence of narrative works *à la recherche du temps perdu*, Genesis–2 Kings. It is indeed incontrovertible that the narrative begun by Genesis does not really come to a pause—as a narrative—until the end of 2 Kings; but there it does come to a full stop, and any extension of the narrative can only be possible by telling the story all over again from the beginning, starting again with Adam, Seth, Enosh (1 Chr. 1.1).

Genesis, that is to say, starts a narrative chain that concludes with 2 Kings 25. So, in order to answer our initial question more comprehensively, perhaps we need to ask, What happens to the Announcements by the point the narrative has reached at the end of 2 Kings? Perhaps 'what happens in Genesis' can only be stated once we have read to the end of the story as a totality. So, what *has* happened?

The first set of announcements, in Genesis 1, presents an agenda that is not explicitly said to have been carried out, but neither has it failed. Even though by the end of 2 Kings the Jewish people is decimated, the human race at large has been adequately prolific and there is at least no shortage of Chaldaeans and Egyptians. The earth has been filled and subdued: there are no more famines, in the land or

[1] This is in opposition to the view of Peter D. Miscall, 'The Jacob and Joseph Stories as Analogies', *JSOT* 6 (1978), pp. 28-40 (32), who believes that one must distinguish in biblical narrative between divine and human words in the following way: with divine words (e.g. prophecy, oracle), 'it is a question not of whether it will be fulfilled but of how it will be fulfilled', whereas with human words (e.g. blessing, prediction), 'it is a matter of whether it will be fulfilled, and not just of how'.

out of it, that may be laid to the account of the earth; only humans create starvation (2 Kgs 25.2-3). Wild animals are no threat to the stability of states, and human dominion over animals as beasts of burden and as food is too much taken for granted to be remarked upon. The animal kingdom has indeed experienced a major reprieve through the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, but no one represents that as any derogation of human power over the animals.

But with the second set of Announcements things are quite different. If Genesis 12 announces that the Abrahamic family is to become a great nation, 2 Kings tells us that in the end this did not happen. The 10,000 significant members of the nation still surviving at the end of the narrative sequence (2 Kgs 24.14) are carried into Babylon, where they may be presumed to lose the status of a nation. And the insignificant members go, 'all' of them (25.26), to Egypt, and equally to oblivion. Whatever happened to the promise between Genesis and 2 Kings, and whatever nationhood the Abrahamic family acquired in the bygoing, has been undermined by the end of 2 Kings.

And if Genesis announces that Abraham and his descendants will be given a land, 2 Kings reports that in the end the family of Abraham ended up precisely in Babylonia and Egypt, for all the world as if they had never left Ur or as if Abram, Sarai and Lot had never escaped from Genesis 12. In case we needed the point spelled out, 2 Kgs 25.21 observes, amazingly laconically: 'So Judah was taken into exile out of its land'. It does not need to say, The land promised by Yahweh. We know that.

And then if Genesis announces divine blessing for the Abrahamic family, and a covenanted divine-human relationship, 2 Kings reports: 'It came to the point in Jerusalem and Judah that he cast them out of his presence'. And as for the intended blessing to the nations, we wonder whether the arrival of 7000 mercenaries and 1000 carpenters and smiths in Babylon, along with their numerous dependants and various nonentities (2 Kgs 24.16; 25.11) constitutes a blessing commensurate with the effort expended in getting all the way from Genesis to 2 Kings.

In short, Israel's Primary History, the narrative sequence of Genesis–2 Kings, is a narrative of (in the end) unmitigated disaster, and Genesis' story of the failure to meet the programme set forth by its Announcements is no contrast to the Primary History as a whole, but rather presages the direction in which the larger story is headed. In fact, Genesis distracts us, to a certain extent, from recognizing what

the future course of events in the Primary History will inevitably be by suggesting that to some degree the Announcements are coming true. For, according to the narrative of Genesis to 2 Kings, despite appearances, they do not.[1]

[1] For further elaboration of this reading of the Primary History, see Chapter 4 below.