

Beginnings: A Walk Through Genesis

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Starting to Read Genesis

“The proper interpretation of any piece of literature, and in particular a text as ancient and as important as the Bible, deserves our careful reflection.”¹

So where does one start when they begin to read a book in the Bible? The logical answer is with chapter one, duh! Sure, when you start to read chapter one is a better starting point than chapter five or twenty. But before you start reading a book doesn't it make sense to know somethings about the book itself?

- Who wrote it?
- What was that guy like?
- Why did he write it?
- Who was it written to?
- When was it written?
- What type of book is it? (genre)

We will consider all of these questions, in fact, in order to understand the book well we need these answers before we dive in. However, it is this last question, what type of book is Genesis, that will serve as our starting point.

What Are Our Options?

When we are asking about the type of book Genesis is, we are asking the question, what genre does it come from? Do you remember learning that word in school? For me I always confused genre and gerund (even though they bear little resemblance). So let's start with this question, what does genre mean?

¹ Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 17.

The word *genre* is a French word that means “kind, sort, style.”² In essence, genre describes different types of literature.

What different types of genre then do we find in our Bible?

- Historical narrative (Genesis, 1st half of Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jonah)
- Law (2nd half of Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy)
- Wisdom (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)
- Psalms (Psalms, Song of Songs, Lamentations)
- Prophecy (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)
- Apocalyptic (Daniel & Revelation)
- Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John & Acts)
- Epistles (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, and Jude)

What is our goal of interpretation? The answer to this question is not as straightforward as one might think. The technical name for what we are talking about is *hermeneutics*. Perhaps someday I might teach a class on interpretation and what is all involved and what is contested. For now, what I want to start with and what will operate with in this class is that we are pursuing the intention of the author who is writing the text (do you see why it is going to be important to know who wrote it?).

So to do this we need to identify what kind of writing we are looking at. If we don't identify the genre correctly the way in which it is interpreted can and will change.

² Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1971), 67.

Longman says in *How to Read Genesis*:³

It makes a world of difference whether we identify Genesis as myth, parable, history, legend or a combination of these and other genres. We expect different things from a parable than we do from a history book. Furthermore, if we conclude Genesis is in some sense a history, that doesn't end the genre question, because there are different types of history writing.

The identification of Genesis genre is not one without controversy. However, most conservative Bible teachers and preachers identify Genesis as historical narrative. Longman at times will treat Genesis this way and at other times he'll treat it as parable. I do not agree with this approach.

Narrative: Now What?

Now that we know it is narrative we need to come to an understanding of what is all involved in narrative. That is where we will pick up next week.

Life Study Assignment

1. Read the article I have attached to the notes here called "Biblical Narrative." Mark it up, ask questions, and bring it back next week and that is where we will start.
2. Order a book on this sign-up sheet. Everyone put your information on it and fill it out, put \$10 in the envelope for your book if you have it this week, if not bring it next week. We are running on the honor system here. I will assume that if you don't pay you cannot afford it right now and that is fine, I will take care of it for you.

³ Longman, *How to Read Genesis*, 23.

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CHAPTER 4

Biblical Narrative

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Prose and poetry are the two basic modes of literary communication. What constitutes the one over against the other differs in various cultures and time periods, and it is always difficult to make a hard and fast distinction between them. In general terms, though, **prose is much like the language of normal conversation, and thus poetry is often considered a language characterized by a higher degree of literary artifice.**

Literature has a variety of functions. It informs readers, arouses their emotions, stimulates their imaginations, and appeals to their will. **Prose is often the discourse of choice for those written acts of communication whose predominant aim is to inform.** This statement does not intend to preclude the informative function of poetic discourse, but it does take into account the accentuated artifice of poetic language.

It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that most of the Bible is prose, since its authors intend to communicate a message. What is striking to most readers of the Bible is the occurrence of large portions of poetic material (see next chapter).

Much of the Bible is written in a prose format and, more specifically, narrative. Narrative may be distinguished from other prose forms like the

essay or the report by its storylike nature. Quite simply, narrative prose tells a story. That is, its events are related to one another by an explicit or implicit cause-and-effect structure. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore the nature of biblical narrative.

The Literary Quality of Biblical Narrative

The literary nature of biblical poetry has been unquestioned for centuries. The same is not true for the narrative portions of the Bible.

The church has focused our attention on the Bible's theological message, and scientific theology has concerned itself with the question of sources and historical referentiality. Both tend to denigrate its literary function (Prickett). However, because of recent studies by biblical and literary scholars an interest in the storylike character of biblical narrative has resurfaced.

When allowed to stand as unified compositions, the stories of the Old and New Testaments work powerfully on the imagination, vividly evoking a world long since past. Some of the more memorable include the episodic account of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, the novellalike Joseph story, the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea, the tragedy of Samson and Delilah, the epic episode of David and Goliath. The list could continue. Not only are these stories literary masterpieces themselves, but they have exerted an incredible influence on the form and content of all subsequent Western literature (Frye). Until very recent times, authors and poets, whether sympathetic or hostile to the Judeo-Christian tradition, wrote from a deep knowledge of Scripture and assumed the same from their readers.

Robert Alter ("A Response" 113) has reminded us that each culture tells stories differently:

Every culture, even every era in a particular culture, develops distinctive and sometimes intricate codes for telling its stories, involving everything from narrative point of view, procedures of description and characterization, the management of dialogue, to the ordering of time and the organization of plot.

This conviction encourages us to look closely at biblical narrative rather than simply assuming that it is like narrative from our own culture. We will see that there are traits that distinguish modern narrative from ancient biblical narrative. We can, however, group Old and New Testament narrative together. The two narrative traditions are very similar, perhaps because most

of the New Testament, though written in Greek, was authored by people steeped in the Old Testament and its culture.

As mentioned, the Bible contains a number of memorable narratives. These stories display an impressive variety of theme and character. But the Bible as a whole constitutes a single narrative. The main characters and the setting are introduced in the first two chapters of Genesis. They are God and the human race as they interact in the latter's earthly home. Suspense is introduced into the story by the Fall, narrated in Genesis 3. The sin of Adam and Eve has led to alienation from God. The bulk of the Bible narrates what God does about this problem and how people react to God's actions. The whole story comes to denouement in the last two chapters with the vision of the New Jerusalem and the restoration of relationship between God and his people.

The Dynamics of Narrative

All stories have four elements, though the way in which these elements are presented in a story may and do differ from culture to culture and even within the same culture. These four are plot, characters, setting, and narrator/point of view. These are closely interrelated with one another, but for purpose of description I will give each a separate discussion.

PLOT

The plot of a literary narrative is the succession of events, usually motivated by conflict, which generates suspense and leads to a conclusion. Abrams calls it a "structure of actions" (137) and points out that plot analysis is not a simple recitation of the episodes that make up a story, but happens "only when we say how this is related to that" (137). In other words, the reader must decide how each part contributes to the whole. This narrative trait of plot is so pervasive that readers will automatically attribute causation between narrative episodes even if they are not explicit in the text itself.

Thus, while one is analyzing narrative in the Bible, it is illuminating to describe the plot. One way of proceeding is to identify the central plot conflict of a book and then see how the different episodes of the story fit into the progression toward the resolution of the conflict.

I will illustrate this by a brief look at the book of Jonah. The central conflict of the book of Jonah becomes obvious in the first three verses. God gives Jonah a command to preach in the city of Nineveh, and Jonah refuses by hopping on a boat that is sailing in the opposite direction. Jonah's reluctance,

motivated by an intense hatred of Assyria that is rooted in his ethnocentrism, is contrasted to God's concern for his creatures in that city.

There are four major scenes in the book that constitute the plot and correspond roughly to the four chapters of Jonah as they are divided in the English Bible (the Hebrew differs). These are Jonah's flight from God in a boat, God's rescue of Jonah by means of a great fish, Jonah's preaching in Nineveh, and Jonah's final conflict with God after God spares Nineveh. As we will see, the four episodes are easily distinguished by means of their different settings.

The first episode heightens the conflict between God and Jonah and thus heightens the tension that the reader feels. Jonah is trying to get as far away from Nineveh as he possibly can. In so doing, he is attempting to flee from God as well, something that he soon finds impossible to do. God's long arm reaches out and causes the sailors to reluctantly throw Jonah overboard.

The second episode illustrates how impotent Jonah is as he stands against God and his purposes. God rescues Jonah from certain death by causing a large fish to swallow him. This fish provides Jonah with safe, if admittedly uncomfortable, haven until God delivers him onto the shore. Though undignified, his arrival on the shore points him toward Nineveh, and there he resignedly goes.

The third episode shows Jonah doing God's will. The brevity of Jonah's sermon as reported in the book highlights his reluctance: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." In spite of the fact that he provides no door of hope to the Ninevites, they repent and are spared. Jonah's reaction to Nineveh's deliverance shows that the conflict with God is not resolved. Jonah fusses and fumes over God's deliverance of Nineveh, presumably because God shows compassion to a people who have oppressed and tormented Israel. But God has the last word. The book closes with God's question to Jonah: "Should I not be concerned about that great city?" Although we never hear Jonah's response, the question is rhetorical, and thus the reader is left with the obvious conclusion that God's way of compassion and mercy is the right one, while Jonah is satirized as a narrow-minded Israelite (see below).

CHARACTERS

A second important aspect of the analysis is the examination of the characters who populate a story. The close association between plot and character may be observed in the fact that it is the characters who generate the actions that make up the plot, thus leading to the famous statement from Henry James, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" (qtd. in Chatman 112-13).

Characters are like real people in that we can know them only partially and never exhaustively. Our knowledge of real people comes through our experience of them in their actions and conversation. We learn about the characters of a story in much the same way—by their actions and by speech (both the speeches they make and those that are made about them).

Our understanding of a character is controlled and mediated by the narrator, who may even be one of the characters. The narrator may choose to reveal much about a character, in which case the character is complex or round; or the narrator may choose to tell us very little about a character, who is therefore flat. There are even some characters about whom we learn next to nothing. They appear to perform some specialized function in the plot and are simply agents (Berlin 31-32).

Other technical language that for some reason is not used as frequently in biblical studies, though it is more common in literary studies, is that of protagonist, antagonist, and foil. The protagonist is the main character of the story and the one through whose perspective we follow most of the action. The antagonist is the one who stands against the protagonist, blocking his or her desires. The foil is a character who serves as a contrast to other characters, most often the protagonist (Ryken 72).

Jonah is the protagonist of the Old Testament story. We are not sympathetic toward him, even though we may identify with him. God and the Ninevites (an unlikely pair) are Jonah's antagonists. The sailors on the boat on which Jonah tries to flee from God are a foil to Jonah, because, though they are pagans, they show respect and fear toward Jonah's God.

Jonah and God are round, complex characters, whereas the Ninevites as a whole constitute a single "corporate" flat character, and the king of Nineveh (or even the "great fish" for that matter) an agent.

Since Auerbach (3-23) and much later Alter (*The Art* 114-30), the biblical narrator's reticence about such things as character development is well documented. The biblical text does little by way of direct commentary and description of its characters. When details are given, they are therefore of special significance to the story. Thus Samson's hair, Saul's height, Bathsheba's beauty, and Job's righteousness are all crucial elements of their story. Most of our knowledge of a character comes indirectly through actions and dialogue.

Biblical narrative does not speak explicitly of the characters' personality or the motivations of their actions; therefore the reader is called upon to enter into the process and interpret the gaps of the narrative. This is not as subjective as it sounds. That David does not go out to war in the spring (2 Sam. 11:1) is clearly a negative statement about the king, a fact that becomes evident because his leisurely presence in Jerusalem leads to such

catastrophic consequences (2 Sam. 11–12). Perhaps the best advice is Ryken's when he instructs Bible readers to "simply get to know the characters as thoroughly as the details allow you to" (75).

SETTING

The setting of a story is the space in which the characters perform the actions that constitute the plot. It is important to recognize, however, that setting performs more than one function in a narrative. Much of the narrative of the Bible is highly literary prose with a historical intention. It is therefore not surprising that biblical authors give us details about specific physical locations in which the action takes place. Thus the first important function of setting in biblical literature is that it imparts reality to the story. We can picture the action of the story in our minds as that action is related to well-known ancient settings. But setting contributes more to a story than providing a simple backdrop for the action. Other functions include generating the atmosphere or mood of a narrative and contributing to the story's meaning and structure. Let me illustrate these three functions of narrative with another brief look at the book of Jonah.

Although we are not told where Jonah is when he first hears the word of the Lord, we are told that he flees to the port town of Joppa. He is fleeing from Nineveh by setting sail on the Mediterranean. These locations are all historical places well known from antiquity. They are not the fabrication of the author's imagination. Their use in the narrative implies the reality of the story.

The book of Jonah further provides illustration of the other two functions of setting—generating atmosphere and contributing to the meaning of a story. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, and eventually he does go there. Important to the story is the fact that Nineveh was the major city of Assyria, the ruthless nation that oppressed Israel and many other small nation states for over a century. After receiving the call to go to Nineveh, Jonah flees in the opposite direction. His westward rather than eastward direction tells the reader much about Jonah's state of mind toward God without the need for direct authorial commentary.

Finally, in one of the most spectacular settings of any biblical story, Jonah speaks with God from the belly of a large fish in the depths of the sea. This setting shows God's control even over the sea and its monsters. The sea and its monsters are often found, especially in poetic settings, as representative of the forces of chaos and the absence of God. By having Jonah speak to God from the belly of the fish, the biblical author makes it clear that Jonah can find no place on earth to escape God (Ps. 139).

We must realize that in the historical narrative that dominates the narrative genre of the Bible, the author's choice of setting was usually restricted. Authors simply placed action where it actually occurred. Of course these authors controlled the selectivity of detail in the description of settings, requiring the reader to pay close attention to these textual signals.

POINT OF VIEW

This last narrative trait is closely related to the presence of a narrative voice in the story. The narrator is the one who controls the story. His is the voice through whom we hear about the action and the people of the narrative. The narrator's point of view is the perspective through which we observe and evaluate everything connected with the story. In short, the narrator is a device used by authors to shape and guide how the reader responds to the characters and events of the story.

Literary critics make some basic distinctions in point of view, starting with first- and third-person narrative. In first-person narrative, the narrator is also a character in the story. This kind of narrative appears infrequently in the Bible, but it may be illustrated by parts of Nehemiah and the "we" passages in Acts. By far the most frequent type of narrative is that of the third-person narrator, about whom Rhoads and Michie (36) comment thus:

The narrator does not figure in the events of the story; speaks in the third person; is not bound by time or space in the telling of the story; is an implied invisible presence in every scene, capable of being anywhere to "recount" the action; displays full omniscience by narrating the thoughts, feelings, or sensory experiences of many characters; often turns from the story to give direct "asides" to the reader, explaining a custom or translating a word or commenting on the story; and narrates the story from one overarching ideological point of view.

As these and other authors have pointed out, such a narrative strategy gives the impression of an all-knowing mind standing behind the stories of the Bible—a mind that in the context of the canon must be associated with God himself.

Thus it is not surprising that the Bible knows nothing of the so-called unreliable narrator. In the words of Sternberg, "The Bible always tells the truth in that its narrator is absolutely and straightforwardly reliable" (51). As Sternberg also notes, the narrator, while telling the truth, often does not tell the whole truth, and this results in the characteristic brevity of biblical narration. This 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.

Narrative Style

There are many different ways of telling the same story. For instance, a scene in a novel could be presented by means of a dialogue or through a description by a narrator. These choices contribute to the style of a work. In the words of Leech and Short (19), "Every writer necessarily makes choices of expression, and it is in these choices, in his 'way of putting things,' that style resides. . . . Every analysis of style . . . is an attempt to find the artistic principles underlying a writer's choice of language."

The concept of narrative style may be expanded beyond that of an individual author, so that on a more general level we may speak of a cultural style. My purpose in this section is to examine biblical style in the spirit of Alter's methodologies. We will in turn look at the following narrative devices: repetition, omission, dialogue, and irony.

REPETITION

Repetition is a function of most literature, but it is particularly emphasized in biblical literature, where it occurs on a number of different levels: words, motifs, themes, and whole scenes (what Alter calls type scenes [see *The Art* 95–113]). While here we are most interested in repetitions that occur within a unified work, we must also keep in mind that some repetition, especially of motif and theme, occurs beyond a single work and even across the whole canon (see Longman 1982 for an example). Here is where literary study intersects with biblical theology.

Repetition provides a sense of coherence to a narrative. This coherence is denied even by some critics like Alter who prefer to think of the text as a "composite unity," thus providing a diachronic explanation for a synchronic phenomenon. That is, the repetition is taken as a sign that the text is the end result of a process in which several sources have been brought together over a period of time. Over against this approach, others argue that the repetition may provide the key to the meaning of a story (Ryken 83), as in 2 Samuel 7 where the repetition of "house" (*bayit*) indicates that the chapter is about the building of David's "house," that is dynasty.

OMISSION

Another characteristic trait of biblical narrative is its tendency to omit information that the reader might expect to find. I hinted at this above when I described the "reticent narrator" (Alter). This phenomenon has also been called gapping and is nicely described by Sternberg (235) as "a lack of information about the world—an event, motive, causal link, character trait, plot structure, law of probability—contrived by a temporal displacement."

DIALOGUE

In the context of telling a story, the narrator will often recount dialogue. Different literary traditions have various ways of handling dialogue. For instance, nineteenth-century English novels (e.g., those by Eliot) have considerable narrative exposition in relationship to dialogue. Biblical prose is the opposite, with a noticeable preference for dialogue, so much so that Alter (1981, 69) speaks of the Bible's penchant for "narration-through-dialogue."

While the narrative exposition of the Bible is important to convey necessary information, the reader's interest is often captured most readily by dialogue. It brings a vividness to the story, a sense of being present.

Alter (63–87) and Berlin (64–87) provide detailed examples of the conventions of dialogue in the Bible. These include such things as the predominance of two-character dialogues, the importance of the initiation of the dialogue, the manner in which dialogue will contrast two characters, and the way in which dialogue "conveys the characters' internal psychological and ideological points of view" (Berlin 64).

IRONY

Irony is a term that is hard to pin down because it is used to label a number of different, though related, textual strategies. Edwin Good, in one of the few full discussions of biblical irony in recent days, throws out a simple definition at which he scoffs: "To say one thing but mean another, generally the opposite—that is sufficient definition of irony for most people" (22). But then, again, he never finally arrives at a more sophisticated definition.

One of the clearest discussions of irony may be found in Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Irony*. Booth makes an important distinction between stable irony and unstable irony, of which only the former is found in the Bible. He describes stable irony as sharing four characteristics. First, it is *intended* by the author. The ironic author asserts "something in order to have it rejected as false" (Muecke 56). Of course, this view involves a hypothesis about an unstated intention of the author, but Booth points out that stable

ironies are almost always easily recognized. Second, stable irony is *covert*. The implied author and narrator are silent about the ironic nature of a statement or passage. Ironies are "intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface" (Booth 6). Third, biblical ironies are *stable* in that there is a limit to how deeply they displace the surface meaning of the text. Finally, such ironies are limited in terms of scope, treating only a certain part of the text as ironic. In Booth's terms they are *local*. Biblical narrative contains many examples of irony in both the Old and New Testaments. Turning again to the book of Jonah, we may cite, among many other ironies, the fact that an Israelite prophet disobeys God's command to preach repentance, while the hardened and notoriously violent Assyrians repent after a sermon that takes all of a verse (3:4) and simply announces judgment with no mention of the possibility of forgiveness.

Conclusion

The narratives of the Bible thus are both similar to and different from contemporary narratives. As the past few years have abundantly demonstrated, we may, as a result, benefit in our understanding of the stories of the Bible by taking a literary approach to them. In doing so, however, we must never lose sight of the other dimensions of the biblical text, notably its historical and theological significance. With this reminder, however, it is possible to bracket those functions for pedagogical purposes and to concentrate for the moment on the impressive narrative strategies of the individual books that make up the Bible. This is the task of the chapters to follow.

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