Motifs and Old Testament Theology

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Abstract

The article discusses the importance of motifs for understanding Old Testament literature. *Motif* is defined as the term is used in the biblical studies guild. The article begins by tracing the "clothing motif" in the Joseph narrative. Next, it progresses to a brief discussion of the methods of intertextuality, especially cultivating allusion competence and recognizing how motifs develop in Scripture. The article also demonstrates how this methodology can be applied to one specific motif: the "wilderness" as it unfolds in several early chapters in the book of consolation from the prophet Isaiah. This article demonstrates that studying motifs and their development intertextuality is a method that is beneficial and essential to a deeper description of Scriptural teaching.

Studying motifs in the Old Testament can unveil insights into the inner coherence of Scripture in ways that make for deeper understandings of the message that God wishes us to derive from his Bible. This article will first discuss what constitutes a motif generally, then more specifically in biblical studies. In order to help illustrate motifs more broadly, I illustrate the definition by a reference to the "clothing motif" in the Joseph narrative. Next, I will describe a method that may be used for the contemplation of almost any major theme or motif in the Old Testament. This approach is integrally connected with another skill I will discuss, which I call *allusion competence*. Next, I will

discuss what dividends are accrued in the application of this kind of study. I will illustrate the method with an example (i.e., the "desert/wilderness motif") from the Old Testament, demonstrating the kind of study that can be accomplished using the method I propose in this article.

I. *What Is a Motif?*

Not surprisingly, the term *motif* was first used in the English language around 1848 or 1850 in the fields of visual art.[1] By 1887, it was used to describe recurring fragments in the work of Wagner's operas.[2] By 1897, it was being applied to the book of Ruth in biblical studies. Almost everyone can recognize the notion of a recurring musical motif; however, coming to appreciate repeating motifs in biblical studies may take a little more sustained reflection.

Leland Ryken defines a motif as "a discernible pattern composed of individual units, either in a single work or in literature generally." He adds that it is basically like a "pattern."[3] The Oxford English Dictionary defines a motif as "a recurrent character, event, situation, or theme."[4] This definition is helpful, since it especially shows that a motif can be "in a more restrictive sense (a recurrent character, event, situation, or theme), as well as in a broader sense (a recurring event or situation)."[5] Let us examine how this can happen by observing an Old Testament example: the use of clothing in the Joseph narrative (Gen 37:2–50:26).[6] "References to the garments of Joseph form a unifying pattern in the story," claims Ryken.[7]

At the outset of the Joseph narrative, the *multicolored garment* is given to Joseph (Gen 37:3). What does this symbolize? Joseph is marked out as Jacob's favorite with the gift of the multicolored coat; meanwhile, his brothers hate him. When Joseph has a dream and tells it to his brothers, the brothers hate him even more. You can almost hear their speech dripping with sarcasm as they see him approaching from a distance and say, "Here comes the master

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[1] Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Desert Motif in the Bible and in Qumran Literature," in *Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible: Form and Content* (Jerusalem: Magnes, Hebrew University, 1993), 225.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 361.

[4] Quoted by Weston W. Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah: History and Motif in Biblical Narrative*, JSOTSup 231 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 19.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 101–2.

[7] Ibid., 101.

of dreams" (Gen 37:19). Almost all of the characterization in this opening chapter focuses on the brothers (consistently negative), not Joseph. The narrator will describe his character in greater detail in later chapters. The disrobing and distribution of the garment signals the hero's break from his family (v. 23).

Thus, the account opens with Joseph portrayed as a "spoiled brat, tale-bearer, braggart."[8] One could say (at least at the beginning of the narrative) that Joseph's bad report runs counter to the advice of Proverbs to "draw a veil over the transgressions of others."[9] Stuart Weeks, criticizing the view that Joseph is a paragon of wisdom, remarks,

> Joseph's tale-bearing (cf. Prov. 11.13), his indiscreet revelation of his dreams, and his false accusations against his brothers (cf. Prov. 12.17ff.), are all of importance in the story, and in the portrayal of Joseph, but are hardly in accord with the ethical ideals of the wisdom literature. It cannot be denied that we should expect in a didactic, idealizing text not only a more lucid, but also a more consistent idealization.[10]

Later in his essay, after commenting on the possible parallels between wisdom literature on avoiding the loose woman and Joseph's behavior with Mrs. Potiphar, he says, "It is difficult to find any other point in these chapters where Joseph's behaviour, while he is in a position of responsibility, serves as a possible model for emulation."[11] Nevertheless, Joseph is a type of Christ. Summing up Stephen's speech in Acts 7, Nils Dahl writes, "In Stephen's speech Moses and, to some extent, Joseph are seen as types of Christ, but the typology is subordinated to the recurring pattern of prophecy and fulfillment."[12] Joseph may also be an antitype of Adam, a notion beyond what can be developed here.[13] However, our immediate interest is in considering the motif of clothing in the narrative.

Genesis 38 is often not considered as part of the Joseph narrative (37, 39–50), since Joseph does not appear nor is even mentioned. However, the narrative effect of placing the story of Judah and Tamar here may be to

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[8] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 98.

[9] Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 499.

[10] Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 94.

[11] Ibid., 99.

[12] Nils Alstrup Dahl, *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 73.

[13] Lindsay Wilson, *Joseph Wise and Otherwise: The Intersection of Wisdom and Covenant in Genesis 37–50* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 231–32.

build suspense by slowing down the plot.[14] Lindsay Wilson contends, however, that if the story is read within the context of the Joseph narrative, then it is pregnant with meaning.[15] The clothing motif plays a prominent role in this chapter and becomes an important part of developing how Tamar is presented as a wise woman.

In Genesis 39:12–18, the garment motif (pattern) is picked up again to show Potiphar's disfavor, which foreshadows Joseph's being outcast. In Genesis 41, Joseph is called forth from prison, and the author says, "When he had shaved himself and *changed his clothes*, he came in before Pharaoh" (v. 14). The point becomes clear in this verse: clothing becomes a signal that you are in a critical transition point in the text.

Chapter 39 has resumed with Joseph being a slave (v. 1); however, by the time we reach Genesis 41:57, he has become second in power and all the world is coming to him to be saved. The rise in power and influence within the court was not due to his rhetorical savvy, as Gerhard von Rad had suggested, but was "the result of a unique set of circumstances, [including his being] summoned from prison to interpret the Pharaoh's dreams."[16] These chapters clearly communicate the rise of Joseph, but in Genesis 39:2–6 we learn how Joseph prospers because "the LORD was with Joseph" (v. 2a).

Notice the extent of Potiphar's trust in Joseph and the emphasis on the fact that Yahweh was with Joseph. This should not be understood from a psychological perspective with regard to Joseph, as if he needed to know that Yahweh was present with him at this time. The implied reader is the one the narrator is informing at this point and therefore "Yahweh is introduced into the story to link Joseph's rise with Yahweh's behind-the-scenes care, but without distracting our attention from the person of Joseph."[17] In the next section of the plot, when Mrs. Potiphar makes repeated sexual overtures to Joseph, the true character of Joseph emerges, as does his true wisdom (cf. Prov 6:26; 5:21–22). The contrast between how Joseph uses privilege and power and how Mrs. Potiphar does could not be starker. The story continues in Genesis 39:13–18 with a deception about the garment. She serves as a foil to Joseph's integrity as she shrewdly misrepresents the facts stating that *Joseph's garment* was left beside her (vv. 15, 18), as it was instead left in her hand (v. 12). Furthermore, she claims that Joseph's alleged indiscretions have become a threat against all Egyptians.

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[14] Ibid., 86.

[15] Ibid., 93. His more elaborate argument that Genesis 38 is a microcosm of the fuller Joseph narrative is given on pages 285–92.

[16] Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom*, 94–95.

[17] Ibid., 101.

When we come to Joseph's rise in prison in chapters 39–40, it is important to note that the text does not register this elevation as a result of Joseph's strength of character; rather, it is because Yahweh was with him (e.g., 39:21). In Genesis 41:42, Joseph is clothed in "garments of fine linen" at the time he is promoted to a higher status. In addition to being *clothed in fine garments*, Joseph is given a signet ring and a gold chain to wear around his neck. All these items are loaded with symbolic value: they demonstrate his newly appointed royal power and authority.[18]

Chapter 42 begins a new section where Jacob and Joseph's brothers are reintroduced, but attention on Pharaoh now recedes. Clearly, the focus is on Joseph and his family. Commentators are divided as to whether the narrator presents a positive or negative appraisal of Joseph in these chapters, especially in relation to his treatment of his brothers (cf. 42:7). Perhaps he is just playing the part of an Egyptian official here.[19] His treatment of them, however one interprets it, is under the good hand of God and, as Bruce Waltke notes, "mark[s] an important transformation in the brothers' characters from being untrustworthy to trustworthy and in their interrelationships from dysfunctional to functional."[20] Although at first glance some of Joseph's actions may seem to be marked by revenge, his episodes of crying later reflect his true feelings: "Neither the narrator nor the protagonists at any time suggest that Joseph is angry with them or motivated by revenge."[21]

Chapter 45:1–15 contains one of the most beautiful denouements in all of world literature. Joseph finally reveals his true identity. God, active behind the scenes, remains a primary focus of the narrative (cf. vv. 5, 7–8). Because of these delightful circumstances of providence, Joseph's family may find refuge in Egypt now, a land and culture in which Joseph has learned to delight in the midst of his honor (cf. vv. 9 and 13). In the reunion scene with his brothers (v. 22), Joseph gives to each of his brothers *festal garments*. Egypt generally, and this Pharaoh more particularly, are pictured favorably in the subsequent verses (vv. 16–28).

In the remaining chapters (46–50), the Abrahamic promises spoken of in previous chapters of this book come to the fore again (especially in Gen 26:3, which echoes Gen 12:2).[22] The narrative not only relates Joseph's wise administration (cf. Gen 47:13–26), but also that the resolution with his brothers leaves no uncertainty about cordial fraternal relations and prepares for the next books of Scripture.

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18 See Wilson, *Joseph Wise and Otherwise*, 133.

19 Ibid., 145.

20 Waltke, *Genesis*, 543.

21 Ibid., 544.

22 See Wilson, *Joseph Wise and Otherwise*, 185.

The Joseph narrative has highlighted his ability not only to end family strife through shrewd planning but also his administrative gifts in bringing relief from the famine, not just for his family but for many others as well (cf. Gen 41:57). The clothing motif marked significant turns in the story. Joseph's unique circumstances would make it hard for anyone analogously to emulate today; nevertheless, "he clearly shows the right way to use power once in a position of authority."[23] He was a man of faith, looking to the future at the end of his life, making provisions for his bones to be brought out of this temporary residence as he looked toward another homeland (cf. Heb 11, esp. v. 22).

II. *Method?*

In the previous section, I introduced definitions of motif and an example of a motif, clothing in the biblical Joseph narrative. In this part of the article, I will discuss additional techniques that can further enhance the study of biblical motifs.

Recent studies in biblical narrative (particularly in the Hebrew Bible) have demonstrated the difficulty for the interpreter in getting to grips with essential abstract ideas. In other words, much of the biblical story and message is not given in propositions: there is a "dearth of systematic presentation of speculative thought."[24] As Shemaryahu Talmon says, the student of Hebrew literature is "forced to have recourse to the conjoining of disjunctive bits of information extracted from a diversity of texts."[25] What is beneficial from studying these recurrences, however, is that "a discerning analysis will show that some such patterns, particularly motifs, are in fact condensed signifiers of speculative thought."[26] In other words, they are "condensations of the biblical authors' and editors' ideas and thoughts."[27]

At this juncture, we need to make our definition of motif in biblical literature even more precise. In 1966, Talmon proposed the following definition, at least for biblical studies:

> A literary motif is a representative complex theme that recurs within the framework of the Hebrew Bible in variable forms and connections. It is rooted in an actual situation of anthropological or historical nature. In its secondary literary setting, the

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[23] Ibid., 240.

[24] Shemaryahu Talmon, "Literary Motifs and Speculative Thought in the Hebrew Bible," *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts* 16 (1988): 150–68.

[25] Ibid, 151.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 19.

> motif gives expression to ideas and experiences inherent in the original situation and is employed by the author to reactualize in his audience the reactions of the participants in that original situation. The motif represents the essential meaning of the situation, not the situation itself. It is not a mere reiteration of the sensations involved, but rather a heightened and intensified representation of them.[28]

In order to understand how motifs "function" in literature, and in our case the Bible, we first need to discuss how literary theorists talk about "influence" and then connect this with the identification of and function of motif study.

"Influence" is a term used in literary-critical circles to describe the attempt to find or forge links between various themes in texts.[29] Strictly speaking, influence should refer to relations between mere texts; however, influence studies often also comment on shared intellectual backgrounds.[30] Of special interest to the study of motifs is that an expanded definition and sense of influence "allows one to shift one's attention from the transmission of motifs between authors to the transmutation of historically given material."[31] In other words, this nuanced approach to how a subsequent author uses a motif from a previous author demonstrates how the latter author is using and developing the motif in new and significant ways. This "associative strategy" has had a long and recognized history; in modern literary criticism, however, few have been more influential than Harold Bloom.[32] Bloom's theory of poetry "remains essentially a theory of literary influence."[33] While admitting to the primary influence of Nietzsche and Freud, Bloom sets forth his thesis:

> Poetic influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.[34]

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[28] Talmon, "The Desert Motif," 225–26.

[29] See Louis A. Renza, "Influence," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 186.

[30] Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, "Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality," in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 3.

[31] Ibid., 6.

[32] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Walter Jackson Bate could also be listed here and anticipated many of ideas that Bloom published just a few years later.

[33] James K. Chandler, "Romantic Allusiveness," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982): 461–87, esp. 462.

[34] Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 30.

Consequently, in Bloom's project, all work is *editorializing*; driven by the weighty burden of working under and after previous authors, the new and subsequent author is motivated to do something original and different. This leads to constructive writing, Bloom asserts. There is constant angst to overcome one's precursor. One of Bloom's favorite concepts is agon (Greek, "contest," from which "agony" is derived).[35] This drives and characterizes influence. Every poem, every literary work should be seen as a revision. Only exceptional poets and writers (Bloom uses Milton as an example) can escape this anxiety and become independent thinkers. Some have been critical of the Bloomian thesis. Is Bloom himself caught in a "vicious oedipal circle" of his own making?[36] Bloom thinks this is a caricature of his work and an unfair reading.[37] One can hardly mention the role of "influence" in literary circles without referring to Bloom's thesis.

My claim in analyzing motifs is that precisely defining how an author in biblical literature is referring to a motif is done through one of four devices: direct quotation, subtle citation, allusion, and echo.[38] A direct citation is when a subsequent author refers to another author (usually previous, but perhaps contemporary) with a citation formula such as "as it is written." A subtle citation is similar: there are enough dictional links to recognize that a citation is being made, but there is no introduction such as "as it is written." The latter two categories, allusion and echo, are a bit more complicated and therefore need more explanation.

The difference between influence and allusion is that the concept of influence focuses on which works affect a subsequent text, whereas the concept of allusion identifies the specific treatment of one text or motif by subsequent texts. Since both concepts include some notion of diachronic development, they are important for our study, but they express different literary dynamics.[39] What, then, is an allusion?

An allusion is usually defined as a tacit or indirect reference to another's work. Most would maintain the intentional aspects of allusion: "An allusion is an intentional echo of an earlier text: it not only reminds us; it means to remind us."[40] However, biblical scholars have often operated with received

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[35] See ibid., 6–8, 20, 88.

[36] See Renza, "Influence," 192.

[37] Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 9.

[38] See Bryan D. Estelle, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing a Biblical Motif* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 30–39.

[39] Benjamin Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 14–15.

[40] Chandler, "Romantic Allusiveness," 463.

assumptions and practices about how an allusion works. Most authorities in the area are aware that something more is required: a rigorous analysis of how allusions work and function.

This need for an allusion theory was addressed in the 1960s. Interestingly, the center for work in this area has emerged in Israel,[41] where Ziva Ben-Porat has provided some of the most extensive analyses of identifications of allusions.[42] She thinks the reigning definition needs to be supplemented and begins by clarifying terminological distinctions at the theoretical level. She regrets the neglect of vigorous analysis of allusion and attempts a clarification between literary allusions and other types of allusions. As for literary allusions, she says,

> The literary allusion is a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts. The activation is achieved through the manipulation of a special signal; a sign (simple or complex) in a given text characterized by an additional larger "referent." This referent is always an independent text. The simultaneous activation of the two texts thus connected results in the formation of intertextual patterns whose nature cannot be predetermined.[43]

Ben-Porat's theory of allusion can be described as having several stages of recognition:

> noticing the marker, identifying the source, bringing the marked sign to bear on the interpretation of the sign which includes the marker, and also noting additional aspects of the source text which affect the reading of the alluding text generally.[44]

Ben-Porat takes pains to understand the nature of literary allusions in a way that goes beyond traditional dictionary definitions. According to her, the traditional views allow almost everything to come under the cover of allusion, making all literature "a massive tissue of allusion."[45] First, she asserts that the language of literature is opaque, "drawing attention to itself as well as its referents."[46] Second, she further states that every reader is

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[41] Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics*, Contraversions: Critical Studies in Jewish Literature, Culture, and Society Series (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 114–42.

[42] Ziva Ben-Porat, "The Poetics of Literary Allusion," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1 (1976): 105–28; and "The Poetics of Allusion" (PhD diss., University of California Berkley, 1967).

[43] Ben-Porat, "Poetics of Allusion," 108–9.

[44] Sommer summarizing Porat, in Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture*, 15.

[45] Ben-Porat, "The Poetics of Allusion," 24.

[46] Ibid., 25.

aware of certain conventions; that is to say that every allusion is made within the bounds of a certain set of conventions that constitute a genre. This point opens the way for the third point: the role of the reader. The nature of literature, according to Ben-Porat, is that "everything represented in a literature text is always presented only partially and with varying degrees of distortion."[47] It is then that the reader's responsibility to provide the links to infer a pattern come into play. Indeed, she is especially interested in bringing the role of the reader into the process of understanding allusions, something that has been strangely absent from traditional approaches to biblical literature.[48]

In this process of "actualization," according to Ben-Porat, a reader goes through several different stages. First, there is the recognition of allusive markers in the text and source identification. Next, there is the realization of the contextual elements that link the allusive markers in each text. For Ben-Porat, the reader takes an active role, not a passive one, in the interpretation of an allusion. In fact, the reader "creates" the complex patterns that form the markers in an allusion. This perspective may sound dangerous, especially to "champions of the objective text" prevalent in many literary theories. Even so, Ben-Porat's point is that the reader plays a crucial and complex role in the development of a pattern whereby all elements of an allusion coalesce into the actualization of a meaningful allusion.

What must the reader do in these creative circumstances? "The reader must distinguish between a so-called 'allusion' to a word, which is actually a form of punning, and a literary allusion introduced by means of a word, which is a true allusion in the sense in which the term is used in this study," says Ben-Porat.[49] In a true *allusion*, vis-à-vis *borrowing* (i.e., citation), a reader implicitly agrees to invoke contextual meanings from the original context incorporating something of the evoked text.[50]

Echo is another crucial concept for this study on motif. John Hollander's fine book on the nature of allusion, *The Figure of Echo*, is essential here.[51] He begins by noting the analogy with nature. Just as there are surfaces seen throughout the natural world (mountains, rocks, caves, forests, etc.) that provide reflective surfaces that can produce serial echoes, so literature

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., 29.

[49] Ibid., 40.

[50] Ibid., 92–93. She comments, "In a borrowing the reader agrees to disregard recognition of other texts within the text and not to activate the original context. The *only* criterion for allusion is the validity of the activation of elements from the summoned text."

[51] John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

(especially poetry) raises questions of the rebounding nature of language itself in subsequent reflecting literary surfaces.[52] In other words, whether it is in Scripture itself, or English literature echoing classical literature and themes, there are always secondary or derivative reflections for the sensitive ear and observant eye. "Texts are haunted by echoes," Hollander maintains.[53] Having these four categories before us, I present the following chart.[54]
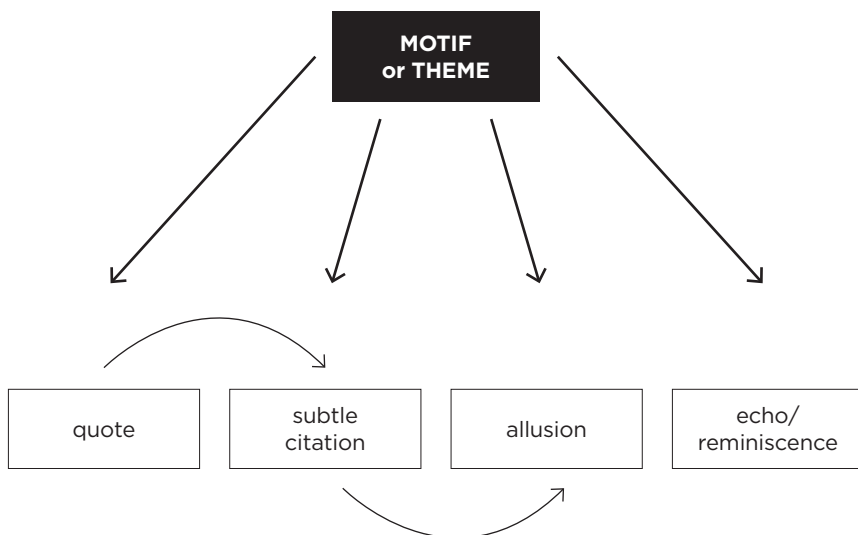
Any motif or theme could be plugged into the "superordinate" box above (e.g., storm, rain, Sodom and Gomorrah). Then, the influences of this motif can be searched in contemporary or subsequent biblical books.

III. *An Example*

Consider as an example of motif in the Old Testament the biblical concept of "desert" or "wilderness." In Hebrew, the typical word for wilderness is *midbar* (although other synonyms can occur); however, wilderness in the

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[52] Ibid., 21–22.
[53] Ibid., 23.
[54] For the idea of the arrangement of the boxes in linear fashion given above, I am indebted to Christoph Uehlinger, from the University of Zurich, "Subtle Citations? Identifying and Evaluating Interplays between Images and Texts," paper delivered November 25, 2013 to the National Association of Professors of Hebrew section of the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

American mind means something vastly different from what it meant to the ancient Hebrew. For the ancient Hebrew, wilderness evoked associations of uncivilized space, danger, wild animals that could harm you, a scarcity of water, and possible thieves and thugs that would assail you. For the modern Westerners, especially Americans, the associations are vastly different. We tend to think in romantic categories about a green space of beauty set aside for purposes of refreshment and revitalization. Therefore, the American reader of the Bible needs to build an interpretative bridge between the ancient Hebrew's understanding of *midbar* with all its cultural significations and his own associative tendencies with the word in order to understand how one might affect the other. In short, the best translation of *midbar* in most contexts in the Old Testament for Westerners (especially Americans) is *desert*.

An interpreter will observe some interesting trends when this motif is traced throughout the Old Testament (and in the New Testament as well). For example, early in the Old Testament, the word can have very negative connotations. This is the place where the Israelites pilgrimaged before they reached their promised land. This is the place of trial, testing, and disobedience, as they were often reminded ("Meribah" and "Massa," cf. Exod 17; Num 14, 20; Ps 95; Heb 3:12–4:13).

As an interpreter performs the archeology of allusion hunting in the Old Testament using this important conceptual grid, the results are quite striking.

Wilderness imagery, issuing from the creation narrative and specifically the expulsion from the garden of Eden, and the pilgrimage theme, is an important motif as it is reworked throughout redemptive history.[55] In Walter Brueggemann's terms, the Israelites were going to be "turfed," and the Jordan represented the boundary of "confidence of at-homeness … the moment of empowerment or enlandment, the decisive event of being turfed and at home for the first time."[56] The wilderness theme triggers a transformation to salvation history in which the land is promised to the wandering-in-the-wilderness Israelites.

Talmon analyzed the occurrences of *midbar* into three geographical areas: grazable land in southern Palestine, borderland between the desert and cultivated land, and finally the desert proper.[57] John Wright adds a fourth

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[55] Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Desert Motif," and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "The Usefulness of the Cross," *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1978–1979): 228–46.

[56] Walter Brueggeman, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, OBT, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 43.

[57] See Talmon, "The Desert Motif," 216–54.

category not covered by Talmon: the Judean wilderness, with its deep wadis and yet its proximity to major population centers.[58] The wilderness is symbolic for a rite of passage that exists between the exodus and the promised land. As Talmon has demonstrated, early on in the biblical theology of the Hebrew Bible, this wilderness (i.e., desert) motif basically denoted a place of punishment and a transitory state in the restoration of Israel to its ideal mode of life.[59] It is this "betweenness" which is crucial. Other studies have recently confirmed that the Sinai pericope extends all the way to the end of the book of Exodus.[60] The complexity enters when we realize that the wilderness motif gives rise to numerous later symbolic ideas, sometimes seemingly conflicting ones.[61] However, the main point here is that the desert becomes a strong trigger for symbolic use later in Scripture.

The Jewish people have recognized for a long time the importance of this transitional period in the wilderness as memorialized in *Sukkot*, or the Festival of Booths.[62] The desert becomes iconic, "the place where they entered the dangerous sphere of freedom, where 'everything is possible.' The desert represents the time separating what was already given (liberation from Egypt) from what was not yet a reality (the Promised Land)."[63]

In the following illustrations about the "desert motif" in the Old Testament, I will restrict my observations to the earliest chapters of Isaiah 40–55, the so-called "book of consolation." The main concern of these chapters is comfort. Indeed, God will answer the people's plight since they find themselves in a "way-less wilderness."[64]

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[58] See John Wright, "Spirit and Wilderness: The Interplay of Two Motifs within the Hebrew Bible as a Background to Mark 1:2–13," in *Perspectives on Language and Text: Essays and Poems in Honor of Francis I. Andersen's Sixtieth Birthday, July 28, 1985*, ed. Edgar W. Conrad and Edward G. Newing (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 269–98.

[59] Talmon, "The Desert Motif," 217.

[60] For example, see Michael L. Morales, *The Tabernacle Pre-Figured: Cosmic Mountain Ideology in Genesis and Exodus*, Biblical and Theological Studies 15 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 208, who is building on the work of Alviero Niccacci.

[61] Wright, "Spirit and Wilderness," 273.

[62] See, for example, James K. Hoffmeier, "'These Things Happened,' Why a Historical Exodus Is Essential for Theology," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James Hoffmeier and Dennis Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 117–18.

[63] Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 44.

[64] Øystein Lund, *Way Metaphors and Way Topics in Isaiah 40–55*, FAT 28 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 144.

1. *Isaiah 40:3–5*

A voice of one calling:
"In the desert [*midbar*] prepare
   the way for the Lᴏʀᴅ;
make straight in the wilderness
   a highway for our God!
Every valley shall be raised up,
   every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
   the rugged places a plain." (Isa 40:3–4 ɴɪᴠ)

The chapter continues to emphasize the incomparability of God in addition to the futility of idols and the overall transitory nature of nations.

What is especially significant in the quoted passage is where God will appear. A way is prepared—not through the desert, but *in* the desert.[65] The imagery is that of a royal road prepared for the sake of easing travel for the king's journey, a lord on a journey to reveal himself in the "hopelessness of desert, exile and catastrophe."[66] The importance of verse 3 among biblical exegetes and extrabiblical material has been significant. Walther Zimmerli argued that Isaiah 40:3 is a literal highway, which is later to be understood as metaphorical.[67] J. Gordon McConville argued the opposite. For him, metaphor was primary and the way of the Lord should be understood as a call "to depart from Babylon with Ezra and return to Yehud."[68]

The importance of this passage also becomes evident with the discovery of the Qumran documents, especially the Rule of the Community [1 QS]. The Jews at Qumran hid this scroll, along with many others, for protection in what is now known as cave 1 as the Roman army rolled in from the north.[69] Except for the phrase, "a voice of one calling," the quotation at the Qumran text (1 QS 8:13–16) is verbatim from Isaiah 40:3–4.[70] So profound was the influence of this verse, research of echoes at Qumran lead Charlesworth to

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[65] Erich Zenger, "The God of Exodus in the Message of the Prophets as Seen in Isaiah," in *Exodus—A Lasting Paradigm*, ed. Bas van Iersel and Anton Weiler (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 22–33, esp. 23.

[66] Ibid.

[67] For a summary of Zimmerli's views, see Bo Lim, *The "Way of the Lord" in the Book of Isaiah*, LHBOTS 522 (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 2–6, 34–37, 103–5, and esp. 109.

[68] Lim, "Way of the Lord," 109. See also J. Gordon McConville, "Ezra-Nehemiah and the Fulfilment of Prophecy," *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 205–24, esp. 208.

[69] See James H. Charlesworth, "Intertextuality: Isaiah 40:3 and the Serek Ha-Yaḥad,"in *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 197–224.

[70] A "fuller" manner of spelling and writing the Hebrew script.

conclude, "This verse is the most important of all the prophetic words of Scripture for the development of the Qumranites' conceptual universe and their self-understanding."[71] What is interesting as we trace the motif of "desert" in this limited corpus is the transformation of meaning: the concept has evolved from its negative connotations to one of eschatological hope.

2. Isaiah 41:16–20

The beginning of this chapter (vv. 1–7) is commonly referred to as a trial scene in which God invites the nations to court in order to establish facts in a case.[72] This leads to three sections in which "comfort and assurance are presented," verses 8–13, 14–16, and 17–20.[73] This text also is commonly referred to as a second exodus text, in which "the future destiny of Israel is described in terms of the Exodus experience."[74] *The importance of this pericope is the transformation of the wilderness or the desert.* However, the immediately preceding verses are also crucial, for God has announced that Israel will be a military force (cf. 41:15–16) and that Judah will wipe out all her enemies.

The wilderness wanderings play a major role in the whole exodus complex, for the wilderness (*midbar*) is symbolic for a rite of passage that exists between the exodus and the promised land.[75] The passage promises with confidence that the exiles will march through a transformed wilderness, a virtual paradise, and that a new eschatological figure will lead them:

> The poor and needy search for water,
>   but there is none;
>   their tongues are parched with thirst.
> But I the Lord will answer them;
>   I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.
> I will make rivers flow on barren heights,
>   and springs within the valleys.
> I will turn the desert into pools of water.
>   and the parched ground into springs.
> I will put in the desert
>   the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive.
> I will set pines in the wasteland,
>   the fir and the cypress together.

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[71] Ibid., 223.

[72] Friedbert Ninow, *Indicators of Typology within the Old Testament: The Exodus Motif* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2001), 172 (what German exegetes call *Gerichtsrede*, "judgment speech").

[73] Ibid., what German exegetes call *Heilsorakel* ("salvation oracle") or *Erhörungsorakel* ("[legal] hearing oracle").

[74] Ibid.

[75] See Talmon, "The Desert Motif."

> so that people may see and know,
>   may consider and understand,
> that the hand of the LORD has done this,
>   that the Holy One of Israel has created it. (Isa 41:17–20)

Creation language and theology are evident here. Verse 20, by using the verb "create," signals that this Isaianic new exodus through the wilderness is a new creation.[76] During this future messianic age, a transformation of the wilderness will occur.[77]

3. *Isaiah 42:14–17*

The beginning of chapter 42 opens with God's assurances that his people are chosen and there is a brighter future ahead. Again, there is a similar transformation of the motif. Leading up to our passage, however, is the revelation of God as warrior (cf. v. 13). The bellicose outcry is similar in passages having to do with warrior culture in surrounding cultures.[78]

Although at first glance it seems that God's actions contradict his transformation of the wilderness, which is such a prominent theme in Isaiah, the resolution of the apparent contradiction is found in God's acts of judgment against oppressors and for the oppressed.[79]

> "For a long time I have kept silent,
>   I have been quiet and held myself back.
> But now, like a woman in childbirth,
>   I cry out, I gasp and pant.
> I will lay waste the mountains and hills
>   and dry up the pools.
> I will lead the blind [the exiles][80] by ways they have not known,
>   along unfamiliar paths [they do not know][81] I will guide them;
> I will turn the darkness into light before them
>   and make the rough places smooth.
> These things I will do;

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[76] Ninow, *Indicators of Typology*, 175. This blossoms into full flower possibly in Isa 65:17 (a text outside of our consideration in this article), since it seems that new exodus gives way to new creation here. But this is an important text that ultimately shows influence on Revelation 21:1–8.

[77] Augustine Stock, *The Way in the Wilderness: Exodus, Wilderness, and Moses Themes in Old Testament and New* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1969), 130.

[78] See Estelle, *Echoes of Exodus*, 161–62.

[79] Lim, *The "Way of the Lord,"* 72–73.

[80] See Lund, *Way Metaphors*, 128. Although, the "blindness" may be an indirect criticism of the people despite the overall pericope pertaining to a message of salvation. See ibid., 136.

[81] The New International Version unjustifiably drops this repeated phrase, probably following the note by the editors of the *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, who consider it *add(itum)* (added [by the Masoretes or other later Scribes]). Such a move is unnecessary.

I will not forsake them.
But those who trust in idols,
   who say to images, 'You are our gods,'
   will be turned back in utter shame." (Isa 42:14–17)

Although the word we have been examining, *midbar*, does not occur in these verses, the conceptual overlap based on the use of synonyms is too significant to ignore: the transformation of the desert into a paradise for the purposes of ushering in a new exodus is evident. The new transformation is even more dramatically explained in chapter 43.

4. *Isaiah 43:14–21*

The Lord now smooths a way back through the wilderness to home for the exiles. Even more than in the previous passage, however, the desert motif is now described in paradisiacal conditions and provides a solid foundation for a future hope:

"This is what the Lord says—
   your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
For your sake I will send to Babylon
   and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians,
   in the ships in which they took pride.
I am the Lord, your Holy One,
   Israel's Creator, your King.

This is what the Lord says—
   he who made a way through the sea,
   a path through the mighty waters,
who drew out the chariots and horses,
   the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
   extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
Forget the former things;
   do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
   Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert (*midbar*)
   and streams in the wasteland.
The wild animals honor me,
   the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the desert (*midbar*)
   and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
   the people I formed for myself
   that they may proclaim my praise." (Isa 43:14–21)

One clear purpose here is to demonstrate the ease with which Yahweh tames unruly forces.[82] Although the passage obviously has roots in the exodus event, the enemy conquered now is not "the sea," but the desert!

The importance of this motif of the desert, the "wilderness," once we open the Gospels hardly needs mention. In at least one of the Gospels, the wilderness motif becomes a unifying theme throughout its prologue (Mark 1:1–8).[83]

Conclusion

Studying motifs in the Old Testament, especially their transformation in redemptive history, can provide a deeper understanding of the unfolding revelation in holy Scripture. Fortunately, in recent years, biblical scholars have been paying closer attention to how motifs function in literature and the Bible.

In this article, I defined motif and illustrated one minor motif, the clothing motif, in the Joseph narrative. Then, I proposed a method for noting the development of motifs by noting how citations and allusions function in Scripture using the categories of direction quote, subtle citation, allusion, and echo. In this discussion, I noted recent scholarly work on the notion of literary influence and especially on how allusions work in literature (including Scripture).

Although I noted that the desert motif often bore negative connotations early in redemptive history, I then demonstrated the transformation of the motif towards a positive, eschatological hope in the early chapters of the book of consolation in Isaiah (Isa 40–43). Most of the interactions with this particular motif of desert (*midbar*) in these chapters would fall under the category of allusion. This positive transformation of the desert motif (by means of allusion) in Isaiah undoubtedly put literary and theological pressure on the New Testament apostles as they wrestled with the meaning and significance of Jesus life and ministry. Ultimately, the transformation of this motif in Isaiah plowed the way for a denouement in the future that ultimately culminated in the advent of the Messiah in the fullness of time.

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[82] Richard Clifford, *Fair Spoken and Persuading: An Interpretation of Second Isaiah* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 60.

[83] See Estelle, *Echoes of Exodus*, 208–16.