

Plot, Character, and Setting in Biblical Narrative

Study Notes

Introduction

Nearly half of the Bible is written in narrative. In order to understand the Bible more fully, it's important to learn how to read this style of writing. In our How to Read the Bible series, we have four videos that focus specifically on reading biblical narrative. We look at four different aspects of narrative—plot, character, setting, and design patterns. These study notes will help you go deeper into the ideas introduced in three of our videos, Plot in Biblical Narrative, Character in Biblical Narrative, and Setting in Biblical Narrative.

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Reading Biblical Narrative

Biblical narratives make up nearly half of the Bible. In their basic form, narratives have characters in a setting going through a series of events, and their primary goal is to communicate a theological message through the medium of story.

When we read biblical narratives we are not watching security camera footage of these ancient events. We're reading an artistic, literary representation of the story of Israel. The goal isn't just to tell us about something that happened, but also to help us discern the meaning of these events.

Let's explore what we mean by artistic, literary representation using an example from art history. Take a look at this illustration of a pipe painted by Rene Magritte in 1929. It's called "The Treachery of Images" and it includes the words "This is not a pipe."



In an interview about his painting, Magritte said, "The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it! And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it's just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture 'This is a pipe', I'd have been lying!" (Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: The True Art of Painting*, 85).

Magritte was reacting against a renewal of "naive realism" in the art world, the idea that paintings ought to represent reality as it really is. Just like Magritte's painting is not literally a pipe, so biblical narratives aren't literally the events they represent.

A photograph of a tree is a good example of the distinction between a text and the event depicted in it. A photograph is a representation of a tree, yet it does not have bark and leaves, nor is the sky behind the tree a real sky. To say that a photograph only represents the tree but is not actually the tree does not mean the tree never existed or that the photograph is inaccurate because it only shows one side of the tree. The same can be said of the biblical narrative texts. To say they represent events but are not the events themselves is simply to recognize a very obvious fact about biblical narratives: They are texts, which means we stand not before events, but representations of events through words.

John Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology*, 47.

Rene Magritte used artistic tools and techniques like different sized brushes, various paint colors, shading, and proportions to render a representation of a pipe in his painting. Biblical authors also used basic tools to communicate the meaning of narrative events. The authors rendered narrative texts using the tools of plot, character, and setting.

Plot

Plot is the arrangement of characters and events within a narrative to communicate a message.

A basic plot starts with a character in a setting. Something new or unexpected happens, causing problems that lead to a conflict, which is then resolved, and the character is changed as a result. The plot is how those events are chosen and arranged by the author.

Plot Embedding: Multi-Layered Biblical Storylines

One way biblical narrative uses plot is through plot embedding, or layers of storylines working together to tell the overall story of the Bible. We can break it down into three layers of storylines.

Level one is the single overall storyline to the Bible. **Level two** is the multiple movements of that overall storyline. For example, the story of the whole Bible can be divided into four movements.

1. Creation to Babylon
2. The Covenant Story with Israel > Exile and Return
 - a. Abraham's family and the covenant
 - b. Exodus and wilderness
 - c. Covenant at Mt. Sinai
 - d. Entry to the promised land
 - e. Failure in the land leads to exile
 - f. Return from exile and unrealized hopes
3. Jesus and the Kingdom
 - a. Kingdom mission in Galilee
 - b. Jesus' enthronement in Jerusalem
4. People of the Kingdom to New Creation
 - a. Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth

Level three includes the hundreds of individual narratives that make up each of those larger movements. The individual narratives include stories like Noah and the ark, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his coat of many colors, Samson the strong, Jesus and the blind man, or Paul in prison.

The very first, and only really rigid, rule in literary theory is that texts must be read from beginning to end. The meaning of a word is not determined by its definition, but by its context. So also a single story's meaning is only determined by the relationship of all its elements to the whole text.

Sean McEvenue, *Interpretation and Bible*, 171.

All of these individual events are framed within a larger context that gives them a total meaning that transcends the individual events.

Narrative Meaning

Narrative meaning is another element of plot. Essentially, the same events can take on different meanings depending on how you arrange the plot and whose point of view the story is told from. It's also important to understand every event or scene in the context of its larger plotline. The same story can have a totally different message if we ignore the context.

Take the story of Gideon laying out the fleece to discern God's will. "If you will deliver Israel by my hand, look I will lay out a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that you will save Israel through me, as you have spoken" (Judg. 6:36-37).

By itself, the plot of this scene (Gideon needs to discern God's will > he asks God for a sign > God provides the sign) could mean he's being promoted as an example for us to follow. But in the larger context of Judges 6-8, this scene highlights Gideon's distrust of God even though God has already provided a sign through the appearance of an angel and fire on the altar. This story is about Gideon "testing God" (Judg. 6:39), which is never a good idea.

The point here is that the same story about Gideon and the fleece communicates the opposite meaning depending on our awareness of the larger plotlines. Context is important.

Narrative meaning can also be found through plot sequence, or the use of conflict, climax, and resolution to convey a message. The same characters in the same conflict but with different resolutions of the climax can have a different message.

Take this simple story about Billy. Billy is a growing, hungry boy (intro + conflict). He keeps sneaking cookies from the snack drawer and this behavior frustrates his mom (the climax).

One way to resolve the story: Billy learns to sneak the cookies at night to avoid getting in trouble. The message of this version of the story is to be resourceful, adapt to solve problems, and sneak if you have to. The story could also resolve with Billy learning self-control from his mom and honoring her wishes. The message is now self-control is a great virtue and honoring authority figures is the way to get ahead in life.

Stories and plots are the crucial agents that invest events with meaning. The way the bare facts are described, *the point at which the tension or climax occurs*, the selection and arrangement of the parts—these all indicate the meaning which the events are believed to possess; and thus what the author means to communicate by telling them to the reader.

N.T. Wright *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992): 79.



Comedy and Tragedy: Types of Plot Structure

Plot structures can also be grouped by comedy and tragedy. Elements of these two genres come from ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle's text *Poetics*, the earliest known work about dramatic and literary theory.

Comedies are ascent stories. The protagonist needs to climb and overcome challenges successfully in order to be transformed. Comedies prompt us to think about what's valuable in the world, what's worth the struggle, and what kind of people win. We want to be like the protagonist in a comedy. The biblical narrative of Joseph (Gen. 37-50) is a good example of a comedy structure. Joseph is abused by his brothers and sold into slavery. But because of his integrity, he rises from slavery to a place of influence in Egypt where he can later save his undeserving brothers.

Tragedies are descent stories. The protagonist is set up well, but due to character flaws or bad choices the protagonist self-destructs. We want to avoid being the protagonist in a tragedy. Tragedies make us think about what will ruin us, what's worth the effort to avoid, and what kind of people lose. The story of Saul falls into this genre (1 Sam. 8-31). Saul is tall, handsome, and a go-getter, but he's also prideful and thinks he knows better than everyone else. He is unable to recognize his own mistakes and he can't take criticism. Eventually, his life falls apart.

Character

Biblical authors use characters as vehicles for their message primarily through showing rather than telling. Biblical characters are not meant to be people we try to emulate. In fact, they often represent how not to act! But the biblical authors use them to communicate the morals and ethics of a godly life.

Most of an author's view of the world and the values they want to communicate are embodied in the narrative and expressed through the characters. Not only do characters serve as a narrator's mouthpiece, but also what is and is not related about them, which of their personality traits are emphasized and which are not, these all reveal the ethical values and moral norms within the narrative. The decisions that characters are called upon to make when confronted with moral choices, and the results of their decisions provide indisputable evidence of a narrative's ethical dimension.

Shimon Bar-Efrat, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 47.

The Greek storytelling tendency of loading the story with details is one that modern literary practice has by and large adopted and developed. Precisely for that reason we have to adjust our habits as readers in order to bring an adequate attentiveness to the rather different narrative maneuvers characteristic of the Hebrew Bible. The underlying biblical conception of people's character is that they're unpredictable, constantly emerging from and slipping back into ambiguity. Thus, biblical narrative style is marked by the art of reticence.

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 129.

Direct Characterization (Telling)

Narrators rarely make comments in biblical narrative, and when they do, it's with small details or brief phrases.

1. Physical appearance: Joseph's looks, Saul's stature, Esau's hair, but only when relevant to the narrative.
2. Moral evaluation of a character's actions: did evil, did good, righteous, wise, foolish, (Nabal, 1 Sam. 25:25).
3. Favoritism in the story of Isaac and Rebecca.

Direct characterization is extremely rare in the Bible. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, uses the illustration of two types of painting. She compares realism (modern, Western narrative) with impressionism or pointillism (biblical narrative).

With small strokes or tiny dots (pointillism), biblical authors give us the trace of a character but we have to fill in the rest based on the little we know.

Esau is hairy, and in the story this description shows that he is outdoorsy, primitive, and behaves like an animal. Eli is old and blind, and this tells us he is both literally and relationally blind, because he ignores the rebellion of his sons. Saul is tall and David is short, and this detail speaks to the contrast of their characters. Saul imposes himself from above, while David humbly allows God to exalt him from below.

[In impressionist art,] The suggestion of a thing may be more convincing than a detailed portrayal. This is due to the tendency of our brains to project meaning onto images in order to complete our expectations. We see what we expect to see, and the surrounding information guides our perception. This is why we fill in a partially drawn figure to conform to our expectations, and in some cases too much information may destroy the image. The trick, from the artists' point of view, is how much detail to include and how much to omit. This is a good corrective for those who wish biblical stories provided more concrete details, but this is precisely its narrative technique. The gaps left in all biblical narratives are intentional, so that with a few deft strokes the biblical author engages the imagination of the reader to construct a picture that is more "real" than if he had filled in David or Abraham or Joseph's portrait with more detail. Minimal representation can give maximal illusion.

Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*.

Indirect Characterization (Showing)

Names

The names of characters often indicate their role in the story.

For example, Saul means "the one asked for." Abram/Abraham means "exalted father/father of a multitude." Israel means "struggles with God." Adam means "humanity." Elijah means "Yaweh is my god." The names of Naomi's two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, means "sicko" and "done-for."

Actions

In the article, "Character in the Boundaries of Biblical Narrative," J.M. McCracken says, "Biblical narrators prefer to show people's character rather than tell us an evaluation of their traits. Characters are something the biblical authors tend to speak **with** rather than about." Instead of moralizing about a character's decisions, biblical narrators simply show you the decisions and consequences of that character's decisions and allow you to ponder the significance. For example, Moses kills an Egyptian. Why? Justice? An anger problem? Is his behavior good or bad?

Speech

Often, the narrative pauses and a key character will offer a long speech (Josh. 24; Samuel in 1 Sam. 8 or 12; Solomon in 1 Kgs. 8) or sing a song (Jacob, Gen. 49; Moses, Exod. 15; Hannah, 1 Sam. 2).

Sometimes, speech reveals character. Take Abraham speaking to his servants in Genesis 22. “The boy and I will go to the mountain and we will worship and **we** will return.” Is Abraham full of faith, or is he selling a line to avoid suspicion?

Once you realize the Bible’s anti-didactic style is a narrative policy, you gain insight into the role of the aesthetic subtlety of these stories. They almost always shun extended commentary or explanation, let alone homiletics [= sermoning, moralizing]. These authors intentionally leave gaps for the reader to puzzle over—discontinuities, indeterminacies, non-sequiturs, unexplained motives—and they’re fully aware of the disorienting effect this has on readers as they try to draw lessons from the past. Biblical narrators conceal the meaning of their stories to an extent seldom equaled by any other literature in history. This style was not inherited by Israel’s neighboring cultures, rather it was invented and elaborated in the Israelite tradition of narrative and it’s nothing less than deliberate.

In day to day life, knowledge and information and the ability to understand the meaning of events is power. But in reading the Bible, we’re constantly puzzling over the gaps in the stories [why did Moses do that? why did God do that?], and this is strategic: our puzzlement is an imitation of our real position in life. It exposes our ignorance about the meaning of history or our lives. Biblical stories imitate our real-life conditions of inference, as we too are daily surrounded by ambiguities, baffled and misled by appearances, reduced to piecing fragments together by trial and error of interpretation, and we’re often left in the dark about the meaning of our lives to the very end. The scarcity of commentary by the biblical narrators forces us to constantly evaluate the character’s motives and the meaning of the plot as we look for clues. It is only by sustained effort that the reader of biblical narratives can attain to the point of view that God has possessed all along. Making sense of biblical stories is to gain a sense of being human.

Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative - Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 42, 47.

The minimalist policy and narrative economics are very intentional. It forces you, the reader, to participate in the making of meaning.

God as a Character

God is the only character who continues through every movement of the biblical narrative from beginning to end. God’s presence in biblical narrative tells us that the fundamental intent of these stories is to reveal God’s character, identity, and purpose in history.

Character: God wants good for people, and he wants to share creation with them (Gen. 1-2). God brings justice on human evil, and he also forgives and restores.

Identity: The author of the universe is the God revealed through the family of Abraham and Israel and ultimately through Jesus of Nazareth.

Purpose: God’s purpose is to rescue his creation from evil so it can be shared in love for eternity.

God has dual roles in biblical narratives.

The first role is that of present/interventionist God. Genesis 1-11 depicts God as a present, direct character walking and talking with people. He also appears or intervenes in wilderness stories. For example, the angel of the LORD comes to Hagar, Abraham’s pregnant slave, in the wilderness (Gen. 16:7-16). Moses encounters God in the burning bush and God calls him to bring the Israelites out of Egypt (Exod. 3-4, 24-31). In Numbers, God is present with the people as a pillar of cloud in the Israelite camp, and he speaks directly to Moses as he leads the people through the wilderness

to the promised land (Num. 11-21). The prophet Elijah meets and speaks with God in the wilderness (1 Kgs. 19:9-21).

The second role is that of absent/supervisory God. In stories like Genesis 37-50, or in stories about King David, Esther, or Ruth, God is depicted as indirect, sporadically known, and hard to perceive. He supervises events from behind the scenes. The drama of these stories is about how the characters will relate to God when they don't know what's going on.

The more God is depicted as a present character, commanding or testing, punishing or forgiving, the more the human characters are depicted in a flat manner, as singular types such as rebellious, obedient, or sinful. But when God is portrayed as absent or behind the scenes, there is more narrative space for multi-faceted human characters and their complex motives.

Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 84.

Setting

The action of every story takes place somewhere, and that place is called the setting. Biblical authors use the setting as a tool in biblical narratives to evoke memories and emotions and to generate expectations about what could happen in the story. Physical places and locations serve as settings, but time also serves as a type of setting.

Place

As the biblical story develops, places and situations begin to take on a symbolic or meaningful significance based on what has happened there. Think about common settings in modern Western films and how each location has a genre associated with it like action movies set in New York, romances set in Paris, or westerns set in dusty ghost towns.

In the Bible, "the east" represents the human spiral of sin and selfishness as people moved from the garden of Eden to Babylon. Adam and Eve are banished "to the east" in Genesis 3. Adam's son Cain is banished "to the East" in Genesis 4, and people move "to the east" to build the city of Babylon in Genesis 11:1-2. Eventually, Babylon becomes a superpower in the story that comes back to take over the family of Abraham when the Israelite people are exiled to the east in Babylon (2 Chron. 36:15-20).

Other places that hold significance in the overall story of the Bible include Egypt, Moab, the wilderness, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. These settings become loaded with more and more meaning as the biblical story develops over time.

Time

Time, or how long things take, also serves as a type of setting in biblical narrative. You can tell which events are most meaningful to the author's message by what gets the most air time. In the Gospel of Mark, chapters 1-10 cover some three years of Jesus' life and ministry, while chapters 11-16 cover seven days in Jerusalem. Thirty percent of the story focuses on those seven days, and this emphasizes the importance of those days.

The number 40 is a meaningful time period in biblical narrative that represents a period of waiting and testing. Noah spends 40 days and nights on the ark, Moses spends 40 days on the top of Mount Sinai, and the Israelites wander in the desert for 40 years (Num. 14:34) as punishment for rebelling after the Israelite spies investigate the promised land for 40 days (Num. 13). And because we have become familiar with this idea of 40 days as a time of patience and testing, when Jesus is tested in the desert for 40 days and overcomes the test, he reverses our expectations.