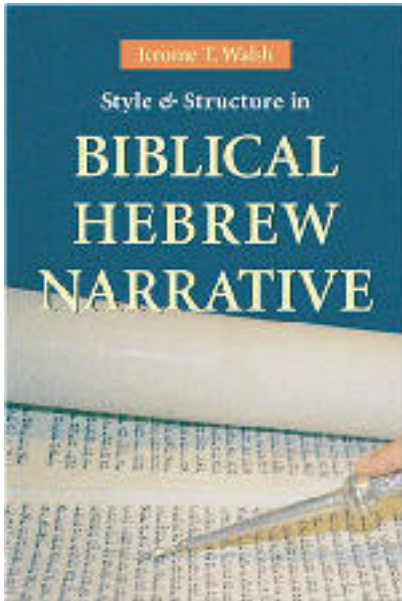


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**Walsh, Jerome T.**

***Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative***

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In this book Jerome Walsh sets out to describe some of the “construction techniques” used by ancient Hebrew authors. His goal is to highlight for English Bible readers significant literary elements that might otherwise be obscured in translation. In the first and longest part of the book, Walsh describes the many symmetrical patterns that organize the units and subunits of biblical narrative and the “interpretive dynamics those patterns can imply” (2). These patterns include reverse (or “envelope”) symmetry, forward symmetry and alternating repetition, as well as partial and multiple symmetry and asymmetry. Part 2 uses concepts derived from text linguistics in order to analyze the boundaries between units. Boundaries are demarcated by changes in “narrative components” such as characters, locale, time, and voice as well as by repetition and breaks in narrative sequence. Part 3 examines “structure of conjunction,” that is, the “threads,” “links,” and “hinges” used to connect units and subunits. In each case Walsh begins with a general explanation of the pattern or technique and then gives brief examples from biblical narratives. Over 45 percent of all the examples come from 1 and 2 Kings. Genesis is also well-represented, although, surprisingly, 1 and 2 Samuel receives little attention.

As in his *Berit Olam* commentary on 1 Kings, Walsh has a keen eye for structural patterns and the rare ability to explain even the most complex technical matters in clear and easily understandable language. He also provides helpful background information about the narratives used in his examples and about the Hebrew language. At times Walsh seems to strive for an almost mathematical precision in his definition and mapping of structural patterns. However, using brief textual examples out of their larger context might make it more difficult for readers to comprehend the ways in which these various patterns might operate along with other rhetorical factors, all in the same passage. This is particularly true when he discusses the same biblical text under different rubrics at different points in the book. For this reason, readers who are interested in Walsh's examples from 1 Kings would be well advised to consult his excellent commentary to see how these structures function in a more holistic context.

Walsh is well aware that the efficacy of the patterns he outlines “depends upon the likelihood that they will be perceived, at least unconsciously, by an attentive reader or hearer” (9; see also 10, 102). The patterns must be able to “evoke” interpretations for the reader (192) and “direct the reader’s interpretive attention” (8). Walsh distinguishes between the attentive and “careful” (118) reader and the “casual” and “inattentive” reader (31, 148). At one point he concedes that certain features are so subtle that only someone extremely familiar with the Bible would recognize them (153). In his conclusion, he repeats that symmetry is “intended to affect an attentive audience, at least subconsciously” (192). When a reader can (presumably consciously) recognize the response the text has evoked in him or her, the reader can gain “a critical and appreciative awareness of what shape the text is attempting to impose on his or her worldview” (192).

The question remains whether the same text will be viewed as having the same structure by different, equally competent, readers and whether the perceived structure will “evoke” the same response in each reader. Walsh cautions that when one identifies a structure solely or primarily on the basis of conceptual repetition one “runs the risk of relying too heavily on subjective judgment” (10). Therefore, other “more objectively demonstrable” repeated elements are essential to provide support. Yet he later concedes that some previous, presumably objective, attempts to demonstrate envelope structures have not been “well thought through.” He sees signs that such “relatively untrammelled experimentation” is being “tamed” by the identification of sober guidelines that help to differentiate between structures that are “solidly rooted” in the text and those that are the product of the interpreter’s own imagination (13 n. 1; see 8 n. 4). Nevertheless, on a number of occasions Walsh notes that other careful commentators have construed the structure of a given text differently from himself, at least to some extent (e.g., 18 n. 8, 31–32 n. 30, 43–45, 88 n. 4, 89 n. 5, 94 n. 10).

A few examples from Walsh’s relatively long treatment of the Jacob story can illustrate this point. They can also serve as a reminder that in cases of alleged chiasmic symmetry

there is always a risk of reductiveness, that is, of the facts being forced to fit the theory. Walsh bases his presentation on the work of Fishbane and Rendsburg but concedes that he has introduced “some differences of detail” (32 n. 30). His version is based on the theory that almost all of the corresponding subunits in this narrative show contrast. For example, Rebekah is not violated in Gen 26, while this does happen to Dinah in the corresponding Gen 34. Walsh’s label for Gen 26 is “Rebekah in a foreign palace.” The problem is that Rebekah is *not* in a foreign palace. That description fits the wife/sister stories in Gen 12 and 20 (not mentioned by Walsh), but not Gen 26. By focusing exclusively on the feature he wants to contrast, Walsh also fails to mention the theme of deception present in both Gen 26 and 34. He also misses the ironic and contrastive parallel between Abimelech looking out his window in Gen 26 and David seeing Bathsheba from his roof in 2 Sam 11. The pagan king Abimelech apparently cannot even imagine doing to this married woman what the Israelite king David does to the married Bathsheba later.

Similarly, Walsh contrasts Rebekah recovering from difficult childbirth in Gen 25 with Rachel dying in childbirth in Gen 35. However, Rebekah is *not* said to have a difficult childbirth (25:24); it is her pregnancy prior to her seeking an oracle from Yahweh that is difficult (25:22). And while Walsh’s structural scheme rightly contrasts Jacob’s two encounters with God in Gen 28 and 32, it overlooks important connections between Gen 32 and other chapters that do not fit neatly into his contrastive structure. For example, Gen 32 is also linked with Gen 25. In both chapters names are given to the patriarch that are based on his fighting with others, both human and divine (25:26; 32:28–29; cf. 27:36). Walsh’s account of Gen 25 focuses solely on Rebekah’s allegedly difficult childbirth; the episode involving Jacob’s name is not mentioned.

Walsh believes that symmetrical patterns are an inherent and enduring feature of biblical Hebrew style and that there is a general correlation between the symmetrical pattern that organizes a text and the interpretive dynamic that is “most suitable” for the narrative. These correlations are “consistent enough to serve as a guide to initial interpretive efforts” (192). At the same time, he admits that the correlations are neither perfect nor inevitable. On one occasion, Walsh also concedes that some of his subtypes are “no more than categories of convenience” that overlap to some extent (58) and that when multiple symmetries coexist in a passage, it weakens the usefulness of symmetry for interpretation (81–82). Readers who attend to these cautions will not be tempted to take his impressive structural diagrams as normative and “inevitable.”

For Walsh, attention to structural patterns benefits interpretation by increasing reader awareness of elements such as contrast and reversal, intensification, and the interweaving of two separate points of view. To reap these benefits, one must do more than engage in a single, linear reading of the text; repeated probings are necessary (192). Readers who follow Walsh’s advice—whether they read the Bible in English or in Hebrew—will find

the structural patterns offered in this book to be of great value as they study the intricacies and nuances of biblical style.

The volume includes author, subject, and scripture indexes.