

Lessons in how to read Narrative (Paul B Hartwig, Lakeside Chapel, July 2022)

"And Jesus said, "What is written in the Law. *How do you read it?*" (Lk 10:26)

How to understand the Bible is done by realizing that there are different *genres* or 'types of literature', and then learning to interpret those forms with a unique reading strategy in keeping with those forms. In sport we say 'play by the rules'; here we must 'read by the rules'. One of these forms is 'narrative', and this is written to help you read the narrative parts of the bible 'by the rules'.

Which part of the Bible is Narrative?

Consider how a large portion of Scripture is narrative:

- Genesis through to 2 Chronicles (just over half the OT)
- Matthew to Acts (well over half of the NT)

What is Narrative?

God is a Storyteller – the greatest! "*In the beginning...*"

Firstly, remember there is basic distinction between of *poetry* and *prose*:

- *Poetry* is a more crafted, stylistic, concise and emotive form of composition.
- *Prose* a more regular form of composition, less concise but more informational and factual.

When we deal with narrative we are mainly dealing with the prose form of writing.

Secondly, the Bible is preoccupied with **history** not fiction, fantasy or myth. The subject of biblical narrative is God and his acts in this world. The narrative parts of the Bible have an intent to inform us of these events in prose mostly **in a story format**. Yet that said, we must remember that this narration deals not only with 'what it says' but also 'how it says'.

The material of biblical narrative is about the 'stuff' of **our common human experience in the world under God**, containing a combination of the familiar and the unique, and tells us something important about that common experience. For this reason, some scholars have said that 'history is what happened, literature is what happens'. War, acts of heroism, murder, domestic trials etc are all an essential part of narrative. Most of the biblical accounts are not created to merely tell us certain events took place, but, in recording history, to relate that history to the theological message of the Bible. Biblical faith is the goal.

Narrative literature is really *a consciously composed literary artefact* – a form of art – *written to communicate a message about a specific story within the wider human experience of all people*.

What makes narrative distinct from say wisdom or prophesy, is that it is a far more **descriptive** medium than a **prescriptive** one. It 'merely' tells us what happened (think of the ruse of Jacob and Rebekah to inherit the blessing) rather than telling us about its morality or what lessons we, the readers, must learn from it. These stories describe events but do not prescribe them for us in any way. The reader is not addressed directly.

In sum, these narratives are three things:

1. A **Window** taking us into past history,
2. A **Portrait** of that history by the artist,
3. A **Mirror** showing us facts of our human and Christian condition.

The human literary creator & the divine literary Creator

The relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Biblical writer is important to discern.

The human author's point of view is key. He shapes and guides us all the way. **He controls the story.** He selects details, adding and leaving out by his design. He thus limits us and channels us in a certain direction. A story is the product of the author's choices. It is through his perspective that we observe and evaluate every thing connected with the story. This narrative strategy gives us the impression of an all-knowing mind standing behind the events. This mind is linked to the Holy Spirit and thus God himself, and we see a merging of these two. Both share a similar point of view.

The narrator (human literary creator) comes to us as omnipresent in his text as the one who relates the story and is present everywhere (ubiquitous). The narrator is omniscient, he knows everything, including the mind of God and the inner thoughts of people. The narrator is sovereign in that he controls everything and we cannot change anything of his account.

Once we realize that the narratives are consciously crafted by a 'narrator' to communicate a message to his original readers (the 'implied' readers), it will be necessary for us to interpret his text along the grain of his own composition. Becoming sensitive to the Spirit's workmanship in and through the writer is therefore important. But because the meaning of the narrative texts is implicit (*onuitgesproke*) and not explicit (*unitgesproke*), it requires some skill to interpret. Ultimately – and this is important - *the meaning of a biblical narrative is what the author meant to teach by the description and development of events recorded in it.*

How to Read Narrative

A: Be Aware of Context, Context, Context

Each episode is part of a larger context. Consider the following 'levels of Signification' by J P Fokkelman which moves from the smallest to the largest. We can also see these as the different literary levels.

1. sounds
2. syllables
3. words.
4. phrases
5. clauses
6. sentences
7. sequences/speeches
8. scene parts
9. scenes [pivotal; people/places; exits & entrances]
10. episodes [plot]
11. sections/cycles [compositional units]
12. book/composition
13. Old Testament – Creation, Fall, Abraham
14. Bible – New Testament, the story of Christ
- 15: Triune God

Identifying these contexts, the large and small frameworks, is very helpful and affects our understanding of the author's meaning. There are two important contexts to keep in mind:

The Context of Christ (a vital 'metanarrative'): I would add, that Christ is the 'Terminal' point of Scripture, and this means that he shapes the direction and content of Scripture. Putting all these stories in the light of the big Story of the Life of Christ is fundamental to knowing how these stories work. They are pregnant with him. He is the meaning of the Old Testament.

The Context of Creation and the Fall: This is the large setting for the whole Bible story, and all needs to be read within this massive framework. We should always remember Genesis 1-3 as the background for the Bible Story.

A good question is always to ask yourself: "*How does each part contribute to the whole?*"

B: Track the Plot

"The plot of a literary narrative is the succession of events, usually motivated by conflict, which generates suspense and leads to a conclusion" Longman.

Plot is the backbone of a story. It is the essential ingredient and attribute of a story. Without it a story is not a story. Plot is about the complications and conflicts encountered by the 'protagonists' (main actors) and how things move toward a resolution. Plot structures the action in the book and frames the episodes. Dr Tremper Longman well says that *we should identify the central plot conflict in the story and then see how the different episodes of the story fit into the progression toward the resolution of the conflict*. How does this unfold in the book of Ruth, David & Absalom, or the prophet Jonah?

*God's Big Plot centres in Creation-Abraham-Jesus Christ, and every piece of Scripture including all the conflict is to be read in that **Big Plot** and Context.*

C: Get into the Local Setting

Space is necessary for any story. There was no story before God created the world (but only in his mind). Creation sets the **stage** for the Story of God and made room for people to act. As stories develop there are shifting physical locations. These need to be observed. Since real space and time is given us as the context of the story, I advise using a map as you read the Bible. It helps 'earth' the story. When you read Ruth, observing the setting of Moab is essential to sense and locate yourself. Learn to think of how the author introduces geographical detail and why the location-shift is done here. It is part of his craft.

D: Notice the Characterization

Characterization is the product of a storyteller's craft and composition. It is about the people who populate the story and how they are created or 'drawn'. The material for the author to draw his character is from the universally common 'real life'. But as they exist in stories they are the result of many choices on the part of the author/s. Noticing how the narrator 'paints their portrait' in his story is the study of characterization. If we do so, we will see that the characters they 'create' are the result of careful design and strategy.

When you and I try and tell a story, most of us will tell a story that is all plot and no characterization. For good storytellers, rather, characterization is one of their main gifts. He or she crafts the character, deciding *what* to include and *when* to include or withhold something. They are strategic in their detail, working like a master sculptor on his raw material.

When we read we should seek to compile a character profile of a person. We see that the characters are like real people in that we can know them only partially and never exhaustively. We also only know them in their speech and actions. One of the things we should note is that the profile, in its more general identity, is:

- characters are either **Positive or Negative**.
- The '**Protagonist**' is a central good character in a story. The forces against this person are that of the '**Antagonist**'. These negative characters are often 'the foil' to contrast the protagonist. Yet readers always need to 'go with the flow' of the story as it unfolds, for we cannot presume on what a 'good' character is apart from the over all story!
- Characters in the Bible are either complex '**round**' characters (e.g. Abraham) or more '**flat**' and thin ones (e.g. Lot).
- Also look out for **major** or **minor** characters. Minor characters appear to perform a function are used to serve the plot and the main characters and nothing more (such as the Pharisees, Scribes). We often don't know their names.

How does an author orchestrate the data in such a way as to guide our responses in the desired direction? Story tellers achieve their persuasive end by controlling our patterns of sympathy and aversion (antipathy) to individual pieces of characterization and ultimately to an entire character. (Tremper Longman)

Mostly characterization happens through **action**. It has been said that: '*action is character and character is action*'. Ask yourself why lot lingered at Sodom? 'Most often we have to infer character from such actions and it is left to us the readers to draw out the right conclusions about character. Novelist Henry James said "*What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character*". (Longman)

In conclusion, here are some of *the details that make up the substance of a character in a Bible Story?*

- Physical actions
- Mental actions and thoughts (motivation for role players). Not often explicit. We need to infer.
- Words. Watch out for *how* a character speaks. Style.
- Feelings or emotions
- Traits and abilities
- Relationships and Roles
- Responses to events or people. (tells us a lot).
- Archetypal character types. Recurring through life and literature (hero, villan, tyrant, benevolent king, virtuous wife, martyr etc).

'Simply get to know the characters as thoroughly as the details allow you to do so'. Leland Ryken

Ways Readers Can Identify the Author's Intended Meaning in a Story (A.I.M.S)

In conclusion, we come back to the fact that narrative is an art form personally and intentionally crafted. Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke wisely observes: "*The narrative imitates and creatively represents real life in the same way a painting represents a real object. The 'meaning' of the painting is derived from how the painter represents the real object. The 'meaning' of the narrative is determined by how the narrator tells the story.*"

Robert H Stein, in his helpful book *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, suggests 8 ways readers can pick up the authorial intent of a narrative (one I have added):

- **Context:** we know the part in terms of the whole, and the whole by its parts; we must toggle back and forth between the immediate and far contexts.
- **Selection & Omission:** noting what an author includes and excludes is vital for going with the grain of his meaning. “The narrative reticence produces gaps in the story and thus both invites the reader into a participatory role in the interpretive process and protects the mystery of God and his ways in the world” Why does the narrator in 2 Sam 23:1 not tell us why God was angry with Israel? Why does Acts not tell us more about Paul’s life?
- **Introductions and Conclusions:** See Judges.
- **Authorial Comments:** Numbers 12:3 (Moses’ humility); Mark 7:19;
- **Authorial Summaries:** See Acts 4:32-37; 9:31 etc. These are the seams in the composition
- **Repetition:** Note the refrain in Kings ‘*He did not walk in the ways of David his father...*’
- **Proportion:** this is the simple fact of the amount of space devoted to a person/event in a frame.
- **Authoritative Speakers:** significant persons, the good (Samuel farewell speech) and evil (Abimelech)
- **Dialogue and Direct Discourse:** notice when an author switches from description to direct discourse.
- **Irony:** “*To say one thing but mean another, generally the opposite*” . Abimelech in Judges 9:54

To illustrate the above, let us use the section of David’s exile and restoration in the books of Samuel. We can identify the section as chapter 13-20.

- **Context:** this fits into monarchy theme of 1 and 2 Samuel; flows into David’s sin and Nathan’s prophecy 12:7-15;
 - **Selection & Omission:** Why the focus on Joab? What about international affairs?
 - **Introductions and Conclusions:** 13:1 and
 - **Authorial Comments:** 14:25; 15:6; 16:23
 - **Authorial Summaries:** 19:2; 19:15; 20:2
 - **Repetition:** Joab assassinations; rise & fall of people; David’s emotions to family trauma (13:21, 31, 36, 39; 14:33; 15:30; 18:33; 19:4, 39
 - **Proportion:** 14:1-20 (wise woman); 15:19-22 (Ittai); 16:15-17:14 (Hushai & Ahithophel); 18:19-33 (runners); Barzillai (19:31-38)
 - **Authoritative Speakers:** David and Joab.
 - **Dialogue and Direct Discourse:** 13:35; 15:31
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