An Introduction to the Hermeneutics
of Old Testament Narrative

WILLIAM K. BECHTOLD, III
Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies,
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Dedication

One of my first seminary classes was Alan Tomlinson's Biblical Hermeneutics. Like many first year seminarians, I was both eager and confident. Eager to learn more about the biblical text I had been studying for the past ten years; confident that my knowledge was already at an advanced stage. By the end of that first class period, my eagerness remained, but my confidence did not. Tomlinson made it abundantly clear that I knew little to nothing about the Bible, and that my study skills were woefully inadequate for the task before me. In the decade since that first class, I have taken Dr. Tomlinson's first—and most important—lesson to heart: in order to study the Bible correctly, we must seek to understand the text in that most-important of all environments: its context. Any student (current or former) of Dr. Tomlinson will tell you that the one thing he drills into his students—the *sine que non* of his classes—is context. Context is king. To ignore the original context of the biblical material is to misunderstand that material.

Dr. Tomlinson passionately pleaded with his students to draw our theology *from* the text, not to lay our theology on the text. To do that, we had to learn how rightly find the author's intended meaning in the text, based on the original context. To do that also meant a lifetime of careful study in a variety of areas—such as language, historical backgrounds, and genre study—each area another tool in our hermeneutic tool kit. Because of Dr. Tomlinson's profound impact on my Bible study, I think it fitting to honor him by introducing Bible students to an important tool for their own tool kits.

The purpose of this article is to provide for students of the Bible with an overview of one of the methodologies that have developed within the field of Old Testament narrative criticism/theology: Poetics. Poetics studies how narrative has been constructed, as literature. Adele Berlin

writes, "Poetics, the science of literature, is not an interpretive effort—it does not aim to elicit meaning from a text. Rather it aims to find the building blocks of literature and the rules by which they are assembled."[1] Does this mean that Poetics have nothing to offer the field of theology? On the contrary: as this article will demonstrate, the "building blocks of literature" exist to construct the author's theological message.[2]

This article will provide an overview of how the field of Poetics relates to Old Testament hermeneutics. First, this article will then briefly sketch the development toward Poetics in biblical theology of the 20th century, and summarize the methodology of four significant scholars in the field. It will then address two concerns that students might have in treating the Bible as literature. As I will demonstrate, to interpret the biblical text as literature does not in any way diminish its inerrancy and authority. Indeed, Poetics can help the interpreter to find the intended theological lesson of the biblical material. With this in mind, I will conclude with a discussion of how one element of Poetics—characterization—can be used to identify the ideological/theological intent of the author. It is my hope that it can serve as a jumping off point for students to begin to study the method themselves to help with a lifetime of successful Bible study.

Movement Toward Poetics in the 20th Century (In Brief)

It has long been recognized that the biblical material has the mark of high literary merit, however there has often been difficulty, especially within Old Testament theology, with coming to terms with the literary nature of the text. Previously, the term "literary-criticism" referred to source-critical approaches that were not interested in literary devices, structure, or intent. The text was atomized, and interest was in tracing an evolutionary development of ideas across hypothetical strata reconstructed within a Hegelian dialectic. This "literary" approach, as Gros Luis notes, was quite different than what "teachers of literature

---

[1] Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 15.

[2] For the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms "ideological" and "theological" interchangeably.

do."[3] In the Old Testament, narrative makes up approximately 40% of the corpus, but scholars were breaking apart the narrative nature of the text, ignoring the possibilities of a truly literary approach.[4] This did not do the text justice. Sternberg writes that the Bible is, "[n]ot just an artful work; not a work marked by some aesthetic property; not a work resorting to so-called literary devices; not a work that the interpreter may choose (or refuse) to consider from a literary viewpoint or, in that unlovely piece of jargon, as literature; *but a literary work."[5]* The clear implication of this is that to understand the biblical text, one must appropriately understand its literary nature.

Though a narrative approach to biblical studies has been present from ancient time, the real beginning of biblical narrative criticism proper came in the late 1960s. James Muilenburg's 1968 presidential address at the Society of Biblical Literature marked the beginning of a turn beyond Form Critical approaches to the text, and toward Rhetorical

---

[3] Kenneth R.R. Gros Luis, "Some Methodological Considerations," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (eds. K. R. R. Gros Luis and J. S. Ackerman; vol. 2 of; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1982), 14. Clines writes that narrative study does not necessarily ignore the lessons that may be learned from the "vast investment of scholarly effort in analysis of the pre-history of the Pentateuchal text...." However, he also notes that "in the end he has to take his stand with the text that won out, and not with JEDP or whatever." David J. A. Clines, "Story and Poem: The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture," in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism* (ed. P. R. House; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 33.

[4] Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 93. Barr has noted that the clearest marking within the complex of information in the text is that of temporal sequence, meaning that there is an intentional presence of story. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 345. See also James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism* (ed. P. R. House; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), who noted intentional rhetorical devices within the text that require closer study.

[5] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (vol. The Indiana literary biblical series; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 2. Emphasis added.

Criticism in biblical studies.[6] Muilenburg did not argue that Form Criticism should be abandoned—indeed, he considered himself a form critic—but noted the limits of the discipline. He further argued that the Old Testament material showed strong evidence of aesthetic and rhetorical construction. Around the same time, scholars such as Brevard Childs (1970) were developing theological approaches that shifted toward a more canonical reading, focusing on the final form of the text and the ways in which that form had been shaped to communicate theological intent.[7] He developed this in response to what he called a "crisis" in biblical theology that, among other things, shifted attention away from the text and toward revelation in history. Further, several scholars began arguing for a story approach to biblical theology, which began shifting the discussion from a historical approach to OT theology and toward a literary one.[8] However, these approaches, though taking the

---

[6] Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," For more on the history of narrative theology, structuralism, and poetics, see Paul R. House, "The Rise and Current Status of Literary Criticism of the Old Testament," in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992); Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), 1-10; John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1984), 141-54; Walter Bodine, "Discourse Analysis of Biblical Literature: What it Offers," in *Discourse Analysis of Biblical Literature* (ed. Walter Bodine; The Society of Biblical Literary Semeia Studies; Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1995), 1-18; Richard Jacobson, "The Structuralists and the Bible," in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism* (ed. P. R. House; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992) Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 132-8. This is not to mention von Rad's own theology, which viewed the material as a constructed actualization of the traditions. On the surface, this is similar to a literary approach, but von Rad's interest was in tracing the tradition-history of the text, which was still atomistic in methodology.

[7] Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia,: Westminster Press, 1970); Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1978).

[8] See, for example, Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of BIblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1974), James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1980), For a list of other works on narrative theology

narrative seriously as literature, did not emphasize how the narrative itself functioned *as narrative*.

By the 1980s, the field of Poetics hit its stride. Developing out of Formalism, which had begun in non-biblical literary studies in the early 20th century,[9] Poetics addressed the form and function of narrative. In this section, I will discuss the most significant and influential scholars whose work drove and defined the field of Poetics for the next two decades. This is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion. Indeed, to interact with all of the authors working within Poetics (or other similar literary approaches) would extend beyond the space allotted here.[10] What this will show is that the field went from the vague readings of the 1970s toward a well-defined and fruitful field of its own. I encourage any student interested in further study of Poetics to begin with these four authors. Though not all of them are evangelical in their approach to or view of the biblical material, their methodology in analyzing the *final form* of the narrative text is quite helpful. In the section below, I will also highlight important terms so that interested students can know what to pay attention to in their own study of the field.

Robert Alter

In 1981, Robert Alter argued in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* that literary art plays a crucial role in shaping biblical narrative.[11] Rather than looking behind the text to the hypothetical sources to explain such features as repetition and apparent contradictions, Alter argued that such features may rather be explained via literary devices that the author (or redactor) intentionally utilized to fit his rhetorical purpose. In Alter, the literary

---

during this time, see Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 132-8.

[9] For instance, see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. W. Trask; Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953), and the collection of works by Vladimir Propp, which was published after his death: Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore* (Theory and History of Literature 5; trans. A. Y. Martin and R. P. Martin; Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1984).

[10] See, for example, the sources referenced in note 6 in Longman III, "Literary Approaches to Old Testament Study," 99.

[11] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 1.

movement in biblical studies found a solid and purposeful methodology. Alter himself expressed his surprise that such literary approaches are new in OT studies, contending that the religious nature of the text hindered such study.[12] However, in lieu of the myriad of suggested meanings within the text, Alter (though he denies that any text can be said to have a single, absolute meaning) writes that "it seems to me that we shall come much closer to the range of intended meanings—theological, psychological, moral, or whatever—of the biblical tale by understanding precisely how it is told."[13]

Alter's approach cannot be characterized as evangelistic, since he is willing to cast the text in the category of fiction. For Alter, the artistic touches of the author reflect his freedom to mix historical data with fictional material, creating what he calls historicized prose fiction.[14] Regardless, his methodology (which is not meant to be exhaustive) allows the reader to appreciate the quality of the biblical material and determine the author's intended meaning. He writes, "Close attention to the literary strategies through which that truth was expressed may actually help us to understand it better, enable us to see the minute elements of complicated design in the Bible's sacred history."[15] In doing this, he suggests the reader pay close attention to certain elements in the text: 1) **words (or phrases),** particularly any that are **repeated**; also important is the fact that terse nature of Hebrew narrative makes any included word quite important; 2) **actions**; 3) **dialogue**; and, 4) **narration**.

Concerning **words and actions**, Alter makes much of the convention of **repetition**. A key element of this is the **type-scene**. Alter argues that the author draws on specific conventions that were based on tacit agreement between him and his audience. That is, they expected to find certain conventions within the text and the author knew and fulfilled those expectations. While many of these conventions have been lost to us in course of time, he believes that one element—the **type-**

---

[12] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 13, 20-21. Alter's point is doubtful. The religious nature of the OT did not prevent the atomistic approaches that dissected the text. Indeed, literary analysis is much more likely to uphold a religious reading of the text. It is the source-critical enterprises that undermined the text as having religious power.

[13] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 222.

[14] *Ibid.,* 26-37.

[15] *Ibid.,* 53.

scene—is clearly evident in the text. For instance, the betrothal scenes that repeat in the Pentateuch are type-scenes that the author has purposefully built into the text. These are not evidence of multiple sources, but rather key scenes in the larger narrative. In suggesting this, Alter moves beyond the *Gattung* of form-criticism (beyond the *sitz im leben*), to posit a tradition that has been recast by the author to fit his purpose.[16] The type-scenes serve as a means to connect the scene to the larger narrative, and the convention provides a rubric by which the reader can interpret its significance. Thus, any deviation from convention would serve great rhetorical purpose. Further, while repetition of phrases or details may seem like primitive components of the Hebrew narrative, it is usually quite purposeful.[17] He writes, "The Bible does not employ symmetrical double plots, but it constantly insists on parallels of situation and reiterations of motif that provide moral and psychological commentary on each other."[18]

Similarly, Alter argues that **narration and dialogue** are quite deliberate means to an end. To him, dialogue is one of the main instruments by which the narrator allows the characters to reveal themselves.[19] Dialogue is important, and should be carefully noted. Narration, on the other hand, is often used to provide sufficient details that allow the reader to judge the words and deeds of a character.[20] Indeed, Alter points to these elements as important means of **characterization**. He contends that the biblical writer developed a quite sophisticated means of presenting its characters: 'Character can be revealed through the report of actions; through appearance, gestures, posture, costume; through one character's comments on another; through direct speech by the character; through inward speech, either summarized or quoted as interior monologue; or through statements by the narrator about the attitude and in tensions of the personages, which may come either as flat assertions or motivated explanations."[21] For Alter, this represents a **scale of reliability**: a character's speech (or

---

[16] *Ibid.,* 61.

[17] *Ibid.,* 111-112.

[18] *Ibid.,* 115.

[19] *Ibid.,* 82.

[20] *Ibid.,* 96.

[21] *Ibid.,* 146.

another's speech about him) is a more reliable indication of who he is than his actions; the narrator's words about a character are the most reliable.[22]

Alter does not reject source-criticism, but he does argue that many of the assumptions that drive the practice may not be as fruitful as is often claimed. He writes, "the supposedly primitive narrative is subjected by scholars to tacit laws like the law of stylistic unity, of noncontradiction, of non digression, of non repetition, and by these dim but purportedly universal lights is found to be composite, deficient, or incoherent. (If just these four laws were applied respectively to *Ulysses, The Sound and the Fury, Tristram Shandy,* and *Jealousy,* each of those novels would have to be relegated to the dustbin of shoddily 'redacted' literary scraps.)"[23] Thus, instead of a crude or simple text, Alter finds in the OT a highly sophisticated work of art.

Adele Berlin

In 1983, Adele Berlin published her own textbook on Poetics, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Literature*. Like Alter, her intent was not to produce an exhaustive description of the discipline. Instead, her focus was primarily on issues of **characterization** and **point of view**. Berlin expounds on a basic distinction between types of characters, particularly **round** versus **flat** characters. Round characters are full-fledged, given fuller description with more than a single characteristic. Flat characters (also known as types) are usually built around a single trait. She adds a third type, the **functionary character (or agent)** who is not characterized. Berlin uses the stories of Michal, Bathsheba, and Abigail to illustrate how the biblical narrative can utilize these types of characters. In fact, she demonstrates how the same character can be round in one scene and a flat one in another. Additionally, Berlin describes the means by which the biblical narrative provides characterization. In this, she does not diverge from Alter. Like him, she notes the **rarity of physical description** in the OT. When physical description does come, it is important.[24]

---

[22] Ibid.

[23] *Ibid.,* 23.

[24] Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative,* 34.

Where Berlin provides the most headway in the discipline is her insight into **point of view**. Drawing on literary theory, she shows how the point of view of the narrative (which she likens to a camera in a movie) is the means by which the narrator mediates what he wants known about characters. In focusing on point of view, it is important to keep in mind that the reader sees only what the narrator (who is omniscient and completely reliable) wants him to see.[25] It is through the point of view, in fact the multiple points of view, of the narrative that the narrator is able to build ambiguity and irony. Berlin points to the example of Abraham's promise to his son that God would see to the sacrifice to come (Gen 22:8). The reader has a knowledge greater than Abraham, though Abraham's point of view is not as accurate. This instills into his words a fuller meaning, the irony of which is not lost on the reader.[26] She writes, "Recognizing the multiple points of view is the first step in discovering the point of view of the implied author; and this is the first step in discovering the meaning and purpose of the story."[27]

Berlin's description of poetic devices is short. However, she does the field a great service by illustrating the principles in an examination of the book of Ruth.

Shimon Bar-Efrat

Bar-Efrat's *Narrative Art in the Bible*[28] is similar in scope to Berlin's *Poetics and Interpretations*. Less theoretical than Alter and Sternberg, Bar-Efrat devotes a chapter to each of the following topics: the **narrator**; **characters**; **plot**; **time and space**; and **style**. He concludes with a discussion of how the narrative of Amnon and Tamar illustrates these principles. Bar-Efrat's book is broader in scope than Berlin's, but much more focused and practical than Alter's. While he does not tread much new ground (though his discussion of plot is much clearer than others), he does demonstrate that by the end of the 1980s, the field of Poetics had developed from an undefined method, to one with clearly defined

---

[25] *Ibid.*, 44.

[26] *Ibid.*, 52.

[27] *Ibid.*, 82.

[28] Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

goals and foci.

Herbert Chanan Brichto

In his *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics*, Hebert Brichto seeks not to provide "a guide, manual, or handbook of either literary criticism in general or biblical poetics in particular," but rather to show the ways that the biblical narratives have been constructed with a didactic purpose.[29] He writes, "The *poetical grammar* posited in the title of this work is thus a hypothesis to be demonstrated, namely, that there is a set of rules that will, when uncovered, show that the Hebrew Scriptures, as a whole and in its constitutive units, constitute a unitary design and a single 'authorial voice,' even though the several or many authors who contribute to that voice and design may have lived centuries apart."[30]

In his introductory chapter, Brichto outlines several elements of narrative that help with this goal. There are the standard features of most Poetic studies—setting, characterization, plot, and point of view—but Brichto makes significant contribution in two areas. First, he writes of what he calls "**free direct discourse**," which he defines as "the speech of a character that in some way must be understood as being *either more or less* than what the person portrayed as a character would have said in that particular circumstance in real life."[31] In other words, the dialogue found in biblical narrative is not necessarily a word for word record of what was said. It is a summary, worded as it has been to demonstrate some element of the character that the author deems most important for his didactic purpose. Additionally, Brichto discusses the **Synoptic/Resumptive Technique** in Hebrew narrative. This is the treatment of a single event twice in the text (e.g. the two creation accounts in Genesis). The first account is broader and less-detailed. The second account is usually longer and fills in details missing from the first. Such a technique allows the author to produce a dramatic effect that enhances the account.[32]

---

[29] Herbert Chanan Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), viii.
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] *Ibid.,* 12.
[32] *Ibid.,* 13-19.

Brichto also address the question of **genre** (which he notes that Alter and Berlin overlook). He is dissatisfied with the tendency of many critics to "pigeonholed" a text by laying on it, *a priori*, a classification of genre.[33] Similar to Meir Sternberg, Brichto is uncomfortable with classifying the biblical narrative as fiction, writing, "The difference, then, between fictional story (realistic and verisimilitudinous though it may be) and history lies in the mind of the author, in the intent that guided his pen."[34] The use of genre is tenuous, based on assumptions on which not everyone can agree, and often even based on the arrogant belief that the biblical text is "primitive," and thus simple (e.g. solely etiological). He writes, "But it is condescension to our grandparents and a childish generational conceit to attribute to the best of yesteryear's minds the kinds of childishness that attribute only to the youngest children or to the least sophisticated adults of our own generation."[35]

Brichto does not claim that his Poetics is science; indeed, he states that it is an art.[36] His discussion on this is an important definition of the usefulness of the method in interpretation. He writes:

> It aims to discern the nature of a literary text and to arrive at the message that the author was trying to communicate in it. Its discourse, therefore, is in the nature of argument, not proof or demonstration; it aims to persuade the reader as to the reasonableness of the argument—to convince him that essential elements of the argument correspond to what it was in the author's mind to convey. The argument, further, eventuates in *an* interpretation, not *the* interpretation.[37]

Having laid the historical (and, to some extent, methodological) groundwork for the field of Old Testament Poetics, I now turn to some of its practical matters. I want to address here two significant concerns that evangelicals—with a high view of the inerrancy and authority of the biblical text—may have concerning Poetics. As we saw above, many of

---

[33] *Ibid.,* 22.

[34] *Ibid.,* 23.

[35] *Ibid.,* 29.

[36] *Ibid.,* 46.

[37] *Ibid.* Emphasis is original.

the scholars approaching the text as a work of literature are willing to dismiss the text as, to various degrees, fictional and unhistorical (or, at the very least, ahistorical). This may leave students wondering if Poetics is compatible with evangelical hermeneutics. Hopefully, this next section will allay any such concerns. As I will demonstrate, we can utilize the tools of Poetics while at the same time holding that the text is both historically accurate and theologically authoritative.

Poetics and History: Mutually Exclusive?

As we saw above, a narrative approach is not, strictly speaking, concerned with the historicity of events described in the text. For instance, George Stroup wrote, "it may be that the text's true authority is not that it refers to historical events or that it preserves eternal truths; rather its authority may be that of the world it portrays and the reality it depicts."[38] That is to say, that the construction of the story creates a world in and of itself, and historical events behind the text (if they even happened) are irrelevant. Barr prefers to read the biblical material as "story."[39] For him, the Old Testament is not history, though it may contain historical material. However, since it contains myth, legend, and folklore, it may not be called history. What we are left with is not history, but the text, constructed as a story. Barr thus creates a paradigm by which history and story are mutually exclusive.

Similar to Barr, Robert Alter believes that narrative may be drawn from historical events, but prefers the term "prose fiction," or "fictionalized history."[40] He writes that whatever the history behind the text, the author has put the elements into an "imaginative reenactment of history by a gifted writer who organizes his materials along certain thematic biases and according to his own remarkable intuition of the psychology of the characters."[41]

---

[38] George W Stroup, "A Bibliographical Critique," *Theology Today* 32, no. 2 (1975), 142.

[39] This section is drawn from Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*, 345-361. See also, Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 133-136.

[40] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 23-54.

[41] *Ibid.*, 40.

Meir Sternberg has no problem reading a literary text like the Bible as history, though the events portrayed therein may not be completely factual. To him, the difference between fiction and historiography is not the presence of false details (for then any work of history that contains any inaccuracies must be dismissed from being history), but rather of intentionality.[42] A work is a piece of fiction only if the author exercises an "at will flaunting of free invention."[43] In regards to form, there is no clear differentiation between historiography and fiction—works within both can contain very similar elements. The biblical material intends to portray actual events and an actual God; this makes it history. Sternberg writes, "Were the narrative written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination, with the most disastrous results."[44]

In Sternberg we find an appropriate response to the argument of Barr. However we may define history, there can be little doubt that the authors of the narrative material considered what they were writing to be based in actual events and especially actual saving events of God. Waltke has noted three elements that indicate the historical intent of the author: 1) they were "obsessed with locating events in time and space;" 2) they appeal to written records; and 3) they used "commemorative markers," such as "to this day."[45] To this we could add how essential the saving acts of God in history are to the covenantal relationship portrayed in the texts. Their obedience was due to Yahweh because He had delivered them from Egypt (Ex. 20:2).[46] The theological force of the narrative is based on the history it describes. As evangelicals, then, we can be assured that a literary approach to the narrative material of the Bible cannot, at the same time, be an historical one.

---

[42] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 23-25.

[43] *Ibid.,* 29.

[44] *Ibid.,* 33.

[45] Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*, 96.

[46] Cf. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p.25-35.

Scripture or Literature? Why Not Both?

The next question is this: is biblical narrative (or the Bible as a whole) simply literature, or is it something more? Krister Stendahl has noted the dangers of treating the Biblical material simply from a literary perspective, as a classic rather than a Holy Scripture. In his words, "The normative nature of the Bible requires, however, a serious attention to the original intentions of the texts."[47] Because of this, the Bible should be read as both a "classic" and as Holy Scripture. Its artistic features do not trump its normative purpose and function—instead they serve it. Grant Osborne writes, "The perfect example of this is the exodus narrative. It communicates meaning on two levels, the historical events it purports to transmit, and the theological perspective it provides for those events."[48]

The difficulty is that there is little to no direct theological reflection within the narrative material itself. As Barr writes, "the story is not theology, but is the 'raw material' of theology."[49] What he means is that the story does not contain abstract theological reflection. There may be bits of theology there—such as creeds that serve as theological reflections (or precursors) to the story—but the story is not written (in his view) to be theology.[50] This includes the Deuteronomistic History, of which Barr writes, "There is something unsatisfactory about this as a theological explanation for national disaster."[51]

Contra Barr, Meir Sternberg argues that the text is *both* literature *and* sacred text. He writes, "The question is *how rather than whether* the literary coexists with the social, the doctrinal, the philosophical. In

---

[47] Krister Stendahl, "The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 1 (1984), 9.

[48] Grant R. Osborne, "Historical Narrative and Truth in the Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 4 (2005), 685.

[49] Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*, 354; cf. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. J. A. Baker; 2 vols.; vol. 1; repr. of 6th edition; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 32.

[50] Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York,: Harper, 1962).

[51] Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*, 357. Barr does not explain what he means by "unsatisfactory," but this betrays an alien standard that he is placing on the material. It does not satisfy *his* conception of what theology is; therefore, it is not theology.

ancient times, the two were so closely related as to become indistinguishable."[52] This is similar to Stendahl's position, but Sternberg is helpful in that he further explains how the text has come to hold both a literary and ideological function. He identifies three types of discourse within the narrative, which cooperate with one another: ideological, historiographic, and aesthetic.[53] Unlike Barr, Sternberg is not bound to historical-critical methodology that tends to dissect the narrative into constituent parts. He does not have to separate the historiographical nature of the text from the ideological or aesthetic. The three are symbiotic and together make up the whole, producing a text that is both historical and ideological, presented in a highly aesthetic way. It is on this basis that narrative analysis may serve theological purpose.

If the text is ideological (and thus normative), the question still remains: how do we sift through the aesthetics to arrive at ideology?[54] This is where the methodology of Poetics helps. Waltke notes the ways that biblical narrative produces its ideology. The theology of the text—the author's intended ideology—is buried "in the layers of discourse and story."[55] The author does this because story is able engage the emotions of the reader in a way that a pure theological discourse would not. As Auerbach writes, "Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, [the Bible] seeks to overcome our reality:

[52] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 35-6. Emphasis added.

[53] *Ibid.*, 41. Sternberg means by aesthetic the material that may be invention. I would use a different definition: aesthetics includes the material that allows the author to produce literary effect, but within the scope of divine revelation. cf. Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), who would argue for a historical, literary, and rhetorical context within the text. By rhetorical, he means "how an author writing in a particular context organized his work to try to persuade his readers to respond in the way he wanted" (p. 3).

[54] "The pedagogical problem is how students are to be invited to notice, understand, comment on, and even offer judgments about the theology and moral values in a book that is sacred to a large part of our society." Thayer S. Warshaw, "Some Pedagogical Considerations," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (ed. K. R. R. Gros Luis; vol. 2 of; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1982), 33.

[55] Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*, 104.

we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history."[56] This is an implicit style of teaching, rather than an explicit one, and it allows theological learning by the way it allows the reader to experience the development and growth of characters on a variety of levels.[57]

While such an interaction lends itself well to reader-response analysis, it is important to remember that the author has an ideological perspective and intent, and that ignoring it is dangerous. Though the narrative may affect and instruct different readers on different levels, as Stendahl noted above, it would extinguish the ideological intent of the author to ignore the message he is trying to get across. To use an example from modern fiction, a reader may react to *To Kill a Mockingbird* in a variety of ways, and relate to various characters on different levels. However, if the reader does not recognize the implicit critique of racial injustice that is the author's intent in the novel, one will misread Harper Lee's intended ideology. The same may be said for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Both novels can be enjoyed and experienced without appeal to ideology, but doing so ignores the texts' *raison d'être.* The narrative of the Old Testament (while not necessarily fiction) was written explicitly with ideological intent, and the narrative form allows the reader to experience the ideological world of the text on a more personal level.

I argue that in order to rightly use the text in a normative fashion, one must understand its narrative nature and literary features. John Goldingay correctly points out that though the biblical text exists to address theological concerns, it does so mainly in the form of narrative.[58] He writes, "God's person emerges in a series of contexts. God is a creator, then a destroyer. God relates to a family in the concerns of its ongoing

---

[56] Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* 12; cf. Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach,* 104.

[57] Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach,* 105.

[58] He writes that systematic theology needs to "do justice to the essentially narrative character of the OT and NT gospel if it is to do justice to the nature of biblical faith." John Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," in *Between Two Horizons: Spannig New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (eds. J. B. Green and M. Turner; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 130.

family life, such as the finding of a home, the birth of children, and the arranging of marriages; God then relates to a nation in the different demands of its life, which include God's becoming a war-maker."[59] The material, though presented in story form, shows the unmistakable mark of theological intent.[60] Though the text does contain literary devices, it transcends them, and is best described as *kerygma*.[61] This is evident in the designation of the first five books of the OT as *Torah*. Genesis through Deuteronomy were recognized as "instruction," though they contained as much history (i.e., narrative) as they did explicit teaching.[62] Genesis, though it contains little (if any) actual "instruction," is still Torah.[63] The implication is that the community recognized that the stories themselves contained a didactic significance. The Deuteronomistic History is another example. The histories were apparently shaped by a theological agenda, and were intended to be read in that light. Theology should then take into account the narrative nature of the text by shifting its focus to what that narrative teaches about God.

A "Building Block" of Ideology: Characterization

In the final section of this article, I want to discuss in a bit more detail how one specific element of Poetics can help us with our hermeneutics of the text. By paying close attention to this element (and others), the reader can understand how the author has constructed his story, and in so doing, better understand its ideology. One of the basic assumptions behind Poetics is that the biblical material does not contain incidental details. The author has carefully shaped the final form of the text. "Such

---

[59] Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," 131.

[60] Cf. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*, 3; and James L. Crenshaw, *Story and Faith: A Guide to the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1986), who writes that the OT has both "literary artistry and...religious power" (p. 1).

[61] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 298-300.

[62] Sailhammer has noted that even the legal material in the Pentateuch is portrayed within a narrative frame.
John. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative : A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (vol. [Library of Biblical interpretation]; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992).

[63] Cf. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*, 3.

is the economy of this art," writes Brichto, "that no descriptive detail is devoid of significant purpose; and the careful attention of the reader is called for when a descriptive detail seems merely ornamental or a detail is absent where one would most expect it."[64] At its most basic level, story narrative contains three essential elements: characters, plot, and setting,[65] and each of them contributes to the ideological picture of the text. Space limitations on this article do not allow me to examine each of these, so I will here only discuss one of these elements—character—demonstrating how Poetics allows the reader to determine the ideological/theological purpose of the narrative material.

The primary way in which ideology is expressed is through the way it portrays its characters. Careful attention paid to characterization allows the reader to determine the ideological perspective through which to judge the characters and their actions.[66] Bar-Efrat writes:

> Many of the views embodied in the narrative are expressed through the characters, and more specifically, through their speech and fate. Not only do the characters serve as the narrator's mouthpiece, but also what is and is not related about them, which of their characteristics are emphasized and which are not, which of their conversations and actions in the past are recorded and which are not, all reveal the values and norms within the narrative...The decisions they are called upon to make when confronted with different alternatives, and the results of these decisions, provide undisputable evidence of the narrative's ethical dimension (*sic*).[67]

---

[64] Herbert Chanan Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6.

[65] Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets*, 5. Of course, Poetics addresses other elements within the narrative. The commonality of these elements is evident in that most works on biblical Poetics spend a lot of space discussing various aspects of them. See Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, who dedicates the bulk of his book (197 of 282) on these elements; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, who focuses primarily on character; Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, who spends four chapters on various aspects of these elements.

[66] Cf. Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*, 109-110.

[67] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 47.

Not all characters are created equal within the narrative. Some hold an important place within a particular scene, while others are peripheral. The more important characters in a scene are generally portrayed in a fuller, more complex manner. These are the characters that have "opinions and emotions of [their] own."[68] In Berlin's terms, these are the full-fledged characters, and they are contrasted to the less important characters within a scene: the type (flat character) and the agent (a character that holds simply a functionary position in the scene, such as a servant who brings a message and leaves the full-fledged character to respond).[69] The full-fledged character holds the reader's attention and often serves as the focus for the ideological purpose of the narrative. For instance Jonah is the only full-fledged human character in the biblical book that bears his name. The sailors with whom he interacts, as well as the people and king of Nineveh, are simply types. The plant and worm of chapter four are agents in that they simply serve to push the plot tension (God vs. His prophet) ahead. The words and deeds of the types and agents provide the context through which we learn more about Jonah. They are not the focus of the book (or the individual scenes)—Jonah is. As the full-fledged character, Jonah captures the attention of the reader. Through his words and actions the ideology of the book becomes clear.[70] The merciless prophet shows much more concern for a plant than he does a city full of men (and cattle) and a ship full of sailors. The character types with whom he interacts are more caring than he is. When set against the declaration in 4:3 of God's loving nature, we discover that the "hero" of the book is nothing of the sort. The theological point is mercy, and the reader, by relating to Jonah through the story, is faced with the same rhetorical question with which the prophet is faced in the last verse: should not God have compassion; is compassion not important?

We may ask exactly what role God plays as a character in Jonah. Certainly God is an important character in this narrative, as He is in so

---

[68] Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 24.

[69] *Ibid.*, 23-24.

[70] For a more detailed poetical examination of the book of Jonah, see Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets, Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics*, 67-87. Brichto seems to argue that there are no full-fledged characters in Jonah (p. 86). I disagree. Jonah is clearly full-fledged, as defined by Berlin.

many other ones. Brichto makes a salient point when he notes that Moses (one of the most full-fledged characters in all of biblical narrative) ultimately exists within the story as an agent of God, "in his full-fledged roundedness as a human sorely taxed by God's call and overtaxed by human perversity he is yet a flat character, that is to say, a type of the prophet, who embodied God—voice and person—all the while he shows how great the abyss between human and Deity."[71] Indeed, the character of Jonah has no theological purpose without God. It is against God's mercy that Jonah is implicitly compared and found wanting. It is through God's words and deeds that Jonah's story is moved forward and shaped. Without the character of God, the narrative has no theological force. Indeed, without God, Jonah is no prophet, but rather the simple son of Amittai, another anonymous name lost in the rabble of history.

The narrative shapes the characters in the way it portrays them,[72] and in that characterization we can discover the author's ideological point. Not all characters (such as Jonah) are ideals to be copied, but object lessons from which to learn. Characters are most often revealed in what they say and do (we are shown, rather than told about the character): this can come in the form of inner dialogue, outer dialogue, or interactions with God and others.[73] Physical description may also be used, but it is rare and usually only comes when such a description plays an important role in the narrative (such as the great height of King Saul and Goliath).[74] All of these instruments are indirect methods of characterization and provide the reader with tools to evaluate the theological intent within the narrative. For instance, the actions and appearance of the character do not reveal clear ideology, and deeper evaluation is needed.[75] Direct characterization by the narrator, or by God, is clearer and provides specific ideological evaluation.[76]

---

[71] Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets*, 8.

[72] Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," 137.

[73] Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 37-39; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 64-92.

[74] Cf. Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets*, 6-8.

[75] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 146-149; cf. Jerome T. Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative: A Guide to Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

[76] A clear example of this principle is the evaluation of Job (Job 1:1-5, 8, 22; 2:3,10). We find in the words of both the narrator and God an explicit positive

Closely connected to this is point of view. Shimon Bar-Efrat writes that, among the many contributions that point of view provides to the narrative, one is that "the point of view is one of the means by which the narrative influences the reader, leading to the absorption of its implicit values and attitudes."[77] He knows all details, even those that the reader might not expect a merely human author to know of historical figures: thoughts, emotions, motives, and private dialogue. In spite of this omniscience, he is selective in what he includes and omits.[78] The narrator has access to the mind and deeds of both God and man, which allows him to stand as something of a mediator between the two points of view. This shift may work at times to "limit" the omniscience of the narrator. At times the reader may see the scene through the narrator's eyes, at others he may see it from the perspective of one (or more) of the participants.[79]

---

characterization of Job. Through these points of view, we receive a clear description of Job's moral character. However, we do not have the same concerning Job's friends (at least, until chapter 38). The narrator does not inform us of the blamelessness of Job's companions, nor does he express his opinion of their words. The reader becomes a participant, along with Job, in the conversation. However, the explicit characterization of Job by God and the narrator provides a rubric by which to judge the words of Job's companions through the first 37 chapters of the book. Their words do not align with the truth that both the narrator and God have established, and so the reader may determine that their words do not hold authoritative value. Thus, the theology of the book of Job is clear, though the narrator never directly explains the purpose of his book.

[77] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 16; cf. Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*, 106-112; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 193-220; cf. Osborne, who writes, "[B]y ascertaining the implicit commentary and point of view, one can see how the author is developing the significance and moral content of the story." Osborne, "Historical Narrative and Truth in the Bible," 684.

[78] Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 44. As Sternberg puts it, "And whether or not interpreters share this belief, they cannot make proper sense of the narrative unless they take the narrator's own omniscience as an institutional fact and his demonstration of God's omniscience as [an] informing principle." Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 90.

[79] Space does not permit a detailed explanation of the types of POV at the narrator's disposal. For a more specific overview, see the following: Bar-Efrat,

For instance, when he presents the Woman's point of view in Genesis 3:6 ("When the woman *saw* that the tree was good for food...) there is no hint of the danger presented by the fruit. That danger comes via another point of view: that of the omniscient spectator in chapter 2. Thus, the narrator has created a tension between these two points of view. He reveals *and* conceals, thus making the reader both a spectator and a participant.[80] The reader is a spectator who has heard the warning from God concerning the fruit and recognizes the Woman's peril. The reader is also a participant in that he sees through the Woman's eyes, viewing the fruit from her perspective.

Conclusion

Since the middle of the 20th century, OT theology has shifted from a source-critical approach toward one that was more interested in its final and literary form. The field of Poetics, the science of literature, has been helpful in coming to terms with the literary art of the biblical material and identifying its theological message. As a methodology, it takes seriously the fact that much of the biblical material—which is intrinsically ideological—comes to us in the form of narrative. While this does not preclude the classifying the text as having a historiographical purpose, it also recognizes that the author has constructed his narrative in an artistic way that expresses theology through the art of story.

Dr. Tomlinson's tireless devotion to his students has had a profound effect on me. By pushing me to slow down and devote myself to developing the necessary skills to interpret the Bible, he has made me a much better student of the Bible. This is something I try to pass on to my own students. This article has been an effort to introduce students to an important area of Old Testament hermeneutics. Of course, this is just one tool in the interpreter's tool kit. Hopefully, this article can serve as a jumping off point for someone in a lifetime of biblical study. Such study means attention to detail, in this case, the detail of the narrative. Careful

---

Narrative Art in the Bible, 13-46; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 43-82.

[80] Cf. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 84-94.

attention paid to such details can reap great exegetical and theological rewards.