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DODGING THE QUESTION?

THE RHETORICAL FUNCTION OF THE מה־זאת עשית FORMULA IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS

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Summary

Building on recent research that demonstrates a rhetorical movement in Genesis from fratricide (Cain and Abel) to forgiveness (Joseph and his brothers), this article considers the function of a repeated question utilised throughout the patriarchal narratives. On eight occasions, variations of מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ *('What is this you have done?') are used to confront wrongdoers. The typical response is to mitigate culpability; the outcomes are generally negative. However, the final instance of the question in chapter 44 is markedly different. This subversion of expectation works powerfully as a rhetorical tool to instruct readers regarding a right response to the uncovering of sin.*

1. Introduction

As recently as 2010 Gregory Jones and Célestin Musekura could bemoan not only limited *Christian* reflection on the topic of forgiveness, but also a predominant focus on its divine–human expression.[1] Even in works which explicitly attempt a biblical and theological understanding of human–human repentance and

Authors' note: We are grateful for comments made by the anonymous reviewers which helped clarify aspects of this article. Any errors, of course, remain our own.

[1] L. Gregory Jones and Célestin Musekura, *Forgiving as We've Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010): 31.

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reconciliation[2] – at both academic and popular levels – engagement with Old Testament texts is often minimal, if not entirely absent.[3]

There is, of course, a degree of warrant for this lacuna. The prevailing concern in the Old Testament is demonstrably bound up with issues related to the need for, the securing of, and the results stemming from, divine forgiveness.[4] Yet, for Anthony Bash to conclude that '[i]n the Old Testament, forgiveness is always – and only – understood to be part of what it means to be put right with God' overstates the case.[5] Albeit limited in scope, the Old Testament is not silent regarding human responses to acts of human wrongdoing.[6] Yet, as mentioned, this biblical witness rarely receives the consideration it deserves.[7]

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[2] Consideration of forgiveness from a *therapeutic* stance is beyond the scope of what we are attempting here. The literature on the topic is vast. For an introduction, see Michael E. McCullough, 'The Psychology of Forgiveness: History, Conceptual Issues, and Overview' in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen (New York: Guilford, 2000): 1-14; James K. Voiss, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness: Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Explorations* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015): 71-100. Interested readers should also consult the extended bibliography in Robert D. Enright and Joshua North, eds, *Exploring Forgiveness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 165-86.

[3] There is, at times, a hermeneutical assumption motivating this neglect. Bash, for example, equates the 'Christian Scriptures' with the NT (Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness: A Theology* [Eugene: Cascade, 2015]: 4). The resulting paucity of engagement with a presumed 'non-Christian' OT is therefore not surprising. Other works which explicitly attempt a biblical and theological understanding of interpersonal forgiveness but do not engage with OT perspectives include Jones and Musekura, *Forgiving as We've Been Forgiven* and Maria Mayo, *The Limits of Forgiveness: Case Studies in the Distortion of a Biblical Ideal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

[4] For an overview, consult Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (SLTHS 1; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009).

[5] Anthony Bash, *Just Forgiveness: Exploring the Bible, Weighing the Issues* (London: SPCK, 2011): 16.

[6] Arguably, biblical lament contributes to the topic, perhaps especially its imprecatory elements (e.g. Ps. 137). Wisdom literature frequently turns to interpersonal issues (e.g. Prov. 17:9). Other genres are also potentially fruitful. Four narrative instances of human-to-human requests for forgiveness (Gen. 50:17; Exod. 10:17; 1 Sam. 15:25; 25:28) are surveyed by Donald E. Gowan, *The Bible on Forgiveness* (PTMS 133; Eugene: Pickwick: 2010): 87-89. Concerning the interplay between law and narrative in relation to interpersonal forgiveness, see the forthcoming essay by G. Geoffrey Harper, 'Joseph and His Brothers: Genesis 44–45'.

[7] Limited engagement with human–human forgiveness in the OT is offered in Gowan, *The Bible on Forgiveness*, 86-90; Bash, *Just Forgiveness*, 15-18; Bash, *Forgiveness*, 14-20; Sol Schimmel, 'Joseph and His Brothers: A Paradigm for Repentance', *Judaism* 37 (1988): 60-65. More extended discussions can be found in George W. Coats, 'Strife without Reconciliation – A Narrative Theme in the Jacob Traditions' in *Werden und Wirken des Alten Testamentes: Festschrift für Claus*

Our aim in this article is to explore the contribution Genesis makes to the biblical portrait of human–human offence and reconciliation. The potential fruitfulness of such an endeavour is indicated in a recent monograph by Matthew Schlimm which traces a literary and rhetorical movement in Genesis from fratricide (Cain and Abel; Gen. 4) to forgiveness (Joseph and his brothers; Gen. 50). Schlimm concludes in relation to interpersonal forgiveness that 'Reading Genesis is an act of moral education.'[8] Taking Schlimm's insight as a point of departure, we want to pursue this line of reasoning with respect to a question that is repeatedly asked in Genesis. Always occurring in contexts of wrongdoing, variations of מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ ('What is this you have done?') are posed in interpersonal speech to confront offenders.[9] As we will argue, the use of this question and the responses it generates shed light on the moral education Genesis seeks to inculcate regarding matters of interpersonal grievance and response.

Accordingly, the approach taken in this article is primarily synchronic. Our interest lies in determining the function of a repeated question within the received text, irrespective of compositional history. The final editor(s) of Genesis either added this formulaic phrase or retained what was already present in the source material and hence appropriated it.[10] Either way, therefore, it remains possible to consider the rhetorical function of the מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ construction for readers.

Westermann zum 70 Geburtstag, ed. Rainer Albertz et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980): 82-106; Frank Crüsemann, 'Dominion, Guilt, and Reconciliation: The Contribution of the Jacob Narrative in Genesis to Political Ethics', *Semeia* 66 (1994): 67-77; David J. Reimer, 'The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology: The Case of Interpersonal Forgiveness' in *After the Exile: Essays in Honour of Rex Mason*, eds John Barton and David J. Reimer (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996): 259-82; David J. Reimer, 'Stories of Forgiveness: Narrative Ethics and the Old Testament' in *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld*, eds Robert Rezetko, Timothy H. Lim, and W. Brian Aucker (VTSup 113; Leiden: Brill, 2007): 359-78; David J. Reimer, 'Interpersonal Forgiveness and the Hebrew Prophets' in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day (LHBOTS 531; New York: T&T Clark, 2010): 81-97; Matthew R. Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis* (Siphrut 7; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

[8] Schlimm, *Fratricide to Forgiveness*, 179.

[9] Gen. 3:13; 4:10; 12:18; 20:9; 26:10; 29:25; 31:26; 44:15.

[10] The question of who the final editor(s) might have been is, of course, hotly debated in current Pentateuch research. The issues will not be resolved here. Bill Arnold is representative of a group which finds evidence of H redaction in Genesis. He concludes: 'the final edition of Genesis is the result of a … process by an editor of the Holiness school of pre-exilic Israel, who combined and organized these various materials into a continuous and meaningful whole' (Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* [NCBC;

That notwithstanding, any attempt to derive ethics from story is fraught. The fundamental issue concerns how to discern whether narrative elements are merely descriptive or also prescriptive in design. Without doubt, story has persuasive capabilities.[11] But how might an interpreter determine the specific moral freight of that persuasion, if present at all? The question is an important one. Wayne Booth identifies the stakes: 'To pass judgment where the author intends neutrality is to misread. But to be neutral or objective where the author requires commitment is equally to misread.'[12]

In considering the moral force of Genesis for readers, Gordon Wenham offers some useful parameters. Pericopes must first be read in context of the whole book. In the case of Genesis, this means reading in light of the ideal presented in chapters 1–2.[13] Wenham suggests three additional criteria: (1) a behaviour repeated in different contexts is more likely to be presented as a pattern for imitation; (2) traits to be considered as virtuous from the implied author's point of view should be exhibited in positive contexts; and (3) other Old Testament genres, particularly law, may confirm conclusions derived from the narratives.[14] Wenham concludes that Old Testament stories have

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Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009]: 18). Similar compositional models also assign an important role to H *vis-à-vis* the redaction of Genesis. See, for instance, Israel Knohl, 'Who Edited the Pentateuch?' in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, eds Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz (FAT 78; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011): 359-67; Jacob Milgrom, 'The Case for the Pre-Exilic and Exilic Provenance of the Books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers' in *Reading the Law: Studies in Honour of Gordon J. Wenham*, eds J. G. McConville and Karl Möller (LHBOTS 461; New York: T&T Clark, 2007): 48-56; Megan Warner, 'The Holiness School in Genesis?' in *Current Issues in Priestly and Related Literature: The Legacy of Jacob Milgrom and Beyond*, eds Roy E. Gane and Ada Taggar-Cohen (SBLRBS 82; Atlanta: SBL, 2015): 155-74; Benjamin Ziemer, 'Die aktuelle Diskussion zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Pentateuch und die empirische Evidenz nach Qumran', *ZAW* 125 (2013): 383-99. If these models have merit, then it would not be surprising to find concerns that are central to H – especially matters of interpersonal holiness (e.g. Lev. 19:17-18) – highlighted in the final text of Genesis.

[11] For elaboration in relation to fiction, see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). Regarding the persuasiveness of historical narrative, see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[12] Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 144. The potential is not always realised. In what is still regarded as the premier work in the field of OT ethics, Otto eschews insights that can be derived from *stories*. See Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994).

[13] Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000): 77, 87.

[14] Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 88-89.

powerful didactic capabilities and attempt to instill theological and ethical ideals in readers.[15] His criteria set helpful parameters for the discussion that follows.

2. Occurrences of the מה־זאת עשית Question in Genesis

The syntactical formulation of the interrogative particle מַה ('why?') used in conjunction with second person *qal qatal* forms of the verb עשׂה ('to do') occurs eight times in Genesis, each in the context of interpersonal dialogue. In all eight instances the combination is utilised by an aggrieved party to question an act of (perceived or real) wrongdoing, aligning with Pietro Bovati's contention that עשׂה can signal formal accusations in judicial contexts.[16] The programmatic instance is YHWH's interrogation of the woman following the primordial couple's act of eating (3:13). With stylistic variations, often employing זאת ('this') or לְ + pronominal suffix ('to *x*'), the question appears another seven times throughout Genesis (see Table 1).

Gen. 3:13	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂית	'What is this you have done?'
Gen. 4:10	מֶה עָשִׂיתָ	'What have you done?'
Gen. 12:18	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי	'What is this you have done to me?'
Gen. 20:9	מֶה־עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ	'What have you done to us?'
Gen. 26:10	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ	'What is this you have done to us?'
Gen. 29:25	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי	'What is this you have done to me?'
Gen. 31:26	מֶה עָשִׂיתָ	'What have you done?'
Gen. 44:15	מָה־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם	'What is this deed that you have done?'

(Table 1)

[15] Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 3. That events portrayed have little overlap with contemporary scenarios (how many readers, for example, will try to pass their wife off as their sister while sojourning in Egypt?) is not problematic. As Bar-Efrat notes, creating distance between character and reader is an essential precondition for enabling the latter to think clearly with respect to the values embedded in the text (Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* [JSOTSup 70; trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989]: 31).

[16] Pietro Bovati, *Re-Establishing Justice: Legal Terms, Concepts and Procedures in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 105; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994): 117-18.

The same combination of terms, used as an accusation in interpersonal dialogue, only occurs another eight times outside Genesis. In Judges 2:2 the Angel of YHWH confronts 'all the people of Israel' (cf. v. 4), asking 'what is this you have done?'[17] On four occasions the question is utilised by a group to confront an individual: the Israelites against Moses (Exod. 14:11); the men of Ephraim against Gideon (Judg. 8:1); three thousand men from Judah against Samson (Judg. 15:11); and the sailors against Jonah (Jon. 1:10). The remaining three instances convey person-to-person allegations: Balak to Balaam (Num. 23:11); Samuel to Saul (1 Sam. 13:11); and Joab to David (2 Sam. 3:24).

Thus, while always occurring in narrative contexts, the מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ construction is unevenly distributed; Genesis accounts for half of the total occurrences. Moreover, the conflict scenarios in which the phrase appears there involve fraternal discord, which, as noted above, is an important Genesis trope. Aside from the first instance where God questions the woman (Gen. 3:13), each use of the phrase in Genesis has 'brothers' in view.[18] This contrasts the use of the formula elsewhere where, except for Joab and David (cf. 1 Chr. 2:15-16), the interpersonal conflict is not between close relations. Additionally, in four of the Genesis occurrences, grievance is adequately articulated apart from the formula. For instance, Abimelek asks Abraham, 'how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done … What did you see, that you did this thing?' (Gen. 20:9-10 ESV; see, similarly, 12:18-19; 29:25; 31:25-28). In these four cases the מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ construction, notably fronted each time, is not strictly required but nevertheless serves to connect the episode to other instances of the question.

These factors together suggest the possibility of deliberate linkage of pericopes in Genesis through use of formulaic phrasing. There is warrant, therefore, to explore the potential rhetorical and theological purpose such connections might serve in relation to the book's implied reader, a reader who encounters all eight instances of the question

[17] All translations of biblical texts, unless otherwise noted, are our own.

[18] This is explicitly the case for Cain and Abel (Gen. 4) and Joseph and his siblings (Gen. 44). The 'she's my sister' ruse employed in Gen. 12, 20, and 26 at least implies that Abr(ah)am/Isaac would be considered a brother by marriage to Pharaoh/Abimelek. Furthermore, Laban addresses Jacob as 'my brother' in 29:15.

sequentially.[19] If such purpose can be demonstrated it will confirm the validity of the original premise. To facilitate that end, the narrative contexts of the various iterations listed in Table 1 are explored below to better ascertain the function(s) of the formula in each case. What occasion provokes the question? Who poses the question, and to whom? What are the results in each instance?

2.1 Genesis 3:13

In 3:13, YHWH God questions the woman following the man's insinuation that she had given him the forbidden fruit to eat (3:12; cf. 3:6). Wenham suggests that this divine interrogation is intended to provoke confession.[20] Yet, while acknowledging the act of eating, the woman nevertheless retorts 'the serpent deceived me and I ate' (3:13). Thus, in similar manner to the man (3:11-12), the woman attempts to mitigate culpability – in this instance, by deferring blame to a third party (the serpent) and by withholding mention of her own involvement until the end.[21]

2.2 Genesis 4:10

The next occurrence is also found in divine speech. Cain is questioned over Abel's blood, which YHWH says 'cries out to [him] from the ground' (4:10). In context, Cain has already lied in response to YHWH's initial query about Abel's whereabouts ('I don't know') and denied responsibility for him ('Am I my bother's guardian?') (4:9). Subsequently, Cain is 'cursed … from the ground' and destined to become a fruitless wanderer upon the earth (4:11-12). The divine sentencing elicits a response (4:13). The force of Cain's declaration, however, is debated due to (1) the ambiguity inherent to the formulation עֲוֹנִי (is it 'my iniquity', or 'my punishment'?); and (2) the verb נשׂא, which could refer to either 'bearing' or 'forgiving'. Does

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[19] Kürle defines the implied reader as 'the text-immanent role which a concrete reader has to adopt in order to realise the potential of meaning in the text … One may speak of him as the reader who was imagined by the author during the conception of the work' (Stefan Kürle, *The Appeal of Exodus: The Characters God, Moses and Israel in the Rhetoric of the Book of Exodus* [PBM; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013]: 9). It is the rhetorical effect upon this reader that we are concerned to elucidate.

[20] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco: Thomas Nelson, 1987): 89.

[21] U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part One: From Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961): 158.

Cain confess 'my iniquity is greater than can be forgiven', or does he complain 'my punishment is greater than should be borne'?

While there is some ancient support for the former sense,[22] most commentators understand Cain to be protesting the perceived harshness of his sentence. Gerhard von Rad is indicative: 'Under the weight of the curse, Cain goes to pieces, though not in remorse.'[23] Several factors suggest that confession is not Cain's intent. As noted, in 4:9 Cain lies to YHWH about Abel's demise and shirks any sense of brotherly duty. In fact, Cain's primary concern is the danger *he* faces of being killed (4:14). Moreover, his resultant banishment from the land (4:14) – employing a verbal parallel with 3:24 (גרשׁ, 'to expel')[24] – implies due (albeit mitigated) punishment for 'high-handed' rebellion. Perhaps most telling is that at no point in the narrative does Cain display any remorse for shedding his brother's blood. Cain consistently displays an effort to hide his crime (which he never mentions), deny responsibility for his brother, and to protest against his accuser.

2.3 Genesis 12:18

In 12:18, Pharaoh questions Abram in the wake of serious diseases inflicted upon his household because he had 'taken' Sarai into his palace. The personal nature of the harm inflicted is highlighted by the addition of לִּי ('to me') to the accusation: 'What is this you have done to me?' Two subsequent questions clarify Abram's acts of omission and commission: 'Why did you not tell me she was your wife? … Why did you say, "she is my sister," so that I took her for my wife?' (12:18-19). Abram, however, remains silent. He does not confess; nor does he return Pharaoh's dowry payment (cf. 12:15-16).

2.4 Genesis 20:9

Genesis 20 records the dialogue between Abraham and Abimelech in relation to Sarah.[25] Following a divinely given dream that reveals Sarah

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[22] The LXX renders 4:13 as μείζων ἡ αἰτία μου τοῦ ἀφεθῆναί με ('My guilt is too great for me to be forgiven' NETS; cf. *b. sanh.* 101b). See, similarly, Cassuto's conclusion (*Genesis*, 222): 'Cain's heart is now filled with remorse.'

[23] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (OTL; trans. John H. Marks; rev. ed.; London: SCM, 1972): 107.

[24] Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (NAC 1A; Nashville: B&H, 1996): 277.

[25] The obvious similarity between this episode and 12:10-20 (and 26:1-11) has resulted in various source- and form-critical subdivisions of the text based on appeal to

as being ‘the man’s wife’ (v. 7), not his sister as previously indicated, Abimelech confronts Abraham: ‘What have you done to us?’ (v. 9).[26] Abraham’s deed is considered a ‘great sin’ (v. 9), for which Abimelech demands explanation (v. 10).[27]

Abraham’s response achieves two ends. First, he further implicates himself. He admits he thought the people of Gerar had no fear of God and that they would kill him on account of his wife (v. 11). However, Abimelech and his servants were actually ‘very much afraid’ following God’s warning (v. 8), indicating the opposite. Moreover, God declares that Abimelech acted with ‘integrity of heart’ (v. 6). Abimelech is thus declared innocent in the matter; the fault lay with Abraham alone.[28]

Abraham also seeks to divert blame. He appeals to a technicality, claiming Sarah was, in fact, his half-sister (v. 12). The veracity of this contention remains a matter of debate, however. Victor Hamilton suggests that Sarah’s absence from the genealogy of 11:27-30 leaves open the possibility of total fabrication on Abraham’s part.[29] Even if true, then in the eyes of the implied reader, Abraham is portrayed as a law breaker (cf. Lev. 18:9).[30] Abraham also incriminates both God and Sarah.[31] It was God, Abraham says, who ‘caused me to wander aimlessly from my father’s house’ (20:13).[32] Moreover, the deceptive strategy employed so successfully with Abimelech is claimed as the *couple*’s modus operandi in which, by implication, Sarah is willingly

doublets. Our focus in this article, however, is the rhetorical use of a repeated formulation for readers of the received text.

[26] The first-person plural pronominal suffix is later explicated as ‘me and my kingdom’ (v. 9aδ).

[27] While v. 10 utilises the particle מַה with the verb עשׂה, עשׂה appears in the subordinate כִּי clause rather than being the main verb (ראה, ‘to see’, is used instead). The combination thus sits apart from the מַה + עשׂה formulation under consideration.

[28] The contrast between ‘Because I *said* to myself’ (כִּי אָמַרְתִּי, v. 11) and ‘What did you *see*?’ (מָה רָאִיתָ, v. 10) indicates that Abraham’s impression of Gerar’s populace was based on assumption rather than on observation.

[29] Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990): 68.

[30] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word Books, 1994): 73.

[31] See Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 68-69.

[32] The plural verb הִתְעוּ (‘cause to wander’) used with אֱלֹהִים (‘God/gods’) raises questions. Is Abraham claiming that it was the ‘gods’ who made him wander, is he accommodating his language to (the presumably polytheistic) Abimelech, or is the plural form simply a grammatical anomaly?

complicit (v. 13).[33] In these ways, Abraham attempts to mitigate personal responsibility by justifying his behaviour to Abimelech.

2.5 Genesis 26:10

A generation later, also in Gerar, Abimelech levels an almost identical question ('What is this you have done to us?'; 26:10) to Abraham's son, Isaac, following exposure of another 'she's my sister' deception (vv. 8-9). Like Abram with Pharaoh (12:10-20), however, Isaac remains silent, suggesting guilt and avoidance of confession. In fact, in the previous interchange, Isaac had taken steps to justify his actions, claiming fear of death as the reason for subterfuge.[34] Moreover, whereas Isaac had formerly reasoned to himself that the 'men of this place might kill me' (v. 7), his response to Abimelech merely asserts that he acted this way 'lest I die' (v. 9). Thus, George Savran rightly notes Isaac's subtle obfuscation of his true motives and reasoning.[35]

2.6 Genesis 29:25

When Jacob discovers Leah instead of the expected Rachel in his bed, he immediately calls Laban to account for his deception: 'What is this you have done to me?' (29:25). Laban responds by eschewing culpability. He first appeals to local custom (with biting irony; cf. 27:35-36): 'it is not done so in our place, to give the younger before the firstborn' (v. 26), suggesting not only the immorality of such an act,[36] but also mitigating any potential wrongdoing on his part. Secondly, if the MT's plural is followed in verse 27 – '*we* will give (נִתְּנָה) you the other also' (SP, LXX, Syr, Tg, and Vg have a singular verb, '*I* will

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[33] Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 73, raises the possibility that this was not, in fact, Abra(ha)m's normal policy, with 12:10-20 being the only other instance of the ploy.

[34] Yet, as with Abraham, Isaac's assumption proved untrue (note the irony of v. 11). Furthermore, his starting assumption was even more unfounded considering his father's experience in the same place and in relation to the same matter. Thus, the rhetorical effect of the repeated type-scene is to implicate Isaac to a greater degree than his father and thereby underline the spread of sin.

[35] George W. Savran, *Telling and Retelling: Quotation in Biblical Narrative* (ISBL 18; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988): 34.

[36] Jan P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (BibSem 12; 2nd ed.; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1991): 129, notes that the phrase utilised 'always indicates a highly objectionable, action, morally speaking, one contrary to accepted usage'.

give’) – then Laban’s wording lessens personal liability by making the community complicit in the matter.[37]

2.7 Genesis 31:26

In this pericope, the dynamic of 29:25 is reversed as Laban reproaches Jacob for trickery, fleeing in secret, and driving away his daughters like captives (vv. 26-27), perceived as an act of violence against the family confederation.[38] Laban charges Jacob bluntly: ‘What have you done?’ (v. 26). Jacob counters with his own accusation, claiming motivation out of fear that Laban would do something similar, namely, forcefully ‘seize back’ (גזל) his daughters (v. 31). However, while Laban employs גנב (‘to steal, deceive’) three times to indict Jacob (vv. 26,27,30; cf. the narrator in v. 20), Jacob’s riposte utilises the stronger verb גזל (‘to seize’).[39] The implied charge against Laban is of an abuse of authority.[40] Thus, Jacob not only attempts to rationalise his own action, but, in doing so, paints Laban in a worse light than himself.

2.8 Genesis 44:15

In the final occurrence of the formula Joseph accuses his brothers of malpractice *vis-à-vis* his silver cup. The addition of a cognate noun (הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הַזֶּה, ‘this deed’) extends the formula and adds an element of root-play, thereby drawing additional attention to this ultimate instance of the question.

The response also stands apart from previous instances. As Meir Sternberg notes, throughout the interchange Judah’s words function as the brothers’ collective voice.[41] Thus, on their behalf, and in light of the charge laid in v. 15, Judah expresses inability to prove innocence, acknowledges that ‘God has found out the guilt of your servants’, and states that as the brothers are now liable for reparation they will henceforth be Joseph’s slaves (v. 16). A confession of divinely exposed guilt is thus made without rationalisation. Nor is there any attempt to

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[37] Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26* (NAC 1B; Nashville: B&H, 2005): 470.

[38] So, von Rad, *Genesis*, 309.

[39] Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989): 218.

[40] Raymond Westbrook, *Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Law* (CahRB 26; Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1988): 26-27.

[41] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 308.

mitigate culpability by implicating another party, even though Benjamin alone was the ‘thief’.

2.9 Summary

Having explored the contexts of the ‘What is this you have done?’ allegation in Genesis we can tabulate the general demeanour of the accused in each instance (see Table 2).

Gen. 3:13	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂית	Mitigation of responsibility, blame-shift (animal)
Gen. 4:10	מֶה עָשִׂיתָ	Hiding of crime, denial of responsibility, protest
Gen. 12:18	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי	Silence
Gen. 20:9	מֶה־עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ	Blame-shift (human and divine), rationalisation (technicality, fear of death)
Gen. 26:10	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ	Silence, hiding of motives, rationalisation (fear of death)
Gen. 29:25	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי	Rationalisation (custom), mitigation of personal responsibility
Gen. 31:26	מֶה עָשִׂיתָ	Rationalisation (fear of loss), counter-accusation (abuse of authority)
Gen. 44:15	מָה־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם	Confessed inability to prove innocence, acknowledgement of guilt, reparation for wrongdoing

(Table 2)

The above analysis invites further discussion. While the syntactical parallels may not be exact in each instance, this does not invalidate seeking an editorial purpose in the repetition of the formula. Allusion hinges on use of similar language, with shared phrases being more significant indicators than single lexemes (here, the combination of מָה with second person *qal qatal* forms of עשׂה, often with לְ and זֹאת).[42] Moreover, contextually similar use (here interpersonal accusation, usually between ‘brothers’) raises the probability of deliberate connection. Importantly, grammatical adjustment for either context or

[42] For a more comprehensive methodological discussion, see G. Geoffrey Harper, *‘I Will Walk Among You’: The Rhetorical Function of Allusion to Genesis 1–3 in the Book of Leviticus* (BBRSup 21; University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press/ Eisenbrauns, 2018): 34-56.

effect may actually *increase* the likelihood of allusion.[43] For this reason, the expanded formula and plural form of the verb in 44:15 do not count against its inclusion. Rather, when taken together the above factors suggest intentional linkage of the eight instances for rhetorical ends.

In seven cases there is a failure to elicit any meaningful confession. On the contrary, a range of methods are wielded by the accused party to mitigate responsibility, deny fault, cover guilt, blame-shift, or rationalise with respect to the course of action taken. A desire for self-preservation looms large. Fundamentally, there is a concern to protect one's honour over against the shame of admitting fault. Moreover, the threefold 'she's my sister' ruses are explicit attempts to preserve life; Abram makes no attempt to return the ill-gotten bride price for Sarai (cf. 12:15-16), and reaping the benefit of Jacob's ongoing servitude forms at least part of Laban's rationale (29:26-27). Self-interest drives the evasion tactics.

Throughout Genesis, therefore, the question 'What is this you have done?' is continually stonewalled. Yet, the final instance is different. This time, accusation is met with explicit acknowledgment of personal wrongdoing and an attitude of contrition demonstrated in word and deed. Notably, there is also an eschewing of self-preservation as Judah offers himself as a substitute for the presumed guilty Benjamin and does so for the sake of his father's wellbeing, not his own (44:33-34).

The repetition of a formulaic question throughout Genesis and the similar responses it elicits sets a pattern of expectation for readers. The subversion of that pattern in 44:15 indicates the use of what Yairah Amit terms 'rhetorical progression'. She defines the device as

> a rhetorical technique, or contrivance, that organizes the data for the author in a multi-phased, hierarchical structure, wherein the elements are arranged in an ascending or descending order: from the general to the particular, or vice versa; from minor to major, or the reverse; from the expected to the unexpected; the impersonal to the personal, and so on. Often the final step in the progression is the climactic one, while each of

[43] Although this may seem counterintuitive, the phenomenon is frequently noted in the literature. See, for instance, Richard L. Schultz, *The Search for Quotation: Verbal Parallels in the Prophets* (JSOTSup 180; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999): 219-21; Jeffery M. Leonard, 'Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions: Psalm 78 as a Test Case', *JBL* 127 (2008): 241-65, esp. 256.

> the preceding steps plays its part in expanding or narrowing the sequence, and thereby shedding more light on the subject.[44]

Accordingly, Amit concludes that 'its discovery, like that of other artistic devices, heightens the awareness of the texts' crafting and styling … finding it enhances and enriches the reading'.[45] In what way, then, does the pattern of question and response charted above elucidate the crafting of Genesis and shed light on the subject of interpersonal confrontation for wrongdoing? What rhetorical ends are achieved by establishing and breaking a narrative pattern? To properly address these issues, we need to explore the setting of the final instance of the question in more detail.

3. Joseph, His Brothers, and the Uncovering of Guilt

The final instance of the מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ formula in Genesis (44:15) occurs at a crucial juncture in the Joseph–Judah narrative (Gen. 37–50) as the book's *Leitmotif* of sibling rivalry reaches its climax.[46]

Narrative tension is raised in chapter 37 as interpersonal enmity between Joseph and his brothers culminates in grievous wrongdoing. The brothers' relationship is fraught from the outset and characterised by increasing hate (37:4,5,8) and jealousy (37:11) stemming from Jacob's favouritism towards Joseph on account of Rachel (37:3; cf. 29:30). Joseph's words and dreams only exacerbate the situation (37:8). Relational decay is evident in the verbal hostility. Joseph brought Jacob a 'bad report' (דִּבָּתָם רָעָה) concerning his brothers (37:2). They, in turn, were 'unable to speak peaceably' to Joseph (37:4). Then, at the opportune moment, the brothers (without Reuben) sold Joseph into slavery for 'silver' (כֶּסֶף, 37:28) and subsequently deceived their father into thinking Joseph had been killed by a fierce animal (37:20, 33). The brothers' wrongdoing against Joseph (and their father) remained successfully concealed until God sent a famine on the

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44 Yairah Amit, 'Progression as a Rhetorical Device in Biblical Literature', *JSOT* 28 (2003): 9.

45 Amit, 'Progression', 28.

46 The choice of 'Joseph–Judah' terminology is deliberate. Although often referred to as the Joseph Narrative or (following Gunkel) *Novella*, Genesis 37–50 reveals a dual concern with both Joseph *and* Judah. Thus, the seeming intrusion of ch. 38 is not an example of haphazard redaction, but rather signals the interest in both figures.

land (41:28-30,56-57) and the brothers (without Benjamin) unknowingly found themselves face to face with Joseph once more.

However, instead of immediately revealing his identity and exacting revenge, Joseph proceeded to test his brothers to see if they would repeat their wrongful disposing of a favourite son. He does so in four stages which progressively uncover guilt and lead to a climactic confrontation.

3.1 The Process of Uncovering Guilt

First, Joseph sought to determine if his brothers would abandon one of their own as they had abandoned him. Initially, he demanded that one sibling return to Canaan to fetch the youngest, and now favoured, son, Benjamin (42:16; cf. 42:38). Joseph, however, then changed the test conditions to better emulate his brothers’ abandonment of him. He detained just one sibling, Simeon, and placed the impetus on the others to return and secure his freedom (42:19-20), assuming, that is, they were in fact the ‘honest men’ they claimed to be.

The situation provoked immediate distress. The brothers admitted to one another that they were ‘guilty’ (אֲשֵׁמִים, 42:21)[47] for ‘sinning’ (חטא, 42:22) against Joseph. Moreover, because Joseph could understand them (42:23), they also unknowingly confessed to him their fault of not heeding his distressed begging, presumably from the pit or during his sale (42:21). Accordingly, the brothers concluded they were now experiencing the same distress Joseph had felt, which Reuben interpreted as a ‘reckoning’ (נִדְרָשׁ) for his ‘blood’ (דָּם, 42:22).[48]

This (unknowing) confession of guilt produced an affective change in Joseph – he turned away from his brothers to weep (42:24a). Moreover, and perhaps indicating a thawing of verbal enmity, ‘he spoke to them’ (וַיְדַבֵּר אֲלֵהֶם, 42:24b) in contrast to the initial encounter where ‘he spoke to them *roughly*’ (וַיְדַבֵּר אִתָּם קָשׁוֹת, 42:7).

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[47] Sklar argues that the verb אשם can mean ‘to suffer guilt’s consequences’. More specifically, such consequences are only brought about by God due to the hidden nature of some sins. This understanding fits the use of אשם in 42:21 (i.e. ‘we are suffering the consequences of our guilt’) since the brothers are experiencing the distress they caused Joseph. See Jay Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (HBM 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005): 39-42.

[48] The use of דרשׁ and דָּם in 42:22 is reminiscent of 9:5-6 where God says he will ‘seek’ (דרשׁ) the shedding of blood as punishment for shedding the blood of another. Reuben’s interpretation also alludes to God’s charge against Cain because of his brother’s blood (4:10).

The second stage of the process intensified the test as Joseph sought to ascertain whether his brothers would 'sell' their detained sibling, as they had sold him. Accordingly, he ordered his brothers' silver to be returned in their sacks (42:25). From Joseph's perspective, if they failed to return for Simeon, the silver could be considered the proceeds for the 'sale'.[49] From the reader's point of view, this returned silver also opens new potential for deception. Previously, the brothers had hidden from their father the ill-gotten silver they had earned from Joseph's sale (37:31-33). Thus, when concealed silver is discovered on the road to Canaan (42:27-28), the question arises: Would the brothers once again deceive Jacob about money earned from a brother's demise?

Their immediate response, however, signals a changed (or changing) attitude. The mere sight of the silver produced further distress, indicated by their failing hearts and trembling in 42:28. They suspect divine involvement (42:28), perhaps even accusing God of wronging them through exposure to the charge of theft.[50] When yet more silver was discovered on arrival in Canaan, both Jacob and his sons were filled with fear (42:35). Notably, however, the brothers volunteered to tell their father about all that had happened to them (42:29) and did not hide Simeon's fate.[51] Thus, they eschewed personal gain at the expense of letting Simeon remain in Egypt.

When the brothers returned to Egypt, Joseph responded with increasing openness towards them. The sight of Benjamin perhaps suggested that the brothers were not prepared to abandon or sell Simeon. In response, and instead of treating his siblings like strangers and speaking roughly to them (cf. 42:7,30), Joseph made them honoured guests (43:16,24) and spoke cordially with them (43:27-29). Once more, affective change is palpable. Joseph had to hurry out in order to weep unseen in his chambers, emotional to the point of needing to wash his face and control himself before facing his brothers again (43:30-31). Joseph's lack of observable enmity even led his

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[49] It is worth noting that from the brothers' viewpoint possession of this silver exposed them to the allegation of theft (cf. 44:8). The potential allegation also worked to further deter them from returning for Simeon.

[50] Michael J. Williams, *Deception in Genesis: An Investigation into the Morality of a Unique Biblical Phenomenon*, ed. Hemchand Gossai (StBibLit 32; New York: Peter Lang, 2001): 48.

[51] This is despite them having concealed silver which they fail to mention in their recounting (42:30-34).

brothers to drink and be merry with him (43:34). Benjamin, however, was singled out for preferential treatment (43:34), just like Joseph had once been. This unexpected favour set the scene for what follows.

In the third stage, Joseph again intensified the test to see if the brothers would abandon Benjamin, their father's current favourite, and only remaining son of Rachel.[52] Once more, silver is operative, as Joseph's personal 'silver cup' (גְּבִיעַ הַכֶּסֶף) was secretly placed in Benjamin's sack (44:2). Joseph's steward subsequently confronted the brothers en route and, to isolate Benjamin from the group, rejected any notion of corporate punishment in favour of enslaving only the individual found to have the cup (44:9-10). The other brothers would remain 'blameless' (נְקִיִּם) in the matter (44:10). Again, the brothers' distress is evident. 'They tore their clothes' (וַיִּקְרְעוּ שִׂמְלֹתָם, 44:13) at the likely prospect of losing Benjamin – reminiscent of when 'Jacob tore his clothes' (וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שִׂמְלֹתָיו, 37:34) having lost Joseph – and returned to the city with Benjamin (44:13), thereby refusing to abandon their half-brother.

In the final stage of uncovering guilt Joseph confronted his brothers directly, employing the book's final instance of the מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ formula (44:15). For readers, Joseph's question recalls all the similarly worded confrontations for wrongdoing throughout Genesis as well as the established pattern of dodging responsibility on each occasion.[53] This time the attitude of the accused is strikingly different. Judah, acting as spokesperson, responded with confession and made offers of reparation without mitigating responsibility or attempted self-preservation.

Moreover, several lines of evidence suggest Judah was confessing not the theft of the silver cup per se, but rather the brothers' collective guilt for abandoning and selling Joseph. Formerly, the brothers had been confident of their innocence regarding the alleged theft, seen in their emphatic four-sentence protest (44:8), their vow to suffer slavery and death if proven guilty (44:9), and their eagerness to lower their

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52 This, of course, made Benjamin a half-brother to the rest, unlike Simeon, who had a full-blood relationship to Reuban, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. It is also possible that the detention of Simeon had not sufficiently demonstrated changed hearts. Had the brothers returned with Benjamin in order to free Simeon, or merely to procure more food (cf. 43:2-5)?

53 As argued above, the shift to a plural form of the verb in 44:15 and the addition of הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר ('this deed which') do not rule out the presence of allusion. Rather, the expansion of the formula draws attention to this crucial instance.

sacks for inspection (44:11). Even after the discovery, Claus Westermann observes that Judah only acknowledged that the cup had been 'found' (נִמְצָא, 44:16) in Benjamin's sack, not that it had been 'taken' or 'stolen'.[54] Furthermore, the repeated interjection of 'silver' throughout events seems to have provoked a building sense of guilt regarding the sale of Joseph for silver (42:28,35; 44:12). Thus, as Thomas Brodie astutely notes, ever since that fateful moment, 'the silver seems to stick to them'.[55]

While Joseph's tests are instrumental in uncovering the guilt of his brothers and provoking confession, God's role in the process also demands attention. Crucial to Judah's confession is his acknowledgment that 'God has found out the iniquity of your servants' (44:16). From the brothers' perspective, and still ignorant of Joseph's identity and design, divine retribution was at work (42:21-22). Thus, the first glimpse of unexpected silver made them ponder 'What is this *God* has done to us?' (מַה־זֹּאת עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לָנוּ, 42:28).[56] Subsequently, the brothers heard Joseph's servant surmise that God had put 'treasure' (מַטְמוֹן; 43:23) in their sacks. In the end, Judah offers his own rationalisation: God had uncovered their guilt (44:16).

3.2 The Results of Uncovered Guilt: Repentance, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation

The uncovering of the brothers' guilt and their subsequent repentance led to forgiveness and reconciliation. Following Judah's speech, Joseph was again unable to control himself (45:1; cf. 43:31) and wept aloud in their presence (45:2; cf. 42:24; 43:30). He told his brothers to change how they felt about selling him ('do not be distressed or angry with yourselves') because he could see God's purpose in sending him to Egypt (45:5-8). This does not constitute a dismissal of wrongdoing, for Joseph also acknowledged objective transgression – he refers to himself as the one they had sold and intended harm towards (45:4,5;

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[54] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (CC; trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984): 134.

[55] Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 387.

[56] There is evident similarity between this phrase and the מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ formula. Clear allusion is less certain, however. The verb is third person, and the question is rhetorical rather than being levelled in interpersonal accusation. For these reasons we have excluded 42:28 from our analysis. Nevertheless, the phrase does still hint at divine agency in uncovering guilt.

50:20). Nonetheless, following sincere (and tested) repentance, Joseph no longer counted wrongdoing against his brothers.[57]

The immediate result is a move towards reconciliation. Joseph spoke to his brothers (45:12), wept upon them (45:14-15), and kissed them (45:15). These initial gestures were reinforced by further long-term arrangements. Joseph had his brothers settle in Goshen, so they might be near him (45:10; 47:11), instigating relational closeness.[58] He also displayed goodwill by promising to provide for them and their households (45:11).

The brothers, however, only accepted Joseph’s overtures tentatively. They could not answer Joseph because of dismay (45:3). While Benjamin reciprocated Joseph’s weeping on his neck (45:14), the others only responded by talking with him (45:15).[59] Nevertheless, this still signals a cessation to their former verbal animosity (cf. 37:2,4; 42:7).

Uncertainty again arose when Jacob died. Joseph, however, assured his brothers of complete forgiveness and reconciliation. Reminiscent of chapter 45, he wept (50:17), told his brothers to change how they felt (‘Do not fear’, 50:19,21), and said he would not count their wrongdoing against them because God meant it for good (50:20). As assurance of reconciliation, Joseph again promised to provide for them (50:21a) and to comfort them. Finally, he also spoke ‘to their hearts’ (50:21b) as a sign of final cessation to their verbal enmity (cf. 37:2,4; 42:7) and of complete reconciliation.

3.3 Summary

From the above, a sketch of how human–human conflict and reconciliation play out in this episode can be made.

1. Interpersonal wrongdoing of a grievous nature is committed.
2. Guilt is progressively uncovered through divine and human agency, leading to a climactic public confrontation: ‘What is this deed you have done?’

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[57] Therefore, it is better to view Joseph’s disposition as acknowledging wrongdoing but not seeking retribution.

[58] Joseph’s offer and arrangement for his brothers to dwell near him is significant considering Jacob and Esau’s failure to dwell together due to practical (36:7) and possible relational reasons (33:14b,16-17).

[59] In another example of muted response, Esau’s running, embracing, falling on Jacob’s neck, and kissing only results in Jacob weeping together with him (33:4).

3. Confrontation provokes confession along with internal and external indicators of repentance.
4. Repentance leads to forgiveness being extended to the wrongdoers by the one wronged.
5. Forgiveness opens the possibility for reconciliation and relational repair.
6. Reconciliation becomes the basis for experiencing blessing.

4. The Rhetorical Function of the מה־זאת עשית formula in Genesis

Brodie argues that the Joseph–Judah narrative represents 'Genesis breaking into full bloom, a blossoming that builds on all that proceeds'.[60] That is certainly the case with respect to the intrafamilial conflicts and tensions that permeate the book. As is widely noted, Genesis, in its edited form, is framed by brotherly fallout. The Cain and Abel episode demonstrates the dangerous potential of unchecked anger even between brothers. The resulting sequence of murder, unrepentance, and banishment form a sobering portrait of life outside the garden. Yet, this scene performs an important function for readers of the book. Schlimm comments:

> In presenting the grave danger and consequences posed by anger, the narrative creates the desire for an alternative to how Cain engages this emotion. When readers see anger resulting in death and punishment, they desire an antidote … Readers want to know ways [anger] can be handled that avoid irreversible damage. They wonder what other options are available … The deity makes clear that Cain, though he is angry, can still do good (4:7). Cain obviously does not take this path, but the text leaves open the possibility that other characters will come in Genesis who will respond to anger in ways that are markedly different from Cain.[61]

The Joseph–Judah narrative provides the sought alternative. Here, for the first time, brotherly conflict is fully resolved.[62] Wrongdoing,

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[60] Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 351.

[61] Schlimm, *Fratricide to Forgiveness*, 141-42.

[62] In the Jacob and Esau cycle some reconciliation is achieved, evidenced by the brothers embracing, kissing, and weeping (33:4). Nevertheless, a degree of relational disharmony seems to persist. Jacob is reluctant to have Esau or his men accompany him as escorts (33:12-15). Also, while Esau heads for Seir after their meeting (33:16), Jacob immediately sets out for Succoth (33:17). Genesis 36:6 implies that Esau's move to Seir was in order to get away from his brother. Indeed, the only subsequent mention

betrayal, and hate are overcome with repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. With this bookending of Genesis, readers encounter Joseph as an 'anti-Cain'.[63]

The potential for moral education in chapters 44–45 is significantly enhanced by use of the מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ formula throughout the book. By considering the outcomes in each instance, the cumulative force becomes clearer (see Table 3).

	Form of question	Demeanour of the accused	Outcomes
Gen. 3:13	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂית	Mitigation of responsibility, blame-shift (animal)	Relational tension, banishment
Gen. 4:10	מֶה עָשִׂיתָ	Hiding of crime, denial of responsibility, protest	Curse, banishment, fruitlessness, fear
Gen. 12:18	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי	Silence	Separation
Gen. 20:9	מֶה־עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ	Blame-shift (human and divine), rationalisation (technicality, fear of death)	Fear-induced payment to avoid divine retribution
Gen. 26:10	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ	Silence, hiding of motives, rationalisation (fear of death)	Envy and eventual separation
Gen. 29:25	מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לִּי	Rationalisation (custom), mitigation of personal responsibility	Relational tension
Gen. 31:26	מֶה עָשִׂיתָ	Rationalisation (fear of loss), counter-accusation (abuse of authority)	Mistrust, anger, record of wrongs, separation
Gen. 44:15	מָה־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם	Confessed inability to prove innocence, acknowledgement of guilt, reparation for wrongdoing	Dealing with past, renewed affection, mitigation of relational tension, proximity

(Table 3)

of them being in close proximity is for their father's funeral (35:29). It thus seems best to consider this an example of partial restoration.

[63] Schlimm, *Fratricide to Forgiveness*, 4.

The repeated use of a formulaic question creates a conceptual connection between each of the episodes. In this way, readers moving sequentially through the book encounter an increasingly reinforced paradigm: wrongdoing is confronted, but met with evasion and self-preservation, producing negative or at least sub-optimal outcomes. These outcomes include ongoing relational tension, separation from others (human and divine), geographical banishment, cursing, and fear.

Against this pattern the climactic use of the question formula in 44:15 is thrown into sharp relief. Several features coalesce to highlight the instance for readers: Judah's speech in chapter 44 is the longest in the book; the question formula used in 44:15 is the most developed, incorporating root-play with nominal and verbal forms of עשׂה; the response to the question provokes confession and penitence, not evasion or mitigation of culpability; the outcomes are strikingly positive, including forgiveness for wrongdoing and reconciliation marked by ongoing relational proximity. In all these ways, Joseph's question and Judah's response are emphasised. Thus, a rhetorical progression becomes evident in the shift from expected outcome to unexpected. This patterning generates considerable persuasive force for readers as it sheds light on the topic of interpersonal conflict and resolution. Three interconnected themes are emphasised.

First, readers are encouraged to consider that one right response to the reality of sin in the world is to expose and confront it, a response explicitly commanded in Leviticus 19:17-18.[64] God overtly does so in both the Garden (3:13) and Cain and Abel (4:10) narratives.[65] Therefore, inasmuch as persons act similarly, even employing the same confrontational formula, they align themselves with God's stance towards wrongdoing, rendering that action virtuous. Genesis thus reveals a dual causality with respect to overcoming sin, as divine and human characters employ similar confrontational phraseology in commensurate circumstances. The text invites emulation.

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[64] For consideration of the dynamic between story and law in relation to interpersonal forgiveness, and especially Leviticus 19, see Harper, 'Joseph and His Brothers'.

[65] It is worth noting that God is implicitly involved in other occasions of the formula. In 12:17-18, it is YHWH who instigates Pharaoh's confrontation with Abram though affliction with plagues. It is a divinely given dream that reveals Abraham's deceit to Abimelech (20:3-7). God is also involved in the altercation between Laban and Jacob (31:24) in the exposure of the brothers' guilt in 42:28 (at least from their perspective), and in Judah's exclamation 'God has found out the guilt of your servants' (44:16).

Second, the breaking of an established narrative pattern in 44:16 underlines that the correct response to exposed sin is confession and repentance. Seven times the book correlates self-preservation and mitigation of responsibility for wrongdoing with negative outcomes. The unambiguous reversal of this pattern in the Joseph–Judah encounter drives home the positive potential of genuine repentance. Uncovered sin that is confessed can open the way to reconciliation and renewal. However, as Schlimm cautions, this outcome is not guaranteed; Genesis does not offer readers a naïve optimism.[66] The sevenfold failure of the question formula across the book makes that point clearly. Nevertheless, Genesis does introduce a note of hope into its all-too-real portrait of family dysfunction. Forgiveness and reconciliation remain a genuine possibility.

Third, this dynamic of confrontation and confession is presented as one means by which God will address the reality of sin in the world. Order will not simply be enacted by divine fiat as in Genesis 1. Rather, it will come through inherently messy acts of interpersonal confrontation for wrongdoing and subsequent repentance. Notably, the repetition of מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ throughout Genesis incorporates every generation of the promised line – Jacob’s sons (44:15), Jacob (29:25; 31:26), Isaac (26:10), and Abraham (12:18; 20:9) – and also humanity at large – Cain (4:10) and Eve (3:13). Genesis thus universalises its invitation to align with God in his opposition to evil and, by doing so, to open the potential for life and blessing.

5. Conclusion

Various studies have noted the importance of the Joseph–Judah interactions for the topic of forgiveness and reconciliation. The movement in Genesis from fratricide to forgiveness has concomitant implications for readers. As we have argued, use of a repeated, formulaic question – מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ, and variants – furthers that aim. The establishing and breaking of a narrative pattern adds increased impetus to the interaction between Joseph and Judah and, by doing so, commends to readers one solution to the problem of interpersonal strife. There is hope for sinful humans and it is found in mimicking God’s stance towards wrongdoing.

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[66] Schlimm, *Fratricide to Forgiveness*, 4-7.