

Terminological Patterns and the Verb מָוַל "Circumcise" in the Pentateuch

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In some recent studies the vocabulary of selected passages of the Hebrew Bible has been scrutinized by way of tabulating the words used in a given literary unit. These entities may consist of a brief passage, a chapter or even a biblical book thus bringing to light the distinct distribution, the relative frequency and the structural positioning of significant terms and/or phrases. When we carefully tabulate the respective positions and count the frequencies of the words used, several suggestive terms turn out to be significant as far as structural outlines are concerned. It is these outlines based on counting a given sentential entity, phrase or word, which have been called "terminological patterns."¹ In this process of tabulating it has come to light that in a variable length list often the seventh position and, in case of a longer list, less often the twelfth are emphasized by means of some special term or phrase.²

In this study the extant *Endgestalt*, i.e. the final shape, is made the sole starting-point in exposing the terminological pattern based on the twenty-two occurrences of the verb מָוַל "circumcise." Since it would no doubt exceed the scope of this study by far to present the present *Forschungsstand* concerning the distinct passages juxtaposed in the table below, any question relating to their (actual/alleged) oral and/or written preliminary form has deliberately been left out of consideration.

The existence and structuring role of terminological patterns in Gen 17 — the pericope in which the verb מָוַל "circumcise" occurs the first time in the Hebrew Bible — have already been presented.³ The linguistic links detected not only illustrate the literary cohesiveness of Gen 17 but at the same time elucidate its terminological interrelation with the preceding patriarchal pericopes, and even the primeval story. Whereas these structural outlines are limited to the

¹W. Warning, *Literary Artistry in Leviticus*, BInS 35 (E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1999) 25.

²W. Warning, "Terminologische Verknüpfungen in der Urgeschichte," *ZAW* (forthcoming), discloses the close terminological and thematic interrelation of the seventh occurrences of the two terms טוֹב "good" and עָשָׂה "make" in Gen 1:31, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (NIV), and their twelfth occurrences in 2:18, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (NIV). Because of these clear-cut linguistic links, the *Endgestalt* of the so-called "Priestly" and "Yahwistic" creation stories presents itself as a carefully composed homogeneous literary unit. Cf. idem, *Artistry*, 27-30; 66-82; 133-136 (seventh position); 32; 112-115; 152-159 (twelfth position); idem, "Terminologische Verknüpfungen und Genesis 12,1-3," *Bib* 81 (2000) 386-390; idem, "Terminological Patterns and Genesis 15," *Henoah* (forthcoming); idem, "Terminological Patterns and Genesis 38," *AUSS* 38 (2000) 293-305; idem, "Terminological Patterns and Genesis 39," *JETS* (forthcoming); idem, "Terminological Patterns and the Divine Epithet *Shaddai*," *TynB* 52 (2001) 1-5; idem, "Terminologische Verknüpfungen und Leviticus 11," *BZ* (forthcoming); idem, "Terminologische Verknüpfungen und der aaronitische Segen," *JETH* (forthcoming); idem, "Terminological Patterns and the First Word of the Bible אֵתֵּשׁוּרַב (1) '(In the) Beginning'," *TynB* (forthcoming); idem "Terminological Patterns and the Term עָוֹם 'Strong, Powerful' in the Pentateuch," *AUSS* (forthcoming).

³W. Warning, "Terminological Patterns and Genesis 17," *HUCA* (forthcoming).

narrow confines of Gen 17 and the book of Genesis respectively, the twenty-two occurrences of the verb “circumcise” are the basis for a terminological pattern encompassing almost the entire Pentateuch. In view of the indubitable fact that the verb appears altogether eleven times in a single chapter, in Gen 17, it certainly is of significance that in the *Endgestalt* the first eleven occurrences have intricately been interlinked with the following eleven in the rest of the Pentateuch. Since no reader would want to attribute this outline, extending from Gen 17 to Deut 30, to mere chance, we might presume that it has been conceived and composed by some ancient author, the term “author” being used and understood as referring to the person(s) responsible for the extant text, the person(s) who composed the literary units we call “Genesis 17,” “Genesis” or “Pentateuch,” literary entities which did not exist prior to their composition, whatever the prehistory of their respective parts may have been.

Whereas in Gen 9:12, 13, 17 the phrase *ברית* (ה) (ל) *ארות* (“sign of the covenant” refers to the rainbow, the sign of the Noachian covenant, the term *ארות ברית* appears only one more time in the Hebrew Bible. As shown in the aforementioned study of Gen 17, its one and only occurrence in the Abraham story in Gen 17:11 constitutes the very center of a structure based on the thirteen occurrences of the noun *ברית*. In view of the fact that besides the rainbow the Hebrew Bible designates circumcision as the only other *ארות ברית* “sign of the covenant,” the twenty-two occurrences of the verb *מורל* “circumcise” in the MT of the Pentateuch⁴ — being, as it were, a “weakened form of alphabetic composition”⁵ — might gain in momentum.

The soundness of this hypothesis is substantiated by two more stylistic devices: First, the divine command regarding the proper time for circumcision, i.e. the precise date in the life of a male when he should be circumcised, is mentioned only twice in the Pentateuch. Both in Gen 17:12 and Lev 12:3 it is explicitly stated that every male Israelite should be circumcised on the eighth day. The following table indicates that these two important instructions have been placed in the *third* and *third-from-last* positions, and because of their being positioned equidistantly from beginning and end, this type of terminological pattern is called “equidistant structure.”⁶

Second, the hypothesis of authorial deliberateness seems to be supported by what is stated in the seventh and twelfth positions. In Gen 17:23, the seventh time the verb appears in Genesis, we read: “Abraham took his son Ishmael, and all those born in his house, and all those he had bought with money, all males in the household of Abraham, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin that very day as God had told him.” We are therefore correct in concluding that the *seventh* occurrence of the verb *מורל* is closely connected to the circumcision of Abraham’s firstborn son, Ishmael. This being the case, we should pay attention to the fact that the *twelfth* occurrence of the verb in the extant *Endgestalt* describes the circumcision of Isaac: “So Abraham circumcised his son Isaac, when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him” (21:4). Since the seventh and twelfth occurrences of the verb “circumcise” describe the circumcision of Abraham’s two sons,⁷ Ishmael and Isaac, we might proceed on the assumption that by means of this numerical precision the theological significance of their circumcision has been enhanced:

⁴ As is the case in the Hebrew concordance, the infinite absolute (*המורל*) and the finite verbal form (*ימורל*) in Gen. 17:3 are interpreted as two occurrences of the verb, and they have been counted as such.

⁵ L. Alonso-Schökel, *A Manual of Biblical Poetics* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988) 191.

⁶ Preliminary research has brought to light equidistant structures in different parts of the Pentateuch, Esther, Joel, Jonah, and Haggai. Both in Amos and Micah an equidistant structure has been disclosed which is based on the PN “Jacob.”

⁷ In the extant text of Leviticus, Warning, *Artistry*, 156-159, has brought to light a terminological pattern based on the noun *איל* “ram” extending from Lev 5 to 23. Besides being a twenty-two-part structure, the seventh and twelfth positions are identical and the wording of the second and second-to-last are almost verbatim.

Gen 17:10	לכם כל זכר	המורל	
11	את בשר ערלתכם	ונמלתם	
12	<u>לכם כל זכר לדרתים</u>	<u>ובן שמנת ימים ימול</u>	
13		המורל	
13	יליד ביתך	ימול	
14	את בשר ערלתו	אשר לא ימול	
23	<u>את בשר ערלתם בעצם היום הזה</u>	<u>ויקח אברהם את ישמעאל ... וימול</u>	
24	בשר ערלתו	בהמלו	
25	את בשר ערלתו	בהמלו	
26	אברהם וישמעאל בנו	בעצם היום הזה נמול	
27	אתו	וכל אנשי ביתו ... נמלו	
21:4	<u>אברהם את יצחק בנו בן שמנת ימים</u>	<u>וימול</u>	
34:15	לכם כל זכר	להמל	
17		ואם לא תשמעו אלינו להמול	
22bα	לנו כל זכר	בהמול	
22bβ		כאשר הם נמלים	
24	כל זכר כל יצאי שער עירו	וימלו	
Exod 12:44	אתו אז יאכל בו	ומלתה	
48	לו כל זכר	וכי יגור אתך גר ... המורל	
Lev 12:3	<u>בשר ערלתו</u>	<u>ימול</u>	<u>וביום השמיני</u>
Deut 10:16	את ערלת לבבכם	ומלתם	
30:6	יי אלהיך את לבבך ואת לבב זרעך	ומל	
Gen 17:10	all your males must be	circumcised	
11	you must be	circumcised	in the flesh of your foreskin
12	<u>all your eight-day-old ... must be</u>	<u>circumcised</u>	
13		circumcise	
13		circumcise	who is born in your household ⁸
14	who has not been	circumcised	
23	<u>Abraham took his son Ishmael and ...</u>	<u>circumcised</u>	<u>them</u>
24	... when he was	circumcised	in his foreskin
25	... when he was	circumcised	in his foreskin
26	that very day Abraham and Ishmael were	circumcised	
27	and every male ... was	circumcised	with him
21:4	<u>Abraham</u>	<u>circumcised</u>	<u>... Isaac when he was 8 days old</u>
34:15	... by	circumcising	all your males
17	if you do not agree with us to be	circumcised	
22bα	when all our males are	circumcised	
22bβ	as they are	circumcised	
24	and every male in the city was	circumcised	
Exod 12:44	... after you have	circumcised	him
48		circumcise	all the males in his household
Lev 12:3	<u>on the eighth day his foreskin shall be</u>	<u>circumcised</u>	
Deut 10:16		circumcise	the foreskin of your hearts
30:6	the Lord your God will	circumcise	your hearts ...

⁸In this somewhat awkward translation, two verbal forms have been retained as is the case in the Hebrew (the infinitive absolute and the finite verbal form).

The striking terminological similarity between 17:12 and 21:4 (ו)בן שמנת ימים “eight days old” must not be left unmentioned, because both times when circumcision is actually performed on Ishmael and Isaac, the biblical author explicitly points to Abraham’s obedience by stating that he did *כאשר דבר / צוה אתו אלהים* “as God had spoken to / commanded him” respectively (17:23b; 21:4b). In Lev 12:3, where the divine command to have all males circumcised on the eighth day is given for the second time in the Pentateuch, the instruction is expressed differently: *וביום השמיני ימל* “on the eighth day circumcise.” We should pay heed to the fact that the reference to the eighth day in Gen 21:4 does in no way detract from the equidistant structure, since it cannot be denied that both in Gen 17:12 and Lev 12:3 the exact date is given in the context of a divine decree, whereas Gen 21:4 is part and parcel of the narrative of Isaac’s birth.⁹ If we were to evaluate this terminological pattern, the following could be concluded: In this weakened form of alphabetic composition the exact date when circumcision is to be performed in the life of a male has been placed in the *third* and *third-from-last* positions, thus creating an equidistant structure. The references to the circumcision of Abraham’s firstborn son, Ishmael, and his long-hoped-for son, Isaac, have been placed in the significant *seventh* and *twelfth* positions respectively. If it is true that in “literature the form is meaningful ... In literature the form creates meaning ... In literature the meaning exists in and through form,”¹⁰ the *מורל*-structure constitutes a perfect blending of form and content. Whatever the oral and/or written *Vorlagen* of the twenty-two texts juxtaposed above may have been, it cannot be questioned that the author of the extant *Endgestalt* has created a “concealed” terminological pattern containing a clear-cut theological message: The “sign of the covenant” between the Lord and Israel, circumcision being the *conditio sine qua non* of his being their God and Israel’s being his people, encompasses almost the entire Torah, the “Magna Charta” between the Lord and Israel, and in this law code the rules and regulations for their mutual relationship have been laid down.

Conclusion

In evaluating the present state of Pentateuchal studies, it has been maintained by R. N. Whybray that

as far as assured results are concerned we are no nearer to certainty than when critical study of the Pentateuch began. There is at the present time no consensus whatever about when, why, how, and through whom the Pentateuch reached its present form, and opinions about the dates of composition of its various parts differ by more than five hundred years.¹¹

In view of this situation it might be profitable to make the *Endgestalt* the sole basis for any future analysis. Since it cannot be denied that in analyzing the structure of a given biblical text our option consists of the alternative between more or less substantiated hypotheses, and not between a hypothesis and no hypothesis, we ought to keep in mind that the reliability of any hypothesis is always conditioned by its degree of explanatory power. Therefore, while pondering Whybray’s realistic assessment, the reader is called upon to weigh the evidence and to decide for herself or

⁹ In Gen 17:14a both the Samaritan Pentateuch and the LXX add the phrase “on the eighth day” which is identical with Lev 12:3. This reading, however, has no real bearing on the terminological pattern based on the verb *מורל*, because it is the divine *command* in the third and third-from-last positions which is crucial for the structure.

¹⁰ L. Alonso-Schökel, “Hermeneutical Problems of Literary Study of the Bible,” *VTSup Congress Volume 28. Edinburgh 1974* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975) 7.

¹¹ R. N. Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 12.

himself whether the methodological approach presented in the preceding pages should be taken seriously. In my view, the terminological pattern presented in the preceding pages enhances the theological meaningfulness of circumcision as *the* “sign of the covenant” between the Lord and Israel, not least because “chronologically” it reaches from Abraham, the first human instructed to perform the rite of circumcision, to his descendants who are given the promise that “when you and your children return to the Lord your God ... the Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live” (Deut 30:2-6, NIV).