

Discerning the Story Structures In the Narrative Literature of the Bible

by Barry McWilliams.

The Scriptures have a lot of narrative material, over 40%. These stories have thrilled most of us since childhood. God's story is *"magnificent, grander than the grandest epic, richer in plot and more significant in its characters and descriptions than any humanly composed story ever could be."* (Fee & Stuart) There is an art to listening to these stories - in recognizing their structure as stories, and the subtle clues within them, or, sometimes reading between the lines - in order to grasp their meanings for us. They are not just moral tales, or entertainments - they are perhaps the best revelation of God and His character as He both speaks and acts in human history. Beyond the basic concerns of word meanings and grammar, and of historical and cultural contexts, a Bible student needs to be aware of prose narrative structures. Though trained in seminary in the languages and in hermeneutical principles and methods, I became aware of these story structures through my interest in storytelling, and my own study and teaching and preaching from the Bible. I found confirmation in these in several sources which I commend to your study as well:

- **He Gave Us Stories** by Richard L. Pratt, J. (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1993)
- **The Art of Biblical Narrative** by Robert Alter (Basic Books, 1981)
- **An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning** by Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva (Zondervan, 1994) In particular Chapter 4.
- Also helpful is **How to Read the Bible for All its Worth** (Second Edition) by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan, 1993) which is helpful in understanding the various types of Biblical literature.

Steps in Story Analysis

Here are some of the steps I use in working with Bible Stories. I assume an inspired and trustworthy text, though sometimes a sparse one. From storytelling, I have learned that preserved oral traditions are often compacted texts, sometimes reduced to a "bare bones text". However everything that remains in the recorded text is all the more important to the story. The use of a particular word or phrase or description may be very important both for catching often subtle meanings, and in "fleshing out" the story. Sometimes we have to read a little between the lines, while using careful historical-grammatical exegesis, especially in developing a Bible Story.

1. A careful and alert reading of the text. Not just once, but many times, asking lots of questions. Be sure you ponder all the Six "C's": Character, Circumstances, Conflict, Crisis, Climax and Conclusion.

2. Visualize the story as you read it calling upon all the senses, and not just what has been included, but what is also implied, or suggested. Are there details or aspects left out, but yet implied by the whole.

3. Visualize it from the viewpoints of each of the characters. Look for clues concerning the characters - their state of mind, feelings, motivations. Since the Bible is sparse in giving descriptions, pay attention when it does; and to the significance of names.

4. Be alert for repetitions of words, phrases, actions. Be alert for changes in pacing, shifts in settings, or in the mode of narration, use of dialog, etc. These offer important clues.

5. Diagram the plot. Break it down into its structure - episodes and scenes. What was the problem? The turning point? Is the conclusion satisfactory?

6. Consider "Why?" the story. Why was it included in the narrative by the writers? What role does it have in the flow of its larger contexts? Why has God passed it on to us?

7. In preparing the story for telling, whether as a story or in a sermon, I will look for ways to convey in my telling, not just the facts, but also the dramatic action and emotional "colors" of the tale as it has come "to life" for me.

The Building blocks of Narrative Literature:

As I became more sensitive to storytelling, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of recognizing the basic elements of character, scene and plot in understanding a story. In learning any story for telling, one analyzes it, looking for, and diagramming these elements. In Biblical narratives, they give us significant clues concerning the meanings God has for us.

Characters

God is the hero of Biblical narrative and its most important character, though sometimes he disappears into the background, yet He is always present.

The human characters are many, and they are presented honestly, noting their virtues and weaknesses. The authors exercised much selectivity in choosing what to tell us about them, sometimes, they are presented as fully three dimensional people (like Moses or David), and sometimes, as flat (plain and colorless, exhibiting just one character trait) - or merely functionary characters in the story. Judgments are often given concerning their actions and hearts - the clues to their character are in: descriptions of appearance (which are rare, so usually significant), their social status, overt actions, dialogue and speech; as other descriptive comments, as well as any reactions of the author, or subsequent blessing or judgment by God. Scripture is not neutral concerning its characters, and often makes significant value judgments concerning them.

Within the stories, the characters take on particular roles in their relationships to each other:

- **Protagonist:** The main character of the story (whether good or bad) and his supporters.
- **Antagonist:** The character (again whether good or bad) who is arrayed against the protagonist - representing the opposite side of the dramatic tension.
- **Foil:** a character that serves as a contrast to the main character.
- **Ambivalent** characters are those who either support neither side, or shift from one to the other.

Dialogue

Dialogue has an important role in narrative stories. It frequently reveals character as *"the transactions between characters unfold through the words they exchange, with only the most minimal intervention of the narrator."* (Robert Alter) The point at which it is introduced, or narration is resumed is often significant in the story. Sometimes a summarizing speech is introduced at a critical juncture to speed up the flow of the narrative, avoid repetition or give perspective.

Scenes

A story is a sequence of scenes. A scene presents what took place at one particular moment and place. They are basic building blocks [i.e. the "paragraphs" of narrative literature]. We need to learn how to define them - and to discern when the scene has changed. This is often signaled by a significant shift in Time (such as a gap ("and it came to pass"), a shift to a previous time ("meanwhile"), or a flashback ("Now it had happened that...")); or in the Pacing of the story: when the "action" speeds up or slows down; or the "focus" of the writer draws in closer on the details, or out to a broader perspective; or there is a shift of place (or of a place's environment - such as shifts from day night), or a change of characters is made.

Within scenes, Imagery is often significant: all senses should be engaged and taking note of whatever sights, sounds, touching, smells, and flavors (taste). Stories are as much pictures as they are words. All these contribute to our experience of the story.

Plots:

Dramatic flow is also an essential part of story. Even the simplest story will have a plot. To be sure, Reports (Statements of facts) are found in narrative and sometimes conflicts are presented as unresolved tension, but most Biblical narratives have the basic elements of conflict and resolution. Biblical stories have a beginning, middle and end; there is frequently a climax, or turning point in the middle and they usually have carefully structured symmetry and balance in the presentation of these. A similar structure called Parallelism is the basic characteristic of Biblical poetry, in fact the various kinds of Parallelism can be seen in the arrangements of narrative stories as well..

Episodes

Episodes are the simplest unit of narrative material displaying a significant level of independence from the larger context, i.e., a series of scenes which are grouped in Phases and Steps which together make up the complete "story". The Steps are made up of various scenes and phases (which are groups of scenes unified by their characters, or setting, or theme). They are the basic parts of the plot and usually take one of these structural forms:

Two Steps [problem | resolution],

Three Steps [problem / turning point \ resolution],

Four Steps [problem / rising actions | falling actions \ resolution]

Five Steps [problem / rising actions / turning point \ falling actions \ resolution]

Within an episode, there will be symmetry and balance - problems have their corresponding solutions, and similarly rising actions (where tension increases) correspond to falling actions (where tension decreases.) The Turning point or climax is also important.

Narratives, Sub-plots & The big picture:

Narratives also have larger structures where they may show similar arrangements of episodes - sometimes arranging episodes chronologically; presenting them as simultaneous events or gathering episodes topically into clusters, or by paralleling episodes. These ultimately become the Books of the Bible.

You can almost expand these structures beyond individual Books of the Bible into Four great Epics - Moses and the Exodus and the Conquest. Saul, David and the United Kingdom. The Kings and Prophets. The Exile and Restoration. All setting the Stage for God's greatest Story: Jesus! And the Story of His Church that follows. We can thus talk of a story existing in three levels - individually as an account of its characters; as a part of its intermediate contexts (within the history of Israel); and ultimately in God's working out of his divine decrees.

Literary Devices

A number of rhetorical devices are used on both the verbal and larger levels:

Repetition is a favorite Hebrew literary form in both Narrative and Poetical literature, whether of words and phrases, or of actions, images, motifs, themes or ideas. Use of repetition is frequently significant and offers clues to understanding meaning.

Resumptive Repetition is when a writer returns to a point in a story after narrating a related incident.

Inclusion uses repetition to mark off the beginning and ending of a section, framing or bracketing of the episode what it contains.

Chiasm, a Semitic poetic form, is sometimes used in prose arrangements as well, juxtaposing reversing, or contrasting words, dialogues, episodes, scenes and events. Walter Kaiser calls it "*one of the major artistic conventions for narratives in the Bible. . . a key for detecting an author's aims for the main event or principle idea typically occurs in the apex - that is the middle of the story.*"

At sometime in the narrative, the author will bring to a climax the series of episodes in the various scenes, supplying the whole Point of View for the story, the perspective from which the whole story is told.

Beware of allegorizing or moralizing narratives.

They are not intended to teach moral principles, though they may illustrate them. Do not assume from them that God expects us to behave in the same ways as Biblical characters, or that we will have the same experiences. *"Narratives are precious to us because they so vividly demonstrate God's involvement in the world and illustrate his principles and calling. They thus teach us a lot - but what they directly teach us does not systematically include personal ethics. For that area of life, we must turn elsewhere in the Scriptures, to the various places where personal ethics are actually taught categorically and explicitly."* (Fee & Stuart)

The questions of authorship and composition:

The authors of Biblical narratives are largely unknown, and their intentions and audience must largely be deduced from the narratives. They clearly collected, copied and used both oral and written sources and sometimes quoted from each other. Their audiences may have been living in different circumstances than the subjects of the Narratives.

The time spans of the events recounted are often different from the rather broad time spans of the composition of the narrative (its boundaries being: the absence of significant events being mentioned, anachronistic statements, and other authorial comments [which set the latest possible date]; as well as external references to the document, the latest events mentioned in it, or its ideological viewpoint [which sets its earliest possible date]).

Some examples: Moses wrote Genesis over 300 years after the days of the Patriarchs and Joseph, to explain the background of the Exodus to the people; Judges was written when there was a king as justification for needing one, Kings was written after the fall of the monarchy in Jerusalem, probably early in the captivity; and Chronicles even later in the days of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the city. They contain a narrative history of real people and actual events, a history that can be confirmed with the archaeologist's trowel, and by the ancient documents of other cultures. But the intention was not just to record history. But rather to tell His Story! The authors were highly selective in the episodes they used and in the details they included, carefully editing and selecting that which suited to theirs (and the Holy Spirit's) purposes. Clues to deducing these are found in the characters, scenes, literary structures and other techniques they used to disclose their viewpoint.

Once we have done our study of the original story, and understand its meanings through word, grammar and narrative structure within its particular cultural and historical contexts, then we can begin to develop it into a story, fleshing it out, and making it come to life for our listeners.

Barry McWilliams

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