Matthew Michael. *Yahweh's Elegant Speeches of Abrahamic Narratives: A Study of the Stylistics, Characterizations, and Functions of the Divine Speeches in Abrahamic Narratives.* Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Monographs, 2014. 320 pages. $35.00 (Amazon). ISBN: 978-1-78368-975-0, paperback.

Matthew Michael (Ph.D. Biblical Studies, ECWA Theological Seminary, Jos, Nigeria) is currently a lecturer in the Department of Christian Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Nigeria, and in addition to this book has published several articles on the literary-stylistic features of Hebrew narratives (cf. *OTE* 29 [2016]: 116-132). *Yahweh's Elegant Speeches* is a well-researched, in-depth linguistic and literary study of all the major divine speeches in the Abrahamic narratives of Genesis (12:1-9, 13:1-8, 15:1-21, 17:1-22, 18:1-33, and 22:1-19). The fact that there are more direct speeches in Genesis than in any other narrative portion of the Hebrew Bible (34, *all citations are from the book under review*) underscores the importance of Michael's research, especially with respect to his chosen corpus, the divine discourse of Yahweh, which is distinguished by a range of stylistic features that "are largely absent in the speeches of the other characters of the Abrahamic narratives" (10, perhaps Gen 49 would be an exception). Michael overviews his scholarly enterprise in a brief introductory chapter, noting that his analysis is not only formal in nature, but is one that explores the literary character of the biblical text in an effort to suggest how its "stylistic techniques … look forward towards addressing the problems of the author's world" and by extension also some of "the ills of the modern world" (9).

In chapter two, Michael presents a detailed survey of relevant literature, namely, "the dominant studies on the literary features of the divine speeches" (11). This material is subdivided into two sections: "general studies" and "specific studies on biblical speeches." Below I will simply list the different scholars surveyed (in both sections) along with one of their central ideas that contributed to Michael's "literary/synchronic" (7) methodology, an approach which, while recognizing the complex compositional history underlying these texts, "persistently seeks to read these narratives in their final form" (8):

- *Charles Conroy* – "attention callers" that serve to highlight the emotive dimension of direct speech in the Scripture (17)

- *E. J. Revell* – the importance of "deferential speech" in biblical dialogues (21)

- *Robert Longacre* – the markers of "peak" in narrative discourse (24)

- *Alviero Niccacci* – the use of *qatal* or *X-qatal* and *wayyiqtol* verbal patterns in direct speech, as distinct from strict narrative (29)

- *George Savran* – four basic patterns in which quoted reported speeches are "framed" (32)

- *Cynthia Miller* – the linguistic forms and functions of "quotative frames" (35)

- *Caspar Labuschagne* – the significance of "numerological" patterns in speeches (45)

- *Hugh White* – a philosophical-semiotic reflection on the "'logic' of the divine voice" (48)

- *Wilfried Warning* – structural patterns manifested by the occurrence of divine speeches in Leviticus (52)

- *Samuel Meier* – variations in the "discourse markers" employed to initiate divine discourse in Hebrew narrative (56)

Michael's literary survey, which also includes references to the important work of Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, Adele Berlin, and J. P. Fokkelman, leads him to three "conclusions": (a) the significance of biblical speeches in Hebrew narrative; (b) their strongly "artistic nature"; and (c) their functional importance (e.g., in characterization) and strategic positioning within the text (60).

Chapter three is the heart of Michael's study in which he delineates the various "stylistic aspects of the divine speeches" to be found in the Abrahamic corpus of Genesis. By "stylistic aspects" he is referring to the "distinctive use of language or the 'special expressive' way in which the divine speeches are framed" (61)—that is, literary features "which appear to be absent in the speeches of other characters such as Abraham, Sarah and Lot" (62). Michael identifies and describes these different compositional characteristics in the six major divine speeches under five general categories: Structure, Literary Context, Grammatical Analysis, Stylistic Aspects, and Significance. I will briefly define each of these categories along with their sub-categories (if any) and then give a significant example or two of each one, selected from the first and/or last divine speech analyzed by Michael (12:1-9, 22:1-19).

1   Structure:

In this section major topical-thematic patterns are displayed as they pertain to the entire pericope under consideration, in particular, those configurations involving direct speech and the divine discourse of Yahweh. In relation to the first discourse of the Lord to Abram, for example, we have this alternating, mirrored arrangement (69):

A. Introduction (11:27-32)
   B. Divine Speech—1 (12:1-3)
      C. Abraham's (*sic*, Abram's) Obedience (12:4-6)
   B' Divine Speech—2 (12:7a)
      C' Abraham's Worship (12:7b-8)
A' Conclusion (12:9)

The structure found in the last narrative passage in Gen 22 is longer and more complex (227):

A. Introduction (1a)
   B. First Dialogue (1b-2)
      C. Description (3-4)
         D. Second "Dialogue" [actually, only the "speech" of Abraham] (5)
            E. Description (6)
               F. Third Dialogue (7-8b)
            E' Description (8c-10)
         D' Fourth Dialogue (11-12)
      C' Description (13-14)
   B' Fifth "Dialogue" [actually, only the "speech" of Yahweh's angel] (15-18)
A' Conclusion (19)

Though one might quibble here or there about these structural diagrams, in most cases they do serve to give readers a helpful overview of the general arrangement of a given pericope.

2   Literary Context

In this section Michael goes into some detail in tracing the relevant intertextual topical connections between the current pericope and those that precede or follow, primarily in Genesis, but also subsequent books in the Hebrew Bible. With respect to chapter 12, he helpfully traces the theme of "divine blessing" that precedes Yahweh's prophetic words to Abram in 12:2-3 and 7a (71-72), including the connection with "their clans/nations" (מִשְׁפְּחֹתָם) of the so-called "Table of Nations" in chapter 10 (vv. 5, 18, 20, 31, 32) (73). When dealing with Genesis 22, Michael includes Wenham's comparative chart, which shows the close parallels between the respective "ordeals" of Isaac and Ishmael, found in the preceding chapter (229):

God orders Ishmael's expulsion (21:12-13)	God orders Isaac's sacrifice (22:2)
Food and water taken (21:14)	Sacrificial material taken (22:3)

Journey (21:14)	Journey (22:4-8)
Ishmael about to die (21:16)	Isaac about to die (22:10)
Angel of God calls from heaven (21:17)	Angel of the LORD calls from heaven (22:11)
"Do not fear" (21:17)	"Fear God" (22:12)
"God has heard" (21:17)	"You have heard my voice" (22:18)
"I shall make into a great nation" (21:18)	"Your descendants will be like stars" (22:17)
God opens Hagar's eyes; she sees a well (21:19)	Abraham raises his eyes and sees a ram (22:13)
Hagar gives Ishmael a drink, and so the lad is saved (21:19)	Abraham sacrifices a ram instead of Isaac, and so the lad is spared (22:14)

3   Grammatical Analysis

The syntactic features considered in this section "are important in understanding the context or the pericope where the divine speeches are found" (75). These significant constituents are manifested in all of the six divine speech segments considered:

a) *Quotative frames* serve as "discourse markers" (75) to introduce the direct speech segments of the characters, usually Yahweh or Abram, for example וַיֹּאמֶר both in 12:1 and in 12:7. Such openers serve to create the illusion of verisimilitude—"that the narrator has no interference with the speech of the original speaker" (75). These markers not only distinguish the speeches of different characters, for example, Yahweh and Abraham in 22:1-2, and 7, but they may also mark stages within a single speech act, as in 22:16, which continues the words of "the angel of Yahweh" begun in verse 12.

b) *Syntactical considerations* incorporate any noteworthy aspects of syntax that are exhibited within the speeches themselves, for example, the alternating parallelism of 12:2, which "creates a heightening of the two concepts of greatness and blessing" (79) that God promises to Abram:

A—And I will make you a great nation; B—And I will bless you; A'—And I will make your name great; B'—And you will be a blessing. This is followed by a centrally focused contrastive chiasmus in verse 3: A—I will bless; B—those blessing you; B'—the ones distaining you; A'—I will curse (80). The notion of "blessing" (בָּרַךְ) is thematic throughout the speeches of Yahweh. In chapter 22 a sequence of כִּי clauses in the words of the LORD highlights the obedience of Abraham (vv. 11-12, 16-18) in response to the initial divine imperative that sets the severe test in motion (v. 2).

c) *Imperative commands* are of course significant because they express the divine will for Abra(ha)m to observe, either immediately or in the future. The entire cycle of divine speeches is initiated by Yahweh's command for him to "leave" his home and "go" to some new, divinely appointed land (12:1) (82). Interestingly, God's foundational blessing in 12:2 also concludes with an imperative form (וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה), thus in effect underscoring and guaranteeing Yahweh's grand purpose for Abram as expressed in all the speeches to come.

4   Stylistic Aspects:

In this section, Michael identifies and carefully describes the different literary features that appear in a certain divine speech pericope. The contributions of other scholars regarding a specific issue are liberally offered in footnotes. On what basis are such devices selected for consideration? The response (citing T. Todorov): "The structural descriptions of a particular text will not consider a property stylistic if it cannot show that this property is found in relationship with others, at other levels, or, to put in other terms, that is meaningful" (84-85), that is, compositionally functional. Space limits me to a mere listing of the combined stylistic features recognized in chapters 12 and 22, plus a prominent example of each one:

a) *Metaphor* (interpreted quite broadly, i.e., "figurative expressions," 85): In 12:7 Yahweh promises to give the new land to the "seed" (זֶרַע) of Abram, which is probably the most significant figure of speech found in all of the divine discourses. Michael observes: "In translations, the met-aphoric nature of the term 'seed' is often lost in the quest for a dynamic equivalent since the English terms such as 'descendants,' 'posterity,' or 'offspring' do not have the double nuances for 'progeny' and the intended agricultural imagery of a physical crop" (93).

b) *Simile*: In 22:17 the LORD juxtaposes two graphic similes that relate to heaven and earth in reference to Abraham's promised "seed" (descend-ants), who will be as numerous as "the stars in the sky" and "sand on the seashore." "In ancient and modern times, the two domains of these divine similes … normally evoked a sense of mystery and awe" (240).

Michael also considers these comparisons of Abraham's descendants to stars and sand grains as instances of "hyperbole." But on this point one wonders whether the utterances of an omnipotent God can appropriately be regarded as "divine exaggeration" (241).

c) *Paronomasia*: This feature refers to the reiteration of words that resemble one another in sound but differ in meaning; Michal includes "alliteration, rhyme, and wordplay" in this stylistic category (96). There is an obvious example of alliteration in the repetition of the verbal root בָּרַךְ in 12:2-3, five times in fact, with clear thematic import. Furthermore, as Wenham observed, "Every mention of the term 'bless,' [or] 'blessing' … evokes the name 'Abram,' אַבְרָם …" (97), the benefactor of these divine promises. This is also an example of "repetition" (see below), namely, that of a *leitwort*, in this case one which has already featured prominently in Genesis (e.g., 1:22, 28; 2:3; 5:2), and most recently in the Flood account (9:1, 26) (99-100).

d) *Repetition*: Lexical reiteration, which is characteristic of Hebrew biblical discourse in general, is foregrounded, again with thematic implications, in 22:2 with Yahweh's startling command to Abraham to "Take *your son, your only one*, Isaac, whom you love" (the italicized words reappear for emphasis in vv. 12 and 16). Such repetition adds an emotional element to the narrative and also serves to "characterize Abraham by underscoring his willingness to do the unthinkable in deep obedience to Yahweh" (244).

e) *Allusion*: This literary device is constituted by "a subtle reference by an author or speaker to a statement, theme, or motif from another source" (101, citing G. H. Johnston). Reference to the divinely blessed multiplication of Abraham's "seed" in 22:17-18 "resonates with the similar theme in the Creation account of Gen 1:26-28," restating, as it were, "the original mandate [Yahweh] gave Adam and Eve" (248). It further recalls the initial divine speech made to Abram in 12:1-3, recalling in particular the surprising promise that his seed would become a blessing in turn to other nations. In this case, the allusion also performs a discourse structural function since it "brackets the Abrahamic cycle within this dominant motif" (249).

f) *Euphemism*: Michael interprets the verb "sacrifice" (*hiphil* of עָלָה) in 22:2 as a euphemism, an expression of avoidance, for "the murder or killing of Isaac" (242). However, since Yahweh is the speaker and in the context of a contemporary ANE religious (covenantal) setting, it could be argued that this is a perfectly appropriate term to use in the present situation—the ultimate "test" for Abraham in relation to his God. A better example of euphemism is found later in verse 12: "Do not extend

your hand (אַל־תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל־הַנַּעַר) toward the boy," that is, "Don't harm/lay a hand on him" (243).

g) *Suspense*: This device is activated whenever certain information is not supplied where it would normally belong in the narrative, but it is withheld for a later stage. Suspense is clearly initiated in the first of Yahweh's speeches to Abram, for how could he even begin to understand the promise of becoming a "great nation" when he was childless at the age of 75 (12:2-4)? These divine words were not of a "bogus nature" (Michael's inapt term); rather, it is simply a matter of "the narrator [employing] suspense as a means to hold the reader or listener on edge as they seek to find out in the life of Abram how these divine speeches actually become true" (106).

h) *Gradation*: This is "a literary device whereby the narrator describes items, persons or categories of his narrative by means of progression, that is, from tallest to the lowest, richest to poorest, general to the specific, or the other way around" (107). In the divine speech of Gen 12:1, for example, we see this in the reduction of Yahweh's reference in relation to Abram from the broadest category of "your land" to "the specificity of 'your father's house'" (108). On the other hand, Yahweh's promise of blessing expands progressively from "you" (Abram), to those who bless him, and finally embracing "all peoples on earth" (vv. 2-3).

i) *Irony*: Various types of irony are found throughout Genesis, most prominently in the Joseph set of narratives. In the Abrahamic cycle they begin with the name "Isaac" (יִצְחָק), which means "laughter" (21:3, 6). But this name is later contradicted by Ishmael's aggressive "mocking" (צָחַק) of his younger brother. On the macro-narrative level, dramatic irony is manifested in the fact that "even though the reader understands the divine command to Abraham [in ch. 22] is merely a test, the characters in the story are ignorant of this knowledge" (247). I do not agree, however, that these ironies in the account include "excessive divine anthropomorphism," for example, in the fact that Yahweh seemingly does not know that "Abraham loves him more than his son" and must put his faithful follower through a horrible test in order to "find out" for himself the answer (247). This might be a case of irony for some modern ("process") theologians, but it would not have been so understood by the narrative's initially intended audience.

j) *Significance*: This is the last category that Michael considers under the "stylistic aspects" of the divine speeches in a given pericope. It is not a literary characteristic *per se* like the others (including now the text's structure, literary context, and main grammatical features), but rather summarizes their combined hermeneutical importance to the entire segment. With respect to Genesis 12, these devices, along with a few not

mentioned above (e.g., rhetorical questions), serve to characterize Abram, present the divine point of view (from the narrator's reliable perspective), create suspense as the narrative begins to unfold, and structure the text of Genesis internally as well as externally, thus distinguishing the Abrahamic cycle as a whole from the preceding primeval accounts, and functioning as a conceptual "literary and theological bridge" to subsequent material in the book that pertains to Abraham (109-110). The significance of the divine speeches in Genesis 22 is that they bring to a climax the narrator's depiction of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Abraham, strongly certifying the latter as a loyal man "of faith and obedience" to his God. Through allusion and repetition the "previous motifs of Abraham and his descendants becoming a blessing to the nations of the earth (22:18)" are narratively underscored (251-252).

Chapter four follows up in a sense from the periodic "significance" sections found in the preceding chapter. Michael stresses the integral connection between literary form and function, "or between the stylistic features in a narrative and [their] possible meaning" (255). On the other hand, he also attempts to distinguish the twofold function of the divine speeches internally, from the perspective of the implied narrator, and externally, from the perspective of the implied author: "The complicated nature of the divine speeches comes from their double significance on the level of the story and ultimately above the story" (257). This latter endeavor is complicated by ultimately insolvable issues, such as whether the text was originally written in Hebrew or translated from Aramaic (260), the extent to which a redactor (or redactors) was involved in the telling (261), and the text's "possible origins in different sources" (262). This last factor is somewhat surprising since at the outset of his study Michael seems to have rejected a source-critical approach; indeed, the "quest to fragment or tear up [the narrator's] works into literary pieces and endless sources seems to have failed" (5). From a literary-critical and discourse-compositional point of view, this conclusion only makes sense in this case, as Michael himself has abundantly demonstrated, of a "brilliantly constructed" work that presents "perhaps the most beautiful and most profound stories ever known on earth" (3-4, citing H. Gunkel; cf. the author's "powerful artistic skills," 261).

Michael identifies six "general characteristics" of the Abrahamic divine speeches, which I understand to be those that reflect the distinctly text-internal, source-text oriented perspective—that of the implied narrator. In the first place, this sequence of Yahweh's discourse "express a high degree of optimism" with reference to the many and varied blessings that are predicted for Abraham through his "seeds" (*sic*, 263). I would prefer the originally intended collective use of this word, "seed," thus preserving its possible double reference, that is, also allowing for a Messianic implication. The second characteristic then follows from the first, namely, the speeches' "particularistic outlook … primarily

centered on the 'seeds of Abraham'" (265). Moving on from an ethnocentric or nationalistic outlook, the third characteristic reveals the speeches' "universal emphasis" (268), that is, with the pointed inclusion of all nations on earth. Feature four, thoroughly documented in chapter three, is their "elevated language" (269), which both attracts an audience to God's words (even in translation) and "magnifies" their content. Characteristic five of the divine speeches is their "futuristic orientation" since they are, after all, prophetic in nature. "Finally, a general characteristic of the divine speeches is their obvious emphasis on Yahweh's covenant or distinct relationship with Abraham and his descendants" (272).

Michael devotes most of his attention to what he terms the "ideological functions" of the divine speeches to Abra(ha)m, which I regard as their text-external, target-audience oriented perspective—that of the implied author. Michael's reasons for the more "neutral" (than "theology") term "ideology" are presented: first of all, because the persuasive character and aims of these speeches are not stated explicitly in terms of their "relationship to the world of the author," which is "clearly hidden, masked, or even out-rightly denied" (273). On the other hand, they "still show the interpenetrating presence of the world of Abraham and the concerns and issues in the world of the author" (274). This line of reasoning was not very clear to me, especially in view of the fact that it begs the question concerning a precise temporal location of "the world of the author," which Michael does not distinctly identify in his discussion. One gathers from reading between the lines that he has in mind the post-exilic community of Israel. In any case, he puts forward the following ideological functions for the Abrahamic divine speeches: they "provide hope" by virtue of a "substitute reality" for a landless, nationless target audience (276-277); second, the divine speeches offer the audience a "robust identity … that is primarily defined along the lines of obedience and trust in the covenant made with Yahweh" (278-279); third, they "function as a tool of polemics" to justify the election of Israel as a nation by virtue of Yahweh's "choice on (*sic*) Isaac and him alone" (excluding Ishmael, Eliezer, and Lot) (279-281); fourth, the divine speeches serve to "legitimize certain religious or social forms of the author," such as circumcision, monotheism, and ancient Israel's right to the land of Canaan (282); finally, the speeches perform a "prophetic" function as they establish Abraham as a significant prophet in Israel, thus providing a hopeful "window on the world of tomorrow" (282-283). In conclusion, the various stylistic devices that are widely manifested in the sequence of Abrahamic divine speeches lend some significant formal support to their thematic coherence as well as their pragmatic purpose in a way that also generates a substantial "relevance which transcends the world of Abraham and the author to the world of the early church" (284).

In chapter five, the book's formal "Conclusion," Michael begins by briefly reviewing the findings of the preceding chapters (287-292). He para-

phrases this material nicely in summary fashion and not by way of obvious repetition. He then turns to a contemporary application and several "recommendations that could be made for the Christian church" (292). Thus, today's church must endeavor to offer a message of hope to combat the prevailing "landlessness, hopelessness and the identity crisis of the modern age" (292). In view of "the existential realities of the present world," Christ's church must also "invigorate a new identity … of what it means to be a Christian and a child of Abraham," "speak prophetically to the ills of the present world," and "create a universal or global vision whereby … it will become a blessing to the nations of the earth" (292-293). Essentially, such a divine blessing is only able "to reach the nations through Jesus Christ who is now (?) conceived to be [Abraham's] promised seed" (290, I have repositioned this quote in order to reinforce the Messianic emphasis that I missed in general throughout Michael's study). With respect to possible follow-up research ensuing from his work, Michael suggests an independent study that would investigate the supposed "distinctive stylistic features of each of the sources" (J, E, D, P—an exercise in futility, in my opinion), a study of "the secondary speeches of other characters of the Abrahamic cycle" in comparison with the divine speeches," and an exploration that would "closely relate the ideological functions of these divine speeches in light of New Testament theology" (293-294).

Yahweh's Elegant Speeches includes an extensive, up-to-date Bibliography (295-320), but no topical or author index. In addition to a number of places where I found myself disagreeing with the author's interpretation (mainly in reference to the implied author and his "ideology" in chs. 4-5), I noted several formal problems that detracted from Michael's interesting, though detailed, and thoughtful discussion: (a) an excessive number of printing mistakes within the text itself, where closing punctuation was periodically deleted leading to erroneous, run-on sentences; (b) quite a few Hebrew text citations lacking English glosses (whereas they are given elsewhere); (c) a rather repetitious style in places (both b and c being exemplified on p. 239); and (d) several instances of basically repeated diagrams (pp. 67-70), or pages where a particularly lengthy footnote was either topically redundant or which presented information that could have been more effectively included within the main text above (e.g., p. 250). These criticisms, however, do not diminish my appreciation for Michael's scholarly work, which has opened my eyes to the impressive stylistic excellence, thematic connectivity, and theological significance of the divine speeches to be found in the Abrahamic narratives of Genesis. Therefore, I can heartily recommend this insightful study to all Old Testament theologians and students at the seminary/college level, as well as to those Bible translators who happen to be working on this prominent portion of

Genesis. This is indeed a most valuable resource that will need to be consulted by anyone who is making a serious study of this, the inaugural scroll of the Holy Scriptures.

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