
Pursuing and Overtaking as a Type-Scene

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The place of type-scenes in the Bible has been recognized at least since Robert Alter masterfully treated the subject in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Alter 1981, 47 *et seq*). In brief, a type-scene is one of a “series of recurrent narrative episodes attached to the careers of biblical heroes that are analogous to Homeric type-scenes in that they are dependent on the manipulation of a fixed constellation of predetermined motifs” (Alter 1981, 51). The scenes occur at “crucial junctures” in the lives of biblical heroes; they incorporate a standard series of elements associated (in the audience’s mind as well as the narrator’s) with the portrayal of such scenes; and the alteration, suppression, or omission of some of those elements communicates something of significance to the audience. Alter demonstrates the workings of the phenomenon through a comprehensive study of one very prominent type-scene, the “betrothal at the well,” explicating carefully the similarities and differences among the accounts of how Isaac, Jacob, and Moses came to marry the women they did.¹

In this essay, I want to examine a series of episodes that appear to constitute a variant on the type-scene. They are not related to critical junctures in a hero’s life, yet they incorporate recurring actions and words in a manner suggesting a recognized motif. And, as in the case of other type-scenes, the variations among the episodes are meaningful.

Described most generally, the episodes in question involve an individual or a group departing (or fleeing, depending on who perceives the event), being pursued, and being overtaken. The pursuer hopes to cap-

ture some form of booty but is usually frustrated. In describing the scene, the texts use a series of key words. The two most prominent of which appear frequently, in poetic and narrative contexts unrelated to these episodes, as a regular, parallel pair.²

To present the scene, of course, is all but to recite the most famous poetic verse in which its key words are used, and used very straightforwardly. In the Song at the Sea, “the foe,” presumably Pharaoh, declares his purpose: “I will pursue [*ʾrdf*], I will overtake [*ʾsyg*], I will divide the spoil” (Ex. 15:9; unless otherwise indicated, biblical translations are from NJPS). The stems *r-d-f* and *n-s-g*, of course, are a regularly encountered pair, in both poetry and narrative:

I pursued [*ʾrdf*] my enemies and overtook them [*wʾsygm*] (Ps. 18:38)

All her pursuers [*ʾrdfyḥ*] overtook her [*ḥsygwh*] (Lam. 1:3)

Pursue [*wʾrdfḥ*] her lovers as she will, she shall not overtake [*wlʾ tsyg*] them. (Hos. 2:9)

All these curses . . . shall pursue you [*wʾrdfwk*] and overtake you [*whsygwk*] (Dt. 28:45).

Otherwise, when the distance is great, the blood-avenger, pursuing [*yʾrdf*] the manslayer in hot anger, may overtake him [*whsygw*] (Dt. 19:6).

Quick, go after [*ʾrdfw*] them, for you can overtake them [*tsygm*] (Josh. 2:5).

In all these examples, the stems function as a typical pair, but the final example, from the spy episode in Joshua, points beyond that usage to something broader. Joshua sends his spies to scout out Jericho, and they are taken in by Rahab, a harlot.³ Thereafter, “it was told [*wyʾmr*]”⁴ to the king of Jericho that spies had come to town, and the king dispatches agents to direct Rahab to produce them. Rahab hides the spies on the roof, tells the king’s agents that they’ve left, and, using the quoted wording, dispatches the king’s agents on a fool’s errand. The key elements of the story, for present purposes, are the effort to pursue and overtake the spies, described by using the stems *r-d-f* and *n-s-g*, and the initiation of that effort in consequence of the king being

told, by an anonymous informant described in the passive voice, something about the people who are to be pursued.

The use of the passive voice here is significant because the verb itself, *wy'mr*, is not from the stem normally employed in this element of the story. In all other instances, as will be seen, the verb describing the conveyance of information to the pursuer (or the pursuing agents' principal) is a passive form of the stem *n-g-d*. In every case, however, the verb is passive and the informant is not identified in the text (though midrashim sometimes fill in the gap), offering some evidence that this incident is part of the same rubric.

The rubric, described most generally (with thematic stems noted in brackets), comprises episodes in which a group of people depart (or, depending on the point of view, flee [*b-r-h*]) an alien environment, usually carrying with them (often unknowingly to some or all of them) property that may be seen as stolen. An important figure to whom they had been subservient in the alien environment is told [*n-g-d*] of their departure, and he or his agents pursue [*r-d-f*] and overtake [*n-s-g*] them, demanding, among other things, return of the stolen property. The demand for the booty may be responded to with an imprudent offer to have the thief punished by death. Ultimately, the matter is resolved peacefully, and the departing group goes on its way.

At least three fully developed examples of the story line may be identified, two in Genesis and one in Exodus. Of the two in Genesis, the later seems clearly to hearken back to the earlier.⁵ In the first (Gen. 31:17-36), Jacob gathers his family and departs from Laban, intending to return home to Canaan. Before they leave, Rachel, his favoured wife, steals her father's household idols. Jacob and his ménage depart in secret, but "it was told [*wygd*] Laban"⁶ on the third day that Jacob had fled [*brh*].⁷ Laban, with his entourage, pursues [*wyrdf*] Jacob a distance of seven days, and (after being warned by God not to harm Jacob) eventually overtakes [*wysg*] him.⁸ In the ensuing exchange, Laban takes Jacob to task for stealing his gods, and Jacob, unaware that Rachel is the thief, imprudently volunteers that anyone in whose possession the gods are found will not remain alive.

In summarizing this episode, I have presented the elements it shares with the second incident (Gen. 44:1-17), Joseph's brothers'

aborted departure from Egypt at the end of their second journey there to buy food. The contours of this second passage bear a striking resemblance to those of the first, though the passages differ in significant respects as well. After dining with his brothers, still not having disclosed his identity, Joseph directs his steward to fill the brothers' sacks with food, to return their money, and to put his silver goblet in the mouth of Benjamin's sack. The brothers depart in the morning, unknowingly carrying property that may be regarded as stolen, and Joseph directs his steward to pursue [*rdf*] and overtake them [*whsgtm*] and to chastise them for their act of theft. The steward indeed overtakes them [*wysgm*] and levels the charge, whereupon they respond, as imprudently as Jacob did to Laban, that "whichever of your servants [the cup] is found with shall die," and the rest of the brothers shall be slaves to Joseph.

As Alter notes, the brothers' offer to have the thief executed evokes Jacob's earlier, similar, offer with respect to whoever stole Laban's gods. Like his mother Rachel before him, Benjamin is put at risk by the imprudent offer; but he, of course, is wholly innocent, while she was guilty as charged (and, as Alter suggests in noting what he terms a "teasing parallel," may in fact have suffered the punishment specified by Jacob when she died giving birth to Benjamin⁹). Beyond that, the second episode uses the principal key stems *r-d-f* and *n-s-g* and includes a demand by the pursuer for the booty—in this instance, of course, booty whose existence is unknown to the entire group being pursued, not only to its leader. The later episode lacks the secondary key stems, *b-r-h* and *n-g-d*, but that is hardly surprising. Since the entire episode is a put-up job, there is no flight, not even in the perspective of the pursuer; and there is no need for the pursuer to be told that the pursued have departed.

The third episode (Exodus 14:1-14) describes the Israelites' departure from Egypt. After they leave—indeed, after Pharaoh himself had "let the people go" (Ex. 13:17)—"it was told [*wygd*] the king of Egypt"¹⁰ that the people had fled [*brh*]. Thereupon Pharaoh and his forces pursue [*wyrdf* (v. 8); *wyrdfw* (v. 9)] the people and overtake [*wy-sygm*] them at the sea. The people panic and, in their despair, suggest it would have been better to die in Egypt than in the wilderness.

Moses reassures them that God will prevail over the Egyptians on their behalf.

Although this third episode includes all four verb stems associated with the type-scene (*b-r-h*, *n-g-d*, *r-d-f*, *n-s-g*), it appears to omit two prominent motifs: a demand for the return of stolen property, and an imprudent offer to punish the thief. Not that there is no arguably stolen property to be returned: Moses had instructed the Israelites “to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold” (Ex. 11:2), and the Israelites, we are told, “had done Moses’ bidding and borrowed from the Egyptians objects of silver and gold, and clothing” (Ex. 12:35). Like the brothers in the second episode, then, the Israelites left Egypt with plenty of Egyptian property; but unlike the brothers, they possessed the property not because it had been planted on them in an effort to test or torment them—Joseph appears to have intended one or both in having the cup placed in Benjamin’s sack—but because it was the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that his descendants, after being enslaved in Egypt, would “go free with great wealth” (Gen. 15:14). God’s role is much more blatant in this episode than in the others—indeed, the very first use of a key word is in a statement of God’s intention (“I will stiffen Pharaoh’s heart and he will pursue [*wrd-f*] them”) (Ex. 14:4)¹¹—and the omission of any demand for the return of the property may be a way of tacitly observing that it rightfully belongs to the Israelites by reason of God’s promise. Pharaoh, of course, did not see it that way, as suggested by the statement of intention attributed to him in the Moses’ song—“I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil” (Ex. 15:9)—but the overwhelming force of God’s promise prevents him from even articulating a demand for return of the property.

In the absence of any demand for the return of stolen property, there can be no imprudent offer to punish the thief by death. But imprudence is certainly present in the Israelites’ reaction to their situation, which includes a suggestion that they would be better off dead. Instead of trusting in God, whose plans for them are so powerful and authoritative, they panic and express regret about having left Egypt. In the earlier episodes, Jacob, and then the brothers, were overconfident that no one in their respective groups possessed the stolen property—

so much so that they made imprudent offers to punish any thief that might be found. Here, in contrast, the Israelites display an appalling lack of confidence in both themselves and in God. Moses properly chastises them for that failing, which, incidentally, shows the positive side of their ancestors' responses, however misguided, to similar provocations.

All three of the foregoing episodes turn out happily. In stark contrast is the fate of King Zedekiah, which seems, at least on the basis of vocabulary, to be portrayed against the background of the episodes in the Torah. The story appears three times (2 Kings 25:4-7; Jer. 39:2-7; Jer. 52:4-11), with substantially the same elements; the following account presents the pertinent verbs as used in Jer. 39. The Chaldeans enter Jerusalem, after breaching its walls. Upon seeing them, King Zedekiah and his soldiers flee [*wybrhw*] the city by night. The Chaldean troops pursue [*wyrdfw*] them and overtake [*wysgw*] Zedekiah, taking him captive, slaughtering his sons, blinding him, and bringing him to Babylon for trial. The same three stems—*b-r-h*, *r-d-f*, and *n-s-g*—appear as well in the account in Jer. 52; the account in 2 Kings 25 lacks *b-r-h*.¹²

That this episode lacks the stem *n-g-d* should not be surprising. The Chaldean forces were so overwhelming and so much in control that it would be unnecessary to inform them that Zedekiah's forces had fled; they no doubt were aware of the Judeans' movements.¹³ Likewise, there is no demand for the return of stolen property, also irrelevant to the situation, though there is little doubt that the Chaldeans made good on Pharaoh's stated intent to "divide the spoil." Meanwhile, this is the only one of the episodes in which *b-r-h* accurately describes the situation. As already noted, Jacob's "flight" from Laban, and even more so that of the Israelites from Egypt, was only in the eye of the beholder; in fact, they simply left on their respective ways. Here, the flight is genuine and, ultimately, unsuccessful. The contrasts between this episode and those in the Torah, highlighted by the shared vocabulary, underline the poignancy of the situation here.

One final incident in the Bible deserves consideration.¹⁴ David's exploits before becoming king include an incident (1 Sam. 30) in which Amalekite raiders sack the town of Ziklag and capture its

women and children, including David's wives and his troops' families. David, threatened by possible mutiny of his dispirited troops, asks God, through Abiathar the priest, "Shall I pursue [*ʾrḏf*] those raiders? Will I overtake them [*h'sgnw*]?" God answers, "Pursue [*ʾrḏf*], for you shall overtake [*hsg tsyg*] and you shall rescue" (1 Sam. 30:8). David and his troops set out on the mission and are led to the raiders' camp by an escaped slave of the Amalekites. David's forces attack and prevail, and they recover their families and all their stolen property.

The frequency with which the stems *r-d-f* and *n-s-g* appear in other contexts suggest caution about bringing this story within the rubric under discussion merely because it contains repeated forms of those stems, in God's answer to David as well as in David's question. That caution is further warranted by the omission of the stems *b-r-h* and *n-g-d*, though that omission is easily accounted for by their irrelevance to the particulars of the story line.¹⁵ But the story also contains the stolen property motif—in this case, property that is genuinely stolen. And it includes an interesting reversal of the usual plot outline: from no one's perspective do the Amalekites flee, yet they are not merely overtaken by the pursuer; they are subdued by him as well, and the spoil, for once, is in fact divided. David's exploit may be portrayed through the use of a familiar narrative framework, and David's victory as pursuer and overtaker becomes all the more impressive when contrasted with Pharaoh's defeat.

This examination of "pursuing and overtaking" episodes suggests that we are dealing here with an identifiable plot motif, partaking of many features of the type-scene as identified by Alter. Particularly prominent is the use of the verb stems *r-d-f* and *n-s-g*, along with *n-g-d* and *b-r-h*; the first two are a standard parallel pair, but their deployment, together with the latter two stems, in the scenes here discussed suggests they point beyond that parallelism to a recognized plot motif as well. Consideration of the recurring actions and vocabulary will lead the alert reader to place any of the episodes in the context of the others; to reflect on the significance of the variations on the theme; to derive the aesthetic pleasure associated with recognizing a literary pattern; and to gain an understanding of the midrashic interpretive technique that views the Hebrew Bible as a seamless web. I hope this

study will contribute to the identification and explication of other similar patterns.

Notes

¹ Although it is Alter who identified, described, and comprehensively portrayed the workings of the phenomenon, earlier commentators, traditional and modern, recognized recurring story elements in the Bible and considered their implications, sometimes adumbrating aspects of Alter's type-scene analysis. See, for example, Cassuto's explication of the three "wife-sister" narratives in Genesis (12:10-13:1; 20:1-18; 26:6-11) (Umberto Cassuto, 256-264.) Cassuto's close reading of those distinctions and their significance resembles in some ways Alter's examination of the distinctions among the various "betrothal at the well" episodes, and Cassuto, like Alter, sees the variegated repetitions in the text we possess as the crafty use of a literary device rather than random scrambling by oral transmission. Nevertheless, Cassuto seems to posit just the type of "ur-story" that Alter rejects. (Cf. Alter 1981, 50, with Cassuto 1990, 262).

² The betrothal-at-the-well type-scene, as Alter describes it, includes, at a particular point, the verbs "hurry" and "run." Nevertheless, recurring actions, rather than recurring words, appear to be the principal defining feature of the typical type-scene. Recurring words figure much more prominently in the variant I examine here.

³ Whether Rahab was in fact a harlot, as the text states and most commentators understand, or was simply an innkeeper, as Josephus reads and the Targum may suggest, is of no import here. See, for a recent discussion of those views, Novetsky and Mermelstein 1999, 67.

⁴ Josh. 2:2; translation per OJPS, which seems to capture not only the emphasis on the informant's anonymity but also the portentous nature of the telling better than NJPS' "the king of Jericho was told."

⁵ See Alter 1981, 173, where he discusses one shared element of the two episodes—the risk faced by the individual possessing the "booty."

⁶ Translation per OJPS.

⁷ Cassuto, 1951, 111, notes that "fleeing" describes Jacob's action from Laban's point of view, even if not from Jacob's own; as we shall see, the same word is used to describe the Israelites' departure from Egypt from Pharaoh's point of view.

⁸ In commenting on the episode in Exodus (at 14:9), Sarna (1991, 72) cites this verse as proof that *n-s-g* can refer to the pursuer coming into sight of the pursued and need not denote direct contact between them.

⁹ Alter 1981, 173; 1996, 261. To the same effect is Gen. Rab. 74:9, cited by Rashi on Gen. 31:32. Ibn Ezra disputes the suggestion, pointing to other instances of women dying in childbirth. Other midrashim link the stories by having the brothers refer to Benjamin, when the cup is found in his sack, as “*gnb’ br gnb’*,” “thief, son of a thief.” See, e.g., Ber. Rabbah 92:8; *Yalqut Shimoni*, *Miqets Remez* 150.

¹⁰ Ex. 14:5; translation per OJPS.

¹¹ The midrash (Shemot Rabbah 29:5) goes further in this regard, stressing the portentous nature of the passive “it was told the king of Egypt” and suggesting it means that God himself told Pharaoh that the Israelites had fled, intending thereby to put in motion the sequence of events by which the Egyptians would pursue the Israelites and ultimately be destroyed in the Reed Sea.

¹² The verse where one would expect to see a form of *b-r-ḥ* (2Kings 25:4) contains no other verb in its stead; NJPS infers a verb that it adds in brackets: “... All the soldiers [left the city] by night through the gate between the double walls...” A better inferred verb, given the parallels, might be “fled,” as suggested by *Da’at Miqra* as well as by Radaq and Ralbag, among others.

¹³ Nevertheless, Radaq, commenting on Ez. 12:13, suggests that God inspired the Chaldeans to pursue Zedekiah and overtake him, perhaps reflecting the portentous implications of the anonymous, passive usage of the *n-g-d* stem that appears in the full-blown versions of the scene.

¹⁴ Rashi (on Gen. 29:11) may present a further instance of the scene, even though it appears nowhere in the Bible itself. The cited verse describes Jacob as weeping when he meets Rachel at the well, which a midrash (Ber. Rabbah 70:12) attributes to his distress at having no presents to offer her, in contrast to Abraham’s servant, who, in the situation a generation earlier, had showered Rebecca with gifts. Rashi goes on to describe Jacob’s lack of possessions as the outcome of an episode in which Jacob [after fleeing!] had been *pursued* by Esau’s son Elifaz, acting on his father’s directive to kill Jacob. When Elifaz *overtook* Jacob, however, his moral scruples (learned from his grandfather Isaac) prevented him from committing murder, yet he felt bound by his father’s command. Jacob suggested that Elifaz take his property, citing the rabbinic hyperbole that a poor person is as good as dead. Rashi’s use of the *b-r-ḥ* and *n-s-g* terminology may suggest an intention to fit the episode into the rubric here analyzed, particularly since Elifaz takes the spoils. It also is noteworthy that Jacob’s flight is prompted by Rebecca “being told” (*wygd lrbqh*), anonymously and in the passive voice, of Esau’s intention to kill Jacob when the opportunity

arises (Gen. 27:42). Rashi cites a midrash that Rebecca was told by the holy spirit (Ber. Rabbah 67:9), seeing the use of the passive voice as portentous.

¹⁵ Is it too forced to suggest that David's use of *gdwd* [OJPS, troop; NJPS raiders] to describe the band of Amalekites is a play on the missing stem *ngd*?

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