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MAKING AND MEANING IN THE STUDY OF BIBLICAL STORIES:
A Case for a Unified Approach to Narrative Criticism

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Chapter 1—Introduction

The appeal and reach of storytelling are universal across societies in time and geographic space. Let us put this claim to the test by taking a look at the following story. A significant portion of the Bible is presented in narrative.¹ So it seems appropriate to begin by reading a short-short story² and then briefly discussing it. Consider the following narrative.

The Daily Dose: A Story of Love and Grace³

1.

“Careful with that iron boy” shouted Moze at his apprentice on this clear winter’s day.

“I’m watchin’ it old man” replied the boy. When he called Moze ‘old man’ he meant no disrespect; it was merely part of the ongoing by-play between old Moze Priestly and his apprentice Josh Youngman. The boy, now coming of age, loved the ancient smith who had passed on just about every parcel of knowledge, wit, and artistry of his craft as the town blacksmith. The boy knew that he would soon have to operate his own smithy and his emotions evinced a jumble of hopes and aspirations alongside of a mountain of anticipated sorrow and loss at the prospect of leaving the tutelage of this crusty sage.

“Don’t make me come over and finish the job again” chortled Moze giving the boy the needle.

“As if you could do any better with those old bones” retorted Josh.

Moze leapt to his feet in mock fury feigning a charge at the boy’s forge station. As quickly as he

¹ I am using the term *narrative* here in the most general of senses. Thus, a “narrative is a story, whether in prose or verse, involving events, characters, and what characters say and do.” M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, sixth edition, (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), 123. This use of the term *narrative* in this study is distinguished from its other use as a specific genre designation identifying a particular type of literature appearing in Scripture (e.g., Joshua-2 Kings, the Gospels and Acts, etc.). To be sure within this generic use referring to biblical narrative lies a host of sub-genres including: parables, proverbs, visions, and fables to name a few. Generally speaking, in this study we will be using the term *narrative* in its broader sense akin to “story” or “storytelling.”

² A *short-short story* is “a brief short story, usually no more than 2,000 words, sometimes with a surprise ending.” See William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, editors, *A Handbook to Literature*, 9th edition, (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 472.

³ The present writer is the author of this story.

had gotten up he tumbled to the ground and Josh's glee at their play-acting instantly transformed into horrified concern. He ran to Moze and propped him up against the tool bench.

"You old fool! You know better than to do that with your condition," and then after looking around added, "has the king's messenger delivered the medicine yet today?"

"No, it's just half past three. He won't be here for another hour or so."

"Well you better take it easy until then. I can't afford you passin' on right now with all of these orders coming in. I'm afraid you're going to have to pull your own weight around here old timer—no gold bricking for you," said Josh with a wink in his eye.

The boy tried to restore an air of frivolity to the workshop, but he knew Moze's attacks were coming with far greater frequency than ever before. Moze would never really say what caused his condition, but for as long as anyone could remember Moze was stricken with a paralysis of his limbs and his very breath whenever he attempted too sudden a movement of activity. O sure, he could work at the smithy with regular strokes of hammer on anvil. However, any sudden motion, especially with one of the refined products of his work—specialty swords ordered by the King for use by his knights errant—brought on one of these attacks.

"Moze tell me again what happened to you to cause your condition," the boy not so cleverly inquired in hopes of catching the old man off his guard and opening up once and for all.

"You think your pretty clever don't you my young friend. So I have a little episode—my limbs shut down and my lips start flapping? Is that how it's supposed to work, churl?" replied Moze in mock consternation.

"Won't you please tell me how you got your condition? Would you die without your daily dose from the King's stores? What is in that vial delivered here every day anyway? What's the big secret?"

"There's no secret boy. You know that my heart's been failing for these many years and that a dose from the King's stores in that vial revives my circulation every day. In fact it was the King himself who charged me to quit my old service to him and take up the smithy with the promise that as long as I

would forgo my old work, run his smithy, *and* train young rascals like you that he would provide a daily dose of his medicine to keep me going.”

Well, this *was* a day of days. Moze had never spoken so frankly about his condition to Josh before. The boy was delighted and terrified all at once. Something must be up for Moze to have shared so much detailed information. Josh was sure no good would come of it.

2.

The mists of the glade had all been burned off by the mid-morning summer sun and the tournament field was made ready by the squires of the participating knights. Sir Gawath represented the King and Sir Malagrانت stood for those who challenged the King’s authority in this land. The King had not charged Gawath with defending his honor in this joust to decide monarchical supremacy in the land. Gawath had grown angrier with each passing day’s affronts to the King’s name and rightful claim to title of the land. It was Gawath who authored the challenge to the opposition party to send up a champion to decide this issue once and for all who ruled the realm: the King or the people themselves. Both parties agreed to abide by the rules of heraldry and acknowledge the victor’s party as supreme.

The details of the battle between Gawath and Malagrانت are better told by lore masters and one can find this chapter in the Chronicles of the Prophetic Age. Suffice it to say, Gawath prevailed after a protracted engagement in which Malagrانت employed numerous illegal maneuvers to which he cackled a witch’s laugh with each act. When, at last, Gawath unseated his opponent he alit from his steed, his blood boiling and knelt over Malagrانت to issue a dolorous blow.

But a curious thing happened as Gawath raised his sword to strike the final cut; he found himself unable to complete his task. His body went numb and he lay beside his vanquished foe. Just then a voice spoke from the clouds saying, “Know dear hearts that I reside in my palace and do as I please and that my reign is universal. Viceroy, attend to my servant!” And with those last words appeared a man kneeling next to Gawath. He possessed a knowing countenance and an air of royalty hung about him. He was dressed simply and produced a small vial containing a single portion of a crystalline liquid. He propped

up Gawath's head against his bosom and emptied the contents of the vial down his throat. The man with the quiet presence whispered these words in the ear of Gawath, "Learn this lesson well prideful one. Know that you are loved. Your life is now preserved so that you may point men toward the King's Way and never take this vainglorious road again or you shall surely die. As long as you live you will not wield your blade again until the day that I call upon you to do so in the King's service. As a reminder of this day and your utter need to rely upon the mercies of the king alone, a messenger from His Majesty's court will daily deliver a dose of the King's medicine to revive your prideful heart and sustain you until you are called upon to serve the King at his good pleasure." As these last words were spoken from the Viceroy's lips Gawath lost consciousness. No one ever saw Malagrant again. Gawath woke up in his own bed thinking he had dreamed a dream until he gazed at an empty vial upon his nightstand.

3.

The bitter cold outside made the heat spilling out of the smithy's forge all the more welcome inside this midnight hour of activity in Moze's shop. The orders for harnesses, blocks and tackle apparatuses, hammers, cooking utensils, and many other items flooded in for the great voyage across the sea to the new land promised by the King. The entire body of the King's servants were finalizing details and getting ready to depart on the morrow despite the bitter cold winds of early winter. The people of the King had lived in this valley by the sea for two generations and were now making ready to sail across the deep blue to a new land prepared just for them by the King. Sea charts and the ships were ready to convey the people West over the ocean; it would be a two-week journey. Josh was loading a box full of pots and pans to be taken to the ships and loaded for the voyage. Moze wanted to help and he possessed a unique vigor for one so ancient, but his condition precluded him from doing so. He instructed Josh to take the horse drawn cart to the docks where the goods could be loaded onto the proper ships.

Moze now looked at the nearly empty smithy he had operated for nearly 40 years with a sense of accomplishment and of loss. He wondered if his health would allow him to successfully survive an ocean-going voyage. As these thoughts ruminated in his heart and mind, a terrible crash sounded outside

his shop. He made his way to the threshold of the door only to see that the mast of one of the ships had been cut, and to his dismay, he saw that Josh lay trapped under the partial weight of the mast. Josh could survive for a few minutes, but someone would need to act soon to cut the ropes from the masthead loose and allow the mast to roll off Josh into the bay. No one was around to help due to the lateness of the hour and Moze feared his condition would restrict his movements leaving Josh to die. As he thought of what to do he heard a fiendish laugh over the howl of the bitter wind, a laugh he had not heard in 40 years. The source of the laugh was found bending over Josh's broken body and as this figure stood up it pivoted on crutches to make eye contact with Moze. Moze realized his enemy, from a distant time and different life; it was Malagrante—albeit an old and wizened Malagrante. What he lacked in virility he made up for in the fury of his festering anger. He now had his revenge on Moze and Moze's King; no one could help out and Josh would surely die.

The helplessness of the moment for Moze was overtaken by the sound of a voice charging him, "Drink deeply and take up thy blade one last time." With those words the old man grasped the crystal vial in front of him and drained its contents, picked up his sword, and charged the scene. Malagrante recoiled in horror knowing he had nowhere to flee. Moze knew he had the strength for one dolorous blow. As he rushed forward he raised his sword, Malagrante prepared for the full measure of the old knight's stroke, and Moze, with all his might leveled his stroke downward.

Moze fell over dead on the spot; Malagrante buried his face in his hands in abject cowardice and tears; the mast rolled off Josh's body and he breathed a breath of one who seemed to breathe for the first time. He was alive! By this time some of the village had responded to all the commotion and begun to mill around attending to Josh's wounds. And as *they* gathered together, elsewhere and at the same time, a knight in full armor knelt before His Majesty, the King, seated on a majestic throne in the midst of a Great Hall. The King uttered these words, "Rise Sir Gawath, lately known as Moze the smith and now and forevermore to be called Sir *Chesed*, and enter my kingdom. Long ago you decided to slay the vile works

of pride and iniquity in your own heart. And since that day you have tasted of my Grace for many years, now drink deeply of it at my table in my fellowship!”

And so the man who once wielded his sword in anger and pride wielded it one last time to serve his King not by taking life, but by preserving it.

1. A Closer Look at “The Daily Dose”

Most people, upon reading a story, will instinctively make some observations about the narrative without necessarily sounding like an English professor. For example, we should not be surprised if the most memorable aspect for readers of the above story was the moment when one learns that the *dolorous blow* of Moze’s blade was aimed at cutting loose the ropes that were binding the crushing weight of the mast on Josh’s broken body and *not* aimed at cleaving Malagrant in two. When we reach this part of the story, we intuitively know it is the focal point of the action; most of us will not know that this is what students of literature call the *climax* or *turning point* of a narrative. In a short story or a novel “the climax is the point of highest interest, whereat the reader makes the greatest emotional response.”⁴

If readers of this story are able to take note of the *turning point*, they also may intuitively (and not consciously) be mindful of the movement of the narrative from the beginning to the middle to the end. Any good story’s structure will begin with some measure of *exposition* where characters and the setting are introduced (Moze and Josh at the shop planning a sea voyage.). This will give way to the *rising action* where the plot thickens with an *exciting force* (Moze’s sudden attack) introducing *conflict* into the story. In order to keep the plot moving along conflict must be *resolved* before the story can continue (Josh runs to comfort Moze inquiring about his

⁴ “Climax,” in Harmon and Holman, 98. See also Abrams, *A Glossary of*, 161 for more discussion.

medicine.). This movement of *conflict* and *resolution* may occur a number of times in a narrative depending upon the length of the story—a short story or a novel—until the *turning point* is reached leading to some final resolution and the end of the story culminating either in some sort of catastrophe (e.g., a death or a wreck at sea, etc.) or a “happy ending” (such as we have here with the rescue of Josh’s life and the resolution of the long-standing disagreement between Moze and Malagrant.). Most readers will not be able to identify all of these terms, but they will sense the story’s movement and may even anticipate certain plot developments.

Careful readers will also notice that this story has a *happy ending* and is reminiscent of a *fairy story*⁵ with its knights, a King, contests of chivalry (on the field of honor *and* on the shipyard loading docks), and sword-play. It has that “Once upon a time...” feel about it. J. R. R. Tolkien asserts that the true form of drama is tragedy (the catastrophic ending) and the most important component of a *fairy story* is the “Consolation of the Happy Ending” which he coins as the *eucatastrophe* or “the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn.’”⁶ In our story Moze/Gawath is conveyed to heaven (the Great Hall).

A reader of “The Daily Dose” might also observe that the *characters* of the story bear a resemblance to several biblical figures. An analog to Moze Priestly would be Moses, the servant of Yahweh. Josh obviously corresponds to Joshua; the King with Yahweh; and the Viceroy with Jesus.

It is likely that those who encounter this story will recognize its use of the literary device known as a *flashback*. A *flashback* affords the author the ability to “represent events that

⁵ The classification of a narrative as a *fairy story* is called a *genre*. The term *genre* “denotes a recurring type of literature or... ‘literary form.’” Abrams, *A Glossary*, 75-6. A fairy story is a sub-classification of the larger type known as *narrative*. Narrative sub-genres would also include: novel, short-story, and essay.

⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *The Monsters & the Critics and Other Essays* (London: Harper Collins, 1983), 153.

happened before the time at which the work opened.”⁷ The extended sequence in which we are introduced to Gawath and Malagrant is a *flashback*.

Readers of any story and, of course, this one, perceive that someone is telling the story. This individual is called the *narrator* and he “is someone outside the story proper who refers to all the characters in the story by name.”⁸ In “The Daily Dose,” the story is related from an *omniscient point of view* in which the author “acts self-consciously as *narrator*, recounting the story and freely commenting on it.”⁹ The last sentence of the story about preserving life instead of taking it is an example of such free commentary on the part of the author. Wayne C. Booth adds to this discussion about the *telling* role of the author’s voice as a *narrator* indicating that when this device is executed well “the narrator has made of himself a dramatized character to whom we react as we react to the other characters.”¹⁰

The above comments speak to the bulk of readers of “The Daily Dose” and their intuitive observations. Again, most people encountering this story or any short-story or novel will perceive the presence of these literary devices without being able to label them.

Truly perceptive readers may grasp the connectivity of the *figurative language* employed in the *metaphor* of the “daily dose” delivered in the form of a vial of medicine to be swallowed each day. Simply stated, in a *metaphor* “a word or expression which in literal usage denotes one kind of action is applied to a distinctly different kind of thing or action, without asserting a

⁷ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 161. See also Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 210-211.

⁸ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 166.

⁹ Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 329.

¹⁰ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 212.

comparison.”¹¹ In our story the literal medicine coming in the form of a daily portion is applied to the reality of looking to God’s love and mercy to be delved out today and tomorrow as needed to empower followers of Jesus with the measure of faith required to believe on the promises of God.

Another subtlety perceived by some readers might include grasping the connection between the near-death experience of Moze when he lurches rapidly forward in mock fury in his smithy and the rapid assault with the sword on the ropes entangled with the mast. This is called *foreshadowing* which is “the presentation of material in a work in such a way that later events are prepared for.”¹² The earlier event that nearly resulted in Moze’s death lays the foundation for our ready acceptance of his death at the loading dock; we believe this is plausible because of what happened before.

When Josh asks if Moze has taken his daily dose of medicine close readers intuitively recognize that these two figures are speaking about some sort of shared and commonly known background information. This is a *rhetorical* device employed by the story’s writer to build an atmosphere of shared intimacy. Shimon Bar-Efrat asserts that “Whenever simple, daily tasks are mentioned this is important in shedding light on the character.”¹³ This story also persuasively portrays the development of the arc of Moze from a self-inflated and impetuous young knight errant to an older man who has learned his lesson from his king well. We instinctively note this in reading the story without necessarily understanding the literary terminology for what is going on. The *gesture* of the young knight who wields his sword without a royal directive in order to

¹¹ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 67.

¹² Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 215.

¹³ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (New York: T & T Clark, 1989), 79.

claim personal victory is vastly different from the ancient smith who wields his sword one last time to save life. Efrat affirms that readers benefit from this depiction because a character's gestures "have expressive value and indicate something about the inner state of the person involved."¹⁴

One of the great realities of well-told stories is their universality across societies and time. A quality of these narratives is that their experience can be enjoyed on multiple levels by a variety of readers whose differing levels of engagement still allows them to properly connect with the author's intended meaning. As we read through "The Daily Dose" we note when Moze/Gawath enters the Great Hall that the King renames him Sir Chesed. Readers who might know a little Hebrew will probably recognize that the moniker *Chesed* is a transliteration of the word חֶסֶד meaning "loving kindness," "grace," or, in this case, "faithfulness." The dedicated reader who is following the story closely might also wonder about the name Gawath and, after noting the connection with Chesed, observe the relation to the OT word גָּאֹוֹן meaning *haughty* or *prideful*. Such a reader would experience the delight of noting the specific lexical clues marking the transformation of the story's central character from a life of a prideful young knight who thinks he is serving his King when he is only really an impudent and prideful youth to a wiser older man whose life is now marked by faithful fealty to this same King.

The greater point to be made here is that even the reader who does not know Hebrew will not have a diminished experience with this story's conclusion. Any reader can still experience the emotional satisfaction of knowing that Moze/Gawath who becomes Sir Chesed of the Great Hall has been rewarded for believing the whispered word of the Viceroy all those years ago on a battlefield of shame. Moze/Gawath's belief became obedient action over the course of a lifetime

¹⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 84.

and allowed him to then truly raise his sword in the service of the King in saving Josh's life. Both those knowledgeable about Hebrew and able to catch the subtle name imagery and those who know no Hebrew at all can arrive at the same level of delight in this story's resolution.

2. Some Questions Arise and the Focus of This Study

Perhaps the most important takeaway from the short story above and the subsequent literary discussion is the reality of the universal reach of stories. The focus of this study is the investigation of the Bible's extensive use of narrative. The discipline studying these stories is called *narrative criticism* which entails "Reading the text as a *narrative* and paying attention to aspects including plot, theme, and characterization."¹⁵ A problem manifesting itself within the field of narrative criticism is that most of its practitioners limit their interest regarding biblical stories to the matter of a particular text's literariness.¹⁶ This study will diverge from the typical course, arguing that the best way to study the stories of Scripture is to integrate the normal function of literary analysis, used in narrative criticism, with exegesis, hermeneutics, and theological reflection. We will also spend a significant amount of time discussing Scripture's use of imaginative literature to communicate theological and ethical truth. Naturally, a host of questions arise.

The questions coming to mind include (1) Why do stories even appear in Scripture? (2) What kind of stories appear in the Bible? —or otherwise stated— Are there different modes of expression? (3) Why do so many stories appear in the Old and New Testaments? (4) How are these stories made? (5) What is the relationship between the storytelling in Scripture and

¹⁵ Douglas Mangum and Douglas Estes, *Literary Approaches to the Bible*, Douglas Mangum and Douglas Estes, editors (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), x.

¹⁶ So David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 5-6; James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 19; and Steven L. McKenzie, *Introduction to the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 37 to list just a few.

undertakings such as exegesis, literary analysis, and hermeneutics (And for that matter—what are these undertakings?)? (6) Related to the previous inquiry one asks how can we best interpret these stories? And (7) How do we go about grasping the theological message of a biblical story?

Over the next few pages, we will attempt, in aggregate, to answer each of these questions as part of setting the table for our argument of a case for a more integrated narrative criticism of biblical stories. Some of the answers venture across the frontiers of some of the other questions. The answers to these questions will inform the grounding argument for the thesis of this study.

2.1. The Extensive World of Biblical Narrative

We began by asking why stories even appear in the Bible. It is often noted that the Old Testament (OT) is comprised mostly of narrative ranging upwards to about 40 percent of its total body.¹⁷ Leland Ryken asserts, “Narrative is the dominant form of the Bible. Despite the multiplicity of literary genres found in the Bible, it is above all a book of stories.”¹⁸ This fact does not answer our question, but does point out how much of Scripture is devoted to storytelling.

In our comments above on “The Daily Dose” and narratives in general it was noted that the telling of stories is a worldwide experience which is enjoyed by all. Stories connect with readers. One of these points of connection is the fact that, as Amit notes, the Bible “makes plain that it ascribes great importance to stories and their presentation as a means of persuasion.”¹⁹ There are even instances of biblical narratives where one figure makes use of a story to

¹⁷ So Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 78; Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (New York: T & T Clark, 1989), 9; and Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 13.

¹⁸ Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 35.

¹⁹ Amit, *Reading*, 1.

successfully persuade another person. We observe this in the case of Judah telling the story of his family before Joseph, who is still incognito as Pharaoh's viceroy. Joseph is moved by the account and reveals his identity (Gen. 44:18-45:2).²⁰

Gordon Wenham contends that biblical writers make use of narrative for didactic purposes which allows them to communicate theological truths and ethical principles.²¹ In telling their stories in the pages of the Bible the biblical writers are not "advocating a minimalist conformity to the demands of the law in their storytelling, rather that they have an ideal of godly behaviour that they hoped their heroes and heroines would typify."²² Akin to this assertion is what Ryken notes to be that the stories of the Bible possess a central focus on the guiding principles of what is right and wrong—sort of a built in internal moral compass.²³ These aspects of storytelling mount a compelling case for why so many stories appear throughout the Bible.

2.2. The Types of Biblical Narrative

Our second question inquires as to the *types* of stories told in Scripture. The short answer is that biblical writers mostly convey stories by way of *historical narrative*. Craig Blomberg's definition states that "historical narrative recounts that which actually happened."²⁴ Or to put it another way the writers report only the facts of the accounts they include. This would include biblical books like Genesis, the Joshua to 2 Kings corpus, the Gospels, and the book of Acts to name some.

²⁰ Amit, *Reading*, 1.

²¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 3.

²² Wenham, *Story*, 3.

²³ Ryken, *Words of*, 45.

²⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, second edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 19n.12.

There is another type of story appearing in Scripture which is *imaginary narrative*. What is meant by this is, of course, *fiction* in the literary sense of this word.²⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines this use of fiction as “The species of literature which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters.”²⁶ Abrams develops this understanding a bit further declaring

that fictive sentences are meaningful according to the rules of ordinary, nonfictional discourse, but that, in accordance with conventions implicitly shared by the author and reader of a work of fiction, they are not put forward as assertions of fact, and therefore are not subject to the criterion of truth and falsity as these apply to sentences in nonfictional discourse.²⁷

Biblical examples of fictive stories include: Jotham’s fable (Judges 9:8-15), Nathan’s parable (2 Samuel 12:1-4), the tales of Dames Wisdom and Folly (Proverbs 9:1-6, 13-18), the parables of Jesus, and some of the visions of John in the book of Revelation. We would be well-served to explore the topic of fiction a bit more in order to understand its significance as it appears in Scripture.

2.2.1. The World of Fiction

The narrative of our focus, “The Daily Dose,” is *fiction*. The literary term *fiction* is common enough, but we would be well-served to discuss, a bit further, another of this term’s definitions. Abrams provides a helpful take on the matter asserting “In an inclusive sense, *fiction* is any literary *narrative*, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that in fact happened.”²⁸ Daniel Estes helpfully adds that “for the literary scholar

²⁵ Fiction is not understood here as invention opposed to truth telling.

²⁶ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 991, s.v. “fiction.”

²⁷ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 65.

²⁸ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 64.

fiction is used to speak of the genre of imaginative literature that consciously communicates principles that the author considers true within a conceptual framework.”²⁹ Imaginative literature would necessarily be differentiated from historical narrative, which can be measured by empirical events and data. Meir Sternberg aids in grasping this distinction by asserting, “What opposes fiction to historiography is not the writer’s breach or avoidance but his independence of factuality: the built-in license to create a world as one thinks fit.”³⁰ The purpose of this extended discussion on the topic of imaginative literature is to prepare us for our study of the use of fiction in biblical narrative. A good starting place is to ask how and why does the Bible employ fiction?

2.2.1.2. Imaginative Literature in the Bible

The *how* of biblical fictional narrative is a poetic construction the likes of which matches any other work of fiction having a plot, characterization, setting, and making use of many other literary devices. We will have more to say about this later.³¹ As to the *why* of the appearance of imaginative literature in Scripture, the answer is varied.

Perhaps the best place to start is to inquire as to why we even have stories telling fictional tales at all in this world. Any successful narrative requires having its plot points of *conflict* and *resolution* which will lead to an ending of catastrophe or *eucatastrophe*. Michael Edwards suggests that this is only possible because of the Fall. He asserts that “we cannot imagine stories in Eden. There could certainly be the recounting of events, so as to pass on information or communicate a response; but events would be received as in no way different from reality.”³²

²⁹ Daniel J. Estes, “Fiction and Truth in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature,” in *Themelios* 35.3 (2010): 387-99, here 389.

³⁰ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 26.

³¹ See chapter 2—“The Poetics and Storytelling Aspects of Biblical Narrative Literature.”

³² Michael Edwards, *Towards A Christian Poetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 72.

The case Edwards builds is premised on the claim that “the need for story comes with the exile from Eden” and that “we tell stories in a fallen world.”³³ One can see the merit of this assertion: stories need *conflict* and *resolution* in order to create movement in the plot. There is no *conflict* in a sinless world. Even the great storyline of God’s great redemptive plan is founded on the need to resolve the issue of sin’s presence in this world. The rhythm of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation as God outworks his plan mirrors the pattern of narratives with their beginning (exposition/introduction), middle (rising action/conflict, turning point, falling action/resolution) and ending (denouement/eucatastrophe). One could argue that God is the ultimate storyteller in his redemptive plan and also in the revelation of his divine will in Scripture which contains a great many examples of imaginative literature. Thus, out of the tragedy of the entrance of sin into this world is born a unique form of communication for God to reach men with his revealed Word—the story. Stories lament and counter the Fall.

Second, fiction is used in Scripture to demonstrate truth under God’s heaven. Estes avers that we should view fiction not as the historian would—as the opposite of fact—but in “its literary sense as a subset of narrative in which the imaginative stories of the Bible have been composed in order to communicate aspects of spiritual or ethical truth.”³⁴ The idea here is that the genre of *fictional* narrative in Scripture is just like the factual, *historical* narrative in how God teaches and reveals his will to men.³⁵

Third, the Bible uses both historical and fictional narrative as a rhetorical device. Consider the parable of Nathan appearing in 2 Samuel 12:1-4 where the prophet intends to

³³ Edwards, *Towards A Christian*, 73.

³⁴ Estes, “Fiction and Truth,” 389.

³⁵ Estes, “Fiction and Truth,” 389.

reproach David for his seduction of Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Instead of citing the principle of adultery as sin, Nathan fashions the story of two men—one rich and the other poor and the owner of one little ewe lamb. As David attends to the story, he becomes angry to learn that the poor man's sole lamb is taken away by the rich man. It is then that Nathan connects the reality between the rich man of the story and David. This bit of fiction became a functioning piece of persuasion. Amit asserts "Since biblical literature sought to convince its audience (readers or listeners), the device of stories was employed" and "Much depended on the power of stories, because a good story is irresistibly persuasive."³⁶

Fourth, stories written as imaginative literature in Scripture have the express purpose "to elicit the active participation of the reader by constructing a story that is familiar, even though of imaginative origin."³⁷ There are two factors at play: (1) instead of simply stating a guiding principle which can be received passively, a piece of imaginative literature, argues Estes, "compels the reader to think through the issues that have been raised in the story, thus making the reader actively involved in the process of discovering truth,"³⁸ and (2) a fictional story pulls the reader in by way of a deep emotional connection with the characters and the movement of the plot leading the reader to accept the direction of the author.³⁹

Fifth, historical and fictional biblical narrative have a didactic purpose. Gordon Wenham declares that biblical narrative is "trying to instill both theological truths and ethical ideals into their readers."⁴⁰ Wenham makes a persuasive case that the stories of biblical narrative "are not

³⁶ Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 2.

³⁷ Estes, "Fiction and Truth," 393.

³⁸ Estes, "Fiction and Truth," 393.

³⁹ Estes, "Fiction and Truth," 393.

⁴⁰ Wenham, *Story as*, 3.

advocating a minimalist conformity to the demands of the law in their storytelling, rather that they have an ideal of godly behaviour that they hoped their heroes and heroines would typify.”⁴¹ Take for instance Jotham’s fable in Judges 9:8-15 which tackles the issue of leadership offering an indirect comparison that is condemning of both Abimelech (the bramble) and of the “lords of Shechem” (בַּעֲלֵי שֵׁכֶם) (the trees).⁴²

Sixth, the work of the fiction writer or speaker is an act of *sub-creation* in which believable secondary worlds are made serving as an echo of the real and primary world made by the Creator. The author of a fictional story desires to achieve what Tolkien refers to as an *inner consistency of reality* and is “true” in the sense of the conceptual framework of the story.⁴³ Tolkien posits that the *eucatastrophe* (his term for a story’s “happy ending”) of a fiction writer’s narrative offers a vision of something more important, which the best of imaginative literature will point to, namely “the far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world.”⁴⁴ The principle is the same for the imaginative literature appearing in Scripture; it serves to point one to the primary world reality of the Gospels and the ultimate *happy ending* of the story of Jesus Christ.

These six examples are important components offering an apology for why God has ordained that fiction be employed in his revealed Word. Each of these components, in their turn, helps the reader of biblical fiction, whether encountering Nathan’s parable or the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, become emotionally involved in order to think more deeply about the story’s ethical and theological teaching so that we will draw closer to our Lord and Savior Jesus.

⁴¹ Wenham, *Story as*, 3.

⁴² Wenham, *Story as*, 53.

⁴³ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 155.

⁴⁴ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 155.

Examples of biblical fiction, as we briefly mentioned above, include the fables in the OT: Jotham's in Judges 9:8-15 and by Jehoash in 2 Kings 14:8-10. Another OT case is the parable told by Nathan to David in 2 Samuel 12:1-4. The apocalyptic imagery of much of the book of Ezekiel and Daniel 7-12 and also in the New Testament (NT) book of Revelation ranging from chapters 4-22

is presented in a visionary mode, in which collages of fantastic pictures impressionistically evoke an emotional response in the reader. The portrayals of beasts and battles are not intended to be taken primarily as realistic descriptions to inform the mind; rather they are imaginative creations designed to touch the heart of the reader by employing a fictional strategy.⁴⁵

In the NT, Jesus often teaches in parables. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, writes “First then, concerning paradigm let us speak; for paradigm (is) similar to a bringing about, and the bringing about (is) a beginning. Of paradigms, that which is seen is two—for one is a paradigm which is seen to speak of things which happened before, and one (is) a thing to make. And of this on the one hand (is) fictitious comparison [παραβολή] and on the other one fables [λόγοι].”⁴⁶ For Aristotle a *parable* is the result of artistic *making* (ποιεῖν) or creative composition and is a “fictitious comparison.” Charles Hedrick asserts that parables are “brief fictions realistically portraying aspects of first-century Palestinian life.”⁴⁷ Klyne Snodgrass defines a parable with greater subtlety. He combines Aelius Theon's definition of *fable* (μῦθος)—understanding this

⁴⁵ Estes, “Fiction and Truth, 390.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *The ‘Art’ of Rhetoric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 2.20.2; 272. This is the present writer's wooden translation of: πρῶτον μὲν οὖν περὶ παραδείγματος λέγωμεν: ὁμοιον γὰρ ἐπαγωγῇ τὸ παράδειγμα, ἢ δ' ἐπαγωγῇ ἀρχή.

παραδειγμάτων δὲ εἶδη δύο: ἓν μὲν γάρ ἐστιν παραδείγματος εἶδος τὸ λέγειν πράγματα προγενομένα, ἓν δὲ τὸ αὐτὸν ποιεῖν. τούτου δὲ ἓν μὲν παραβολή ἓν δὲ λόγοι,

⁴⁷ Charles W. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3.

term to be directly related to *parable*— as a “fictitious saying picturing truth”⁴⁸ with the thinking of a contemporary poet who avers “parables are imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”⁴⁹

The sense here is that parables create an imaginary world that is reflective of reality.

This has been a long excursus, but an important one since much of the focus of our study will be centered in the use of fiction in Scripture. We do have a few of our initial questions posed to answer regarding how the literary study of the Bible jibes with exegesis, hermeneutics, and theological reflection as all of this relates to narrative criticism.

2.3. Making and Meaning in the Study of Biblical Stories

We also asked questions about how biblical stories are made and what we need to do in order to interpret them. In order to properly understand biblical narratives—both historical and imaginative—it makes sense to know how such stories are *made*. This is the stuff of *poiesis* (ποίησις) which is the act of artistic and creative *making* or *composing* of a story. We want to take a look at the component parts of a poet’s tool box as he constructs his narrative. We will note that these poetic elements are the same for the composing of both historical and imaginative narratives which include: plot, characterization, setting, the use of metaphor, alongside of other literary devices. A correct grasp of these tools wielded by the poet enables us to perform a literary analysis of a story to understand how it functions as a story.

Solid literary analysis of any narrative will, in part, help us to clearly understand the *meaning* of a biblical story. Other aids used to correctly interpret a story are the process of *exegesis* and the practice of *hermeneutics*. In short, the goal of exegesis is to explain or interpret the biblical story in front of us. In order to do this one must adopt a solid methodology reading

⁴⁸ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 8.

⁴⁹ Snodgrass, *Stories With*, 8. The description leading to this definition comes from poet Marianne Moore.

the text closely in its original tongue paying attention to matters of grammar, syntax, lexicography, and historical context. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. For our purposes of successfully understanding the meaning of a biblical story it is our duty as readers to unlock the author's intended meaning.

In the study of the stories of the Bible, only the integration of literary analysis (the typical focus of narrative criticism) with grammatical-historical exegesis and an author-centered hermeneutic can yield a solid theological application.

3. The Desired Method for Studying Scripture's Imaginative Literature

The literary approach to the study of the Bible is one of the most fragmented areas of biblical scholarship and very little agreement is to be found amongst the various interpretive approaches.⁵⁰ Some approaches are more interested in what is *behind* the text like *form criticism* which studies the text in order to discover the oral traditions used by the author or *source criticism* which reads the text to locate the written sources employed by the author. Another method more interested in the background of a text is *redaction criticism* which seeks to reconstruct the historical development of the traditions having been cataloged by form criticism.

Other approaches deal with the text more directly. *Reader-response criticism* is a reader-focused approach denying the author as the determiner of meaning in favor of asserting that the meanings of a text are the *production* or *creation* of the individual reader.⁵¹ *Structuralist criticism* looks at the text in terms of *contrasts* and *oppositions* asserting meaning is recognized

⁵⁰ Douglas Estes, "Introduction: The Literary Approach to the Bible," in *Literary Approaches to the Bible*, Douglas Mangum and Douglas Estes, editors (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 31.

⁵¹ See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? —The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) for the seminal work on the introduction to reader-response theory.

in the form of binary oppositions within cultural phenomena and linguistic theory.⁵² *Narrative Criticism* is a text-centered approach that is interested in the text as narrative and analyzes it according to its “literariness” identifying things like plot, characterization, and setting.

A concentrated review of the broader field of *literary criticism* has led me to conclude that narrative criticism is the best approach for evangelicals in studying biblical narrative—historical or imaginative—as literature. Grant Osborne makes an obvious observation writing, “Evangelical hermeneutics has somehow stressed the author’s intention for every book of the Bible except the narrative portions.”⁵³ This is attested to by a host of narrative critics aligning themselves with a reader-response critical hermeneutic including the likes of: David Rhoads, Meir Sternberg, Mark Powell, and Robert Funk.⁵⁴ Narrative critics have traditionally surrendered any goal to pursue exegesis in order to derive theological meaning in favor of only analyzing the biblical text’s *literariness*.

4. The Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study is threefold and involves looking across the disciplines of literary theory and criticism, hermeneutics, exegesis, and theology in the analysis of biblical literature. In the areas of *literary theory* and *criticism* this involves looking at poetics, modern linguistic theory, structuralist criticism, mimetic theory, and the elements of narrative storytelling. For hermeneutics we will measure how one might best interpret a story comparing

⁵² See Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978) for a gateway study into the structuralism applied by many narrative critics including Jeannine K. Brown and James Resseguie.

⁵³ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, revised and expanded edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 202-03.

⁵⁴ See David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); Sternberg, *The Poetics*; Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); and Robert W. Funk, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988.)

the differences between text-centered, reader-centered, and author-centered approaches.

Regarding exegesis we will advance an argument for the adoption of the grammatical-historical method over any other. This will allow us to make a case for the advancement of a new (and hopefully unifying) approach to biblical narrative criticism that attends to the *making* and *meaning* of biblical stories by performing both exegesis and literary analysis which will render a better understanding of the theological and ethical teaching and messages of these narratives.

4.1. Literary Theory and Criticism

We will argue for the outworking of an approach to biblical narrative criticism that abandons formal and informal ties with structuralist criticism (see chapter 4) because it is grounded in modern linguistic theory as a so-called primary system which treats the study of literature as a secondary system. The upshot of this method is to read literature through the lens of linguistics and not approaching literature as literature. We will argue for the return to Aristotle's theory of *mimesis* and the study of literature as literature in order to properly understand what we are reading.

4.2. Hermeneutics, Exegesis, Literary Analysis, and Theology

It is important to recognize that the literary study of the Bible cannot be conducted in a vacuum. The Bible is, by its very nature, a theological book requiring a thoughtful process of interpretation. We will argue that the best way to grasp the meaning of Scripture and its stories is to adopt an author-centered hermeneutic which acknowledges the author as the determiner of meaning in a biblical story. This hermeneutic is coupled with the practice of the grammatical-historical method of exegesis which investigates matters of grammar, syntax, semantics, and historical context in the interpretation of Scripture.

In the matter of the stories of the Bible a healthy narrative criticism an author-centered hermeneutic working in concert with a grammatical-historical exegetical methodology works best with a literary analysis that is grounded in *mimetic* theory which investigates matters of plot, characterization, setting, and other literary devices employed by biblical storytellers.

4.3. The Connection between the Poetics of Biblical Historical Narrative and Biblical Imaginative Stories

We shall demonstrate that the careful collection of events by a biblical writer of historical narrative and the fancies of the imagination of a biblical writer of fiction appeal to the foundation of the same *poetic* of foundational rules for the construction of their stories and while making use of the same poetic devices to build their stories. Writers of biblical stories—both historical and imaginative—employ the use of the aspects of narrative (plot, characterization, aesthetics, etc.) in the fashioning of their works.

4.4. The Case for a New Approach to Narrative Criticism

It is the goal of this study to advance a commitment to solid exegesis while employing a synchronic literary analysis. I intend to propose the development of a focused narrative criticism that both honors a historic emphasis of a literary analysis of the text (grounded in an Aristotelian model while rejecting the infusion of a Structuralist literary model) combined with a commitment to a canonical approach to the text as grounded in a grammatical-historical exegetical method which appeals to the author as the determiner of meaning (as opposed to the reader-response method adopted by the bulk of narrative critics) leading the practitioner of this method to draw some God-honoring theological implications from his study of biblical narrative. This study will look at both historical and fictional narrative, but center its focus on the imaginative literature of the Bible.

5. A Brief Review of What to Look for in This Study

Our study of the Bible's stories begins with a discussion of the features of *poetics*, *hermeneutics*, and the aspects of *narrative* which helped shape our approach to narrative criticism of biblical narrative. Chapter 3 reviews the plethora of literary approaches used by biblical scholars and argues for a narrative criticism grounded in a synchronic and canonical approach buttressed by an author-centered, grammatical-historical exegetical method. The discussion about the various literary approaches used by biblical scholars over the years invites a closer historical review of the broader field of literary criticism as it has helped shape narrative criticism over the years. Once done, we can then formally propose a new approach for the use of narrative criticism of biblical narrative—both historical and of imaginative literature (chapter 4).

This new approach will allow us to perform a literary and theological analysis of some historical and fictional narratives in both the Old and New Testaments. Our analysis of the imaginative literature of Scripture will necessarily lead us to ruminate about Scripture's use of fiction and what it means theologically.

Chapter 2—The Poetics and Storytelling Aspects of Biblical Narrative Literature

Any study of the *making* and *meaning* of biblical narrative literature will necessarily involve taking a serious look at the topics of *poetics* and *hermeneutics* as well as the *aspects* of narrative literature. Over the next two chapters we will attempt to begin to make some points of connection between these three areas of focus. An established regimen of literary theory will allow us to apply our system of thought to an exegetical and literary analysis of a biblical story which, in turn, will yield theological application. These conclusions will serve as the building blocks of the proposed *narrative criticism* of this overall study. This chapter will concentrate on the topic of *making*, namely *poetics*—the rules adhered to in order to build a story—and the *aspects* of narrative storytelling—the raw materials used in the construction of the house of literature. Chapter three will turn our attention to the subject of *meaning* and the full flowering of our enterprise in the form of the exegesis, literary analysis, and theological exposition of a brief NT story.

Poetics

General Introduction

The literary study of poetics emanates from the Greek word ποιητικός which very generally denotes that which is “capable of making, productive” or more specifically what is “fitted for a poet, poetical,” and “the art of poetry.”¹ Aristotle made this term famous in his work of literary criticism *Poetics*.² In this study we are interested in the uses of ποιητικός having to do with the *making* of art or of poetry and the product of it. In this discussion we are understanding

¹ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [orig. 1889]), 651. Hereafter *L & S*.

² Aristotle, *Poetics*, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge, MA: 1995).

the term *poetry* to be the literary work produced by a writer of biblical literature in the form of narrative or story, which can be either historical or imaginative. Before we take a more in depth look at the Greek terms important to our study we will enter into a basic discussion of poetics as used in literary studies.

As we noted above, *poetics* has to do with the process of making poetry. A good starting place is to begin to define the literary use of poetics. William Harmon and Hugh Holman assert that poetics is “a system or body of theory about poetry; the principles and rules of poetic composition.”³ The *Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* offers a similar definition of poetics, “The theory or principles of the nature of poetry or its composition; writing that expounds such a theory or principles.”⁴ Owen Barfield in writing about the philosophy of language and the beginnings of the meaning of poetic composition proffers, “When words are selected and arranged in such a way that their meaning either arouses, or is obviously intended to arouse, aesthetic imagination, the result may be described as *poetic diction*.”⁵

Thus far we see the term *poetics* having to do with the principles or, we might say, rules about poetic composition. It is safe to suggest, along with Barfield, that we ought to be concerned about how a writer chooses his words and then arranges them in a specific way to produce an emotional response of a reader’s imagination. We should next take a look at the Greek origin of this term in order to learn the connections from how the ancients made use of this topic to how these contemporary denotations jibe or differ.

³ William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, editors, *A Handbook to Literature*, 9th edition, (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 389.

⁴ Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 289.

⁵ Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 41.

Specific Terms in *On Poetics*

The obvious place to begin is with Aristotle's *Poetics*. This is the first recorded instance of anyone thinking over and writing about literary theory. Aristotle begins his work writing, "Concerning both poetry itself and its forms, each has a certain force of meaning, and how it is necessary to put together the stories if the making of poetry ought to be beautiful."⁶

The first thing we notice is that Aristotle is interested in both the *art of poetry* (ποιητικῆς) and the various "kinds" of forms in which it is made. The phrase *τινα δύναμιν ἕκαστον ἔχει* has to do with the emotional power of the *form* (εἶδος). R. S. Crane thinks of it as a governing principle in the *Poetics* for Aristotle "in what he calls, in his first sentence, the peculiar *dynamis* or 'power' of the form—that which animates its parts and makes of them one determinate whole."⁷

The infinitive *συνίστασθαι* ("to put together") speaks to the element of *making* in the art of poetry and of the forms. I have taken Seth Benardete's and Michael Davis's lead in translating *μῦθος* as "story" rather than the typical "plot" because it is a better fit in this context of the discussion of *making*.⁸ The *putting together* of *stories* if done right in the making (*ποίησις*) results in something that "ought to be beautiful."

In these opening lines of Aristotle's seminal and enduring work on literary theory, at least three important observations can be made. First, Aristotle argues for a key link between the *art of*

⁶ This is my translation from the original: *περὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς τε καὶ τῶν εἰδῶν αὐτῆς, ἣν τινα δύναμιν ἕκαστον ἔχει, καὶ πῶς δεῖ συνίστασθαι τοὺς μῦθους εἰ μέλλει καλῶς ἔξεν ἢ ποίησις*. Aristotle, *Poetics*, I, 1447a, ll. 8-10; 28.

⁷ R. S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), 52.

⁸ See Seth Benardete and Michael Davis, translators, *Aristotle—On Poetics* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), 1.

poetry or of the *making* of it and its various *forms* or *kinds*. He is particularly interested here with the drama of tragedy, but the operating principles set forth in this work extend to other *forms of making* including anything under the broad category of *stories*. We have already stated that our purpose in this study is to look at the *narratives* (both historical and imaginative) of the Bible and that we are understanding this use of narrative in this broader sense of *storytelling* which includes a host of genres and sub-genres in Scripture.

Second, there exists a dynamic emotional power in this poetic making and its forms. This *power* is rooted in experiencing the work of literature as a unified whole, “each” one.

Third, the making of these stories, if they are “put together” correctly results in a work that is *beautiful*. This speaks to the experience of a work producing joy and delight.

Two other Greek terms related to ποιητικῆς are employed by Aristotle. The host verb ποιέω when used contextually to refer to the realm of poetry denotes “to compose, write.”⁹ He also makes use of the noun ποίησις which means “a making, fabrication, creation, production.”¹⁰ Benardete and Davis add that ποίησις “the product of *poiein*, frequently takes the narrower meaning of poetry.”¹¹

Having taken a brief perusal of the key terms used by Aristotle that help us to understand what he means by *poetics*; we now proceed to grasp how Aristotle and other literary theorists and critics have come to grasp this topic. We begin by continuing with Aristotle’s treatment of *poetics*.

⁹ L & S, 650-51.

¹⁰ L & S, 651.

¹¹ Benardete and Davis, *Aristotle—On Poetics*, 1.

A Brief Review of a Theory of Poetics from the Vantage Point of Some Notable Thinkers

As we have already observed a key element of the Greek terms used by Aristotle in his discussion on *poetics* is the concept of a poet/maker “putting together the stories” so that what is produced, the ποίησις, would be *beautiful*.¹² In the very next line in *Poetics* Aristotle writes, after noting that poetry should be well constructed and beautiful, about poetry’s constituent elements in terms of its extent and fitting qualities: “and further from how many and of what kinds are its right parts.”¹³ In order to construct poetry well and ensure its beauty, the poet is to pay attention to the amount of and the elements of narration in his story. Aristotle proceeds to discuss these various *parts* (μορίων) which include narrative structure and literary devices employed by the maker of poetry. Let’s review a brief survey of some of these of particular interest for our study.

A key component of any poetic making is, as Aristotle declares, μίμησις. This is commonly rendered as “imitation” and this term does indeed denote this. The word μίμησις also conveys the sense of “representation by means of art.”¹⁴ Aristotle writes, “Now epic poetry and the poetry of tragedy, and further comedy and the making of dithyrambic poetry and most of the flute and of the skill in harp playing all happen to be at, on the whole, imitations.”¹⁵ This is a key component in the composition of imaginative literature because the poet/maker must be a keen observer of the world around him in order to correctly *represent* it in his poetic art. Benardete and Davis aver, “The entirety of *On Poetics* could be understood as an attempt to articulate the

¹² Aristotle, *Poetics*, I, 1447a, ll. 9-10; 28.

¹³ This is my translation of ἔτι δὲ ἐκ πόσων καὶ ποίων ἐστὶ μορίων, ὁμοίως. Aristotle, *Poetics*, I, 1447a, ll. 10-11; 28.

¹⁴ *L & S*, 513.

¹⁵ This is my translation of ἐποποιία δὴ καὶ ἡ τῆς τραγωδίας ποίησις ἔτι δὲ κωμῳδία καὶ ἡ διθυραμβοποιητικὴ καὶ τῆς [15] αὐλητικῆς ἡ πλείστη καὶ κιθαριστικῆς πᾶσαι τυγχάνουσιν οὔσαι μιμήσεις. Aristotle, *Poetics*, I, 1447a, ll. 13-16; 28.

importance of *mimesis* for understanding human nature.”¹⁶

The maker of literary art must employ any number of literary devices so that he might maximize the power of his story. One such device is that of *metaphor*. Aristotle asserts, “And a metaphor is the carrying towards of a name belonging to another, either from a genus to the species or from the species to the genus, or from species to species, or by analogy.”¹⁷ Thus, part of the successful composition of poetry involves the use of this figure of speech involving the transference of meaning by way of an indirect comparison.

As to the narrative structure of a poetic work, Aristotle writes of what now seems obvious, “And with regard to narrative and in a meter of imitation, that it is necessary to put together the stories just as in tragedies, (being) dramatic, concerning one whole and complete action having a beginning and a middle and an end.”¹⁸ Two matters become immediately apparent in this brief statement. First, Aristotle is speaking here about the composition of imaginative narrative literature, but as we will see the writing of historical narrative plays by the same rules. Second, the creative force employed in the making (*put together*; συνιστάναι) of these stories is dedicated to producing the reading experience of a unified and whole narrative flow in the form of a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Aristotle also speaks to the creative work of the poet/maker with respect to the business of plotting stories. He writes, “And as the story is the imitation of the action—for I mean by

¹⁶ Benardete and Davis, *Aristotle—On Poetics*, 2-3.

¹⁷ This is my translation of μεταφορά δέ ἐστιν ὀνόματος ἀλλοτρίου ἐπιφορά ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ γένους ἐπὶ εἶδος ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ εἶδους ἐπὶ τὸ γένος ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ εἶδους ἐπὶ εἶδος ἢ κατὰ τὸ ἀνάλογον. Aristotle, *Poetics*, I, 1457b, ll. 7-9; 104.

¹⁸ This is my translation of περὶ δὲ τῆς διηγηματικῆς καὶ ἐν μέτρῳ μιμητικῆς, ὅτι δεῖ τοὺς μύθους καθάπερ ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις συνιστάναι δραματικοὺς καὶ περὶ μίαν πράξιν ὅλην καὶ τελείαν [20] ἔχουσιν ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσα καὶ τέλος, Aristotle, *Poetics*, I, 1459a, ll. 17-23; 114.

‘story’ this putting together of events.”¹⁹ Two observations pertinent to our discussion of poetic making emerge from this brief sentence from Aristotle. First, the concept of the *story* (μῦθος) is reiterated here to be an *imitation* (μίμησις) of action. This means that the making of an imaginative narrative is an echo of real events having been observed and then envisioned by the poet. Second, Aristotle is specifically identifying the “story” in terms of the active construction of a sequence of events forming the basis of a plot.

We turn to one other declaration of Aristotle on the topic of poetics and for this we shift to his work *Rhetoric*.²⁰ In Book 2 he distinguishes between two patterns of the substance of writing asserting:

First then, concerning paradigm let us speak; for paradigm (is) similar to a bringing about, and the bringing about (is) a beginning.

Of paradigms that which is seen (is) two; for one is a paradigm which is that which is seen (is) to speak of things which happened before, and one to make up. And of this on the one hand (is) comparison (παραβολή) and on the other one “words” (λόγος = *fables*).²¹

This brief statement by Aristotle asserts regarding the two paradigms, as George Kennedy clarifies, that “the species are ‘historical’ and ‘fictional.’”²² That Aristotle identified the

¹⁹ This is my translation of ἔστιν δὲ τῆς μὲν πράξεως ὁ μῦθος ἢ μίμησις, λέγω γὰρ μῦθον τοῦτον τὴν σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων, Aristotle, *Poetics*, I, 1450a, ll. 4-5; 48.

²⁰ Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge, MA: 1926).

²¹ This is my translation of πρῶτον μὲν οὖν περὶ παραδείγματος λέγωμεν: ὁμοιον γὰρ ἐπαγωγῇ τὸ παράδειγμα, ἢ δ’ ἐπαγωγῇ ἀρχή

παραδειγμάτων δὲ εἶδη δύο: ἓν μὲν γὰρ ἔστιν παραδείγματος εἶδος τὸ λέγειν πράγματα προγενομένα, ἓν δὲ τὸ αὐτὸν ποιεῖν. τούτου δὲ ἓν μὲν παραβολή ἓν δὲ λόγοι, Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.20.2, 272.

²² George A. Kennedy, translator, *On Rhetoric*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 162.

sub-genre of *parables* as fictive has implications for our discussion of them later regarding their use in biblical literature.

Each of Aristotle's declarations and identifications of various literary devices and of the elements of poetic making served to blaze a trail that had not yet been traveled. As we will see, those literary critics who have followed in his steps have built on his foundation and have advanced the discussion of the principles of poetics.

Phyllis Tribble, a rhetorical critic and devotee of structuralism, haltingly acknowledges Aristotle's literary theory as "the most ancient and persistent approach [which] holds that literature mirrors a world external to itself. The Greek word *mimesis* (imitation) denotes the concept."²³

Tribble returns to Aristotle's discussion of the proper construction of a story with the inclusion of its component parts. She reminds us of Aristotle's commitment viewing a story as a complete whole of action unfolding in a beginning, middle, and an end.²⁴ Tribble then proceeds to suggest that Aristotle paints himself into a corner declaring that:

By "beginning" he meant that which is itself not after anything but after which something comes. By "middle" he meant that which comes after something and after which something comes. By "end" he meant that which itself comes after something but after which nothing comes. Well-constructed plots neither begin nor end by chance but conform to these principles.²⁵

As we have already seen in commenting on Aristotle's own words about the construction of narratives, his comments on the importance of a story's beginning, middle, and end have to do with the cohesion of a complete and whole sequence of events. Tribble's take on Aristotle is a

²³ Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 10.

²⁴ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 116.

²⁵ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 116.

contrivance and a misreading of his intent.

Trible next proceeds to attempt to map out the plot of the book of Jonah by imposing her erroneous Aristotelian framework. Accordingly, the result is a forced outline with the *beginning* being the command of Yahweh and Jonah's response (1:1-3); the *middle* being the narrative at sea (1:4-2:11) and of the city of Nineveh (3:1-4:5); and the *end* being the appointments of Yahweh and Jonah's grumbling (4:6-11).²⁶ This charting is highly reductive and does not capture the intent or spirit of Aristotle's thinking on the whole of a narrative sequence of events. Tribble is imposing a structuralist viewpoint on the biblical text insisting that we "Remember that form [design and structure] and content [plot] must converge for appropriate interpretation."²⁷

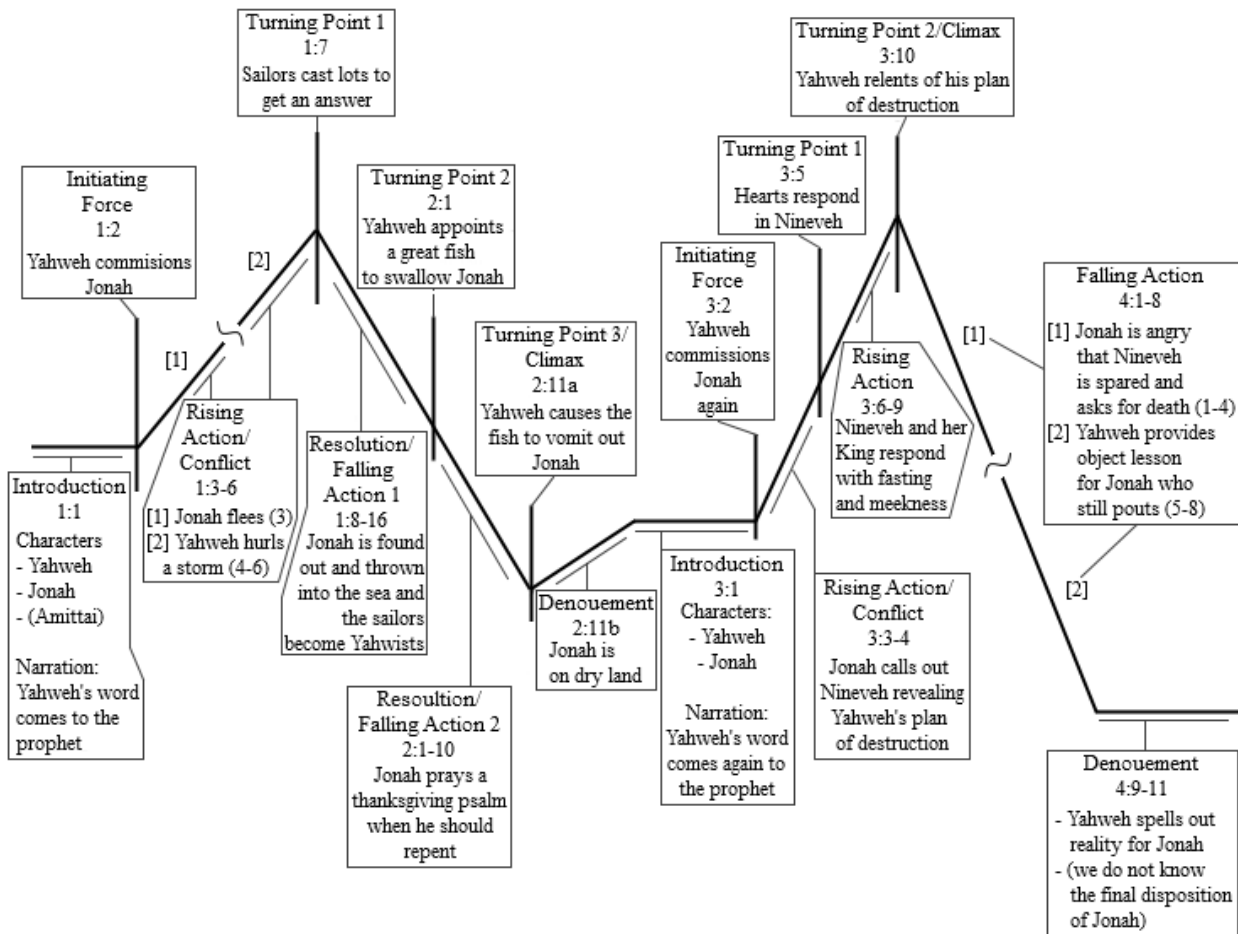
Instead of Tribble's artificial charting of the narrative flow of Jonah and her forced Aristotelian outline, let us consider a more natural charting allowing for the ups and downs of narrative flow in one complete whole action as seen in TABLE 1 below.

²⁶ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 116.

²⁷ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 116.

TABLE 1 (Devised by the present writer.)

Narrative Arc for the Book of Jonah



In the above chart we take note that the complete action of this whole story unfolds over the course of two rounds of beginning, middle, and end sequences. Such a charted depiction traces the flow of a story's narrative arc.²⁸ The first arc's "ending" of Jonah being spit out by the fish offers no real resolution and so readers of the book of Jonah expect more. Upon turning the page to reach the next verse in 3:1 we encounter language closely mirroring that of what we read in 1:1. Chapter 3 begins וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יוֹנָה בְּוָאֲמָתִי לֵאמֹר ("And the word of Yahweh came to

²⁸ This chart is based ostensibly on Freytag's Pyramid. For more discussion see below.

Jonah a second time saying...). The language *וַיְהִי דְבַר-יְהוָה אֶל-יוֹנָה ... לֵאמֹר* is exactly the same as 1:1 indicating to the reader that something of a second “beginning” is occurring in this narrative. And indeed this is the case as Yahweh again commands Jonah to *קוּם לֵךְ אֶל-נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וְקַרְא* (“Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out [against her].”) in 3:2 as he did in 1:2. The *beginning, middle, and end* of the story of 1:1 to 2:11 and of 3:1 to 4:11 is something of a narrative parallelism where the structure of events is highly stylized and repeated.²⁹

The point of all of this is that we observe a complete whole story being told regarding the adventures of Jonah which does indeed have a beginning, a middle, and an end unfolding over a highly organized rhetorical structure that repeats itself with some newly added story elements. This affirms Aristotle’s observations on narratives as whole complete actions with the well-known “three-act” structure.

A key component of Aristotle’s thinking is the concept of *mimesis* advancing the idea of the poet/maker’s close observation of human agents and their nature in order to best function as a storyteller representing mankind. J. R. R. Tolkien advances the discussion of this Aristotelian concept in an essay of literary theory entitled “On Fairy-Stories.”³⁰ Tolkien furthers the discussion of the imitative nature of the poet’s work through the lens of the *imagination*. He notes that men are imbued with the power of making images by way of the imagination resulting in what he terms a “successful expression.”³¹ But Tolkien argues that there is another aspect of this *expression* writing, “The achievement of the expression, which gives (or seems to give) ‘the

²⁹ See Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah*, ZECOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 38-39 for more discussion. It is also possible to view this narratorial repetition as a *paneled sequence* which is a “literary structural technique where repeated elements appear in successive movements, yielding a structure of ABC//ABC.” Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2006), 230.

³⁰ See Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *The Monsters*, 138-39 and 155.

³¹ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 138.

inner consistency of reality,' is indeed another thing, or aspect, needing another name: Art, the operative link between Imagination and the final result, Sub-creation."³²

Tolkien has added an important theological dimension to Aristotle's idea of mimesis declaring that any poetic making of the imagination is a work of *sub-creation* following in the footsteps of the Creator as the ultimate Maker. This has enormous implications for the composition of imaginative literature in Scripture. Tolkien develops his thinking on this topic a bit more asserting:

Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it. If he indeed achieves a quality that can be fairly described by the dictionary definition: "inner consistency of reality," it is difficult to conceive how this can be, if the work does not in some way partake of reality. The peculiar quality of the "joy" in successful Fantasy can be thus explained in the sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a "consolation" for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, "Is it true?" The answer to this question that I gave at first was (quite rightly): "If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world." That is enough for the artist (or the artist part of the artist).³³

What Tolkien has done here is advance Aristotle's thinking about *imitation* by tying it to the doctrine of creation or specifically here, of sub-creation. Sub-creation is the holy work of a poet/maker (Tolkien's *artist*) in which stories are devised as based on the real, primary world of God's creation and *making* in which a believable and *true* secondary world is imagined and expressed.

Our focus turns now to contemporary literary criticism that highlights the development of the principles of poetics regarding the rules that poet/makers play by in order to compose a story. Biblical scholar Adele Berlin identifies *poetics* as "the science of literature," which is interested

³² Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 139.

³³ Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 155.

in how literature's *building blocks* are assembled and what are its governing principles.³⁴ This means that poetics is not involved in the process of interpretation where meaning is derived from a narrative.³⁵ Berlin avers that "poetics describes the basic components of literature and the rules governing their use. Poetics strives to write a grammar, as it were, of literature."³⁶ In order to fully grasp this image, Berlin offers up the analogy of likening a cake to the product of literature, poetics providing the recipe, and interpretation remarking on the taste of the cake.³⁷

Robert W. Funk defines poetics as having "to do with everything involved in the creation or composition of (literary) texts."³⁸ As is the case with Berlin, Funk employs the image of poetics as a grammar in the sense that it is comprised of the principles, or more specifically, "the constituent elements of a natural language" of literary art.³⁹ Along similar lines, John Barton adds that *poetics* "is an attempt to specify how literature 'works'" and "is interested in how the text is articulated."⁴⁰

As we have seen, there is a general agreement in how many have defined poetics over the years as concerned with the business of the *making* of stories founded upon a set of rules which anchor its governance. This promotes a universal understanding aiding poet/makers to go about the construction of their narratives which will then allow readers of their stories—who intuitively understand the grammar of the rules of poetics—access understanding and delighting in them.

³⁴ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 15.

³⁵ Berlin, *Poetics and*, 15.

³⁶ Berlin, *Poetics and*, 15.

³⁷ Berlin, *Poetics and*, 15.

³⁸ Robert W. Funk, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988), 5.

³⁹ Funk, *The Poetics of*, 5.

⁴⁰ John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 205.

With this stated, there are also many contemporary literary critics who challenge the above assertion. Petri Merenlahti acknowledges that while the grammar of principles for poetics will continue to function, the critical schools of Formalism and Structuralism as well as other ideological considerations have co-opted the term *poetics* for their own use. As a result, Merenlahti concludes:

Poetics is also likely to persist in a secondary, critical role—even if not exactly in the way in which it used to exist. Stripped of claims of objectivity and universality, it will have to become an historically and ideologically sensitive discipline. It will need to adapt to the fact that perceptions of literary form, function, meaning and value are not fixed for all time, but mutate and develop from one time and culture to another; and that, far from being neutral, these perceptions are integrally connected with ways of perceiving reality that reflect particular interests in human societies.⁴¹

This is a fascinating observation made by Merenlahti in that what he notes has happened in so many of these ideological critical schools. This is the case with literary critic Meir Sternberg whose own understanding of biblical poetics does not fall along the lines of writers establishing and abiding by the rules of compositional construction which, in turn, allows readers to perform a literary analysis based on this initiated grammar. Sternberg declares, “Contrary to what some recent attempts at ‘literary’ analysis seem to assume, form has no value or meaning apart from the communicative (historical, ideological, aesthetic) function.”⁴² This is because, as Barton observes, Sternberg “is firmly in the camp of those who, like structuralists, are concerned with the *discourse* of the biblical text rather than with its *genesis*: in our terms, with ‘the text itself.’”⁴³ Such meddling panders to the reading audience and denies the poet/maker his due as the one who has fashioned his work.

⁴¹ Petri Merenlahti, *Poetics for the Gospels* (New York: T & T Clark, 2002), 5.

⁴² Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), xii.

⁴³ Barton, *Reading the*, 205.

But all of this ideological posturing is nothing more than imposing one's worldview on an established set of rules that has been in operation since the beginning of storytelling and universally observed since Aristotle's *Poetics*. Wayne C. Booth offers, "Most of us can accept the essential poetic truth first formulated by Aristotle—that each successful imaginative work has its own life, its own soul, its own principles of being, quite independently of the prejudices or practical needs of this or that audience, and that our poetic devices should be an 'integral part of the whole.'"⁴⁴

If we can come to the place of acknowledging an existing reality of a grammar or set of "rules" in play regarding the matter of poetics, that is to say that any good story is going to contain the basic elements of narration—plot, characterization, setting, the use of metaphor, rhetorical devices, etc.—then we can proceed with a literary analysis of that text and further proceed to coming to grips with grasping the meaning of that story. But before we begin to discuss the important matters of *literary analysis* of narrative and of the principles of *interpretation*, we would be well served to move on from this general discussion of poetics to that of *biblical poetics*.

Establishing a Biblical Poetics

Literary critic George Steiner acknowledges that in our western culture "Vacant metaphors, eroded figures of speech, inhabit our vocabulary and grammar"⁴⁵ observed in things like our insistence on using the terms *sunrise* and *sunset* in a post-Ptolemaic world. In our world of highly scientific and technological advances we tend to employ the word "God" in this same

⁴⁴ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 93.

⁴⁵ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3.

anachronistic way clinging “to our culture, to our routines of discourse, He is a phantom of grammar, a fossil embedded in the childhood of rational speech.”⁴⁶ But Steiner has other ideas and he offers this bold proposal “that any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, that any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God’s presence.”⁴⁷

Steiner’s assertion forms the foundation of our thinking about the establishment of any stable biblical poetics. The construction of biblical storytelling—historical and fictional—can only happen because God inspires the writer and imbues the composition of any biblical narrative with the emotional experience of the whole of the story and real meaning.

Secondarily, we turn to the intersection of historical and imaginative narrative as found in the Bible and how the writers of Scripture go about their business. Tolkien wrote about the *truth* of a secondary world of fiction possessing an inner consistency of reality which points to the primary world.⁴⁸ The glory of the stories of the Bible is that they contain the reality of the primary world. Tolkien speaks of the Gospels—historical narrative and of the primary world—as being the type of “story of a larger kind” since

they contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: “mythical” in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete and conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation. The birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the “inner consistency of reality.” There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true

⁴⁶ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 3.

⁴⁷ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 3.

⁴⁸ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 155.

on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation.⁴⁹

We make two observations from Tolkien's thinking applicable to our discussion about biblical poetics. First, the primary world reality of the historical stories about Christ in the Gospels read as if they are imaginative tales, but they come to us with all of their *marvels* and *mythic* qualities as narratives *entering history*.

Second, both the sub-creation of the writer of fiction in Scripture (parables, fables, visions, etc.) and those recording, in historical narrative, the Primary Art of God's Creation in the Christ story contain "truth" each because they possess the *inner consistency of reality*. In one case, the sub-creational art of fiction points to the reality of the primary world, and, in the other, the stories of recorded history reflect the reality of Creative Art.

Another key bit of biblically poetic prolegomena involves the nature of *truth* claims of literary theory made by biblical writers. This has to do with the mingling of the reality of God's presence in the world with the *truth* of both sub-creative art by poet/makers in imaginative and historical stories and the Creative Art of God. This has to do with one of the rules for the grammar of biblical poetics. Erich Auerbach, in speaking of the traditions in western storytelling, observes, "The Bible's claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it is tyrannical—it excludes all other truth claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, it is destined for autocracy."⁵⁰ The gist of Auerbach's observation has profound implications for biblical poetics.

⁴⁹ Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 155-156.

⁵⁰ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, Willard R. Trask, translator (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 14-15.

When a biblical writer sits down to compose an imaginative story such as the competing worlds of Dame Wisdom and Lady Folly (Proverbs 9) or to put together the components of an historical narrative (e.g., 1 Kings 21) he does so under the unique reality of what we have come to understand as its claims to *truth* telling above all other storytelling. This assertion falls within the context of the matters of doctrinal truth claims and does not invalidate the storytelling of others outside of Scripture; it merely positively asserts the unique position of the making of and claims of the Bible's storytellers.

The above three bits of introductory matters of biblical poetics have prepared us for a discussion of the topic proper. We begin with what the writer of Ecclesiastes has to say about poetics and the nature of composition for biblical writers.

At the close of the book of Ecclesiastes, in the frame narrative, the writer offers these concluding remarks in 12:9-10:

9—And furthermore, Qohelet was a wise man. He continually taught the people knowledge. And he weighed, and searched out, (and) put into good order many proverbs.
10—Qohelet sought to find words of delight and that which was written correctly—words of truth.⁵¹

The epilogist of Ecclesiastes sets forth the rudiments of a biblical poetics which Leland Ryken identifies as “the theory of writing with which biblical writers approach their work.”⁵² Estes adds, speaking of the frame narrative's relationship to the whole of the book of Ecclesiastes, that it is sensible “to view these verses as providing the back story about the composition of this

⁵¹ My translation from the MT.

⁵² Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 353.

biblical text.”⁵³

Verse 9 begins with a third person reference identifying Qohelet as a *wise man*. Two obvious questions emerge: (1) What is *wisdom*? and (2) What is the type of *wisdom* practiced and written about in this book? Al Fuhr suggests that one can point to the typical generic expression of wisdom in the form of *proverbs* the kind of which are compiled in the book of Proverbs which can be observed in Ecclesiastes 4:1-12; 7:1-29; 10:1-20; and 11:1-4.⁵⁴ Fuhr argues that the “lens of wisdom” through which Qohelet gazes is, at root, a positive vision that, at the same time, “incorporates skepticism, and theological tension, [in which] the entire book of Qohelet drips with wisdom observations, reflections, rationale, internal dialogue, and stated conclusions.”⁵⁵ This *wisdom perspective* continues throughout the book of Ecclesiastes and Fuhr asserts that the affirming words of the epilogist in 12:9-10 serve to advocate understanding Qohelet’s road traveled in composition is bathed in wisdom and “evaluated through the ‘lens of wisdom.’”⁵⁶

As a wise man, Qohelet was constantly teaching the people knowledge. This statement in verse 9 implies that the *knowledge* conveyed by Qohelet was of a theological nature since Ecclesiastes (and for that matter, the whole of Scripture) reveals God’s will for his people. This indicates that part of the poetic enterprise in the composition of Scripture keenly involves theological teaching. C. S. Lewis avers that the Bible is “through and through a sacred book.

⁵³ Daniel J. Estes, “Well-Crafted Proverbs—And Yet God’s Inspired Word,” *Presbyterian* 45/2 (Fall 2019): 47-59; here 49.

⁵⁴ Richard Alan Fuhr, *An Analysis of the Inter-Dependency of the Prominent Motifs Within the Book of Qohelet* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 76.

⁵⁵ Fuhr, *An Analysis of*, 76.

⁵⁶ Fuhr, *An Analysis of*, 84.

Most of its component parts were written, and all of them brought together, for a purely religious purpose.”⁵⁷ Verse 9 describes the type of wisdom practiced by Qohelet in his calling as a teacher which is, as Derek Kidner notes, a “partnership between thought and expression, research and teaching.”⁵⁸ Qohelet’s literary goals clearly include a didactic purpose.⁵⁹

The final sentence in 12:9 employs an asyndetic verb series indicating how Qohelet went about his business.⁶⁰ The first is *נָאֵץ* (*to weigh* or *balance* in the Piel stem and *to listen* in Hiphil),⁶¹ which Estes notes is closely related to the noun *אָזְן* (*ear*) suggesting the importance for Qohelet to listen and carefully weigh his words which is in keeping with someone who views the world through the *lens of wisdom*.⁶² The next verb is *חָקַר* denoting *to search out* in the Piel stem.⁶³ This has connotations suggesting that one, as Estes notes, is to “examine carefully in order to understand in Job 5:27; Prov. 25:2; and Ps. 139:1, 23.”⁶⁴ The third verb in the series is *תָּקַן* means *to put in good order* in this context.⁶⁵ In the process of *making*, the editor’s job is to

⁵⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 32.

⁵⁸ Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance: The Message of Ecclesiastes*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 105.

⁵⁹ So Gordan J. Wenham, *Story as Torah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 3 and Ryken, *Words of*, 353.

⁶⁰ It is preferred to consider these three verbs as a coordinated compound sharing the compliment “many proverbs.” See Robert D. Holmstedt, John A. Cook, and Phillip S. Marshall, *Qoheleth: A Handbook to the Hebrew Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 305 for more discussion. Against C. D. Ginsburg who argues that the first two verbs act as adverbial modifiers of the third following GKC § 120 g-h citing several examples where, in verse, in the cases of paired coordinating verbs the first modifies the second. But in Qohelet 12:9 we are dealing with prose and a series of three verbs in coordination. See Ginsburg’s case as quoted in Michael V. Fox, “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83-106; here 97.

⁶¹ *HALOT*, 27.

⁶² Estes, “Well-Crafted Proverbs,” 49.

⁶³ *HALOT*, 348.

⁶⁴ Estes, “Well-Crafted Proverbs,” 49.

⁶⁵ *HALOT*, 1784.

creatively order each of the composed proverbs in the best way possible.⁶⁶ Qohelet was a careful organizer of the material he used for composition because, as Kidner observes, “he accepts the challenging ideal of perfect clarity” by *weighing, searching out, and putting together* these proverbs.

Verse 10 continues the *seeking* motif stating that Qohelet “sought (שָׁקַץ) meaning to find words of delight” as a poet/maker. This tells us that Qohelet pursued a deliberate course of literary beauty choosing his words carefully. The second half of the verse reveals that Qohelet’s search wanted to produce “that which was written correctly—words of truth.” Estes writes of verse 10, “This statement describes his efforts to combine elegant form with excellent content.”⁶⁷ Tremper Longman affirms that the construct chain דְּבָרֵי־חֵפֶץ “likely refers to artful expression.”⁶⁸ Kidner sums up rather adroitly what is going on in verse 10 regarding the writer’s process of making, remarking, “it will take the skill and integrity, the charm and courage, of an artist and a scholar to do justice to the task.”⁶⁹ Estes is correct in asserting that the noun חֵפֶץ has “the connotation of enjoyment, what is aesthetically pleasing to the reader.”⁷⁰

As to our assertions regarding biblical poetics, Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 demonstrates that the “proverbs” composed by Qohelet were intentionally written as art by a careful *maker* with the additional reality that they are also the *true* words of God’s revealed will.⁷¹ Ryken adds,

⁶⁶ Estes, “Well-Crafted Proverbs,” 49.

⁶⁷ Estes, “Well-Crafted Proverbs,” 49.

⁶⁸ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 278.

⁶⁹ Kidner, *A Time to Mourn*, 105.

⁷⁰ Estes, “Well-Crafted Proverbs,” 49.

⁷¹ Estes, “Well-Crafted Proverbs,” 50.

speaking to the broader reach of the making of biblical composition, “Here is the writer as craftsman and self-conscious artist. It is impossible to read the Bible without sensing that aesthetic considerations were important to its writer. They knew how to tell well-made stories and handle poetic language.”⁷²

Our study thus far has dipped into the world of poetic making in a general discussion of literary theory and in the specific application for biblical poetics. This has helped us gain insight into the business of *poetic making* and the tools and process of how writers go about their work. When the poet/maker’s work is done and the work of his sub-creation sits on the desk before us, we now are faced with the job of the *literary analysis* of his story. The business of literary analysis involves observing how the writer of a story employs the narratological aspects of *making*, namely literary devices such as plot, characterization, setting, metaphor, etc., to fashion a readable story. The appreciation of how to grasp these aspects of literary composition will aid in our quest to better perform narrative criticism of the Bible’s historical and imaginative narrative texts.

Aspects of Narrative Literature

When one talks about *stories* we do not include every type of writing; one usually is referring to the type of writing that is *imaginative* in nature, as opposed to *expository* composition.⁷³ If we look at Genesis 3:1-7, the fall narrative, our imagination is engaged by an author whose “governing purpose is to recreate the actual scene and event in sufficient detail that we can imaginatively experience them.”⁷⁴ In reading through these verses it seems apparent that

⁷² Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 355.

⁷³ See Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 11-12 for more on this discussion.

⁷⁴ Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 13.

Moses intends to tell a *story* and not advance a theological argument.⁷⁵ Ryken captures the distinction between *imaginative literature* and *expository writing*:

Expository writing gives us the precept, literature incarnates the precept in an example—an example that does not simply illustrate the truth but is itself the meaning. A work of literature is incarnational—it embodies meaning. The customary literary terminology for talking about this is to say that the writer of literature shows rather than tells.⁷⁶

Notice how Ryken observes that the account of the fall is both *history* as a matter of factual record and *storytelling* with all of its imaginative trappings. It is helpful to note that biblical narratives possess literary qualities. The narratives of the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) “exhibit many literary characteristics such as imagery, figures of speech, and intricate structures.”⁷⁷

As we shall see, the narrative sections of the Bible possess the classic elements of narrative such as plot, setting, and characters. These are the tools of literary analysis. We shall first identify these elements of narrative and then apply a literary approach to a narrative text from Mark 4:35-41, in the next chapter on *hermeneutics*, with the goal of our analysis being to better understand the Word of God and his will because we have grasped this narrative in its literary presentation. This discussion will explore how the elements of fictional narrative including plot, characterization, and setting serve as a means of rhetorically communicating truth in historic biblical narrative, namely that of Mark 4:35-41. The literary devices employed by the writer of this narrative serve to help convey doctrinal truth regarding how God’s people should understand who Jesus is as the Christ who possesses divine power over nature. We begin by reviewing how the game is played in *narrative* by familiarizing ourselves with its rules.

⁷⁵ Ryken, *Words*, 13.

⁷⁶ Ryken, *Words*, 13.

⁷⁷ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1990), 98.

Literary Devices Used in Narrative

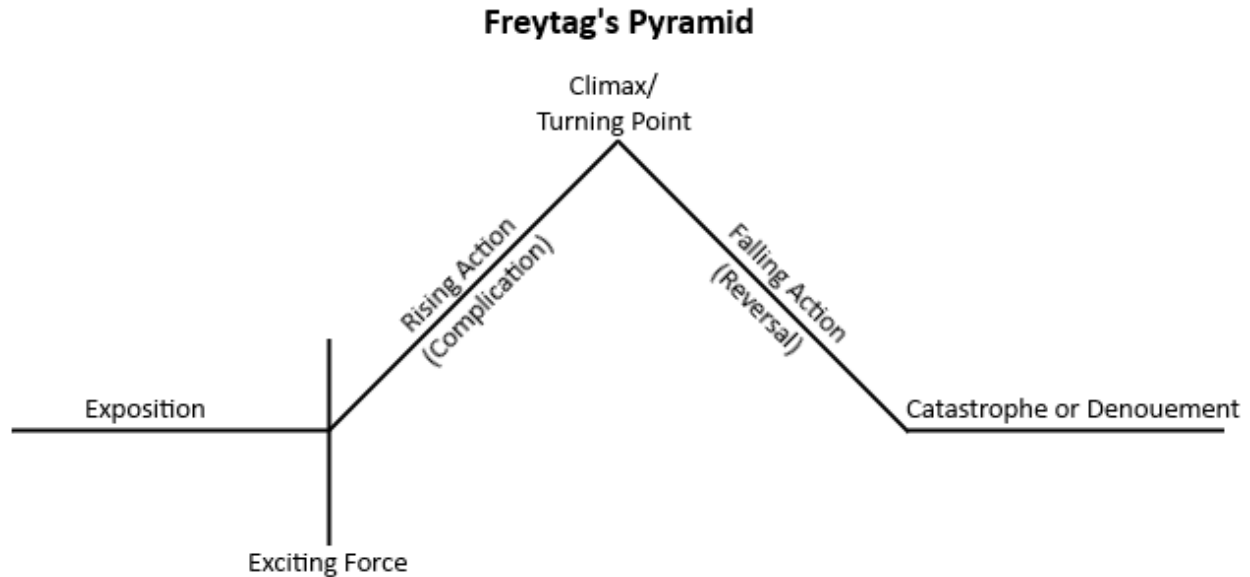
Aristotle, in *Poetics*, as we have already seen above, helped identify the most basic nature of narratives in asserting *περὶ δὲ τῆς διηγηματικῆς καὶ ἐν μέτρῳ μιμητικῆς, ὅτι δεῖ τοὺς μύθους καθάπερ ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις συνιστάναι δραματικούς καὶ περὶ μίαν πράξιν ὅλην καὶ τελείαν ἔχουσιν ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσα καὶ τέλος.*⁷⁸ It seems silly to have to say that any good story has a *beginning* and a *middle* and an *end*, but when we begin to identify how each of these component parts function we see that some discussion is needed.

One helpful way to trace the flow of dramatic and narrative structure is offered by literary critic Gustav Freytag. See TABLE 2 below.

⁷⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459a, 114. My wooden translation of this passage reads “And concerning the imitating (art) of narrative verse, it is necessary that the plots, as in tragedy, should be constructed dramatically and concerning one action—whole and complete, having a beginning and a middle and an end.”

TABLE 2

FREYTAG'S PYRAMID⁷⁹

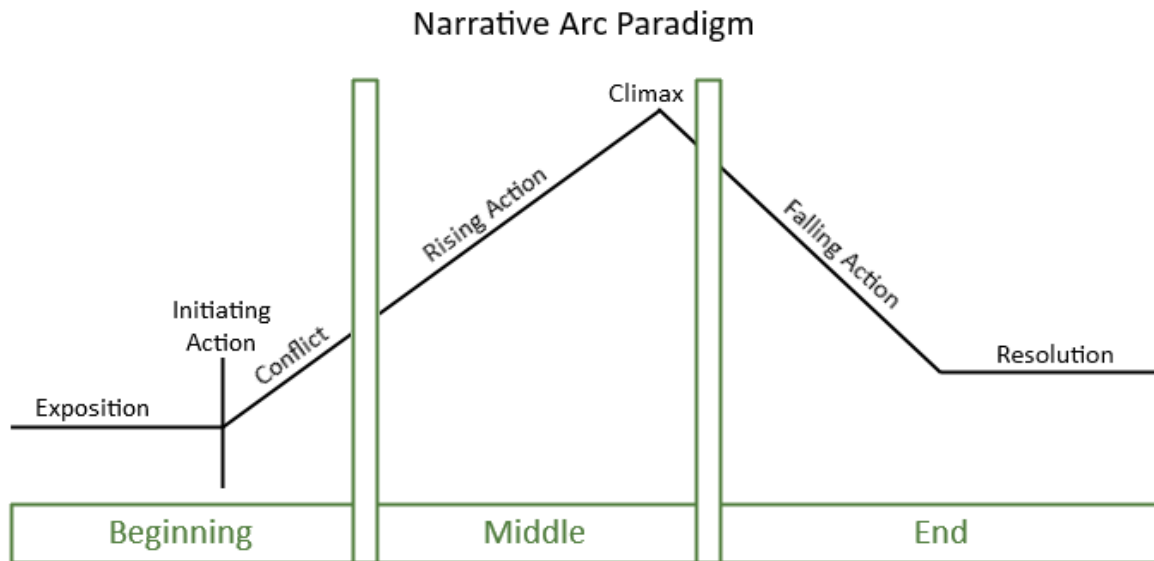


On some level it is an oversimplification to assert that every story can fit into what amounts to a five-act structure. With that stated, this model proves a very helpful introduction to tracking the narrative flow of a plot. This model works best in the case of drama (Shakespeare's plays had five acts), but does not really jibe with Aristotle's three-part structure for narrative. Our literary analysis of Mark 4:35-41 will shed light as to the nature and function of each of these elements.

A slightly more helpful template fuses the depiction of the narrative flow captured in Freytag's Pyramid as overlaid on a linear presentation of the movement from beginning to middle to end. See TABLE 3 below.

⁷⁹ Harmon and Holman, 221. See also Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1987), 92 and Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, second edition, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 33 for similar structural analysis.

TABLE 3



In this pattern the important elements of the plot are retained from Freytag's model, but are represented in what equates to the three-act structure of Aristotle. This paradigm and the component parts of plot will serve as the initial point of discussion of narrative which will proceed to *character*, *setting*, and *point of view*.

Plot

Generics of Plot

Aristotle argued that a narrative's *plot* is a piece of literature's primary element in storytelling. He defines plot (or *story*) as ἔστιν δὲ τῆς μὲν πράξεως ὁ μῦθος ἢ μίμησις, λέγω γὰρ μῦθον τοῦτον τὴν σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων,⁸⁰ and it is this "imitation of action" and "construction of events" that forms the basis of our understanding. Abrams adds that a plot in a "narrative work is constituted by its events and actions, as these are rendered and ordered toward

⁸⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450a, 48. Aristotle was technically making his comments in the context of discussing tragedy, but his observations about the nature of *plot* extend to the whole of storytelling.

achieving particular emotional and artistic effects.”⁸¹ Novelist E. M. Forster draws a helpful distinction between *story* and *plot*. A story is “a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence.”⁸² A plot also contains the sequential narrative of events with the addition of an emphasis of causality.⁸³ The distinction between a story and a plot is best demonstrated in the following way: “The king died and then the queen died” is an example of a story. However, “The king died, and then the queen died of grief,” is a plot because of the introduction of the element of causality.⁸⁴ Fokkelman likens the concept of plot to a “course that is run” and that one can best describe a plot’s “course of action... as a *trajectory*.”⁸⁵

Another helpful way to look at the flow of a plot in a story is to trace the flow of the narrative arc. Two foundational arcs will suffice for our study. They are the narrations of tragedy and comedy.⁸⁶ In a tragedy the central character’s story begins on a level plain of existence. He then commits some act that elevates his station or influence in the plotting of the story. Later his sin or crime is found out and he is again reduced to his first estate or worse by some form of public humiliation, imprisonment, or death. The story of Macbeth follows a tragic arc. He is a nobleman, the Thane of Cawdor, who after hearing the seductive counsel of the Wēirds, plots with his wife the murder of King Duncan. The murder of the rightful king allows Macbeth to

⁸¹ Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 159.

⁸² E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (London: Harcourt, 1927), 86.

⁸³ Forster, *Aspects*, 86. Tremper Longman III declares that “the plot of a literary narrative is the succession of events, usually motivated by conflict that generates suspense and leads to a conclusion.” See Longman, “Literary Approaches and Interpretation,” in *A Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Willem A. VanGemeren, General Editor, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 112.

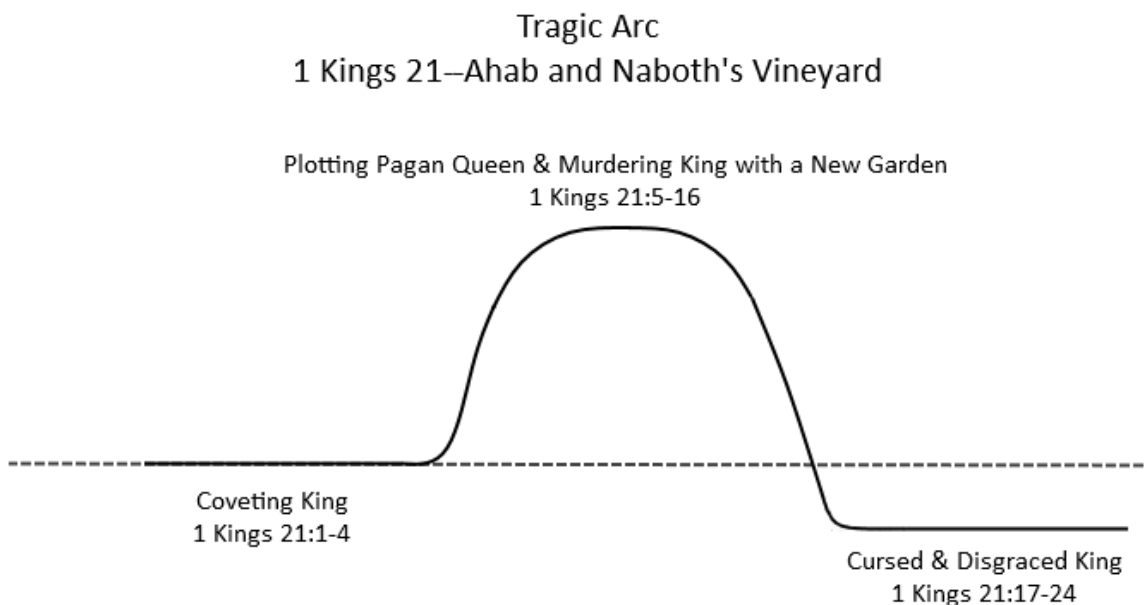
⁸⁴ The examples are Forster’s, *Aspects*, 86.

⁸⁵ J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 77.

⁸⁶ See Northrup Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1982), 169-98 for a helpful discussion of these U-shaped narratives as they appear in Scripture.

ascend to the throne of Scotland. His crime is found out and he is ultimately executed and the rightful heir, Malcolm, is enthroned and order is restored. 1 Kings 21 (the story of Ahab's lust for Naboth's vineyard) also traverses a tragic arc as briefly demonstrated in TABLE 4.

TABLE 4



The events of the arc are traced as follows: (1) Ahab begins this story as a stable (although already identified as evil by the narrator; cf. 1 Kings 16:29-34) and coveting king in the midst of a prosperous twenty-two-year reign when (2) his coveting leads to murder—removal of the obstacle of vineyard ownership—and the seizure of the desired land (life seems good) which leads to (3) Yahweh's cursing and disgracing of the king and his royal line. As is quite often in the case of a tragic arc, the final estate of the central figure of the narrative results in a posture lower than his beginning point.

Within the Bible we find several types of stories that follow the arc of tragedy including tragedies, punitive stories, and negative examples stories.⁸⁷ Robert Chisholm distinguishes the

⁸⁷ Robert B. Chisholm, *Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2006), 33.

three story arcs in the following ways. In a *tragedy* the central figure “who has the potential or at least the opportunity to succeed and achieve greatness, fails and falls, often because of a very human, but fatal flaw.”⁸⁸ In Scripture the accounts of Samson, Saul, and David are classic tragic figures. Chisholm identifies *punitive stories* as those focusing on a theme of the justice of God where “an evildoer violates God’s moral standards and then reaps the consequences of his behavior, often by a combination of direct divine intervention and providential manipulation of events.”⁸⁹ A classic example of this arc is the narrative of Abimelech and the lords of Shechem (בְּעִלְיָ שָׁכֶם) in Judges 9. Elohim sends a spirit to divide the murderous Abimelech and the lords of Shechem resulting in Abimelech attacking and leveling Shechem and to Abimelech’s death at the tower of Thebez, being crushed by a hurled millstone. The third tragic arc is the *negative example story* which narrates a central figure in, as Chisholm notes, “a negative light as an example to avoid.”⁹⁰ The narrative of Ahab (see TABLE 4 above) is a negative example story as is the account of Jephthah in Judges 10-12.

A comic arc unfolds with a “U” shaped story in which the leading figure begins on a level plain, experiences hardship, and is ultimately restored to his first or a better estate. The Cinderella story is the quintessential comedy, as is the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The narrative arc of Miranda in *The Tempest* also follows a comedic line.⁹¹ In the Bible, the stories of Joseph (Genesis 37-50) and that of Jesus follow comic arcs. For that matter, the whole of the story of the

⁸⁸ Chisholm, *Interpreting the*, 33.

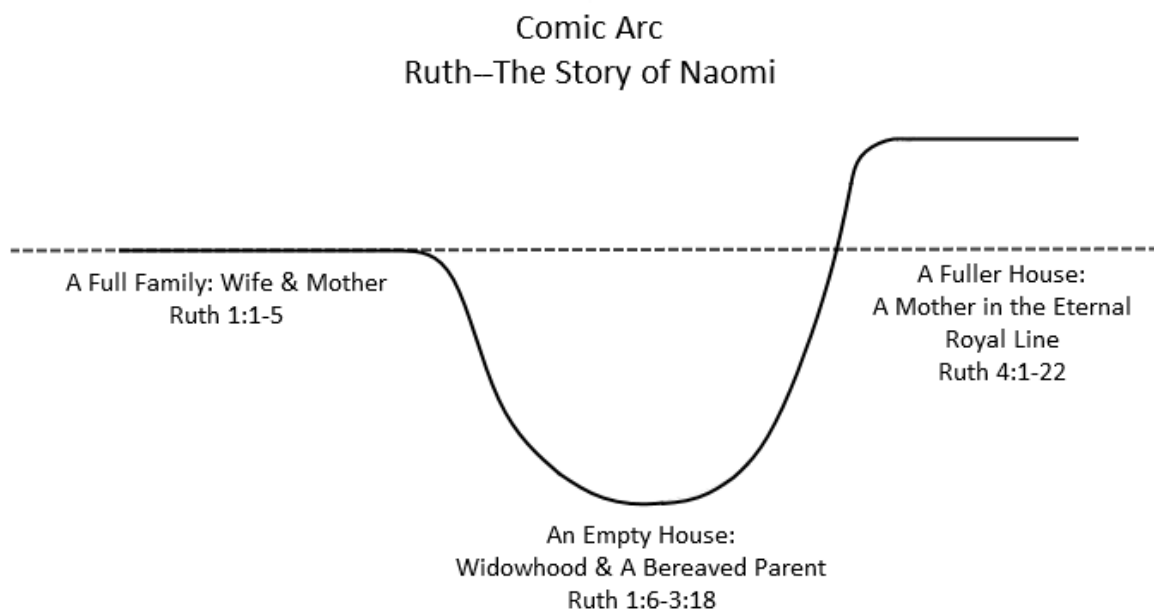
⁸⁹ Chisholm, *Interpreting the*, 33.

⁹⁰ Chisholm, *Interpreting the*, 34.

⁹¹ See Leland Ryken, *Windows to the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 42-5 and Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1957), 158-239 for more discussion on narrative arc and the more general theory of myth.

Bible with its redemptive flow is comic. The book of Ruth follows a comic, U-shaped arc with Naomi starting out full, being emptied, and then being filled again. The comic arc of Naomi's story is depicted in TABLE 5.

TABLE 5



The events of this arc are traced as follows: (1) the story begins with a Naomi experiencing the full life of being married and having two sons while living in Bethlehem when (2) a famine in Judah results in Naomi's husband, Elimelech ("My God is king," note the *irony* of his name), causes the family to move to forbidden Moab where the two sons and he die which leads to Naomi deciding to return home to Judah where Yahweh has made provision of food. Naomi is empty. Ruth comes with Naomi after experiencing a conversion to Yahwism and the two women live out a hard life, respectively, of being an unwanted and cursed alien in the Promised Land and a seemingly property-less widow with no prospects for survival. Naomi devises a daring plan that transpires on the threshing room floor in the middle of the night to secure a kinsman-redeemer for the purposes of gleaning his fields for food and for Ruth and the family namesake. This man is Boaz who is described in Ruth 2:1 as אִישׁ גִּבּוֹר חַיִל. This "worthy man" embraces his

role as the family's rescuer and loves Ruth which unfolds in (3) Boaz securing the family's plot of land and agreeing to marry Ruth who bears a son named Obed who is of the royal line of David who is of the eternal line leading to Jesus. The women of Bethlehem call Naomi the mother of the child; she is full again.

Chisholm identifies two types of comic arcs in Scripture. First, is the *reward story* which like the tragic *punitive story* demonstrates God's justice wherein a character is rewarded "for being faithful and obedient."⁹² The case of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4:8-17 is an example; she practiced hospitality to Elisha and, in turn, was promised that she would bear a son. Second, is the *admiration story* which acts as the flip side to a *negative example story*. These tales "present a character in a positive light as an example to follow."⁹³ The story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) presents the titular figure as a moral example to follow after.

Specific Motifs and Types of Plots

The overall plot arc of the Bible itself is the well-known Creation, Fall, Redemption, New-Creation paradigm. But there are several biblical plot motifs that help us recognize the foundation of a single structure pointing back to the overall plot arc. We are well-served to spend a little time reviewing these clusters in order to help recognize the movement of biblical plots.

The first of these is what is commonly known as the Monomyth which is "the composite story on which all individual stories can be plotted."⁹⁴ The movement of the monomyth is represented in TABLE 6 below and reveals this *one story* as a circle traversing the periods of the four seasons. Northrop Frye envisioned the following correspondence to these *seasonal myths*:

⁹² Chisholm, *Interpreting the*, 34.

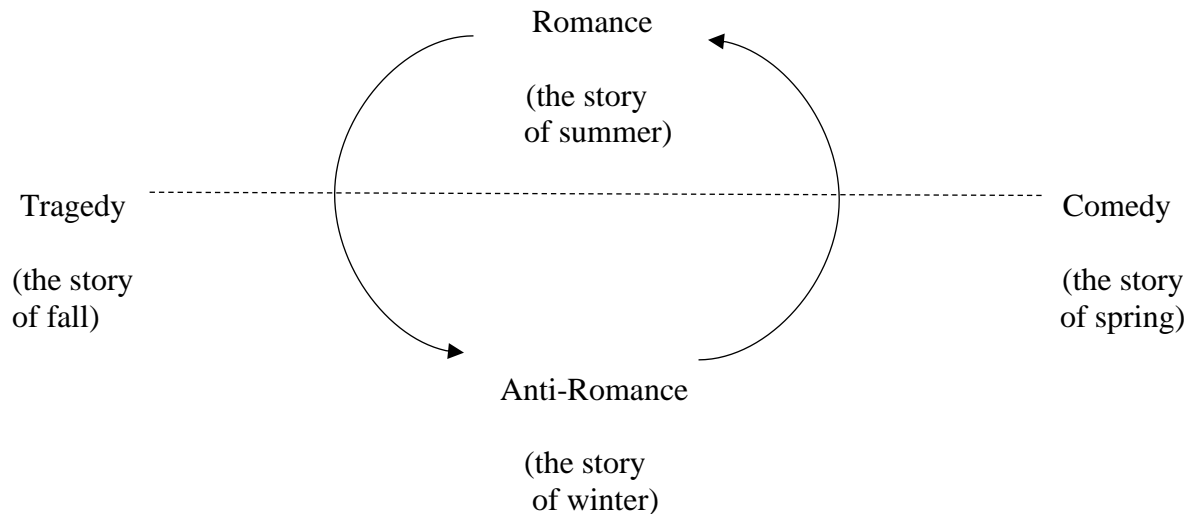
⁹³ Chisholm, *Interpreting the*, 35.

⁹⁴ "Plot Motifs," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, general editors (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 655.

the mythos of spring—comedy, of summer—romance, of autumn—tragedy, and of winter—anti-romance (irony and satire).⁹⁵

TABLE 6

THE MONOMYTH⁹⁶



Note that the “two phases above and below the horizontal line yield relatively few plot motifs because they consist of static states, whereas narrative tends to focus on change and development.”⁹⁷ The static categories are represented by *romance* and *antiromance*. Plot motifs common to *romance* echo the season of summer such as what we observe in *prosperity stories*. These are “wish-fulfillment stories in which the reader’s most cherished longings for success and security are satisfied.”⁹⁸ Biblical examples of this motif include: (1) the story of Joseph who rose from a circumstance of family derision and imprisonment to become a person of international

⁹⁵ See Frye, *Anatomy of*, 158-239 for full discussion.

⁹⁶ Frye, *Anatomy of*, 158-239 and Ryken, *Windows to*, 43.

⁹⁷ “Plot Motifs,” in *Dictionary of*, 655.

⁹⁸ “Plot Motifs,” in *Dictionary of*, 655.

renown, wealth, and power able to rescue his family from starvation, (2) the narrative of Boaz and Ruth and their domestic tranquility, and (3) the blessings experienced by and contentment of Abraham and Sarah after a period of trial.⁹⁹

Another pattern is that of the *good life* story which narrates characters and settings of ideal experience with Paradise noted as the original and typical example.¹⁰⁰ Elements common to these stories include: a “protected and beautiful environment, harmony with nature and God, moral innocence, and the satisfaction of all human appetites... it is the picture God, people, and nature in perfect interrelation.”¹⁰¹ The pastoral imagery of the rural agrarian life of Abraham and Sarah granting hospitality to the heavenly visitors (Gen. 18:1-15) is such a story of the good life especially when juxtaposed with the urban decay and moral sin depicted in the very next chapter.¹⁰²

The season of winter is outworked by the paradigm of *anti-romance*. Typical to this mythos are stories of suffering which would include the passion of Christ and its key components of “the taunting of enemies, the experience of false conviction, the crown of thorns, and crucifixion on a cross.”¹⁰³ Another important biblical example is the story of the prolonged suffering of Job. Another type of anti-romantic story is that of *oppression* which is quite prevalent in Scripture. Four expressions of this type of story emerge in the Bible being associated with “physical and spiritual burdens, the violence of war or unjust social and political

⁹⁹ “Plot Motifs,” in *Dictionary of*, 655.

¹⁰⁰ “The Good Life,” in *Dictionary of*, 342.

¹⁰¹ “The Good Life,” in *Dictionary of*, 342.

¹⁰² “The Good Life,” in *Dictionary of*, 342.

¹⁰³ “Suffering,” in *Dictionary of*, 826.

systems.”¹⁰⁴ The saga of Hebrew slavery in Egypt, the repeating pattern of oppression and deliverance in Judges, and the persecution of the early church are examples of oppression stories in Scripture.

The largest category of stories in the monomyth is that of *comedy* wherein the movement of the narrative is characterized by a reversal of a negative circumstance to one of rising to a positive estate. Amongst a plethora of story types are those of “increase, mercy, reform, reunion/reconciliation, rebirth, restoration, reward, redemption and return.”¹⁰⁵ A few classic biblical examples include the life of Naomi and of Joseph.

Tragic stories follow the “generic pattern of downward movement from prosperity to loss” including the “fall from innocence, stories of exile or banishment, the crime and punishment motif, and stories of misprizing.”¹⁰⁶ We look to the stories of Cain and Ananias and Sapphira as classic examples.

Ryken identifies plot forms that reenact the monomyth’s circular pattern to comprise the body of all literature. The eleven plots include: (1) the *quest* (the protagonist is called away from the security of home to face a trial and then return again triumphant), (2) the *death-rebirth motif* (the protagonist experiences death or danger and returns to life or security), (3) the *initiation* (the protagonist is plucked from an inexperienced or ideal life to undergo a series of trials and ordeals forming him into maturity), (4) the *journey* (our man encounters threats testing him and leading to his development as a person), (5) the *tragedy*, (6) the *comedy* (the U-shaped story), (7), *crime and punishment* (societal order is shattered, a criminal is apprehended and punished, and order is

¹⁰⁴ “Oppression,” in *Dictionary of*, 607.

¹⁰⁵ “Plot Motifs,” in *Dictionary of*, 655.

¹⁰⁶ “Plot Motifs,” in *Dictionary of*, 655.

restored), (8) the *temptation motif* (an innocent is victimized by the evil machinations of a tempter), (9) the *rescue motif* [also known as a chase narrative] (a protagonist experiences a threat and is then rescued) (10) the *Cinderella* or *rags-to-riches* tale (a central figure overcomes obstacles and poverty), and (11) the *scapegoat motif* (a figure who is singled out as someone saddled with the welfare of society on his back and who must die before stability can return to society).¹⁰⁷

We will call the second grouping of plot motifs that of *narrative conventions*. This simply refers to the typical narrative movement of a story's arc in some basic pedimental structure. This involves a beginning-middle-end shape where characters and a setting are laid out and then some measure of *conflict* is introduced leading to mounting tension which is then resolved into a *denouement* or catastrophic conclusion.

The third cluster of plot patterns is the *journey motif* emphasizing "the linear progress of the action, accompanied by the growth of the characters who undertake the journey."¹⁰⁸ Biblical instances are the sojourning of Abraham and the Patriarchs and the missionary journeys of Paul. Typical to this motif are "travel stories, stories of quest and wandering, and stories of pilgrimage."¹⁰⁹

The final motif discussed here is that of *judgment*. This is an important motif conveying the sense of poetic justice in which a story ends with a reward for virtuous affections and actions and punishment for sin and vice.¹¹⁰ This includes stories the likes of the parable of the Ten

¹⁰⁷ Ryken, *Windows to*, 43-4.

¹⁰⁸ "Plot Motifs," in *Dictionary of*, 655.

¹⁰⁹ "Plot Motifs," in *Dictionary of*, 655.

¹¹⁰ "Plot Motifs," in *Dictionary of*, 656.

Virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) and the sheep and goat judgment (Rev. 19:11-21; cf. Matt. 25:31-46).

As we have seen in all of these discussions about plotting and the arc movement of stories, they all have figures who speak and act as part of the narrative. We now move to the formal discussion of *characters* in stories.

Characterization

The next element of narrative storytelling is *characterization*. Characters are, as Abrams notes “the persons presented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as being endowed with moral, dispositional, and emotional qualities that are expressed in what they say—the dialogue—and by what they do—the action.”¹¹¹ Any knowledge we possess about the people with which we interact in our lives is based on our experience with them in conversations and in observing their actions. Berlin points out that the narrator of a story is the force that provides insight into any character’s traits through their actions and speech.¹¹² Perhaps the primary foundation of the essence of any character in a work is his temperament, desires, and the moral nature for his speech and actions, which form his *motivation* for thinking and doing anything.¹¹³

Characters in stories are shaped in two ways with the narrator either *showing* (indirect presentation) us something about them through speech and actions or by *telling* (direct presentation) us about them by way of their inner thoughts and through description.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 23.

¹¹² For more on the discussion about the nature of characterization see the very helpful chapter “Characters and Characterization,” by Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 23-42.

¹¹³ See Abrams, *A Glossary*, 23 for more discussion.

¹¹⁴ James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 126-130 provides a helpful discussion of the distinctions between showing and telling in characterization.

Historically, authors have employed both showing and telling in their composition of historical and imaginative literature.

Jeannine Brown, in commenting on how writers proceed with the business of characterization, asserts that ancient authors, including biblical ones, “tend to *show* rather than *tell* their readers about their characters. And they do this *showing* routinely through what their characters say and do.”¹¹⁵ But certainly this is not the case with both ancient and biblical authors which can be demonstrated with a casual perusal of these works.

Booth notes that

One of the most obviously artificial devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character’s mind and heart. Whatever our ideas may be about the natural way to tell a story, artifice is unmistakably present whenever the author tells us what no one in so-called real life could possibly know.¹¹⁶

He then catalogs how in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* the poet proceeds to *tell* the reader how to think about a certain character describing her (Monna) as the *fairest* and full of virtue.¹¹⁷ It is interesting to note that once Boccaccio’s narratorial voice has *told* us about the moral character of Monna he then lets her speak in dialogue *showing* us her virtue.¹¹⁸

In biblical stories the narrator possesses a third person omniscient point of view in most cases.¹¹⁹ This viewpoint means that a biblical narrator is involved in his share of *telling* where he, as Resseguie notes, “intervenes to comment directly on a character—singling out a trait for

¹¹⁵ Jeannine K. Brown, *The Gospels as Stories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 71.

¹¹⁶ Booth, *The Rhetoric*, 3.

¹¹⁷ See Booth, *The Rhetoric*, 9-16 for the full discussion.

¹¹⁸ Booth, *The Rhetoric*, 18.

¹¹⁹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 17.

us to notice or making an evaluation of a character and his ... motives and disposition.”¹²⁰ We observe this in Mark 6:52 where the narrator comments directly on the failure of Jesus’s disciples to discern what he was doing and who he was, saying, “for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.” In John 6:71 the narrator shares information about the inner affections of the heart of Judas revealing, “for he (Judas), one of the Twelve, was going to betray him (Jesus).” We see this also in Genesis 6:9 where the narrator evaluates Noah as “a righteous man, blameless in his generation.” Bar-Efrat avers, “What is evident is that the trait noted by the narrator is always extremely important in the development of the plot.”¹²¹ There is a bargain made between the narrator and the reader and what he tells us influences how we read the story and we rely on him to provide key information and evaluation about the characters.¹²² Or to put it another way, Booth asserts, “the author pronounces judgment, and we accept his judgment without question.”¹²³

The Bible’s narrators also present a large measure of *showing*. In this *indirect* mode, often referred to as the *dramatic method*, the “author presents characters talking and acting and leaves the reader to infer what motives and dispositions lie behind what they say and do.”¹²⁴ A character’s *speech* and *actions*, declares Bar-Efrat, “indicate something about an individual’s inner state. The reader has to interpret these details and construct the character’s mental and emotional make-up accordingly.”¹²⁵ We can gather some insight into the emotional state of

¹²⁰ Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 127.

¹²¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 53.

¹²² Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 127.

¹²³ Booth, *The Rhetoric*, 4.

¹²⁴ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 24.

¹²⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 64.

Ahimaaz, David's fleet of foot messenger, who volunteered to run to David with the news of Absalom's death in 2 Samuel 18. When he arrives before the king his speech is disjointed which is likely the narrator's choice reflecting the difficulty facing Ahimaaz having to reveal to David that his son is dead. In 2 Samuel 18:29 David inquires of Ahimaaz about the matter anticipating good news (cf. 2 Sam. 18:27b and 29a) and Ahimaaz responds, already knowing that Absalom is dead, "I saw a great commotion, but I do not know what it was."

Brown discusses how a narrator can communicate with both *direct* and *indirect* presentations of characterization and points to the story of the woman at the well in John 4.¹²⁶ The narrator tells us that the woman is a Samaritan who is coming to draw water from Jacob's well at Sychar (4:5-6). The narrator also discloses that, "Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (4:39). The woman is also characterized by showing in her *speech* and *actions*. She misunderstands Jesus's metaphor of "living water" (4:11); the discernment of Jesus and his comment to her about having five husbands indirectly provides more about this Samaritan woman (4:18); she does not understand the true nature of worship and lists Gerizim as her people's locus of worship—Jesus has to inform her of the true nature of spiritual worship (4:20-26); and she speaks to her townspeople challenging them to recognize Jesus as Messiah (4:28-29).

Characters are typically manifested in narrative in two different kinds: round and flat.¹²⁷ A flat character, or sometimes called a *type* reflecting a two-dimensional expression, is a figure

¹²⁶ See Brown, *The Gospels as*, 71-2 for the full discussion.

¹²⁷ A third category is sometimes discussed: the *functionary* or *agent* who is mentioned in the text, but possesses no depth of characterization or substantive description. Biblical examples include the two young men who traveled with Abraham to Moriah in Genesis 22 and Abishag in 1 Kings 1-2. For more discussion on the *functionary*, see Berlin, *Poetics*, 23-33; Pratt, Jr., *He Gave*, 142-43; Longman, *Literary Approaches*, 92-3; and David M. Howard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 52.

who is identifiable by a single quality or trait.¹²⁸ The flat character lacks individual detail and is often described in a single sentence. They are also often important, even central, figures in moving the plot along in a narrative. Examples of flat characters in literature include: Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*, Sherlock Holmes in the detective stories of Doyle (note how even a central character can be flat), and Caliban (*The Tempest*) and Polonius (*Hamlet*) from Shakespeare. The Ninevites from the book of Jonah, Abigail from the Samuel narratives (1 Samuel 25, 27, 30; 2 Samuel 2), and Yahweh as he appears in the Solomon's prayer for wisdom pericope (1 Kings 3:1-15) are all examples of flat characters in the Old Testament.

A round character is multi-dimensional in his traits and is "complex in temperament and motivation and is represented with subtle particularity."¹²⁹ These are the "thinking, feeling, and choosing persons"¹³⁰ of the story who seem like real persons and possess the ability to surprise readers. Prospero, from *The Tempest*, is a round character who traverses from the marooned, morose, and usurped Duke of Milan, who is a practitioner of white magic and very protective of his daughter, to a redeemed man who announces that:

.....I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.¹³¹

He says this revealing the change in his person. He is now restored to his first estate and lovingly gives his daughter, Miranda, to her suitor.

¹²⁸ See Forster, *Aspects*, 67-73; Berlin, *Poetics*, 23-4 and 31-33; and Abrams, *A Glossary*, 23-4, and Pratt, *He Gave*, 142-43 for more discussion.

¹²⁹ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 24, see also Forster, *Aspects*, 73-78 and Berlin, *Poetics*, 23-31.

¹³⁰ Pratt, *He Gave*, 141.

¹³¹ From *The Tempest*, 5.1.54-57.

In the Bible, Yahweh in the Eden narrative (Genesis 2:4-3:24) is a fully round figure who creates, provides, judges, curses, and restores order within this section. The figure of David is also a full-fledged character exhibiting the traits of a real person as a warrior, poet, king, murderer, adulterer, and one who is a man “The LORD has sought out... after his own heart,” (1 Samuel 13:14).

One additional means of identifying characters is by grasping how they are arranged with respect to one another. Three categories will serve us well as we turn our focus to applying literary analysis to biblical narrative. The first is the *protagonist* who is the central figure in a story.¹³² It is usually the hero or heroine, but not so exclusively. Atticus Finch is the protagonist of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as is the villain, Macbeth, of *Macbeth*. Jesus is the protagonist of each of the gospels, as is Naomi (not Ruth) of the book of Ruth, and Abraham of the Terah *toledoth* narrative (Genesis 11:27-25:18).

The *antagonist* of a work is the character who acts in direct opposition to the protagonist.¹³³ The antagonist is pitted against the protagonist as a “rival, opponent, or enemy.”¹³⁴ In the play *Hamlet*, Claudius is the antagonist to Hamlet’s protagonist. In 1 Kings 21, Ahab is the protagonist villain who is opposed by the *antagonist* Yahweh who frustrates the evil machinations of Ahab and his Sidonian princess, Jezebel, by way of the message of condemnation delivered by Yahweh’s covenant prosecutor, Elijah.¹³⁵

¹³² See Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 415; Pratt, *He Gave*, 143-44; and Abrams, *A Glossary*, 159-160.

¹³³ See Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 29; Pratt, *He Gave*, 144; and Abrams, *A Glossary*, 159-160.

¹³⁴ Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 29.

¹³⁵ I am employing the term—*covenant prosecutor*—in the sense that Willem VanGemeran does in *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 36-8. VanGemeran writes, “Unlike Moses, who *interceded* on behalf of Israel (Ex. 31-34), Elijah *accused* God’s people of infidelity.”

A *foil* in a narrative is a character who “through contrast underscores the distinctive characteristics of another.”¹³⁶ Foils often manifest a sharp contrast to the temperament of the protagonist as does Laertes to Hamlet.¹³⁷ The unnamed kinsman-redeemer serves as a foil to Boaz in Ruth 4 as does Esau to Jacob in Genesis.

Whenever one discusses the subject of *character* it is prudent to include what Aristotle says, which is in direct contrast to all of what we have mentioned thus far. In the *Poetics* he asserts: ἐπεὶ δὲ μιμοῦνται οἱ μιμούμενοι πράττοντας, ἀνάγκη δὲ τούτους ἢ σπουδαίους ἢ φαύλους εἶναι (τὰ γὰρ ἦθη σχεδὸν ἀεὶ τούτοις ἀκολουθεῖ μόνοις, κακία γὰρ καὶ ἀρετὴ τὰ ἦθη διαφέρουσι πάντες) , ἥτοι βελτίονας ἢ καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἢ χείρονας ἢ καὶ τοιούτους,¹³⁸ It seems that Aristotle has very little time for character development. He reduces *characters* to *πράττοντας* (*those who are agents*) representing the most basic elements of characterization: *badness*, *excellence*, or mirroring the general population. For Aristotle *character* is more about an ethical representation helping to move the plot along than *actors* in a narrative possessing realistic traits. Aristotle makes this bold claim because he declares the nature of storytelling to be ἡ γὰρ τραγωδία μίμησις ἐστὶν οὐκ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ πράξεων καὶ βίου.¹³⁹ He is not concerned with a character’s motivation or reasoning behind what he does or does not do; Aristotle is only interested in the *action* and *life* of a plot which moves the story forward.

¹³⁶ Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 216.

¹³⁷ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 159.

¹³⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a, 32. Woodenly translated, this reads, “But since those who are imitating imitate those who are agents, these surely must necessarily be good men or base. (For characters almost always follow after these alone; for [it is] through boldness and excellence the characters of all men are carried [meaning—*executed*] in different ways.) Now surely [they should be] *better* of a surety just as for our part, or *meaner*, or such as like [us].”

¹³⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450a, 50.

So what is the student of stories to do? As we have seen above and experienced ourselves as writers and readers, we take the bold step of agreeing with Forster:

“Character,” says Aristotle, “gives us qualities, but it is in actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse.” We have already decided that Aristotle is wrong and now we must face the consequences of disagreeing with him. “All human happiness and misery,” says Aristotle, “take the form of action.” We know better. We believe that happiness and misery exist in the secret life, which each of us leads privately and to which (in his characters) the novelist has access.¹⁴⁰

Setting

The *setting* of a story is “the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which the action occurs.”¹⁴¹ The setting can often add the tonal quality of atmosphere or act as a supporting force for the message of a work.¹⁴² Consider this helpful list of four elements comprising a *setting*. They are:

(1) the geographical location, its topography, scenery, and such physical arrangements as the location of the windows and doors in a room; (2) the occupations and daily manner of living of the characters; (3) the time or period in which the action takes place, for example, epoch in history or season of the year; (4) the general environment of the characters, for example, religious, mental, moral, social, and emotional conditions.¹⁴³

Macbeth is generally set in medieval Scotland; however, when Macbeth encounters the Wēirds it is at a blasted heath. John Buchan sets his *Witch Wood* in 1640s Scotland during the Wars of the Covenanters, but his scenes deep within *Melanudrigill*, his Black Wood, are movingly atmospheric. The setting for Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is an imaginary world conceived as a private mythology by the author, and yet seems very realistic.

¹⁴⁰ Forster, *The Aspects*, 83.

¹⁴¹ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 192.

¹⁴² Longman, *Literary Approaches*, 94.

¹⁴³ Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 469-470.

Point of View

The *point of view* “signifies the way a story gets told—the mode (or modes) established by an author by means of which the reader is presented with the characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and events which constitute the *narrative*.”¹⁴⁴ The first-person and third-person points of view are most commonly employed by authors.¹⁴⁵ An all-knowing narrator proceeds from an *omniscient* point of view.¹⁴⁶ This is a type of third-person point of view. Jane Austen and Charles Dickens wrote with a third-person omniscient point of view in their novels. Narrators can also tell a story from a *limited* point of view which “stays inside the confines of what is experienced, thought, and felt by a single character within the story.”¹⁴⁷

The first-person point of view limits the narration shared to what is known and experienced by the first-person narrator.¹⁴⁸ A first-person witness like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* is a minor participant in the story compared to the protagonist Gatsby. On the other hand, David Copperfield is the protagonist narrator of Dickens’ novel bearing his namesake.

In Scripture the narrator, as Chisholm relates

usually assumes an omniscient, divine perspective that transcends the event *per se* and exceeds what a mere eyewitness would have perceived. He can invade the privacy of a character’s mind (1 Sam. 20:26), is aware of events and statements that are outside the scope of the source material ordinarily available to biblical authors (Judg. 3:24-25; 5:28-30), and has theological insight into the significance of events (Judg. 14:4).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 165.

¹⁴⁵ On rare occasions an author will make use of a second person point of view. A helpful example of this is Jay McInerney’s novel *Bright Lights, Big City*, who begins his narrative: “You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy. You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head.”

¹⁴⁶ See Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 392 and Abrams, *A Glossary*, 166 for more discussion.

¹⁴⁷ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 167.

¹⁴⁸ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 167.

¹⁴⁹ Chisholm, *Interpreting the*, 72.

Or, to put it another way, the omniscience of biblical narrators enables them, Bar-Efrat writes, to “see actions undertaken in secret and to hear conversations conducted in seclusion, familiar with the internal workings of the characters and displaying their innermost thoughts to us.”¹⁵⁰

Narrators in Scripture present information in their stories and characters showing and telling us things that we usually cannot know in our everyday life. Booth notes that if a friend were to share some information about the sterling moral character of a friend of his, one could not trust the reliability of such a report as completely as we do a biblical narrator.¹⁵¹ A helpful example of this is the narrator’s account of the temptation of Yahweh and losses and lamentations of Job at the beginning of his story. At the conclusion of chapter one (1:22) when Job has lost everything, the narrator declares, “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.” Booth observes that the record of the temptation and loss scenes in Job 1 are “presented with no privileged information whatever” and regarding 1:22’s declaration of Job’s affections and actions that “the author pronounces judgment, and we accept his judgment without question.”¹⁵² Amit argues this is so because “in a biblical story, God is to be trusted for reasons of faith, and the narrator is to be trusted, in this respect, as above God and as the source of the report about God. Both God and the narrator must be trustworthy and hence are the benchmark of trustworthiness for all other personae. Whatever accords with the narrator’s statements or God’s must be beyond doubt.”¹⁵³

Chisholm subscribes to all of these assertions about God’s and the narrator’s place in

¹⁵⁰ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 17.

¹⁵¹ Booth, *The Rhetoric*, 3-4.

¹⁵² Booth, *The Rhetoric*, 4.

¹⁵³ Amit, *Reading Biblical*, 95.

biblical storytelling. He affirms the importance of recognizing the narrator's authority as key to any successful and proper interpretation of a biblical narrative grounding his assertion in conditional reasoning. Chisholm submits that if the narratives of the Bible are truly to be accepted as Scripture, then the one who interprets them must respect the authority of the narrator.¹⁵⁴

The above components of storytelling do not comprise an exhaustive list, but do present a discussion of the key aspects of composition. Other literary devices employed by poet/makers will be discussed as they are encountered in the texts of our study. We now endeavor to relate our progression from discussing *poetics* and then the *aspects of storytelling*—the rules for playing at the game of composing stories and the component parts or tools used in the game—to how we may *interpret* these stories.

¹⁵⁴ Chisholm, *Interpreting the*, 73.

Chapter 3—A Brief Hermeneutical Review and an Exegetical, Literary Analytical, and Theological Study of a Biblical Story

In the last chapter we discussed how a proper understanding of *poetics* aids in the goal of the literary study of the Bible. We also briefly perused the building blocks of any story reviewing key elements such as plot, characterization, and setting. This is the stuff of *poetic making* or storytelling. We now turn our attention to the business of *meaning*. That is, how does one go about properly understanding the text of a story in front of him. This calls for a brief discussion of the hermeneutical posture of the present writer. Once offered we can try out this basic foundation of *making* and *meaning* which is rooted in our broader study of biblical narrative criticism by engaging with a brief biblical story. In this case we turn to the historical narrative of Jesus calming the storm in Mark 4:35-31. We begin with hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics

It is not the purpose of this study to present a full-throated articulation of hermeneutics. But since most practitioners of biblical narrative criticism announce their interest only in the literary aspects of a biblical story (historical or imaginative), it seems important to the present writer to make a case for an author-centered approach to biblical interpretation that assumes a posture of inerrancy that can work in concert with a literary approach informed by a holistic neo-Aristotelian poetic viewing each biblical story as a whole work. We begin with a discussion of general hermeneutical principles being upheld before proceeding to a review of the exegetical methodology practiced in this study and how it works in concert with narrative criticism.

We have discussed the theory behind how a chronicler or poet/maker goes about crafting his story—namely its *poetics* and then the component parts (the *aspects* of storytelling) used to compose a narrative. We now turn to how a reader comes to grasp meaning from a story. Two

questions immediately come to mind. First, what is it that readers must do in order to grasp meaning from a story and, secondly, what are the basic elements needed so that one may correctly interpret a narrative. In our overall desire to pair a solid literary analysis of biblical stories (both historical and imaginative) with a solid exegetical methodology, these questions, in turn, give rise to a related inquiry that asks what is the role of exegesis in tandem with that of literary analysis.

When a reader picks up a work of literature he is intuitively able to grasp the meaning of the work. Experience tells us that levels of understanding will be somewhat different for each reader depending upon how closely one reads the text and what preexisting grasp he has of the subject matter before him. Some of the terms important to our discussion on *meaning* include: hermeneutics, authorial intent, and exegesis to name but a few. We will have more to say about these later, but for now we begin with *exegesis*.

Exegesis

The word *exegesis* comes from the Greek word ἐξηγέομαι denoting the sense of setting something forth with great detail—to tell, report, describe, or expound.¹ Its cognate noun is ἐξήγησις is defined by “a narration that provides a detailed description.”² Darrell Bock offers that the purpose of *exegesis* is “to explain or interpret a text.”³ This is, of course, the opposite of *eisegesis* which reads into a work of literature a meaning that one imports to the text.⁴ Bock continues indicating that there are two senses regarding the term exegesis. It is, in one sense, the

¹ BDAG, 349.

² BDAG, 349. This term is used in Judges 7:15 (LXX, Rahlfs B).

³ Darrell L. Bock, “Opening Questions: Definition and Philosophy of Exegesis,” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text*, Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning, editors (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 23.

⁴ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical*, 57.

product of such an explanatory and interpretive effort of a text and, secondly, a *method* of studying texts.⁵ Furthermore, there are both artistic and scientific components to exegesis. The undertaking of exegesis in some way mirrors the craft of an artist who is able to, as an exegete, “ask the text the right set of questions and discern a passage’s inherent conceptual unity with a clarity that also reveals a passage’s depth.”⁶ Similarly, there is also a scientific quality to the process of exegesis. This has to do with the application of methodological principles that can be uniformly used with texts to help the exegete discover information in the text.⁷

Bock defines exegesis as set forth in four central components. First, one is to grasp the author’s meaning as communicated in his work. Next, exegesis requires that one encounter the text of the work in its original tongue. The third element of this definition is that exegetes rely upon a sound hermeneutic. And finally, exegesis must move from solid interpretation to significant application.⁸

The practice advocated in this study is what is commonly called the grammatical-historical method. This involves studying the text through the lens of its structure, grammar, syntax, and lexicography as understood in the historical context.⁹ It is best to understand exegesis as an aspect of the larger undertaking of *hermeneutics*.¹⁰

⁵ Bock, “Opening Questions,” 23.

⁶ Bock, “Opening Questions,” 24.

⁷ See Bock, “Opening Questions,” 24 for more discussion.

⁸ Bock, “Opening Questions,” 24-26.

⁹ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical*, 57.

¹⁰ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical*, 21.

Hermeneutics

The term *hermeneutics* comes from the Greek word ἐρμηνεύω meaning to “help someone understand a subject or matter by making it plain, *explain, interpret*.”¹¹ Osborne defines hermeneutics as “that science which delineates principles or methods for interpreting an individual author’s meaning.”¹² This definition is premised on the understanding that the author of a work is the determiner of meaning. E. D. Hirsch defines *meaning* as “that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent.”¹³ Robert Stein avers the “greatest argument in favor of understanding the author as the determiner of a text’s meaning is that it is the common sense approach to all communication. One cannot have a meaningful conversation or even a serious debate about this issue without assuming this.”¹⁴ Abner Chou echoes this assertion identifying the principle of *authorial intent* as a focal presupposition of any hermeneutical enterprise.¹⁵

For any literary communication to occur there must be three components present: the author, the text and the reader.¹⁶ In our study of biblical stories the *author*, as the determiner of meaning, is the poet/maker who willed to communicate and wrote his text.¹⁷ The *text* is closely

¹¹ *BDAG*, 393.

¹² Osborne, *The Hermeneutical*, 21.

¹³ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 8.

¹⁴ Robert H. Stein, “The Benefits of an Author-Oriented Approach to Hermeneutics,” *JETS* 44/3 (September 2001): 451-66. Here 455.

¹⁵ Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018), 26-30.

¹⁶ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning to This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 25-29 for more discussion.

¹⁷ Hirsch, *Validity in*, 8.

related to the *author*. Stein declares that meaning “involves the construction of thought. It is a property of thinking persons. On the other hand, a text is an inanimate object. It is a collection of symbols on papyrus, vellum, paper, stone, metal, etc. A text consists of unthinking, lifeless material.”¹⁸ This means that a text cannot be a poet/maker because it does purposefully intend anything. A text can, as Stein notes, “convey the meaning of a thinking, willing person, [but] it cannot possess meaning in an end of itself, because it cannot think.”¹⁹

The *reader* makes use of the sign symbols employed by the author to produce the text and endeavors to grasp the meaning of these signs. Stein speaks to the role of the reader who approaches the text with the knowledge that the author

intentionally used shareable symbols [so that] the reader begins with the knowledge that individual building blocks of the text, the words, fit within the norms of the language of the original readers. ... Seeing how the words are used in phrases and sentences, and how the sentences are used in paragraphs, and how paragraphs are used in chapters, and how chapters are used in the work, the reader seeks to understand the author’s intent in writing this work. This process is called the “hermeneutical circle.” This expression refers to the fact that the whole or part of the text helps the reader understand each individual word or part of the text; at the same time the individual words and parts help us understand the meaning of the text as a whole.²⁰

Another important function of the reader is the *ethical dimension*. To be sure the word “ethical” conveys the sense of the responsibility the reader bears in assessing a story in the light of how it affects his sensibility. Booth adds to this the sense the dynamic that *ethical* refers to “the ethics of readers—their responsibilities *to* stories.”²¹ By this Booth means that readers have an ethical

¹⁸ Stein, “The Benefits of,” 453.

¹⁹ Stein, “The Benefits of,” 453.

²⁰ Robert H. Stein, *Playing by the Rules: A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 33.

²¹ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 9.

responsibility to correctly grasp the author's intended meaning by way of careful reading. This assertion is echoed by Vanhoozer who maintains that a realistic reader (one who is not playing interpretive games like that of reader-response critics who are dubbed *non-realists*) is ethically minded because he possesses the moral virtue of respecting what is in a text, namely its authorial intention and invitation to readers to grasp meaning.²²

Vanhoozer has identified a list of what he terms *interpretive virtues* which characterize readers who closely read the text for the author's intent as opposed to pursuing their own interpretive proclivities. He terms them *interpretive virtues* and defines this term as "a disposition of the mind and heart that arises from the motivation for understanding, for cognitive contact with the meaning of the text."²³ The actual virtues he includes on his list are: (1) *honesty*—meaning "acknowledging one's prior commitments and preunderstandings," (2) *openness*—this is a reader who is disposed to receive and consider the ideas of others, (3) *attention*—this virtue speaks to the reader's focus on closely reading the text, and (4) *obedience*—the "obedient interpreter is the one who follows the directions of the text rather than one's own desires."²⁴

A consistent theme we encounter in this discussion of hermeneutics is the primacy of acknowledging the author as the determiner of meaning in whatever text he produces and of the reader being able to grasp that meaning because the author has played by the rules in constructing his work and the words of his text are understandable to the reader who pays close attention to them.

²² Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 376.

²³ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 376.

²⁴ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 377.

Thus far in this chapter we have discussed the business of *making* by looking at what goes on in the poetics of storytelling. We then moved on to perusing the aspects of the construction a story considering the likes of plotting, characterization, and setting. This led us to a brief discussion of how one then goes about interpreting the finished work upon completion. We now want to take a brief swim in the combined waters of literary analysis and exegesis of a brief biblical story and begin to build the house of what this type of biblical narrative criticism will be like when we fully make the case for it. Let's look at Mark 4:35-41, the historical narrative of Jesus calming the storm.

Mark 4:35-41—Jesus Calms the Storm

Introduction

The seven verses of our study immediately follow the collection of parables presented in Mark 4:1-34. The narrative now switches focus from the *word* of Jesus (his teaching ministry in parables) to the *deeds* of Jesus (his ministry in miracles) in 4:35-5:43. This dual presentation is in keeping with how Mark describes Jesus.²⁵ There are four miracle stories in this section: the quelling of the storm, the deliverance of the demoniac, the healing of the woman with the flow of blood, and the raising of the daughter of Jairus from the dead.

The focus of this study in Mark 4:35-41 is to provide a thorough exegetical and syntactical analysis that partners with a literary analysis leading to the drawing of some theological implications. It is the contention of this study that the dual enterprise of exegesis and literary analysis of a story (whether historical like this one or fictive such as a parable) affords the student of the Bible the best means of understanding God's Word. This study is working off of the Greek text and includes a wooden translation in English.

²⁵ Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 240.

Translation of Mark 4:35-41

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35—And he said to them on that day when evening had come, “Let us go over onto the other side.”

36—And after leaving the crowd, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. And other boats were with him.

37—And a great whirlwind of wind arose and the waves were beating upon into the boat, so that the boat was already filling up.

38—And he himself was in the stern on the pillow sleeping. And they awoke him and spoke to him, “Teacher, is it not a care for you that we are perishing?”

39—And he woke up and rebuked the wind and he said to the sea, “Be quiet, be silent!” And the wind ceased and there was a great calm.

40—And he said to them, “Why are you so cowardly? Have you no faith?”

41—And they became frightened with a great fear and they were saying to one another, “Who is this that both the wind and the sea obey him?”

Exegetical Notes and Comment

William Lane makes a helpful suggestion regarding the nature of this miracle story account by Mark proposing that its particular attention to detail—regarding temporal matters and specific facts—point to the likely probability that this is a *personal reminiscence*.²⁶ Whether or not this is the case or the details present point to a well-crafted historical narrative, Mark packs a punch in this first of the miracle stories.

35— Καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ὁψίας γενομένης· διέλθωμεν εἰς τὸ πέραν. This verse begins with the pronouns: the nominative *he* of λέγει and objective *them* in αὐτοῖς inviting the reader to continue to understand with the previous section on parable’s references to Jesus as the *he* and to the disciples as *them*. The clause Καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς is a typical Markan introductory formula which has already been employed in 1:38; 2:25; 3:4; and 4:13.²⁷

The verb λέγει is a typical use by Mark of the historical present common to biblical

²⁶ Lane, *The Gospel*, 174-75.

²⁷ Stein, *Mark*, 241.

narrative which describes a past event.²⁸ The participle γενομένης is temporal supporting the “when ... had come” rendering.²⁹ The two references to time: “on that day” and “when evening had come” is what Stein labels “typically Markan [where] the second designation adds specificity to the first” and serves to connect 4:1-34 with 4:35-41.³⁰

Jesus’s first words here announce his intention to cross over the sea to the eastern side. Brooks asserts that the text does not provide any explanation as to why Jesus wants to do this.³¹ Lane, however, make the plausible suggestion that the motivation for Jesus to cross over is related to his stated and guiding principle for ministry in 1:38, “καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· ἄγωμεν ἀλλαχοῦ εἰς τὰς ἐχόμενας κωμοπόλεις, ἵνα καὶ ἐκεῖ κηρύξω· εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ ἐξῆλθον.” (“And he said to them, “Let us go elsewhere into the neighboring market towns, that also there I may preach, for this reason I have come.”).³²

The use of the hortatory subjunctive διέλθωμεν is a common way for New Testament (NT) authors, as Wallace notes, “to urge some one to unite with the speaker in a course of action upon which he has already decided.”³³ This use of the subjunctive here also supports the idea that Jesus is committed to his outreach in ministry.

36— καὶ ἀφέντες τὸν ὄχλον παραλαμβάνουσιν αὐτὸν ὡς ἦν ἐν τῷ πλοίῳ, καὶ ἄλλα πλοῖα ἦν μετ’

²⁸ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 526-532 for more.

²⁹ F. Blass, A. Debrunner and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), §423, 218, notes that this participle is a Genitive Absolute functioning temporally. Hereafter known as *BDF*.

³⁰ Stein, *Mark*, 241.

³¹ James A. Brooks, *Mark*, NAC volume 23 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 87.

³² Lane, *The Gospel*, 175.

³³ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 464.

αὐτοῦ. The immediate context of the use of the temporal participle ἀφέντες (“after leaving”) suggests that this action was taken shortly after Jesus’s hortatory command to depart in verse 35. The ὄχλον refers to those gathered on the shore (cf. 4:1-2, 10-12, 33-34) to hear Jesus’s teaching in parables.³⁴

The verb παραλαμβάνουσιν is another use of the historical present; the “they” of this third plural verb references the *disciples*, many of whom, as Lane reminds us, were “fishermen who were experienced sailors.”³⁵ The phrase ὡς ἦν (“just as he was”) likely refers to Jesus continuing in the very boat (ἐν τῷ πλοίῳ) from which he has been teaching.³⁶ The sentence “And other boats were with him” demonstrates that some of the *crowd* continued to follow Jesus as he grew in renown (cf. 1:28, 37, 45; 2:2, 13, 15; 3:7-10, 20, 32; 4:1 and on).³⁷

37— καὶ γίνεται λαῖλαψ μεγάλη ἀνέμου καὶ τὰ κύματα ἐπέβαλλεν εἰς τὸ πλοῖον, ὥστε ἤδη γεμίζεσθαι τὸ πλοῖον. The καὶ acts as an expression of narrative continuance. Mark tells us that the first thing encountered on the voyage is a “great whirlwind of wind.” Commentators often note that this language conjures up recollections of Jonah 1:4 and the LXX’s use of the expression κλύδων μέγας (“great waves”).³⁸ The point is that Mark is indicating this was a very dangerous storm. Lane notes that evening (cf. 4:35) storms on the Sea of Galilee were of the most dangerous kind.³⁹

³⁴ Stein, *Mark*, 241.

³⁵ Lane, *The Gospel*, 175.

³⁶ So also Bock, *Mark*, 184; Brooks, *Mark*, 87; and Stein, *Mark*, 241.

³⁷ Stein, *Mark*, 242.

³⁸ So Bock, *Mark*, 184; Brooks, *Mark*, 87; and Stein, *Mark*, 242.

³⁹ Lane, *The Gospel*, 175.

The imperfect verb ἐπέβαλλεν is ingressive in nature indicating, as Wallace notes, a stress on the “beginning of an action with the implication that it continued for some time.”⁴⁰ The use of the result infinitive γεμίζεσθαι explains why then the boat was already filling up.

38— καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν ἐν τῇ πρύμνῃ ἐπὶ τὸ προσκεφάλαιον καθεύδων. καὶ ἐγείρουσιν αὐτὸν καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· διδάσκαλε, οὐ μέλει σοι ὅτι ἀπολλύμεθα; Mark’s focus of narration now turns from attention on the storm to what is going on in the boat. The initial bit of narration forms a stark contrast to the danger Mark has just been describing. We are told, with respect to Jesus, in a periphrastic construction that αὐτὸς ἦν ... καθεύδων (“he himself was sleeping”) in the stern of the boat. This *calm* behavior clashes with the raging storm.

Some speculate that the *pillow* (τὸ προσκεφάλαιον) on which Jesus is sleeping is actually a sack of something acting as ballast for the boat.⁴¹ Stein grounds this assertion in Mark’s use of the definite article may indicate that the pillow “was part of the boat’s equipment.”⁴²

There is some lively discussion among commentators regarding what the image of Jesus sleeping in the back of the boat means. Regarding the report of the sleeping Jesus, Brooks suggests that “Jesus’ sleeping does suggest confidence in God (cf. Ps 3:5; 4:8; Prov 3:24).”⁴³ Bock disagreeing, avers, “Mark simply describes this. It is a detail many have sought to explain, but Mark simply notes it and moves on.”⁴⁴ As to the possibility that Jesus displays faith in God’s providential care, Stein takes it one step further in asserting that “The fact that in the story Jesus

⁴⁰ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 544.

⁴¹ So Stein, *Mark*, 243 and Bock, *Mark*, 184.

⁴² Stein, *Mark*, 243.

⁴³ Brooks, *Mark*, 87.

⁴⁴ Bock, *Mark*, 184.

does not call on God to still the storm, however, argues against such an interpretation.”⁴⁵

We would be well-served to reflect over the nature of narrative storytelling in general and biblical narrative in this specific case. Much of what an author wants to communicate is right in front of us on the page and, often, some of what he desires to communicate must be read between the lines. Literary scholar Gene Edward Veith affirms, “Reading between the lines is a figure of speech. Attending to the empty spaces between the lines of print refers to what is left unsaid, to the values and assumptions that are an important dimension of what we read.”⁴⁶

The lesson to be learned here is that sometimes in our desire to honor God by performing good exegesis through close reading and analysis we choose a path of rigid reading. We forget that good writers sometimes employ pregnant gaps intending by what they leave out (and sometimes fill in later) for us to wrestle with that empty space and grasp the intended meaning. I think this is the case here because of the image of sleeping portrayed for us in the Old Testament texts and because Jesus so clearly possesses the same authority and power that his Father does over the created world. He sleeps (as a man) trusting his Father’s world and his calling as the waking God/man who is sovereign over this cosmic conflict. With two words (σιώπα, πεφίμωσο) uttered in the next verse the storm will be stilled.

Conversely, the disciples are not at peace, but sorely afraid. Upon waking⁴⁷ Jesus they address him as διδάσκαλε. This is the first use of this appellation which is a favorite for Mark.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Stein, *Mark*, 242.

⁴⁶ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reading Between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Literature* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), xiii.

⁴⁷ The text reads καὶ ἐγείρουσιν αὐτὸν καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ; the two verbs are, once again, historical presents.

⁴⁸ So noted by Stein, *Mark*, 243; Brooks, *Mark*, 87; and Bock, *Mark*, 185.

Stein makes a persuasive case arguing that Mark likely used this moniker of “Teacher” because this narration so closely follows 4:1-34’s emphasis on the teaching ministry of Jesus; and that since, for Mark, Jesus’s teaching ministry “is associated with the power to cast out demons (1:22, 27; 9:17-29), raise the dead (5:35-42), and still storms (4:35-41; 6:47-52), ‘Teacher’ carries with it the kind of authority usually associated with a title such as ‘Lord.’”⁴⁹ This inquiry then possesses Christological overtones.⁵⁰

Bock notes that the expression of fear and lack of trust in Jesus by the disciples is the first example of discipleship failure appearing in Mark’s gospel.⁵¹ The disciples’ inquiry, “Teacher, is it not a care for you that we are perishing?” (διδάσκαλε, οὐ μέλει σοι ὅτι ἀπολλύμεθα;) is thought of as a sharp toned rebuke by Lane and Brooks.⁵² It is, however, as Stein avers, more likely with the presence of the οὐ (*not*) that “the question expects a positive answer, so that the statement is best understood as a request.”⁵³ The ὅτι clause here serves as the subject of μέλει.⁵⁴

39— καὶ διεγερθεὶς ἐπετίμησεν τῷ ἀνέμῳ καὶ εἶπεν τῇ θαλάσσῃ· σιώπα, πεφίμωσο. καὶ ἐκόπασεν ὁ ἄνεμος καὶ ἐγένετο γαλήνη μεγάλη. Jesus rebukes that disciples for their failure in fearful lack of faith. The aorist passive participle διεγερθεὶς partners with the finite verb ἐπετίμησεν forming an attendant circumstances construction in which the finitude of ἐπετίμησεν is extended to the participle; thus the rendering “And he woke up and rebuked.”⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Stein, *Mark*, 243.

⁵⁰ Against Brooks, *Mark*, 87 who argues that “Teacher” in this usage should not be thought of a Christological.

⁵¹ Bock, *Mark*, 185.

⁵² Lane, *The Gospel*, 176 and Brooks, *Mark*, 87.

⁵³ Stein, *Mark*, 243.

⁵⁴ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 453.

⁵⁵ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 640-45 for an excellent discussion of this verbal construction.

Regarding the response by Jesus, the text reports that he “rebuked the wind, and he said to the sea...” This is a helpful bit of narration in that it tells us of the dual recipients of Jesus’s rebuke; he is addressing the ἀνέμω and the θαλάσση. Recognizing this helps us understand the two-word rebuke by Jesus in a clearer framework. Jesus says, “σιώπα, πεφίμωσο.” The two verbs in these forms can both be understood as *be silent*. In some measure, the *wind* and the *sea* function as inanimate characters imbued with human characteristics.⁵⁶ Simply stated, imagine Jesus looking up at the wind and commanding it *to be silent* and then turning his gaze to the sea and also commanding it *to be silent*.⁵⁷ The perfect passive imperative πεφίμωσο is a causative passive which issues a command, as Wallace writes, “addressing emotional states, to the effect of ‘be in control of yourself.’”⁵⁸ Even though this verb is passive in form, it is an emphatic command by Jesus.⁵⁹ In response, the narrator tells us that the wind *ceased* (ἐκόπασεν) and that the sea became *calm* (γαλήνη).

All of this points to Jesus’s ability to act sovereignly over the cosmic chaos of the sea because he is the Christ and can act in this matter like the Father. This episode recalls the work of Yahweh acting as both the God of history and of nature in the Red Sea account. Jesus, similarly, is, as Lane asserts, “the personal, living God who intervenes in the experience of men with a revelation of his power and his will. He is the God who acts.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ This figure of speech is, of course, known as *personification* where “either an inanimate object or abstract concept is spoken of as though it were endowed with life or human attributes or feelings.” Abrams, *A Glossary*, 69.

⁵⁷ Stein, *Mark*, 243.

⁵⁸ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 440.

⁵⁹ *BDF*, §346; 171.

⁶⁰ Lane, *The Gospel*, 176.

That Mark has in mind Jesus sovereignly acting in authority over evil and Satan in a cosmic conflict is evident in the use of the verb ἐπετίμησεν (“he rebuked”). This verb (ἐπιτιμάω) was used in Mark 1:25 when Jesus *rebuked* the unclean spirit in the man at the synagogue in Capernaum and again in 3:12 (*rebuking* the crowd to remain silent about him) and later in 9:25 (again *rebuking* an unclean spirit).⁶¹

There are also points of connection and difference here in this text and with Jonah 1. When Jesus commands the wind to be still we are told that the “wind ceased (ἐκόπασεν). In Jonah 1:11 the mariners inquire of Jonah what is to be done “that the sea may cease” (καὶ κοπάσει ἡ θάλασσα; LXX). We note that the same verb (κοπάζω) is used in the LXX and the NT. A parallel in Jonah 1:15 reports of the mariners that upon casting Jonah into the sea that “the sea stopped from its tossing about” (ἔστη ἡ θάλασσα ἐκ τοῦ σάλου αὐτῆς; LXX).

Even though there are many instances crafted by the writer of Mark 4:35-41 inviting us to think of the analogs in Jonah 1 we must ultimately conclude that what he is communicating here is more about the differences. In Jonah 1 it is the mariners who pray to Yahweh who brings about a cessation of the storm (cf. Jonah 1:14-16). However, in Mark 4:35-41 it is Jesus who acts by himself to cause the end of the storm by the authority of his word. This is a Christological image depicting Jesus as exhibiting power over nature.⁶²

40— καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· τί δειλοί ἐστε; οὐπω ἔχετε πίστιν; In this short verse Jesus turns the focus of his rebuke toward the disciples outwardly addressing their failure of trust and faith. Bock reminds us that Jesus’s comments regarding the disciples’ lack of faith is not viewing Jesus as

⁶¹ So also noted by Stein, *Mark*, 243; Brooks, *Mark*, 87; Bock, *Mark*, 185; and Lane, *The Gospel*, 177.

⁶² See Stein, *Mark*, 243-44 for more discussion about this dynamic.

something of a miracle worker (which Mark guards against in his Gospel), but rather about a faith that is “trusting God for his care and program.”⁶³

This rebuke represents the first in a series by Jesus addressing *discipleship failure* (cf. 7:18; 8:17-21, 32; 9:19). Lane is careful to note that this first of the rebukes comes immediately following the private moments of instruction by Jesus (4:11, 34) telling the disciples of their secret knowledge and clear explanations of his teachings; in spite of all of this they fail.⁶⁴

Mark intends us to grasp the meaning of Jesus’s inquiry “Have you no faith?” to refer to the saving power of the Father as working through him.⁶⁵ This is an implicit invitation to look to God in faith in ways they have not yet done as Jesus knows they will face many trials to come.⁶⁶

41— καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν καὶ ἔλεγον πρὸς ἀλλήλους· τίς ἄρα οὗτός ἐστιν ὅτι καὶ ὁ ἄνεμος καὶ ἡ θάλασσα ὑπακούει αὐτῷ; Mark employs a cognate accusative⁶⁷ in pairing the verb φοβέομαι with the noun φόβος for the purpose of emphasis; the construction ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον is literally rendered “they became frightened with fear.” The Semitic nature of this construction highlights both the quality of *awe* in the sense of respect and of actual *fear* for God experiencing his presence and power.⁶⁸

Many commentators find a close connection between what is going on here and the sailors of Jonah 1:10 because the construction is the same in the LXX (ἐφοβήθησαν ... φόβον).⁶⁹

⁶³ Bock, *Mark*, 185.

⁶⁴ Lane, *The Gospel*, 177.

⁶⁵ Lane, *The Gospel*, 177 and Brooks, *Mark*, 88.

⁶⁶ Bock, *Mark*, 186.

⁶⁷ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 190 and *BDF*, §153 (1); 84-85 for more discussion. Bock, *Mark*, 186 identifies this as a *Semitic* cognitive accusative.

⁶⁸ Bock, *Mark*, 186 and Stein, *Mark*, 244.

⁶⁹ So noted by Stein, *Mark*, 245; Brooks, *Mark*, 88; and Bock, *Mark*, 186.

Stein makes a good point when he suggests that the connection is not close theologically since the sailors in Jonah exhibited faith and the disciples here do not.⁷⁰

The disciples' question should be understood, as Stein notes, not "as seeking an answer or as an example of the disciples' failure to understand, but rather as a positive confession of the greatness of Jesus in light of this epiphany."⁷¹ It is a rhetorical question seeking a faithful response that Jesus is the Son of God.⁷²

Literary Analysis

We see the narrator's hand in the composition of the four miracle stories as the storytelling force that uniquely binds them together. It is because of the common elements of literary devices they share. Stein notes the shared presence in 4:35-41; 5:1-20; and 5:21-43 of Jesus, the disciples, a boat, the sea, a miracle, and a confession of Jesus as the Christ.⁷³ A close review of the items on this list points to some of the typical literary elements involved in the composition of any narrative: characters (Jesus and the disciples), plot (in our pericope—the boat tossed about by the wind on the waves saved by the miraculous calming initiated by Jesus), and setting (the sea and the boat). We begin, however, with a look at one of the most important aspects of composition: the narrator.

⁷⁰ Stein, *Mark*, 245.

⁷¹ Stein, *Mark*, 245.

⁷² Lane, *The Gospel*, 178.

⁷³ Stein, *Mark*, 239.

THE NARRATOR

The *narrator* is someone who tells a story typically from a first-person or third-person point of view and is always present even if only by implication in any work.⁷⁴ The writer of the Gospel of Mark presents a third person omniscient narrator as the storyteller who is entirely trustworthy. This narrator is fully omniscient and reports without any limitations. In Mark's Gospel he is not a character, but an overarching, invisible presence with complete knowledge of each of the characters' inner thoughts and feelings.⁷⁵

In our story the narrator begins, in verse 35, telling us about how Jesus calms the storm by subtly drawing our attention to the previous extensive section involving the teaching ministry of Jesus (4:1-34). In a sense he is indicating some form of narrative continuance in writing, Καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς. The narrator does not record “And Jesus said to his disciples;” he does write “And he said to them.” This is a stylistic way to avoid repetition and trust that, in context, his readers will intuitively understand that “he” is Jesus and “them” refers to the disciples. The narrator has also included two temporal references in verse 35. The phrase ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ and the temporal participle γενομένης (“when... had come”) provide some very specific information about that *day* when Jesus was teaching from the boat. The use of the subjunctive mood (διέλθωμεν) is a compositional strategy to indicate an entreaty (by Jesus) for unity (with his men) with the stated goals of the speaker. In this case, Jesus wants the disciples to join him in his commitment to broaden his outreach ministry (“Let us go”).

In verse 36 the narrator *tells* us that Jesus proceeded to get into the boat ὡς ἦν. This bit of direct presentation indicates that Jesus and the disciples are likely sailing in the same boat from

⁷⁴ Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 329 and Abrams, *A Glossary*, 165-69.

⁷⁵ See David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 39-40 for a helpful discussion of this matter.

which Jesus began teaching (cf. 4:1-2). The language of 4:37 appears to be purposeful on the part of the narrator to invite the reader to think of the storm of a similar intensity as in Jonah 1:4 since the phrase used here λαῖλαψ μεγάλη ἀνέμου (“a great whirlwind of wind”) echoes that of Jonah 1:4’s κλύδων μέγας (“great waves”).

In verse 38 the narrator cleverly juxtaposes the report of the raging storm and the agitated disciples with the calm of sleeping Jesus. The use of ἐπιτιμάω by the narrator in 4:39 to report of Jesus’s power over nature is a rhetorical measure since we have seen this verb used before in 1:25; 3:12; and 9:25 to demonstrate Jesus’s *rebuking* power over unclean spirits. We note the same type of rhetorical flourish by the narrator with his choice of the two back-to-back imperative verbs (σιώπα, πεφίμωσο) in which Jesus individually addresses the wind and the sea. These verbs have the effect of Jesus commanding the wind and the sea to gain emotional and physical control of themselves which is something of a coup for the narrator to pull off in treating these inanimate entities as endowed with human traits. It is a highly effective strategy.

In verse 40 the narrator switches from having Jesus rebuke nature to laying into the disciples for cowardice and faithlessness. He is speaking here about his calling to save souls from sin and is expressing his displeasure with his men who, by now, should know better. Careful readers remember the narrator’s prompt in 4:34 (cf. 4:11) where Jesus took time in private to explain everything he was doing to the disciples. Jesus’s comments about the fear of the disciples are heightened with verse 41’s narration, “And they became *frightened with a great fear* (καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν). The doubling of the cognate family of φοβ- is stylistically intentional emphasis highlighting the respect, awe, and genuine fear of the disciples regarding the sovereign power of Jesus.

CHARACTERIZATION

In this very short narrative we have three expressions of characterization: Jesus, the

disciples, and the unnamed men in the other boats traveling alongside Jesus and the disciples (4:36b). Throughout the Gospels as a whole we can assert, with Resseguie, that “Jesus and the disciples are round characters with complex and, in the case of the disciples, conflicting traits.”⁷⁶

In this story, however, Jesus is presented as a *flat* character whose affections and actions as a sovereign figure over the demonic world of chaos (the dark evil of the sea) and over nature (his divine ability to calm the whirlwind) exhibit a singular focus. The unnamed other men traveling in the other boats are also flat figures known only by the singular trait of being fellow seafarers on a stormy evening. The closest example of a *round* character is demonstrated by the disciples. Several traits defining the disciples in the Gospel of Mark are present in these seven verses including the recurring theme of *discipleship failure*, a recurring lack of understanding, a demonstrable fear and lack of faith.⁷⁷ In this brief narrative the disciples plummet from having been told the meaning of Jesus’s parables in private times with him (4:33-34) and beginning their journey across the sea with Jesus with some measure of newfound understanding of his mission to being reduced to utter fear and faithlessness in the midst of the storm.

The writer of this story employs several compositional techniques to aid in his depiction of the characters. The first of these we encounter is his choice of the hortatory subjunctive (διέλθωμεν εἰς τὸ πέραν) at the end of 4:35 where Jesus exhorts the disciples to embark on their watery course. The use of the subjunctive mood here alerts the careful reader to Jesus’s intentions to encourage the disciples to join him in this voyage upon which he has already decided to go. This construction is also a very clever way by the writer to convey Jesus’s commitment to his ministry of outreach.

⁷⁶ Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 123.

⁷⁷ See Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark*, 124-28 for a helpful discussion of this matter.

Second, when the disciples refer to Jesus as “Teacher” (διδάσκαλε) in 4:38 the writer introduces an appellation often used by Mark. Close reading of our story and the broader Gospel of Mark reveals two things about the character traits of Jesus. The use of *Teacher* here reminds us of the substantive amount of teaching performed by Jesus in the narrative of Mark 4:1-34 immediately preceding our short story. This highlights Jesus’s teaching ministry. The moniker of “Teacher” in this brief context (4:35-41) and elsewhere in Mark (1:22, 27; 5:35-42; 6:47-52; and 9:17-29) also points to Jesus as sovereign Lord possessing the authority and power in this world over demons, death, and nature. This *Teacher* is unlike any other and the elegant *showing* of Jesus calming the waves and the storm helps in developing his characterization.

Third, there is a clever way that the narrator of our story has Jesus directly speak to the wind and the sea in 4:39. By having Jesus do this the writer is effectively imbuing the wind and the sea, as inanimate entities, with some of the traits one would expect in human characters, it advances our understanding of the sovereign authority of Jesus who has power over even the wind and waves. It is particularly effective to read, καὶ διεγερθεὶς ἐπετίμησεν τῷ ἀνέμῳ καὶ εἶπεν τῇ θαλάσσῃ· σιώπα, πεφίμωσο. Jesus is depicted as a man who sleeps. He is also portrayed as rebuking the wind and sea by way of speaking to them as figures in a dialogue who can hear and respond to his command. The two imperative verbs—σιώπα, πεφίμωσο—both denote the sense of *to be silent*. Thus, in a careful and close reading, we grasp the scene of Jesus arising from a deep slumber. We then imagine Jesus looking first to the wind and, in effect, saying “Be silent” and then turning his attention to the sea and commanding “Be silent.” It is a stunning portrayal of Jesus.

An important character trait of the disciples is revealed in verse 41 by both direct and indirect means of presentation. We learn directly that they became *frightened with a great fear*.

Later in the verse, in a bit of collective dialogue, the disciples utter their awesome respect and awe for Jesus as the One who has power and sovereignty over all things. This is a complex drawing of these men who have failed Jesus and, at the same time, recognize who and what he is.

PLOT

The brief narrative of Jesus calming the storm in Mark 4:35-41 presents challenges in identifying its narrative arc. Stein declares that “Attempts to see a particular structure in this story have been unsuccessful.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, we shall attempt to identify the rudiments of a basic plot structure in this pericope.

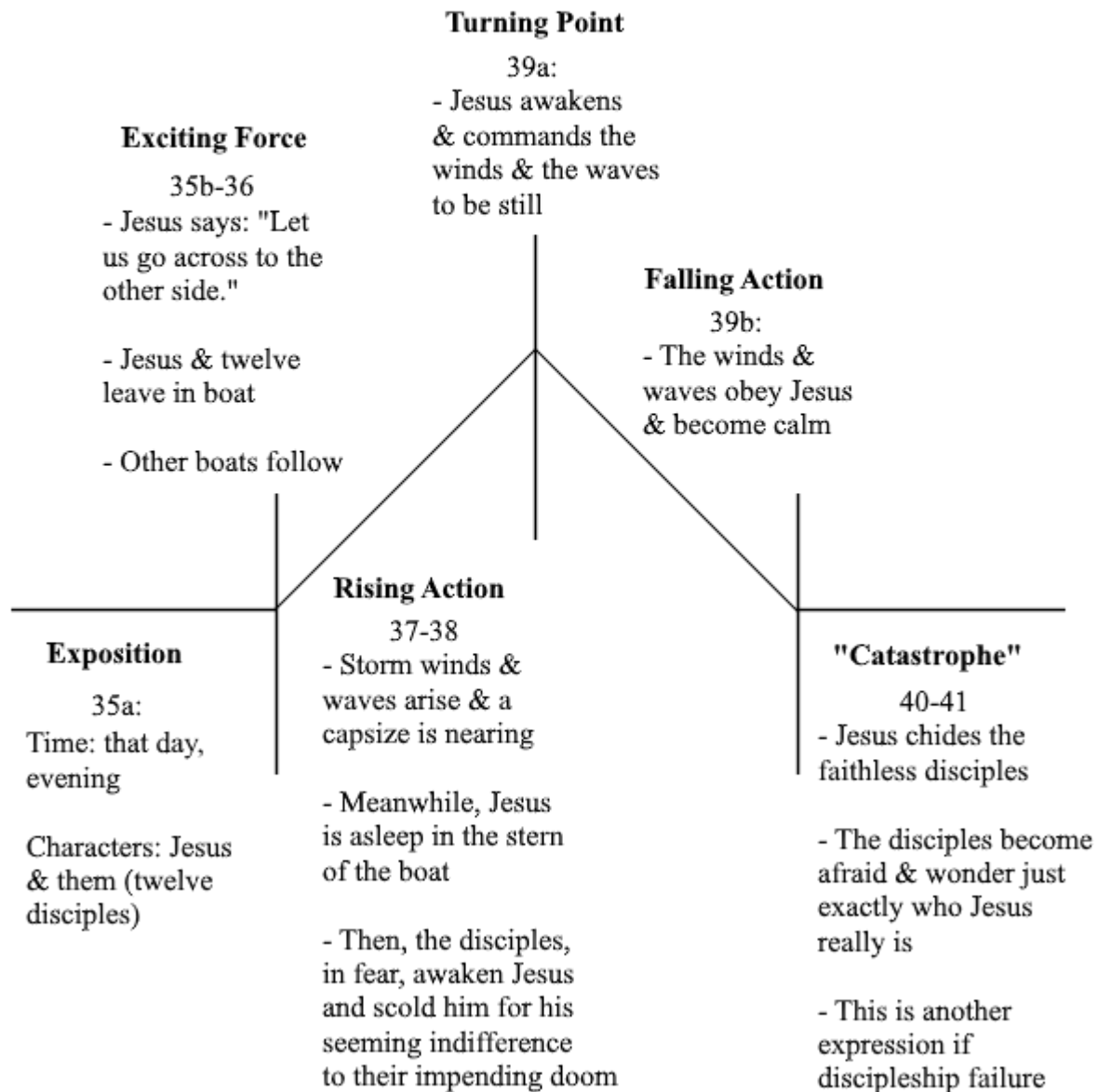
Within the overall plot structure of the Gospel of Mark is a running narrative arc in which the Evangelist presents Jesus in conflict with nonhuman forces (e.g., Satan, demonic, natural, illness, etc.) which are constantly being engaged by him and subsequently resolved by him.⁷⁹ In our brief story here in 4:35-41 we note this broader arc on a smaller scale. The rising conflict for Jesus in this story comes from nature in the form of a raging storm depicted below in TABLE 7.

⁷⁸ Stein, *Mark*, 240.

⁷⁹ See Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as*, 82-4 for a helpful discussion of this dynamic.

TABLE 7

Jesus Calms a Storm Mark 4:35-41



The key to grasping what is going on in the *exposition* of this brief story is to take note of the pronouns in the first clause. We have the nominative *he* of λέγει and objective *them* in αὐτοῖς and

the narrator is clearly expecting the careful reader to understand that these pronouns invite us to recognize Jesus as the “he” and the disciples as the “them” from the immediate context before verse 35. The phrase ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ also serves as a temporal marker for the reader.

The *conflict* arising here is the sudden appearance of “a great whirlwind” in verse 37 as the boat is filling up with water and apparently near to capsizing. There is an interesting contrast in responses from the disciples and Jesus. Jesus is at peace and fast asleep in the stern (38a)—the very opposite of the raging storm all around the boat—while the disciples are agitated and restless; they awaken Jesus and in fear, request that Jesus take care of his surroundings.

The *turning point* in the story (39a) comes when Jesus awakens and, with one word addressed to each the wind and the sea, calms the storm. The narrative action *falls* with the immediate obedience of the wind and sea to Jesus’s command (39b). In the story there is no denouement of a happy ending. Instead, readers are confronted with the *catastrophe* of the failure of the disciples whose faithlessness and cowardice (40) find expression only in cluelessness (41).

SETTING

The obvious setting for this pericope begins at the northwest shoreline of the Sea of Galilee outside of Capernaum (cf. 2:1ff.; 4:1, 35) where Jesus had been teaching the crowd from a boat (4:1-2). Verse 35 tells us it is now evening as Jesus and the disciples make plans to set sail. After Jesus taught from there in parables, 4:36 tells us that “after leaving the crowd, they [the disciples] took him [Jesus] along, ... in the boat.” Jesus had already announced their new destination in 4:35— “the other side” of the Sea of Galilee.

Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie note that “in Israelite understanding, the sea was a place of chaos and destruction, as it is in Israelite creation stories and in the story of the flood. Similarly,

in Mark's story, Jesus refers to the sea as a place to throw someone 'with a millstone tied around his neck' or a place to have a mountain removed in order to destroy it."⁸⁰

Bock observes two matters of this *setting* as Jesus and the disciples sail across the Sea of Galilee. First, Jesus is not traveling alone, but with other boats in what emerges as the beginning of the motif in Mark of *growing crowds*. And second, this journey brings Jesus into "more prominent Gentile territory, as the next encounter will involve pigs. Jesus is ministering to more than Israel."⁸¹

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Four implications emerge from this brief story. First, even in this very short story of historical narrative, Mark takes care to exhibit all the necessary elements of a good narrative: plot, characterization, and the establishment of a setting. All of this aids in the delivery of his theological message. Two examples will suffice to explain. First, with reference to the plot, the *turning point* of the story where a sleeping and calm Jesus awakens in order to command the wind and sea to become silent demonstrating his sovereign power over nature is an excellent example of how the concrete storytelling of this moment aids in the delivery of the theological truth of Jesus possessing such power. Second, the narrator makes powerful use of the negative image of the *sea* as an element of chaos and evil in this ancient world setting.

Second, the expression of discipleship failure is pronounced as the disciples express fear over faith and continue to fail to understand the teaching and ministry of Jesus.

Third, there is a Christological confession on the part of the disciples in 4:38 and 4:41.

⁸⁰ Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as*, 70. So also Lane, *Mark*, 128 and 173 and against the reductionism of Stein, *Mark*, 161 who asserts that the image of the sea "does not serve as a demonic symbol of chaos, but possesses a purely geographical and historical meaning."

⁸¹ Bock, *Mark*, 184.

Their appellation of Jesus as “Teacher” has overtones of “Lord” and of “Messiah.” And their acknowledgment of the epiphany of Jesus and the greatness of his power over Satan and nature here leads to their direct statement a few verses later in 5:7 of Jesus as the *son of the Most High God*.

Fourth, Jesus is fully sovereign over this world. This is seen in his control over cosmic chaos manifested in the sea as an expression of the movement of the demonic in this world.

Some Concluding Remarks

Over the past two chapters we have looked at how *making* and *meaning* work together in composition, exegesis & literary analysis, and interpretation. The argument offered going forward is that the combination of exegesis and literary analysis employed in Mark 4:35-41 is the best way to perform narrative criticism of biblical stories. This is not how narrative critics, on balance, proceed with this discipline. Most reduce narrative criticism to a study of the biblical text’s literariness. The next chapter will review how the literary approaches to the study of the Bible in the 20th century clouded the matter of correctly understanding a biblical story in its literary qualities as paired with exegesis for theological application. To do this we will need to briefly review the various literary theories and schools of criticism contributing to how biblical scholars went about their literary study of the Bible. This will lead up to a review of the current status of biblical narrative criticism today and a formal case made for the kind narrative criticism used in our study of Mark 4:35-41 above.

Chapter 4—The Cloud Cover of the Literary Approaches to the Study of Biblical Stories in the 20th Century: A Historical Perusal

and

The Potential for Clear Skies for Biblical Narrative Criticism: A Case for a New Approach

Introduction

The previous two chapters discussed poetics, the elements of narrative and literary analysis, and the basics of hermeneutics. This led to a brief discussion of a program for the narrative critical study of biblical stories which emphasizes literary analysis alongside of a grammatical historical exegesis, the beginnings of which was demonstrated in a study of Mark 4:35-41.

In order to properly ground our proposal for a more comprehensive practice of biblical narrative criticism, this chapter will provide a brief review of how students of biblical stories have been influenced by the literary schools and theories emerging in the 20th century. It is our argument that this has not served the literary study of the Bible well. In order to demonstrate this we will trace how biblical scholars moved from looking at the poetic making of biblical stories through an Aristotelian lens to one primarily informed by structuralism. This will involve a brief review of the introduction of modern linguistic theory into the study of literature. As a result, we will suggest a more rigorous narrative criticism paired with an equally exacting exegesis which we will argue yields a more comprehensive theological application than the typical practice of narrative criticism seen today.

A popular influence in some evangelical circles of the study of biblical stories today is the movement called structuralism. But before all of this, we begin with a discussion of some key literary terms.

Pertinent Terms for the Literary Study of the Bible

Any literary approach to the study of the Bible involves some familiarity with some the inside baseball jargon to understand terms. We begin with some expressions that seem quite close in their phraseology: literary approach, literary theory, literary criticism, narrative criticism, and close reading.

Literary Approach

The study of the Bible from the perspective of a *literary approach* refers to a generic and non-technical sense of one's method.¹ Doug Estes asserts that for those interested in the correct interpretation of Scripture the term means to "read the Bible with an eye for any method that could fit into any literary theory (new or ancient, conventional or radical)."² This is, perhaps, a bit too broad of a definition as it treats all "approaches" on equal footing. This work argues against a structuralist approach to reading the Bible in favor of appealing to Aristotle's theory from the *Poetics* as a model for narrative criticism being paired with an author-centered grammatical-historical method of exegesis. A better way to think of this is to recognize that one can, indeed, read the Bible through the lens of many differing literary theoretical approaches, but not many of them are ultimately helpful.

Scholars have come to advance the importance of any *literary approach* necessarily acknowledging the function of the *artistry* of biblical stories. Berlin refrains from using the term *art* in the senses of "craft" or "technique" instead favoring the "sense of an art-form, like painting and music. Biblical narrative is a form of literary art."³ Ryken piggybacks on this

¹ Douglas Estes, "Introduction: The Literary Approach to the Bible," in *Literary Approaches*, 4.

² Estes, "Introduction," 4.

³ Berlin, *Poetics and*, 135.

understanding stating that any literary approach to the Bible should acknowledge “the artistry that is everywhere evident in the Bible.”⁴ He grounds his argument in the Bible’s active storytelling in wordsmithery and the use of devices such as metaphor as well as the frame narrator’s comment on Qohelet’s active care in the making of his literary enterprise.⁵

C. S. Lewis warns against any approach that focuses only on reading a biblical story (or text) as a piece of “literature” at the expense of ignoring any attempt to unlock its meaning.⁶ With this caveat stated, Lewis proceeds to aver that Scripture “cannot properly be read except as literature.”⁷

Ryken suggests that the *literary approach* to the Bible is distinguished by what he identifies as its “agenda of interests and set of presuppositions”⁸ and he provides a list of six practical and focal interests. First, Ryken notes that “a literary approach to the Bible is preoccupied with questions of literary form.”⁹ By this he is asserting that a literary study of the Bible needs to acknowledge that the form of *narrative* involves the use of various techniques such as plot, characterization, and setting in the crafting of both historical and imaginative stories.¹⁰ Second, a literary approach recognizes the importance of the *unity* of the books and passages of Scripture.¹¹ This involves treating a biblical story as a single whole and focusing on

⁴ Ryken, *Words of*, 22.

⁵ Ryken, *Words of*, 23.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958), 2-3.

⁷ Lewis, *Reflections*, 3.

⁸ Ryken, *Words of*, 20.

⁹ Ryken, *Words of*, 20.

¹⁰ Ryken, *Words of*, 20.

¹¹ Ryken, *Words of*, 21.

the final form of the text as we have it in the canon.¹² Third, Ryken affirms the *imaginative nature* of the Bible. By this he means that the Bible is not simply a discussion of ideas, but a literary presentation which “helps us to recreate the experiences and sensations in passages.”¹³ Fourth, a literary approach to Scripture recognizes the universal reach and experience it brings to readers and endeavors to promote connections between the stories of the text with readers.¹⁴ Fifth, one makes note of the Bible’s artful verbal expression (briefly discussed above).¹⁵ And sixth, any serious literary approach to God’s Word “shares the biblical scholar’s respect for the very words in which the Bible is written.”¹⁶ This means that one is keenly attuned to matters of how *language* is used in direct ways or figuratively, with word play and other devices.¹⁷

Literary Theory

The splintered state of literary studies in general, as well as that of the literary study of biblical literature, primarily is owing to the abandonment of Aristotle’s poetical theory developed in his *Poetics* in favor of ideas emerging with the rise of the Enlightenment in the 18th century.¹⁸ The work of Aristotle in the *Poetics* regarding the process of *making* stories stresses the importance of *form*, the artistic *unity* of a whole work, and *imitation* as we have previously discussed. Abrams importantly observes that “A salient quality of the *Poetics* is the way it

¹² Ryken, *Words of*, 21.

¹³ Ryken, *Words of*, 21.

¹⁴ Ryken, *Words of*, 22.

¹⁵ Ryken, *Words of*, 22.

¹⁶ Ryken, *Words of*, 23.

¹⁷ Ryken, *Words of*, 23.

¹⁸ See R. S. Crane, “Introduction,” in *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 1-24 and M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 9-11, 22-4, 101, and *et passim* for more discussion.

considers a work of art in various of its external relations, affording each its due function as one of the ‘causes’ of the work.”¹⁹ Aristotle writes of the making of stories, “Tragedy, then, is an imitation [μίμησις] of an action that is of stature and complete with magnitude, that, by means of sweetened speech, but with each of its kinds separate in its proper parts, is of people acting and not through report, and accomplishes through pity and fear the cleansing of experiences [παθημάτων] of this sort.”²⁰ In effect, what Aristotle is saying here, as Abrams relates, is that a story (Aristotle is specifically talking about *tragedy* here, but we can understand his thoughts to extend to the whole of storytelling) cannot be “fully defined, for example, nor can the total determinants of its construction be understood, without taking into account its proper effect on the audience.”²¹ This Aristotelian assertion is akin to E. D. Hirsch’s distinction between *meaning* and *significance*. In Hirsch’s estimation *meaning* is determined by the author, acting as the poet-maker, who composes his text; *significance* speaks to the relationship between the *meaning* of a text and the person who reads it and relates to it.²² We can see echoes of Aristotle’s idea of the poet’s *construction* of the story and his sense of the *effect* on the reader. We will come back to this later, but for now this bit of poetical theory serves as part of the foundation for a definition of *literary theory*.

A long-standing definition (until the 18th century) of *literary theory* was that it is to be understood “in the sense of general principles [working] together with a set of terms, distinctions, and categories, to be applied to identifying and analyzing works of literature, as well as the criteria (the standards or norms) by which these works and their writers are to be

¹⁹ Abrams, *The Mirror and*, 10.

²⁰ Benardete and Davis, *Aristotle—On Poetics*, 17-8, 1449b.

²¹ Abrams, *The Mirror and*, 10.

²² See Hirsch, *Validity in*, 8-10 for a fuller discussion.

evaluated.”²³ R. S. Crane builds on this definition commenting on the art of *making* a story arguing that

what a poet does *distinctly as a poet* is not to express himself or his age or to resolve psychological or moral difficulties or to communicate a vision of the world or to communicate or to use words in such-and-such ways, and so on—though all these may be involved in what he does—but rather, by means of his art, to build materials of language and experience into wholes of various kinds to which, as we experience them, we tend to attribute final rather than merely instrumental value.²⁴

Literary theory was comprehended this way until men began to challenge the way in which one looked at the world in the 18th century. Literary theorists and critics began to abandon Aristotle’s idea of poetic making being an *imitative* enterprise in favor of *passionate utterance* as the initiating force for the poet.²⁵ Coleridge advanced the thought that the art of making—poetry—was a spontaneous expression of feeling asserting poetry as “the language of passion and emotion” and that this language of poetry “is what they [poets] themselves spoke and heard in moments of exultation, indignation, etc.”²⁶

This divergence from Aristotle’s long-established theory became more prevalent from the Enlightenment on down through our contemporary era. This is so much the case that an evangelical author writing in a monograph on the literary approach to the study of the Bible offers this malleable definition of *literary theory* which “describes the philosophical consideration of the many possible methods and meanings that a reader may be informed by the text.”²⁷ Furthermore, Structuralist critic, Jonathan Culler, defines *literary theory* in terms of four

²³ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 39.

²⁴ Crane, “Introduction,” 13.

²⁵ Abrams, *The Mirror and*, 101.

²⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Miscellaneous Criticism*, Thomas Middleton Raysor, editor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 227.

²⁷ Douglas Estes, “Introduction,” in *Literary Approaches*, 4.

interconnected points asserting:

1. Theory is interdisciplinary—discourse with effects outside an original discipline.
2. Theory is analytical and speculative—an attempt to work out what is involved in what we call sex or language or writing or meaning or the subject.
3. Theory is a critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural.
4. Theory is reflexive, thinking about thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and in other discursive practices.²⁸

One can see what has happened here. The theory advanced by Aristotle grounded in *mimesis* has been eclipsed by a theory of personal expression. The concept of *theory* being a definable set of guiding principles allowing us to identify, study, and analyze a work of literature has devolved into an amorphous list of abstractions. This study adheres to the long-established understanding of *literary theory* as defined by the likes of Abrams and Crane.

Literary Criticism

The practice of *literary criticism* owes its origins to the Greek term κριτικός which denotes “able to discern” or “of or for judging.”²⁹ Aristotle makes use of this word in the *Poetics*. *Literary criticism* may be defined as “reflective, attentive consideration and analysis of a literary work.”³⁰ Douglas Estes echoes this model identifying literary criticism with language that is somewhat generic as a “specific consideration and analysis by means of a literary method.”³¹ My quibble here is that Estes leaves too much room for the invasion of “methods” such as Feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, reader-response criticism, cultural studies criticism, etc. into the field of play which are, in effect, nothing more than schools of *eisegesis* reading an individual’s

²⁸ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 14-15.

²⁹ *L & S*, 451.

³⁰ *The Bedford Glossary*, 64.

³¹ Douglas Estes, “Introduction,” in *Literary Approaches*, 4.

own “meaning” into the text instead of drawing meaning from the text.

Abrams adds an important dimension to the discussion of *literary criticism* arguing that there are “four elements in the total situation of a work of art.”³² These are (1) the *work* itself, which in a literary setting constitutes the produced text; (2) the *artist*, here the poet-maker; (3) the *universe* which is the world of existing things comprising that which is to be imitated; and (4) the *audience*, in this case, the *readers* for whom the writer’s story is intended.³³

Close Reading

The idea of a *close reading* carries with it a fair measure of excess baggage for evangelical interpreters. The term owes its origin to the development of the literary school of thought called New Criticism. A distinguishing method employed by New Critics was that of approaching a literary text by *explication* or *close reading*. This is a “detailed and subtle analysis of the complex interrelations and *ambiguities* (multiple meanings) of the components of a work.”³⁴ This reading procedure denies that the author is the determiner of meaning in his communicated text. The most famous defense of this assertion, that one cannot read a work claiming to be influenced by the authors’ historical context and communicative textual intentions, is articulated in an essay by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley entitled “The Intentional Fallacy.”³⁵ Their text-centered approach to reading and interpreting a work declared that the “text should become the one and only indicator of meaning for the reader.”³⁶ This

³² Abrams, *The Mirror and*, 6.

³³ For more see Abrams, *The Mirror and*, 6.

³⁴ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 247.

³⁵ W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review*, Jul. - Sep., 1946, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1946), pp. 468-88.

³⁶ Douglas Estes, “Introduction,” in *Literary Approaches*, 19.

contention is counterintuitive to the very nature of the reading experience since any author sits down with the intent to communicate something through his writing. The measure of the author's success is when readers from many different backgrounds can come to an understanding of his intended meaning as communicated in the text. It is helpful to remember that, as Stein indicates, "Whereas a text can convey the meaning of a thinking, willing person, it cannot possess meaning in and of itself, because it cannot think."³⁷

A more helpful take on the term *close reading* is to understand such a practice as "The thorough and nuanced analysis of a literary text, with particular emphasis on the interrelationships among its constituent elements."³⁸ We can think of the exegetical methodology one uses in analyzing a biblical text in looking at points of grammar and syntax, context, genre related issues, and the like as related to this definition's understanding of close reading. In this study a *close reading* of a story from Scripture is to say that the reader/interpreter will pay close attention to the matter of the text involving both literary analysis and exegesis leading to theological application.

Narrative Criticism

It is the expressed hope of this study to argue for a workable biblical *narrative criticism* that is paired with an adoption of a grammatical-historical exegetical method and grounded in an author-centered hermeneutic. As we have mentioned before, the literary approach to the study of the Bible is quite fragmented. Such is the case for scholars of Scripture who practice narrative criticism. There is general agreement on an approach, but no real consensus. Doug Estes offers this summary take on the matter concluding:

³⁷ Stein, "The Benefits of," 453.

³⁸ Murfin and Ray, *The Bedford Glossary*, 50.

As there is no one, overarching method in the literary approach, or even agreement on what type of questions need to be asked or aspects of the texts need to be studied, there is not really any way to summarize the literary approach in a meaningful way (except by its history of development, which is what most theorists seem to do in literary introductions).³⁹

We would be well-served by a brief review of some of this *history of development* of the literary approach before we offer our suggested approach combining mimetic theory, a grammatical-historical exegesis, and an author-centered hermeneutic.

It is generally accepted that David Rhoads inaugurated the literary study of the Gospels as *narrative criticism* in an article he wrote in 1982.⁴⁰ In a book (*Mark as Story*) co-authored by Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, Rhoads helped to develop the practice of narrative criticism.⁴¹ Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie outline a list of guidelines for how one may read Mark as a story. An overall governing principle for the authors is that “it is important to seek to understand a story on its own terms rather than to have it say what we want it to say.”⁴² The authors suggest four guidelines to read the Gospel of Mark on its own terms. They are: (1) that Rhoads and company insist that Mark be read as *story* and not as *history*, since approaching the Gospel as history will cause one focus on the historicity of Jesus over the narratorial portrayal of him; (2) one should read Mark independent of the other Gospels to avoid filling in any gaps in this shorter and more direct account; (3) refrain from inserting any modern cultural assumptions into what is a 1st century story; and (4) likewise with any contemporary theological insights of

³⁹ Douglas Estes, “Introduction,” in *Literary Approaches*, 31.

⁴⁰ David Rhoads, “Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark,” *JAAR* 50 (1982): 411-34.

⁴¹ David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

⁴² Rhoads, *Mark as*, 5.

our day, do not allow these to be read back into Mark's story.⁴³

Regarding the business of literary analysis our authors identify five key features involved. In order to understand a story, one must grasp how it functions. This first involves looking to the *narrator* and the manner in which a story is told. Second, the *setting* provides context for the story regarding persons, places, and temporal matters. Third, the *plot* speaks to the events of the story in how they are sequenced and developed with conflict and resolution. Fourth, the *characters* are involved in carrying out the plot through their motivations in speech and actions. And fifth, the storyteller makes use of *rhetoric* to build a persuasive case for the story he presents to us.⁴⁴

The best of what Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie have done here is to list some helpful practices which served to begin to identify the dimensions of the playing field for narrative criticism. This is also the case with their substantive discussion regarding the elements of narrative. What is not so helpful is that many subsequent narrative critics have taken their mention of concentrating on the nature of Mark as a *story* over and above reading it as history to the point of ignoring any discussion of history. Even though these authors were not advocating for an ahistorical reading of the Gospels,⁴⁵ many narrative critics who followed closely after these writers eagerly surrendered historicity either because they were materialists or not

⁴³ Rhoads, *Mark as*, 5-6.

⁴⁴ Rhoads, *Mark as*, 6-7.

⁴⁵ Rhoads, *Mark as*, 5 for their full description for reading the Gospel as *story* and not as *history* as a means to grasp the writer's intention to portray characters, a plot, and a setting and rereading the text for any meaning we might have missed on a first run through. Conversely, if we concentrate on a historical reading, whatever we might not understand we might be predisposed to think the gospel writer has omitted and we would then look to other sources to find out what is "missing." Reread the text closely to fully grasp the portrayal of Jesus and the others in Mark first.

interested in the theological message of the Bible's stories.⁴⁶

Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie do not actually provide a definition of *narrative criticism*. They do, however, provide some very practical examples and case studies into how one begins to go about the practice of narrative criticism as they work their way through the Gospel of Mark.

Soon after the seminal work of Rhoads and Michie appeared in 1982 (the first edition of *Mark as Story*) others followed suit in Gospel studies. One such example is the comprehensive narrative critical study of the Gospel of Luke in 1986 by Robert Tannehill entitled *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts, A Literary Interpretation—Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke*. But we are after a definition of narrative criticism.

Mark Allan Powell approaches the topic of biblical narrative criticism by coming at it sideways through the lens of the broader subject of *literary criticism*. Powell notes that “secular literary scholarship knows no such movement as *narrative criticism*... If classified by secular critics, it might be viewed as a subspecies of the new rhetorical criticism or as a variety of the reader-response movement. Biblical scholars, however, tend to think of narrative criticism as an independent movement in its own right.”⁴⁷

Powell proceeds to discuss narrative criticism from the perch of a reader-response critic who emphasizes the importance of the *implied reader*⁴⁸ “who is presupposed by the narrative

⁴⁶ See Richard Pervo, *Profit with Delight* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987) and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, revised and updated version (New York: Basic Books, 2011), and Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1987) for starters.

⁴⁷ Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 19.

⁴⁸ Wayne C. Booth introduced the concepts of the *implied author* and *implied reader* in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), cf. 71-76. Gordon Wenham provides a brief, but excellent take on these terms in *Story as Torah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000). In speaking about the *real author* of a work in conjunction with the *implied author*, Wenham writes, “When someone speaks or writes, he projects an image of himself and his attitudes that may differ considerably from what he is like in real life. Usually one suspects that the implied author is better than the real author,” [*Story as*, 8-9]. Wenham then notes that “the implied reader is a mirror image of the implied author” and that when a “writer writes... he has a sort of

itself.”⁴⁹ Powell asserts that narrative critics

generally speak of an *implied reader* who is presupposed by the narrative itself. This implied reader is distinct from any real, historical reader in the same way that the implied author is distinct from the real, historical author. The actual responses of real readers are unpredictable, but there are many clues within the narrative that indicate an anticipated response from the implied reader.⁵⁰

Powell concludes that the “goal of narrative criticism is to read the text as the implied reader.”⁵¹

This is an interesting case made by Powell, but it is mired in the counterintuitive slough of reader-response criticism that assumes that neither a real reader nor an implied reader can actually unlock the meaning of the author’s intention. His cynical presupposition assumes interpretive unpredictability because, in his view, each reader approaches the story from a different viewpoint which accounts for his declaration of *unpredictability*.

Powell denies that the text of a biblical story can be grasped from its historical context in any way that the original reading audience could. For the narrative critic the historicity of the text is not important and for the narrative critic “it is not necessary to know everything they [the original audience] knew in order to understand the text aright.”⁵²

We began our quest for a definition with Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie who provided a helpful “how to” list of guidelines as to how one might practice narrative criticism. With Powell we have encountered an attempt to kidnap narrative criticism and place it under the banner of reader-response criticism. One appreciates his call for close reading of the text. His overall

reader... in mind. The writer makes a guess at his reader’s knowledge, experience, and outlook and pitches his presentation to appeal to his implied reader,” [*Story as*, 9].

⁴⁹ Powell, *What Is Narrative*, 19.

⁵⁰ Powell, *What Is Narrative*, 19.

⁵¹ Powell, *What Is Narrative*, 20.

⁵² Powell, *What Is Narrative*, 20.

approach is interesting, but not helpful in its denial that meaning can be grasped in a uniform way by all through the appeal to an author-centered hermeneutic. We press on.

New Testament scholar Walter Liefeld offers his own take on narrative criticism. He suggests that narrative criticism as a study of the Bible's stories "*approaches the text on its own terms*. That is, the questions of historicity are laid aside, as background matters, at least momentarily."⁵³ Like Rhoads and company, Liefeld acknowledges that historicity is not necessarily denied, but is often laid aside by narrative critics while one focuses on the literary aspects of the biblical story.⁵⁴ Liefeld warns against too much of a singular focus on the story and the literary elements at the expense of failing to acknowledge the historical context of the narrative being studied.⁵⁵

Steven McKenzie offers some thoughts to aid our quest in defining narrative criticism. He adds some information which is, by now, known to us, but constructive in building our model noting that it is a *synchronic* method in the literary study of the Bible.⁵⁶ McKenzie relates that narrative criticism "approaches the text as a whole and finds meaning in it through the analysis of such features as plot and structure, characterization, and creative use of language, what some might call the text's rhetoric or aesthetics."⁵⁷ He also observes that narrative critics are more likely to align themselves with studying the stories of the Bible "with the disciplines of English and literary studies rather than history."⁵⁸ Thus, once again a scholar notes the importance of

⁵³ Walter L. Liefeld, *Interpreting the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 51.

⁵⁴ Liefeld, *Interpreting the*, 52.

⁵⁵ Liefeld, *Interpreting the*, 52.

⁵⁶ Steven L. McKenzie, *Introduction to the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 37-8.

⁵⁷ McKenzie, *Introduction to*, 37.

⁵⁸ McKenzie, *Introduction to*, 37.

literary analysis, as well as the tendency of narrative critics to overlook historical context as part of that analysis.

Robert Chisholm, similar to McKenzie, notes that a synchronic approach to the literary study of the Bible's stories focuses on the canonical form of the text highlighting the narrative's unity as a whole.⁵⁹ Settling the object of one's study, says Chisholm, on the final form of the text allows the student of these biblical stories to perform a careful literary analysis of plot, characterization, and setting.⁶⁰ Here again we note an emphasis on literary analysis and the study of the final unified whole of the text.

James Resseguie is willing to offer what we would recognize as a more traditional definition of *narrative criticism*. Let's see his offering and then analyze it. Resseguie states that

Narrative criticism focuses on how biblical literature works as *literature*. The “what” of a text (its content) and the “how” of a text (its rhetoric and structure) are analyzed as a complete tapestry, an organic whole. Narrative critics are primarily concerned with the literariness of biblical narratives—that is, the qualities that make them literature. Form and content are generally regarded as an indissoluble whole. Narrative criticism is a shift away from traditional historical critical methods to the way a text communicates meaning as a self-contained unit, a literary artifact, an undivided whole.⁶¹

Resseguie's definition is the most comprehensive we have encountered thus far; especially in the *prescriptive* sense in which he is willing to discuss the topic.⁶² He speaks to many of the elements the others have addressed as noted above. For narrative criticism it is important to study

⁵⁹ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2006), 178.

⁶⁰ Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the*, 178-179 and also 26-36.

⁶¹ James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 18-19.

⁶² The others, thus far, have been occupied with *describing* what narrative criticism *does* more than what it *is*.

the Bible as literature and, furthermore, this literature is grasped as a unified whole and acknowledges the artistry of the work. Narrative critics view the stories of Scripture through the lens of synchronic methodology as opposed to a diachronic approach and are focused on the literary qualities of the Bible's narratives.

Resseguie introduces the idea that narrative criticism is beholding to a literary analysis of Structuralism on the binary levels of a *text* concerning its “how” and “what.” Structuralist critics view what had always been considered a *work* of literature as a *text* composed as a result of linguistic codes and literary conventions.⁶³ Biblical scholars who are practitioners of narrative criticism like Resseguie and Jeannine Brown embrace this structural analysis and abandon the *mimetic* criticism of Aristotle.⁶⁴ Both Resseguie and Brown appeal to the work of Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse*. Chatman argues that a story, following the linguistic model of Saussure, is a communicative act functioning on two levels: *story* and *discourse*.⁶⁵ In writing about the study of literary narratives, Chatman avers that

What is communicated is *story*, the formal content element of narrative; and it is communicated by *discourse*, the formal expression element. The discourse is said to “state” the story, and these elements are of two kinds—*process* and *stasis*—according to whether someone did something or something happened; or whether something simply existed in the story.⁶⁶

We make note of one other departure from the classic mode of mimetic criticism which saw (up to the 18th century) literature as an imitation of reality with a movement toward what is called

⁶³ See Abrams, *A Glossary*, 280-82 for a helpful discussion of Structuralism.

⁶⁴ See Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 18-19 and Brown, *The Gospels*, 11-14 and *et passim*.

⁶⁵ See Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 31-34 and *et passim* for more.

⁶⁶ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 31-32.

expressive criticism where the critic views literature as an expression of “the feelings or temperament or creative imagination of its author.”⁶⁷

The most complete definition of narrative criticism is offered by Jeannine Brown. She writes

Narrative criticism is a method of interpreting biblical narratives that attends to their literary qualities and, specifically, to their narrative or storied shape (Resseguie, 18-19). Literary features such as plot, sequencing, pacing, point of view, characterization and irony, capture the attention of narrative critics. Such literary analysis is accompanied by a focus on the final form of the text rather than emphasis on issues of the text’s production (e.g., source analysis). In fact, early application of narrative criticism to the Gospels purposely bracketed out the historical-critical concerns paramount to Gospel studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Powell, 8). Also characteristic of narrative criticism is an assumption of the unity of the text, although recent critique and reassessment have raised questions about the validity of this assumption.⁶⁸

Brown’s definition is even more complete than Resseguie’s. Like him, she includes narrative criticism’s focus on the literary qualities of the Bible’s stories, the use of the final form of the text, and the assumption of the unity of the text. She adds the important dimension of attending to literary analysis of the elements of narrative including plot, characterization, setting, and point of view.

Brown is also an advocate of appealing to reading the stories of Scripture through the lens of Structuralist criticism. She follows Chatman’s method of separating the unified whole of a work of biblical literature into a binary leveled analysis of story and discourse. Following Chatman’s lead, Brown identifies the elements of the *story* level (the “what”) to be the setting, characters, and the plot. The *discourse* level (the “how”) contains the elements of point of view,

⁶⁷ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 281. See also Abrams, *The Mirror*, 21-26 for a fuller discussion of this matter.

⁶⁸ Jeannine K. Brown, “Narrative Criticism,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, second edition, Joel B. Green, general editor and Jeannine K. Brown and Nicholas Perrin associate editors (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 619.

themes, and the sequencing of episodes.⁶⁹

This study questions two aspects of the collective presentation and practice of narrative criticism as advanced by the scholars above. First, the abandonment of the mimetic approach for the adoption of a structuralist method unnecessarily introduces modern linguistic theory to overly complicate the study of biblical stories. There is a reason that the mimetic theory was used for so long; it makes note of obvious realities present in storytelling. I am speaking of the fact that poet/makers closely observe their fellow humans in order to fashion an imaginative tale. Likewise, writers recording historical narrative closely observe and/or collect data about past events and then fashion them into stories employing the same elements of storytelling (plot, characters, setting, irony, rhetoric, etc.) that imaginative writers do. When we read and subsequently analyze these stories, we are better served by playing by the same rules of the makers of these stories. To invite the overly complex elements of Structuralism is to apply the rules of another discipline, namely linguistics, to the study of literature.

Second, on balance but not universally, narrative critics ignore the importance of including exegesis, an author-centered hermeneutic, and the procession of moving from literary analysis and exegesis to theological application. Osborne cogently observes that “Evangelical hermeneutics has somehow stressed the author’s intention for every book [of Scripture] except the narrative portions.”⁷⁰

We will offer our own definition of *narrative criticism* that will serve to guide our own study and analysis of the stories of the Bible after we take a look at the history of how biblical scholars have been informed primarily by structuralism leading to the current practice of

⁶⁹ See Brown, “Narrative Criticism,” 620-21 and Brown, *The Gospels*, 11-16 for a fuller discussion.

⁷⁰ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical*, 202-03.

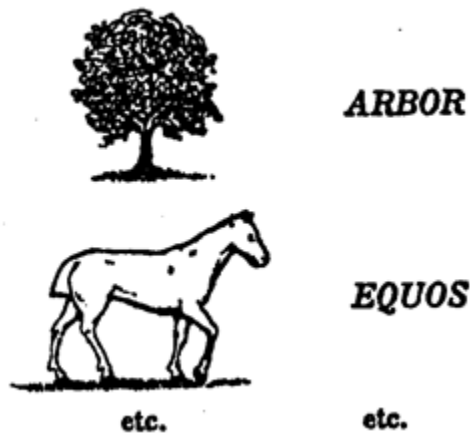
narrative criticism.

A Brief Discussion of How Structuralism Has Informed the Literary Study of the Bible

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure died in 1913 leaving behind no notes or manuscript of his theories on linguistics from the three times he taught his course in an academic setting. When Saussure's *Cours de linguistique Générale* was published in 1916 it was owing to his colleagues at the University of Geneva collecting and putting together notes from his students. Saussure's work formed the foundation for structuralism.

Saussure begins his discussion of general principles in his *Course in General Linguistics* suggesting:

For some people a language, reduced to its essentials, is a nomenclature: a list of terms corresponding to a list of things. For example, Latin would be represented as



This conception is open to a number of objections. It assumes that ideas already exist independently of words. It does not clarify whether the name is a vocal or a psychological entity, for *ARBOR* might stand for either. Furthermore, it leads one to assume that the link between a name and a thing is something quite unproblematic, which is far from being the case.⁷¹

⁷¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Chicago: Open Court Classics, 1986 English translation; orig. 1916), 65-66.

Saussure further writes, “In a linguistic state, then, everything depends on relations. How do they work? The relations and differences between linguistic items fall into two distinct kinds, each giving rise to a separate order of values. The opposition between these two orders brings out the specific character of each.”⁷²

Three claims emerge about the nature of structuralism from these two quotes from Saussure. First, he asserts that language is a system of arbitrary conventions—there is no correspondence between actual things and the signs used to describe them. Second, language is a system of differences and oppositions. Third, the *structure* of a work of composition is grounded in modern linguistic theory. We shall discuss each of these in turn beginning with the third assertion.

The *Structure* of a Work and Modern Linguistic Theory

For Saussure, the *structure* of a work of literature is identified in terms of calling the *work* a *text*. Abrams relates, “structuralist criticism views literature as a second-order system that uses the first-order structural system of language as its medium, and is itself to be analyzed on the model of linguistic theory.”⁷³ Saussure introduced the idea of employing linguistics in literary criticism speaking of the differentiation between *langue* (the system of language) and *parole* (the various and distinct acts of speaking).⁷⁴ The linguist’s job is to “establish the nature of the underlying linguistic system, the *langue*.”⁷⁵ Thus, as Gretchen Ellis concludes, “Literary structuralism argues that just as languages have an abstract ideal structure that governs

⁷² Saussure, *Course in*, 121.

⁷³ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 280.

⁷⁴ Vanhoozer, *Is There a*, 61.

⁷⁵ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 104.

individualized expression, so do texts. Whereas the textual *parole* is the individualized text, the textual *langue* is the idealized textual structure that governs all text of a particular genre and, even more broadly, all genres of texts.”⁷⁶

This understanding of *structure* is quite different from what Aristotle advanced in the *Poetics*. For him the key element of a literary work’s structure was its *form* (εἶδος) or “idea.” Aristotle describes it this way

We have posited tragedy to be an imitation of a complete and whole action having some magnitude; for there is also a whole which has no magnitude. What has a beginning, middle, and end is a whole. A beginning is whatever in itself is not of necessity after something else but after which another [*heteron*] has a nature to be or to become. But an end, on the contrary, is whatever in itself has a nature to be after something else—either of necessity or for the most part—but after it nothing else. And a middle is that which is both in itself after something else and after which there is another. Well-put-together stories, then, ought neither to begin from just anywhere nor end just anywhere but use the aforesaid forms.⁷⁷

We have already visited these Aristotelian elements of making before, namely, of *mimesis*, the unity of a whole in poetic making, and the classic structure of a beginning, middle, and an end.

We now take note how he relates these key components of poetic structure to the element of *form*. In Aristotle’s *mimetic* theory the *form* of a literary work is grounded on its imitation of reality.⁷⁸ Regarding the key compositional elements of *form* and *unity*, Abrams observes that any “transposition, removal, or addition of any part will dislocate the whole.”⁷⁹

Contrary to the viewpoint of Aristotle, literary structuralism does not acknowledge that the business of literary analysis of the *form* of a work’s plot, characterization, setting, etc. is

⁷⁶ Gretchen Ellis, “Structuralism,” in *Literary Approaches*, 226.

⁷⁷ Aristotle, *On Poetics*, Benardete and Davis, translators, 24; 1450b, ll. 24-34.

⁷⁸ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 71-72.

⁷⁹ Abrams, *The Mirror*, 163-64.

performed to aid in grasping the author's intended meaning. Rather, structuralism was developed as an epistemology claiming, as Ellis relates, "to be the precondition for *any* kind of scientific knowing. Structuralism argued that human consciousness has a structure that exists prior to any kind of knowing and, in fact, shapes both how something is known and what can be known. Put another way, consciousness doesn't create structure; it is a structure—and a universal one at that."⁸⁰

What emerges from this discussion is the competing claims of Aristotelian and structuralist literary theory. The *mimetic* theory advanced by Aristotle (and held by most literary men up until the 18th century, and by a remnant of literary critics since then) holds that the making of literature is a focused imitation of reality following the basic form of a story's beginning, middle, and end. Conversely, structuralism, unequivocally opposes this in favor of *expressive* theory which, as Abrams notes, takes the view that "literature primarily expresses the feelings or temperament or creative imagination of its author... More generally, in its attempt to develop a science of literature and in many of its salient concepts, structuralism departs radically from the assumptions and ruling ideas of traditional humanistic criticism."⁸¹

Saussure views a work of literature through the lens of the scientific inquiry of modern linguistic theory tearing apart the "text" into smaller and smaller parts delving into deep structure in order to find meaning. Aristotle looks to the whole unity of a work and studies its contributing elements of story (plot, character, etc.) in order to see how the author has imitated the race of men.

⁸⁰ Ellis, "Structuralism," 219.

⁸¹ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 281.

Language as a System of Arbitrary Conventions

Saussure asserts that there is no correspondence between language and actual things.⁸²

The race of men has been attempting to understand the nature of language for a very long time. In Plato's dialogue the *Cratylus* the figure of Hermogenes argues, "There is no correctness in names other than convention."⁸³ At root in Plato's dialogue is a discussion about whether or not the words of language speak truly providing accurate knowledge of the world around us.⁸⁴ The figure of Hermogenes asserts that words possess only meaning of convention and that, as Vanhoozer relates, words "are thus unreliable guides to the nature of things, for there is no necessary connection between a word and the thing it names."⁸⁵

In effect, Hermogenes' view of language blazes a trail for Saussure's linguistic model of language as a system of random conventions. Culler explains Saussure's thinking about language as a system of differences affirming, "What makes each element of a language what it is, what gives it its identity, are the contrasts between it and the other elements within the system of language."⁸⁶

Saussure's *system* is comprised of the linguistic assertion of the distinctions between speech acts (*parole*) and the system of a language (*langue*).⁸⁷ This *system* for Saussure begins with a *sign* which is understood to be "something that stands for something else."⁸⁸ Furthermore,

⁸² Saussure, *Course in*, 65.

⁸³ Plato, the *Cratylus*, Benjamin Jowett, translator (San Bernadino, CA: Amazon Digital Services, 2019), 84.

⁸⁴ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 17.

⁸⁵ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 17.

⁸⁶ Culler, *Literary Theory*, 57.

⁸⁷ Jonathan Culler, "The Linguistic Foundation," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, revised edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 74.

⁸⁸ *The Bedford Glossary*, 368.

Saussure thought of the *idealistic sign* as being “made up of two elements, a signifier (such as a sound image) and a signified (such as a mental concept), and the relation between the two is arbitrary, conventional, and ‘unmotivated’—that is, no property of the signifier, as substance or entity, qualifies it to be a signifier.”⁸⁹ Saussure put it this way, “A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern.”⁹⁰ The *concept* is that which is “signified” and the *pattern* is the “signifier.”⁹¹

Culler helps us to understand what all of these linguistic assertions mean for the study of the stories of literature (in our case of biblical stories) concluding:

What is crucial is not any particular form or content, but differences, which enable it to signify. For Saussure, a language is a system of signs and the key fact is what he calls the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. This means two things. First, the sign (for instance, a word) is a combination of a form (the ‘signifier’) and a meaning (the ‘signified’), and the relation between form and meaning is based on convention, not natural resemblance.
...

Even more important, for Saussure and recent theory, is the second aspect of the arbitrary nature of the signs: both signifier (form) and the signified (meaning) are themselves conventional divisions of the plane of sound and the plane of thought respectively.⁹²

So we see that, for Saussure, he is, in effect, asserting, as Vanhoozer notes, that “meaning is a function of the difference between signs.”⁹³

We ask ourselves what we are to say about this program of inserting linguistics into the

⁸⁹ Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 474.

⁹⁰ Saussure, *Course in*, 66.

⁹¹ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 61. Abrams, *A Glossary*, 104, adds these helpful distinctions for Saussure’s terminology: “Saussure introduced the terminology of the *sign* (a single word) as constituted by an inseparable union of **signifier** (the speech sounds or written marks composing the sign) and the **signified** (the conceptual meaning of the sign).”

⁹² Culler, *Literary Theory*, 58.

⁹³ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 61.

study of literature. Regarding this posture of structuralism, Vern Poythress asserts, “Ordinary linguistic categories are not comprehensive enough or multifaceted enough to encompass and illuminate all the levels on which literary meanings are generated and refracted.”⁹⁴ I would like to demonstrate the truth of this claim by Poythress in the following paragraphs.

Two assertions of Saussure’s linguistic theory (the foundation of what was to become the literary critical approach known as structuralism) find themselves in direct conflict with the literary analytical approach to the study of literature (including biblical literature) and to an important theological reality about the nature of God and his universe.

First, Saussure’s declarations regarding the nature of language assert that the relationship between a word such as “tree” and that tall object outside my window with a trunk, bark, and leaves which we call a “tree” is arbitrary. To speak of a tree as a *tree* is not to speak truly of what, in its very essence, it is.

Second, *meaning*, in literature, is not a function of a message relayed by an author’s intention as written down in a work and grasped by a reading audience. Instead, claims Saussure, meaning exists as a function of linguistic association between a form/signifier and that which it signifies, namely *meaning*.

The implication of both of these fundamental assertions by Saussure is that God is not sovereign over this world and over language. This is so because these matters of linguistic theory exist as truths outside of and independent of God’s design and control.

Vanhoozer offers a counter assertion to these claims affirming that “Language is a God-given capacity that enables humans to relate to God, the world, and others that yields personal

⁹⁴ Vern S. Poythress, “Structuralism and Biblical Studies” in *JETS* 21/8 (September 1978): 221-37; here 229.

knowledge.”⁹⁵ There exists the fact that language allows men to relate and communicate with God. Vanhoozer goes so far as to aver that language “should be seen as the most important means and medium of communication and communion.”⁹⁶

We see evidence of this and a refutation of Saussure’s above claims in Genesis 2:19-20. A very wooden translation, rendered as such to retain the original word order and literal semantic understanding, reads:

19—And Yahweh Elohim formed out of the ground every animal of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought all land and air creatures to the man to see what he would call them. And every which (one) the man called it—the living living thing—that (was) the name of it. 20a—And the man called the names to all the cattle and to the birds of the heavens and to every animal of the field.

This short passage of a verse and one half is filled with a plethora of important teachings and themes pertinent to our discussion of the nature of language and of biblical narrative. First is the notion of language as a gift of God to communicate and commune with men. In Genesis 2:18 Yahweh Elohim speaks of his intent to solve the man’s solitary existence saying, “I will make a helper corresponding to him” (אֶעֱשֶׂה-לּוֹ עֹזֵר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ). Verse 19 indicates that Yahweh Elohim’s intention is for the man to call/name (קָרָא) the animals and birds of this newly created world. All of this is communicated through *language*. Vanhoozer argues that all of this is part of a planned blueprint wherein “Language, like the mind, another divine endowment, was designed by God to be used in certain ways.”⁹⁷ This design involves the proper functioning of what Vanhoozer terms

⁹⁵ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 205.

⁹⁶ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 205.

⁹⁷ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 205.

communicative faculties and *cognitive faculties* which are designed “to produce true belief” and “to produce true interpretation—understanding.”⁹⁸

Second, the process of *naming* the animals and birds by Adam is a biblical expression in which, Waltke notes, a “name is equated with existence.”⁹⁹ This assertion is born out when we observe the many uses of *being* and *living* terms in verses 19 and 20a. We see this in the narrator’s emphatic use of two “living” terms back-to-back in 2:19 describing, literally, whatever the man called something that would be its name. This *something* is a חַיִּים חַיִּים (“the living living thing”). The word for *animal* is חַיָּה from the cognate “to be” group. Even the Creator’s name יְהוָה suggests *being*.

Third, Adam’s use of language in *naming* the creatures is the only action of his noted in the Genesis narrative.¹⁰⁰ The cosmic Elohim of Genesis 1:1-2:3 likewise called/named (“and he or Elohim called;” cf. 1:5, 8, 10) the primary elements of the universe in 1:3-10. This is a display of God’s sovereignty and dominion over all and he exhibits this supremacy by way of *naming* language. Edwards summarizes this Genesis activity asserting, “After God’s all-powerful divine language had created the world, Adam’s powerful human language, by naming it, could mingle with it and modify it.”¹⁰¹

As Adam in Genesis 2 and 3 uses language to *name* the animals, the birds, and Eve he does so discerning the *natures* of each case.¹⁰² Throughout the history of the church men have

⁹⁸ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 205.

⁹⁹ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 61.

¹⁰⁰ Edwards, *Towards a*, 8.

¹⁰¹ Edwards, *Towards a*, 9.

¹⁰² Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1967), 65-66.

linked Adam's naming of the animals and birds with him speaking truly about their nature. The poet Milton in narrating the account of Adam's naming of the beasts and birds puts these words in the mouth of Adam:

I named them, as they pass'd, and understood
Thir Nature, with such knowledge God endu'd
My sudden apprehension¹⁰³

The literary critic Michael Edwards casts this discussion of Adam's *naming* in opposition to structuralism declaring:

One guesses that 'bird'—or whatever Adam said: but the point is that we can no longer say as he said—rather than being, in Saussurian parlance, arbitrary, a sign problematically linking a signifier to a signified in the mind and being linked itself even more problematically in the sky, met the flying creature truly.¹⁰⁴

Language is a System of Differences and Oppositions

Saussure asserts that "language is a *system* of differences."¹⁰⁵ For Saussure, as we shall see the idea of *differences* yields way to the concept of *oppositions*. We are well served to remember that structuralism as an approach to the study of literature is born out of Saussure's theories about linguistics. Tremper Longman reminds us that

Structuralism as a whole may be defined as the extension of the linguistic metaphor to other semiotic systems. Literature is considered by structuralists to be a "second-order system," in that literary texts are constructed from language. Literature and literary texts are, therefore, capable of structural analysis.¹⁰⁶

Thus, when Saussure (and subsequently structuralist critics) approach a work of literature (we

¹⁰³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Merritt Y. Hughes, editor (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003; orig. 1674), Book VIII.352-354, 193.

¹⁰⁴ Edwards, *Towards a*, 8-9.

¹⁰⁵ Culler, *Linguistic Theory*, 57.

¹⁰⁶ Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 30.

must remember they call the work a *text*) it is done through the lens of linguistics (identifying *signs*, *signifiers*, and that which is *signified*) treating the work as a secondary system and not by way of literary analysis of a work of literature.

Bringing all of this to a moment of crystallization, Saussure writes,

The moment we compare one sign with another as positive combinations, the term *difference* should be dropped. It is no longer appropriate. It is a term which is suitable only for comparisons between sound patterns (e.g. *père* vs. *mère*), or between ideas (e.g. ‘father’ vs. ‘mother’). Two signs, each comprising a signification and a signal, are not different from each other, but only distinct. They are simply in *opposition* to each other. The entire mechanism of language ... is based on oppositions of this kind and upon the phonetic and conceptual differences they involve.¹⁰⁷

There are two important assertions bubbling to the surface in Saussure’s instructive paragraph.

The first claim is that, instead of language allowing speakers or writers to speak truly about their subjects, language only has meaning in the contrasts of *oppositions* present in, what Culler observes, is the contrasts between the elements of language and “other elements within the system of the language.”¹⁰⁸ These oppositions can be, as Ellis notes, a “pair of sounds, terms, or concepts with opposing meanings such as life/death, love/hate, female/male, or divine/human.”¹⁰⁹

Second, Saussure denies that words can stand for pre-existing concepts and realities stating that the only thing giving a language an identity is this assertion of contrasting oppositions.¹¹⁰ However, both of the above assertions fly in the face of biblical reality.

¹⁰⁷ Saussure, *Course in*, 119.

¹⁰⁸ Culler, *Linguistic Theory*, 57.

¹⁰⁹ Ellis, “Structuralism,” 227.

¹¹⁰ See Saussure, *Course in*, 65-66 and Culler, *Linguistic Theory*, 57.

Some Conclusions Drawn from Our Study

The purpose of looking into the matter of Saussure and the rise of structuralism is because so much of what transpires in contemporary biblical narrative criticism is informed and shaped by structuralism. Let us take a step back and make some assessments of the current situation. For those who want to study the stories of Scripture we seem to be faced with two competing visions of how to proceed.

First, one can approach the literary study of biblical stories by appealing to the field of linguistics as the gateway to literary understanding. What has emerged from this approach (as we have seen above) is what Abrams identifies as an “attempt to develop a science of literature.”¹¹¹ We note this in structuralism’s insistence in calling a narrative a *text* (instead of a *work* of art) as if it is something to be mined for information and analyzed for its signifiers. The author of any *text* is not acknowledged as the determiner of meaning, rather, as Ellis relates, “meaning is a product of the text itself. Meaning resides in the relationship among words and concepts within the text.”¹¹² Furthermore, structuralism is less interested in *what* a story means while actively pursuing *how* and *why* it means. Culler declares, “The rules of English enable sequences of sound to have meaning”¹¹³ in this primary system of linguistics.

This linguistic approach to the study of literature expressed in the form of structuralist criticism is succinctly summarized by Abrams who concludes, “The ultimate aim of classic literary structuralism, accordingly, is to make explicit, in a quasi-scientific way, the tacit *grammar* (the system of rules and codes) that governs the forms and meanings of all literary

¹¹¹ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 281.

¹¹² Ellis, “Structuralism,” 217.

¹¹³ Culler, “The Linguistic Foundation,” 73.

productions.”¹¹⁴

Or secondly, one can appeal to the *mimetic* criticism (literature as an imitation of reality) first identified by Aristotle and employed by all up to the Enlightenment and still by some.¹¹⁵ In this approach the critic makes use of literary analysis (plot, character, metaphor, setting, etc.) to study literature as a *work* of art. This work is composed either by the writer paying close attention to the historical details of events leading to the artistic rendering of an historical narrative or by a writer who has dreamt up an imaginative work of fiction. One approaches the story with an appreciation and acknowledgement of the artistry present in a work of poetic making. It is this “poetical grammar” that lays down the rules of poetic making. It is the author (in the case of a biblical story—both the man and ultimately God) who is the determiner of meaning who composes his story by these established rules of storytelling that are universal across the varied societies of the world. This storytelling grammar always has: a devised plot to move the events of the story along with conflict and resolution, characters whose traits are fleshed out and developed by way of their motivations, and a setting which is established in order to frame the time and place for the story’s readers. Readers intuitively grasp these elements of storytelling and access the author’s meaning by way of close reading and correct interpretation.

When we approach the stories of the Bible one asks if we are better off served by a “quasi-scientific” approach based on the principles of linguistics that treats the actual biblical story as a secondary system only accessed by the primary “reality” of linguistic codes. When all

¹¹⁴ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 281.

¹¹⁵ Structuralists advance *expressive criticism* which is “the view that literature primarily expresses the feelings or temperament or creative imagination of its author” apart from the observation and imitation of reality; Abrams, *A Glossary*, 281. Wordsworth characterized this *expressive* theory as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” see Abrams, *The Mirror*, 21.

of this is put in front of us and stripped of its “scholarese” it is fairly easy to identify the counterintuitive nature of this approach. This is why the present writer is opting for a biblical narrative criticism that abandons structuralism in favor of pairing a classic mimetic critical approach with a vigorous grammatical historical exegetical method. Before we outline this vision, we should review the current state of affairs in biblical narrative criticism. We will close this discussion with our suggested definition of biblical narrative criticism.

The Current Practitioners and Outworking of Biblical Narrative Criticism and a Proposal for a New-Old Way of Studying Biblical Stories

The Current Scene

One would be surprised to find out how thoroughly molded the enterprise of biblical narrative criticism is by structuralism. In his definition of narrative criticism, James Resseguie records that it is interested in “the ‘what’ of a text (its content) and the ‘how’ of a text (its rhetoric and structure).”¹¹⁶ We immediately recognize the handiwork of structuralism in terms like the *what* and *how* of a work (which is, of course, called a *text*). Resseguie mentions the narrative critic’s interest in the *literariness* of the Bible’s narratives and we are grateful for this emphasis, but no word about exegesis or interpretation is mentioned.¹¹⁷

New Testament narrative critic Jeannine Brown is a devotee of structuralist critic Seymour Chatman whose *Story and Discourse* has shaped many narrative critics. Brown advocates the adoption of Chatman’s two levels of what he calls narrative communication.¹¹⁸ In essence what Chatman and Brown, following after him, are doing is abandoning the obvious

¹¹⁶ Resseguie, *Introducing*, 18-19.

¹¹⁷ Resseguie, *Introducing*, 19.

¹¹⁸ See Chatman, *Story and*, 31-36.

unity of the storytelling whole of mimetic theory in favor of a more scientifically based approach. Chatman's two levels—story and discourse—needlessly overcomplicate the literary analysis of literature favoring looking at a work of literature through a microscope instead of gazing at a canvas. For Brown, the *story* level investigates the “what” of a story (settings, characters, and plot) and the *discourse* level the “how” of a narrative (matters of themes, sequencing, and point of view).¹¹⁹

The hooks of structuralism have extended their claws to even the likes of the eminent OT scholar Robert Chisholm in his very helpful *Interpreting the Historical Books*. Chisholm offers suggestions for how one can best go about rightly studying, interpreting, and teaching/preaching the narrative portions of the OT. He helpfully writes about the elements of storytelling (plot, character, setting, etc.) that aid in literary analysis.¹²⁰ But in keeping with the unfortunate reach of the linguistic invasion of literary study in biblical narrative studies, Chisholm places a discussion of structuralist methodology alongside his storytelling elements.

This is, of course, the linguistic approach of looking at what Chisholm terms *discourse structure* (also known as “discourse analysis”). To be sure, one can be helpfully informed by carefully looking at biblical texts in the matter of phonemes, morphemes, and syntax as an aid in exegesis.¹²¹ Chisholm's discussion is quite solid, but it is more the matter of exegetical methodology than of literary analysis.

In the monograph *Basics of Hebrew Discourse: A Guide to Working with Hebrew Prose*

¹¹⁹ Brown, *The Gospels as*, 11-16.

¹²⁰ Chisholm, *Interpreting the*, 26-36.

¹²¹ See Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2017), 117-125 for a helpful discussion on how properly understanding *discourse markers* in Hebrew text constructions “signal special structural features in a discourse rather than convey semantic meaning,” here page 506. “Structure” here refers to the way sentences are put together and not to a linguistic reading of literature.

and Poetry, authors Matthew Patton and Frederic Clarke Putnam offer guidelines for discourse analysis of OT narrative and verse.¹²² On nearly all levels this is an excellent book helping Bible teachers and preachers go about their business in a God-honoring way. Patton writes about Hebrew narrative. My only purpose in looking to this book is to point out how structuralism has completely invaded biblical scholarship with little or no pushback.

In Patton's introductory chapter he offers a survey of the flow of scholarship discussing Biblical Hebrew discourse analysis. He begins by looking at what had been thought of as the differing purviews of the grammarian and the literary critic and the inevitable crashing of the literary party by the linguist. He writes:

Theoretically, the grammarian's work stopped at the level of sentence syntax. Beyond sentence syntax, the relationship between sentences was the province of the literary critic, even though due diligence required grammarians to discuss some complex multi-clause sentences like "if-then" sentences.

This classic approach to language, grammar, and syntax was surpassed in the twentieth century when linguists began to attend more rigorously to structures beyond the sentence. Kenneth L. Pike argued that "*beyond the sentence* lie grammatical structures available to linguistic analysis, describable by technical procedures, and usable by the author for the generation of literary works through which he reports to us his observations." This quote highlights a fundamental insight that lies behind discourse analysis: namely, that a grammarian can inquire not only into how a language forms sentences (sentence syntax) but also into how a language forms larger discourse units like paragraphs (discourse syntax).¹²³

What Patton aspires to do regarding the work of the grammarian in *discourse analysis* is an outstanding piece of work and it is highly recommended. My purpose here is to lament how in a few short sentences someone like Patton whose focus is on *discourse analysis* could so blithely range from grammarians to literary critics to structural linguists and back to grammarians

¹²² See Matthew H. Patton and Frederic Clarke Putnam, *Basics of Hebrew Discourse*, Miles Van Pelt, editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019).

¹²³ Patton, *Basics of Hebrew*, 35-36.

without so much as a mention of how structuralism has invaded and conquered the field of biblical narrative criticism. In fairness to Patton, he is writing about grammatical and exegetical matters and does so convincingly.

The best of what linguistic analysis can offer is seen in matters such as *discourse analysis*; the worst of what linguistic analysis offers is the importation of modern linguistic theory into the literary analysis of literature. Modern linguistic theory impoverishes the grandeur and glory of storytelling. It produces a covering of clouds obscuring the interpreter of stories from seeing the sun of a literary treatment of literature, the insight of exegesis, and correct meaning drawn from hermeneutical conclusions.

A Suggested New/Old Way to Study the Stories of the Bible

We began this chapter discussing literary terms leading to a perusal of the various working definitions of *narrative criticism* some of which were descriptive and some prescriptive. I would now like to offer my own definition of narrative criticism in the hopes of pursuing what might be a more balanced literary approach to the study of the Bible. I am referring to this as a new/old way to study the stories of the Bible because it is, by no means, asserting to be blazing some sort of new trail in the study of biblical narrative while, at the same time, purporting to recommend some new emphases and avoid some unhelpful baggage at present used in the practice of narrative criticism.

There are at least seven crucial areas of focus in this study that inform and shape this definition and recommended outworking of the literary approach to the stories of the Bible known as narrative criticism. They are: (1) literary theory grounded in *mimesis* and not structuralism, (2) noting the literary quality of the stories of the Bible and treating, reading, and studying these narratives as story, (3) the appeal to use the present or final form of the biblical

text as it appears in the canon of Scripture, (4) treating a biblical story as a unified whole and not as a text of binary oppositions, (5) adopting a synchronic approach that focuses on the meaning of a biblical story in its present form before us (while acknowledging that important factors may have gone into the production of the biblical text we presently have before us), (6) pursuing the literary analysis of a biblical story alongside of a simultaneous approach of the biblical text from a grammatical historical exegetical methodology, and (7) employing a hermeneutic in which the author is the determiner of meaning instead of the text or the reader.

First and fourth, we have argued for the importance of recognizing *poetics* in establishing a theory of literature. This initial step helps the narrative critic realize what is undertaken in the process of *making* a story whether it is a historical or imaginative narrative. As we have already noted, it was Aristotle who first wrote about the poetic making of stories which entailed matters of *form*, the artistic *unity* producing a work that was whole, and the assertion that any literary work was an *imitation* of reality. Tolkien's thought echoes the importance of this *mimesis* in his distinction between the primary world of reality and the artist's sub-creation of a secondary world possessing primary world believability for the reader.¹²⁴ Literary critics have called this thinking *mimetic* theory.

The guiding principles behind the making of a biblical story (the grammar of poetic making involving plot, character, metaphor, irony, setting, etc.) whether it is an historical narrative or imaginative work together in what Abrams calls a "set of terms, distinctions, and categories"¹²⁵ allowing these works of literature to be analyzed.

¹²⁴ See Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories."

¹²⁵ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 39.

Second, for a narrative critic to do his job he must be invested in the obvious notion that the Bible is *literature*. The stories of historical narrative, as well as those written imaginatively, in Scripture possess all the components of literature—plot, character, setting, etc. This is all about recognizing the *literariness* of the literature of the Bible.

Third, the narrative critic is best served by trusting that the Holy Spirit has guided men to form the canon of Scripture in such a way that the present final form we have before us is the biblical text to be read as Scripture.¹²⁶

Fifth, readers of biblical stories should focus on the literariness and meaning of the narrative in the present form before us. This assertion is related to the third above. In this way we practice *synchronic* criticism. We can and do acknowledge what can be helpful in looking to critical methods involved in focusing on the production of the text (e.g., form and source criticism), but we want to hone in on grasping the meaning of the text before us.

Sixth, no literary study of the Bible's stories could ever be complete without performing exegesis. The grammatical-historical method serves us best because it engages with the text of the original language allowing the interpreter to fully grasp the writer's grammar, syntax, semantics, and any nuances of style. This method also looks to the historical context of the story's composition.

Seventh, in order to fully understand the meaning of a biblical story a narrative critic must honor the author as the determiner of meaning. A reader's job is not to perform eisegesis, but to unlock the meaning of an author's message by way of close reading and applying the principles of literary analysis and exegetical methodology. Following this pathway helps us gain insight into the author's theological and ethical message.

¹²⁶ So also Chisholm, *Interpreting the*, 227, Brown, "Narrative Criticism," 620, and Mangum and Estes, *Literary Approaches*, x.

The aforementioned seven areas of focus permit us to suggest a definition of how one can best go about the business of narrative criticism. It is hoped that these seven emphases will help clear away any present cloud cover allowing the bright sun of understanding to shine through on our literary and exegetical efforts.

Narrative criticism should both honor a literary analysis of a biblical story—whether it is historical narrative or imaginative literature—grounded in mimetic literary theory (rejecting Structuralist methodology that imports modern linguistic theory into the study of biblical literature) and a grammatical-historical exegetical methodology by performing these two exercises in tandem. This involves reading the biblical story in the final canonical form presently before us as a unified whole. We embrace a hermeneutic that asserts we are able to understand the meaning of a biblical story when we correctly interpret (perform literary analysis and exegesis) the author's intended meaning. All of this grants access to the writer's theological and ethical message.

This is the narrative critical method we will demonstrate over the next two chapters as we take a look at both historical narrative and imaginative literature in Scripture. We begin with a look at an OT and NT historical narrative, each of which display the full artistry of poetic making.

Chapter 5—A Narrative Critical Approach to Historical Old Testament Story: An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study

Introduction

Before we get to some examples of the narrative critical method being advanced in this study, we should briefly review how we got to where we are. We have argued that the current practice of narrative criticism employed by the lion's share of biblical scholars pursues a wrongheaded course of action premised on the assertion that the best way to study the stories of Scripture is by way of modern linguistic theory, most often through the auspices of binary oppositions or levels appealing to so-called literary structuralism. We have demonstrated that this is counterintuitive and opted for a return to the century's old practice of mimetic theory which turns to the literary study of stories in order to best understand them. This involves treating the narrative as a unified whole and noting that the beginning, middle, and end of a story as composed by a writer imitates the reality of persons and events around him as he observes and takes note of these things. We are also advancing the dictum that the practice of narrative criticism of biblical stories is really only ultimately useful when partnered with a grammatical historical exegetical approach following an author-centered hermeneutic.

Furthermore, the author of either a historical narrative or an imaginative story in Scripture is best understood as a poet/maker who makes use of artistry to, in the case of historical narrative, carefully collect the facts of the events of which he has designs to write about. This involves crafting and organizing these events with a plot, recording and presenting the motivations for the various characters' speech and actions, and specifically describing the temporal and physical elements of setting. As we shall see in chapters seven and eight, the writer of fictional stories must appeal to the same narrative elements in his composition with the main

being that he is not bound by the requirement of factual reportage. Both biblical historical and imaginative stories speak God's revealed truth to readers, they just arrive at their desired goals by traveling down different roads to get to the same destination.

We begin in the OT by looking to the time of the Omride reign in the northern kingdom of Israel. Specifically, we analyze the insidious murder plot of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel to rid themselves of their subject, Naboth, who was faithful to Yahweh. We begin first with a look at the context of our text as part of the broader Elijah narrative running from 1 Kings 17-2 Kings 2. In the next chapter we turn to the NT and the account of Philip's evangelistic outreach to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40.

A Narrative Critical Look at 1 Kings 21—An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study

Background of 1 Kings 21

Leithart identifies our text as part of what he calls a unit which is "internally organized by a roughly chiastic structure."¹ Leithart's perspective is organized in the following way:

- A Elijah appears suddenly and leaves the land (1 Kgs. 17)
- B fire from heaven in a contest of gods (1 Kgs. 18)
- C Elijah complains to Yahweh on Horeb and is assured that
 Ahab's house will perish (1 Kgs. 19)
- D Ahab spares the Gentile king Ben-hadad (1 Kgs. 20)
- D' Ahab kills the faithful Israelite Naboth (1 Kgs. 21)
- C' Ahab is killed after being warned by a lone prophet (1 Kgs. 22)
- B' fire from heaven in a contest of gods (2 Kgs. 1)
- A' Elijah suddenly departs on the east side of the Jordan (2 Kgs. 2)²

The interesting thing to note here with Leithart's suggestion is his observation of the close and inverted narration of 1 Kings 20 and 21. These chapters vividly display the commitment to evil in Ahab's life. Leithart encapsulates the inversions of chapters 20 and 21 in the following way:

¹ Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 154.

² Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 154.

Ahab's actions in the two chapters summarize his apostasy: he loves Gentiles and their gods while hating faithful Israelites and their God. He fails to carry out holy war against Ben Hadad, but prosecutes it instead against Naboth and his house (2 Kgs. 9:26). He does not know how to fight enemies, and, to say the same thing, he does not know how to protect friends.³

There is an important grammatical connection between chapter 20 and 21 as well.

Hamilton notes that Ahab is both “sullen and vexed” (סָר וְזָעַר) in 20:43 and 21:4.⁴ Beal further observes that chapter 21 begins with וְנִהְיָ אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה (“Now it came about after these things...”) where *these things* “situate the account in the context of the Aramean wars.”⁵

These brief observations provide an insight into the context of the narrative of our study and speak to its connection with the broader Elijah story. We begin with a wooden translation of 1 Kings 21 for the purpose of exegesis.

Translation

¶

1—And it happened after these things, a vineyard was onto Naboth the Jezreelite which (was) in Jezreel beside the palace of Ahab, king of Samaria.

2—And Ahab spoke to Naboth, saying, “Give to me your vineyard so that it will be onto me a garden of vegetables, for it (is) close beside my house. And let me give to you instead of it a better vineyard—more than it; or if (it is) better in your eyes, let me give to you money of equal value to this.”

3—But Naboth said to Ahab, “Far be it for me by Yahweh, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you.”

4—And Ahab went in to his house resentful and vexed because of the word which was spoken to him by Naboth the Jezreelite when he said, “I will not give to you the inheritance of my fathers.” And he lay down upon his bed and turned away his face and would not eat bread.

¶

5—And Jezebel, his wife, came to him and spoke to him, “Why (is) it that your spirit is resentful and you are not eating bread?”

³ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 154.

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 437.

⁵ Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, AOTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 273. Against Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, WBC, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 256 who argues against this narrational connection.

6—And he spoke to her, “Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and I said to him, ‘Give to me your vineyard for money or if it pleases you let me give to you a vineyard instead of it.’ But he said, ‘I will not give to you my vineyard.’”

7—And Jezebel, his wife, said to him, “You now, yourself, do kingship over Israel. Arise, eat bread and let your heart be happy. I, myself, will give to you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”

¶

8—And she wrote letters in the name of Ahab, and she sealed (them) with his seal, and she sent the letters to the elders and the noblemen who were dwelling with Naboth in his city.

9—And she wrote in the letters, saying, “Call a fast and set down Naboth at the head of the people.

10—“And set down two men, sons of worthlessness opposite him, and let them witness against him, saying, ‘You “blessed” (*cursed*) Elohim and king.’ Then cause him to go out and stone him to death, so that he may die.”

11—And the men of his city—the elders and the noblemen who dwelt in his city—did just as Jezebel had sent to them, just as was written in the writings that she had sent to them.

12—They called a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the people.

13—And two men, sons of worthlessness, came in and sat down opposite him. And the worthless men witnessed against Naboth in front of the people, saying, “Naboth ‘blessed’ (*cursed*) Elohim and the king.” And they marched him out to the outside of the city and they stoned him with stones and he died.

14—Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, “Naboth has been stoned and he died.”

¶

15—And it happened when Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and he died, that Jezebel said to Ahab, “Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give to you for money, for Naboth (is) not alive, but has died.”

16—And it happened when Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, that Ahab arose in order to go down to the vineyard of Naboth Jezreelite, in order to take possession of it.

¶

17—Now it happened that the word of Yahweh came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying,

18—“Arise, go down in order to call on Ahab the king of Israel who (is) in Samaria. Behold, (he is) in the vineyard of Naboth because he has gone down there in order to possess it.

19—“And you shall speak to him saying, ‘Thus says Yahweh, “Have you murdered, and also taken possession?”’ And you shall speak to him, saying, ‘Thus says Yahweh, “In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, the dogs shall lick up your blood—also yours.”’”

¶

20—And Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me my enemy?” And he said, “I have found (you), because you have sold yourself in order to do evil in the eyes of Yahweh.

21—“Behold, I will bring to you disaster, and will burn you with pursuit. And I will cut off from Ahab he who urinates against the wall, both imprisoned and free in Israel.”

22—“And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha, son of Ahijah because of the anger which you provoked in (me), and since you caused Israel to sin.”

23—And also in regard to Jezebel Yahweh spoke, saying, “The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the wall of Jezreel.”

24—“He who dies belonging to Ahab in the city, the dogs shall eat, and he who dies in the field the birds of the heavens shall eat.”

25—(Surely, there was no one like Ahab who sold himself in order to do evil in the eyes of Yahweh—because Jezebel, his wife, lured him.

26—And he acted very abominably by going after idols, according to all that the Amorites had done whom Yahweh had dispossessed before the sons of Israel.)

¶

27—And it happened when Ahab heard these words that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth on his body and fasted. And he lay in sackcloth and he went about dejected.

¶

28—And the word of Yahweh came to Elijah saying,

29—“Have you seen how Ahab has become humbled from before me? Because/because he has become humbled before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; in the days of his son I will bring the disaster upon his house.”

Exegetical Notes and Comment

The close of chapter 20 (verses 42-43) narrates a “vexed and sullen” Ahab who has just received Yahweh’s sentence of judgment from his prophet. Ahab returns to his palace in Samaria. As we shall soon see, the story picks up in Jezreel at the scene of Ahab’s second residence which is adjacent to Naboth’s vineyard.

Chapter 21 is organized in roughly a two-act structure narrating Ahab’s abuse of monarchical authority (21:1-16) and Yahweh’s response (21:17-29).⁶ Steven McKenzie identifies a chiasmic sub-structure for the first section unfolding in the pattern below:

21:1 Introduction

21:2-3 Ahab and Naboth

21:4-7 Ahab and Jezebel in their bedroom

21:8-10 Jezebel writes letters

21:11-14 Jezebel’s written orders are carried out

21:15 Jezebel reports Naboth’s death to Ahab

21:16 Ahab goes to take possession of the vineyard⁷

⁶ So Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 272; Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, NAC volume 8 (Nashville: B & H Publishers, 1995), 231-33; and Steven L. McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, IECOT (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019), 183.

⁷ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 183.

Part One

Verses 1-4—This first paragraph in our story begins in verse 1 with a standard narrative continuance (וַיְהִי). The phrase אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה (“after these things”) serves to point to out that the story is picking up right after the account of the Aramean wars narrated in the previous chapter.⁸ We are introduced to Naboth, and the writer highlights his place of birth alongside his place of residence— “Naboth the Jezreelite” whose vineyard was in *Jezreel*. Ahab is also referenced as the “king of Samaria.” Beal notes the significance of Naboth (Jezreel), Ahab (Samaria) and Elijah (the Tishbite; 21:17) all being identified by their places of birth.⁹ Jezreel is located, as Beal relates, about “9 miles east of Megiddo, on a strategic ridge at the eastern entrance to the Jezreel Valley.”¹⁰

Verses 2 and 3 present a back-and-forth bit of dialogue between the neighbors Ahab and Naboth. The scene begins, in verse 2, with a narratorial voice that is not actually present at the scene framing direct speech as an agent through the means of a secondary citation.¹¹ This is achieved by the construction of a *waw*-consecutive with a Piel Imperfect finite verb (וַיְדַבֵּר — “And he spoke to”) paired with a Qal infinitive construct (לֵאמֹר — “saying”) initiating the dialogue.

Ahab begins with, תִּנְהַלְלִי אֶת־כַּרְמִי וַיְהִי־לִי לְגֻן־יֵרֶק (“Give to me your vineyard so that it will

⁸ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 273 makes this argument. Against McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 183 who contests that the phrase “after these things” speaks to only a loose association with chapter 20. He argues for a lack of temporality (even in the face of the temporal adverb אַחֲרֵי) which he states “creates a timelessness for the story that is evinced in the next clause.”

⁹ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 273. She further distinguishes between the narrator’s notation of Ahab’s place of birth in Samaria from his moniker as king of Israel (cf. 21:18).

¹⁰ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 273.

¹¹ See Garrett and DeRouchie, *A Modern Grammar*, 323-28 for more discussion on the OT’s construction of direct speech frames.

be unto me a garden of vegetables”). The epexegetical *waw* combined with the jussive use of the verb *הָנִיחַ* serves to restate the previous clause.¹² This becomes all the more evident when we look back to the Qal imperative *תִּנְּה-לִי* (“Give to me”) at the beginning of the clause inviting us to read Ahab’s speech functioning more like a royal command than a request of purchase.

The portrayal of Israel as a *vineyard* is a well-known motif in the OT (cf. Psalm 80; Isaiah 5:1-2; and Jer. 12:10). Leithart recognizes that “Naboth, the owner of the vineyard next to Ahab’s palace, is a paradigmatic Israelite, the tender of the Lord’s vine, an Israelite who clings to the Lord’s gift.”¹³

The offer by Ahab to secure Naboth’s vineyard and the image of a *garden of vegetables* evokes a host of possible connections with Israel’s history. First, it is possible that Ahab’s offer to purchase the vineyard could have conjured up a thought of Samuel’s warning to Israel of the specter of royal confiscation in 1 Sam. 8:14. The law of kingship in Deut. 17:14-20 indicated that royal authority was to be exercised by close examination of Yahweh’s instruction meted out in the Torah and not by the pursuit of the acquisition of excessive possessions.¹⁴

Second, the very mention of a *vegetable garden* bears a strong negative connotation. The phrase *לִגְן-יִצְקָר* (“to be a garden of vegetables”)¹⁵ is only used one other time in the OT in Deut. 11:10 in a reference to the land of Egypt before the exodus when Israel was still in bondage.¹⁶

¹² Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 653.

¹³ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 154. See also Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274.

¹⁴ Donald J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 181 makes this observation.

¹⁵ The preposition *ל* in this context indicates —7. “aim, purpose of an action,” *HALOT*, 508. Thus, “to be a garden...”

¹⁶ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274.

McKenzie suggests this results in “casting Ahab as oppressive Pharaoh.”¹⁷ Leithart takes it a step further claiming, “Symbolically, Ahab’s intention is to turn the vineyard of Israel into an Egyptian vegetable patch, and this is consistent with his entire policy of ‘re-Canaanization’ of Israel.”¹⁸

It is important to observe that Ahab’s offer is not inherently morally wrong or an action contrary to the instruction of the law.¹⁹ Yahweh is interested in maintaining the integrity of patrimonial land possessions (being the ultimate owner of the land²⁰) as outlined in Lev. 25:23-28, Deut. 25:5-10, and Num. 36:7-9.²¹ The purchase of land is made provision for in the case of poverty (Lev. 25:25), but Naboth is not destitute.

The narrative continues with Naboth’s response (וַיֹּאמֶר נָבוֹת אֶל־אַחָזָב) to Ahab’s overture in verse 3. The first words out of Naboth’s mouth come in the form of an oath, “Far be it from me by Yahweh” (חֲלִילָהּ לִי מִיְהוָה). The aversive/negative interjection “Far be it from” (חֲלִילָהּ) used with the pairing of the preposition מִן and the Qal infinitive to form the construction מִתְּתִי yields the sense of “that I should give.”²² Wiseman characterizes this bit of speech as a “strong oath in religious terms using God’s name.”²³ McKenzie goes a bit further declaring that Naboth’s oath is

¹⁷ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 183.

¹⁸ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 154.

¹⁹ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274 and Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Kings: The Wisdom and the Folly* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002), 302. Davis characterizes Ahab’s offer as the “soul of reason” speaking to the pragmatic nature of Ahab’s thinking. House is not willing to even grant the possibility of Ahab’s moral neutrality in this matter because of his overall villainy. In this case, Ahab’s moral failings include, what House terms as “oppression [and] brutality against his people” because in the Naboth matter “the king proves himself to have even less character than was demonstrated previously.” House, *1, 2 Kings*, 231.

²⁰ Because of this, provision was made to let out the land until the owner could redeem it or reclaim it during the year of Jubilee (cf. Lev. 25:23-28).

²¹ See Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274 and Davis, *1 Kings*, 302 for more discussion of this matter.

²² HALOT, 319; —2 b).

²³ Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 181-82.

“an expression of outrage.”²⁴ This is, perhaps, a bit much since the very next thing Naboth utters grounds his refusal of Ahab’s offer with a theological argument asserting his ancestral inheritance. We would be better served to think of Naboth’s refusal in terms of a principled stance. Davis is helpful in thinking of Naboth’s response as *covenantal* in that he “identifies himself as a man subject to Yahweh and caring about his law.”²⁵

Wiseman asserts that Ahab’s reaction to Naboth’s refusal in verse 4 “shows his real character.”²⁶ The narrator tells us that Ahab was “resentful and vexed” (סָר וְזָעַף). We have seen Ahab behave this way before. In 1 Kings 20:42-43, after Ahab had released Ben-hadad and Yahweh’s prophet condemned the king of Israel’s action with a death sentence, Ahab returned to his palace in Samaria “resentful and vexed” (סָר וְזָעַף). The reason for this resentment and vexation is presented by the narrator in an emphatically stylistic way. Ahab is so, literally, “because of the word which was *worded* (“spoken”) to him by Naboth.” The writer chooses to use two words from the same cognate group: the *word* (the noun—דִּבָּר) and *was worded/spoken* (the verb—דִּבֶּר). As a result, Ahab retreats to his bedroom, lies down on his bed and “turned away his face and would not eat bread.” Leithart and Davis describe this behavior as pouting.²⁷

Verses 5-7—As we begin this new paragraph, Ahab is sulking in bed *resentful and vexed* and Queen Jezebel enters our story for the first time. Readers of 1 Kings are, of course, familiar with Jezebel. Most recently we have encountered her in the first two verses of chapter 19 where, after Yahweh’s victory over the prophets of Baal through the agency of Elijah, she threatened to

²⁴ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 180.

²⁵ Davis, *1 Kings*, 303.

²⁶ Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 182.

²⁷ Davis, *1 Kings*, 303 and Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 155.

murder Elijah. Jezebel had already established herself as an adversary of Yahweh killing his prophets (18:4). She is thoroughly committed to a program of evil in Israel. DeVries describes this pagan Sidonian princess as one who “has been trained in the absolutist traditions of the Phoenician city-states.”²⁸

Verse 5 begins with Jezebel entering the royal bedroom. She is identified as “his wife” (אִשְׁתּוֹ). One might surmise that the reason the narrator is doing this is to highlight that the king of Israel has taken a pagan for his bride in direct conflict with the teachings of the law (cf. Deut. 7:3; 17:14-20). Jezebel has come to Ahab because she intends to speak with him. The interrogative pronoun מִי teamed with the enclitic הִיא emphasizes the question she is posing to Ahab.²⁹

The fact that Jezebel immediately recognizes Ahab’s *resentful spirit* (רוּחַ סָרָה) is the writer’s way of signaling that she has seen this mood and behavior before. The word used for *resentful* is, once again, סָר seen to describe Ahab’s mood in 20:43 and 21:4.

Ahab responds to Jezebel (v. 6) providing a reason—“Because...” (כִּי)—for his sour demeanor. He reports his conversation with Naboth. He correctly passes on what he said in his offer to Naboth short of the details of his vegetable garden plans. What is interesting though is when Ahab comes to relaying what Naboth said in reply, it is reported as a simple and direct negative. Ahab fails to include any mention of Naboth’s impassioned and principled theological reasoning grounded in fealty to Yahweh.³⁰

We further take note that the pairing of a Qal imperative plus a preposition and 1cs suffix

²⁸ DeVries, *1 Kings*, 257.

²⁹ Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to*, 312.

³⁰ Davis, *1 Kings*, 303, McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 184, and Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274 all note this dynamic as well.

תִּנְהַלְלִי (“Give to me...”) in verse 6, where Ahab recalls what he said, is the same construction as what is found in his speech in verse 2 when he is actually speaking to Naboth. This is not the case in reporting what Naboth said. The negative particle plus Qal imperfect 1cs construction אֲנִי לֹא אֶתֶּן (“I will not give to you”) that Ahab passes along as Naboth’s words in verse 6 is radically different from what he actually said in verse 3. There Naboth’s speech began with an adverse interjection coupled with the covenantal use of Yahweh’s name (חֲלִילָה לִי מִיְהוָה — “Far be it for me by Yahweh”).

Jezebel’s reply to Ahab, in verse 7, contains the same identifier אֵלָיו אִיזְבֶּל אִשְׁתּוֹ (literally, “to him, Jezebel, his wife”) we saw in verse 5. This is an obvious compositional choice to keep emphatically identifying this pagan queen inviting readers to note the irony of her being in the king of Israel’s bedroom. We are a long way from the law of kingship in Deut. 17:14-20 while Naboth is about to live out Samuel’s warning of land seizure in 1 Sam. 8:14.

The first words out of Jezebel’s mouth, אַתָּה עַתָּה תַעֲשֶׂה מְלִיכָה עָלֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל (“You now, yourself, make/do kingship over Israel”), are scolding and emphatic. The grammar here in Jezebel’s speech is a bit spotty and McKenzie asserts that “The sentence is halting Hebrew and somewhat obscure in meaning, a reminder that she is foreign.”³¹ This is possible, but what one should really take note of here is that, in effect, Jezebel is saying “Why are you letting Naboth act like he is the king. You tell him what is going to happen!”³² Jezebel, as Wiseman relates, is “an unscrupulous double-dealer [who] enforced her own Phoenician concept of despotic kingship.”³³

³¹ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 184.

³² Davis, *1 Kings*, 303 and Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274 adopt this posture suggesting Jezebel is telling Ahab that he is entitled to act in any way he so desires.

³³ Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 182.

Immediately after Jezebel has rebuked Ahab about asserting himself as king, she starts ordering him around. Ahab has plopped into bed, turned away from the world, and was refusing to eat (v. 4). Jezebel commands Ahab to קוּם אֲכַל-לֶחֶם (“Arise, eat bread”); with these Qal imperatives she is saying that nothing about Naboth will get done in your current state of *resentment*. Jezebel is challenging him to reengage in life (וַיָּטֵב לָדָד) as a king so that he can revel in and take advantage of his position.

After all this talk about fulfilling his role as king, Jezebel now announces to Ahab that she will act as king in the matter of Naboth. In rapid fire succession, she has progressed from reminding Ahab that he was the leader of Israel (“You now, yourself, make/do kingship over Israel”) to now declaring in a shockingly emphatic statement אֲנִי אֶתֶּן לְךָ אֶת-כַּרְם (‘‘I, myself, will give you the vineyard’’).³⁴ The inversion of royal authority in Israel is complete, Jezebel is about to show how one goes about exercising the powers of kingship in Israel, the Sidonian way through brutality and murder.³⁵

The narrator’s clever use of the verb נָתַן in this story is now fully realized. Ahab began (v.2) his interaction with Naboth saying, “*Give* to me your vineyard” and “... let me *give* to you... a better vineyard” and “let me *give* to you money...” in his initial offer. Later on, in verse 6 on his bed of pouting, he reported to Jezebel about his offer again referencing the original uses of *give* in its imperatival and cohortative forms. At the end of verse 6 Ahab falsely reports that Naboth issues a curt and flat out refusal to accept his purchase offer reportedly saying, “I will not *give* to you my vineyard.” As Jezebel is in the virtual act of pulling on her royal trousers of

³⁴ Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to*, 296 provide an excellent discussion of this pairing of an independent pronoun and a finite verb to indicate an intense focus on the self. In this case we have the combination of the 1st person pronoun אֲנִי and the finite Qal impf 1cs (אֶתֶּן) where Jezebel emphatically asserts herself over the second person emphasis of “You .. yourself” earlier in the verse.

³⁵ See DeVries, *1 Kings*, 257 and House, *1, 2 Kings*, 232 for a lively discussion of this dynamic.

kingship in verse 7 she proclaims, “I, myself, will *give* to you the vineyard.” The *giving*, or better understood, *taking* motif is an important one to note in this story of royal abuse of power and our writer has provided these helpful clues for close readers to observe.

Verses 8-14—After effectively announcing to Ahab in the royal bedchamber that he was king in Israel, Jezebel now embarks on a program of the worst kind of abuse of power and kingly authority by misusing Torah instruction to “legally” murder Naboth and secure his vineyard for her pouty husband.

Jezebel begins, in verse 8, by writing letters under the cover of Ahab’s royal seal and official authority. DeVries characterizes this action as an *acquiescence* on the part of Ahab.³⁶ However, as we shall see, Wiseman’s take on this narrative makes more sense suggesting that Ahab must have colluded with Jezebel in order for these letters to go out under his signature.³⁷

Jezebel addresses the letters to elders and noblemen (זְקֵנִים used as a substantive and הָרָר) of Jezreel and DeVries asserts that this is because these men “have a voice in judicial procedures.”³⁸ In actuality, however, it is only the elders, according to Torah teaching (cf. Deut. 19:11-12; 21:1-9, 18-21; 22:13-21; 25:5-10) who “are the administrators of justice as moral leaders of their communities.”³⁹

What we note here with Jezebel is quite revealing. As she unfolds her murder plot we observe that this pagan princess intimately knows Hebrew Scripture.⁴⁰ She appeals to the legal

³⁶ DeVries, *1 Kings*, 257.

³⁷ Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 182.

³⁸ DeVries, *1 Kings*, 257.

³⁹ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 185.

⁴⁰ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 185; Davis, *1 Kings*, 304; and Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275 make similar observations.

necessity of two witnesses (Deut. 19:15) to speak against Naboth needed in a case of a capital offense (Deut. 17:6). The sentence pronounced for cursing or blaspheming the name of Yahweh was death by the execution of stoning (Lev. 24:13-16).

Jezebel's intimate knowledge of Torah suggests that she did not make a mistake when she wrote to both Jezreel's elders and noblemen. The reason for doing this likely lies in her realization that she could count on both groups of men to do her bidding.⁴¹

The presence of *letters* in the OT, especially in the Samuel-Kings corpus “portended disaster.”⁴² We observe this in, at least, four cases: (1) in David's letter to Joab (2 Sam. 11:15) he orders the death of Uriah, (2) the king of Israel received a letter from Syria's king (2 Kings 5:5-7) requesting healing for Naaman, but Israel's king fears the letter is an overture to war, (3) Jehu's letters (2 Kings 10:2, 6-7) meant death to the sons of Ahab, and (4) Sennacherib's letter to Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:14; cf. Isa. 37:14) contains threats which drive Hezekiah to prayer.

Verses 9 and 10 contain the actual text of Jezebel's letter complete with her direct and explicit instructions. The narrator employs a *waw*-consecutive plus a direct speech frame construction typical in OT narrative, “And she wrote... saying” (וַתִּכְתֹּב ... לֵאמֹר). Jezebel's directives appear as Hiphil imperatives (וְהוֹצִיבוּ) in verses 9 and 10 indicating *causation*: “Set down.” We see this similar emphasis of *causation* at the close of verse 10 where Jezebel directs the forceful removal of Naboth from the city, “Then cause him to go out” (וְהוֹצִיאתֶהוּ).⁴³ The narrator also places a great deal of emphasis on the motif of death at the close of verse 10. Jezebel literally says, “... and stone him to *death*, so that he may *die*.”

⁴¹ So also DeVries, *1 Kings*, 257; McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 185; and Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274.

⁴² McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 185. Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274 also notes this phenomenon.

⁴³ See *HALOT*, 426; —1. Cause to go out.

Jezebel issues five directives. First, the elders and nobles are to “Call a fast” (קָרְאוּ צוֹם) in Jezreel. McKenzie reminds us that, “Fasting is an act of penitence and signals a crisis for the community. The people are led to believe the danger is from Naboth.”⁴⁴

Second, they were to place Naboth at the head of the people which could place him either in the role of honor or the defendant.⁴⁵ Naboth is being set-up for a fall, as McKenzie avers, having been “seated at the head, typically a place of honor or leadership. His conspicuousness will enhance popular indignation at his alleged crimes.”⁴⁶

Third, in verse 10, the Jezreelite leaders are to set down two “sons of worthlessness” as witnesses against Naboth. We note that Jezebel openly writes about the selection of בְּנֵי־קִלְיָעַל.⁴⁷ This likely indicates that her understanding of bringing a Phoenician style of royal authority to Israel will not be challenged by the elders and noblemen of Jezreel. She brazenly reveals her evil machinations by upending the intent of Deuteronomy’s two witness provision meant to protect individuals facing charges.⁴⁸

Fourth, they bring false charges against Naboth. The בְּנֵי־קִלְיָעַל are to drum up a charge of cursing against Yahweh which is punishable by death by stoning outside the city (cf. Lev. 24:13-16). Ironically, the actual accusation Jezebel recommends is that Naboth be charged with cursing Elohim (not Yahweh). Both Jezebel (21:10) and the scoundrels (21:13) use Elohim when

⁴⁴ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 185. Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274-75 also notes that *fasting* was observed during periods of national crisis in the land (2 Chron. 20:3; Jer. 36:9) and repentance (later in 1 Kings 21:27-29).

⁴⁵ Davis, *1 Kings*, 304.

⁴⁶ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 185.

⁴⁷ The moniker בְּנֵי־קִלְיָעַל is used in the OT for a catalog of villains: (1) the sons of Eli (priests) are described as בְּנֵי־קִלְיָעַל (1 Sam. 2:12), (2) certain “sons of worthlessness” encourage others to worship false gods (Deut. 13:13), and (3) the men of Gibeah are labeled בְּנֵי־קִלְיָעַל in Judges 19:32 when they indicate their intention to rape the visiting Levite after refusing him hospitality.

⁴⁸ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 185.

Naboth's principled theological reasoning in 21:3 grounded his stance in retaining his ancestral vineyard in the name of Yahweh. The addition of cursing against the king is probably a reference to Exod. 22:28.⁴⁹ Translators, as a matter of practice, render the verb בֵּרַךְ (*to bless*) as "curse" in this context understanding this to be a euphemism indicating the opposite of what is stated.⁵⁰

Fifth, they are to take out Naboth and stone him to death. This is Jezebel appealing to the directive issued in Lev. 24:14.⁵¹

The story proceeds, in verse 11, to inform us that Jezreel's elders and nobles have received the letter and have carried out her instructions. The narrator is keen to make sure that readers know Jezebel's directives have been "followed to the letter."⁵² This precise obeisance to Jezebel's murder plot is carefully noted in verse 11's narration. We are twice told in a construction of a preposition plus a relative (כַּאֲשֶׁר)⁵³ that the elders and noblemen "did *just as* Jezebel had sent to them, *just as* it was written."

Verses 12 and 13 narrate how these compliant elders and noblemen closely mirror Jezebel's instructions. Leithart provides a helpful list (which has been condensed into the chart below) of how what Jezebel commands is exactly followed by the city leadership.

<u>Jezebel writes</u>	<u>Jezreelite leaders do</u>
[1] Proclaim a fast (21:9)	[1] They proclaim a fast (21:12)
[2] Seat Naboth at the head of the people (21:9)	[2] Naboth is seated at the head of the people (21:12)

⁴⁹ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275 and McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 185.

⁵⁰ See Davis, *1 Kings*, 304 and Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 271 for more discussion.

⁵¹ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 185.

⁵² Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 155. Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275, characterizes the elders and nobles' behavior as *acquiescence*. Davis, *1 Kings*, 304, writes they "carried out her plan precisely."

⁵³ The construction of כַּ plus אֲשֶׁר produces "just as" used in a comparative sense, *HALOT*, 454.

[3] Seat two “sons of worthlessness” opposite Naboth (21:10)	[3] The two “sons of worthlessness” are seated opposite Naboth (21:13)
[4] Let them witness against Naboth (21:10)	[4] The two “sons of worthlessness” witnessed against Naboth (21:13)
[5] Jezebel provides the charges: “You <i>blessed</i> (cursed) Elohim and king” (21:10)	[5] The two “sons of worthlessness” charge: “Naboth <i>blessed</i> (cursed) Elohim and king” (21:13)
[6] Jezebel instructs about Naboth: “Cause him to go out and stone him to death, so that he may die” (21:10) ⁵⁴	[6] The gathered people: “marched him out to the outside of the city and they stoned him with stones and he died” (21:13)

In this sequence, the writer, as Leithart notes, “uses a ‘command-compliance’ pattern usually reserved for Yahweh’s commands to his prophets. When Yahweh speaks to Elijah, the prophet obeys, and his obedience is described in exactly the same words as the commandments.”⁵⁵ We note how Yahweh speaks to his servants and how Jezebel speaks to hers and marvel at the irony!

The *waw*-consecutive plus Hiphil imperfect construction וַיֵּצְאוּהוּ (“And they marched him out”) is, again, *causative* indicating the forceful removal of Naboth from the city limits. The third person plural “they” of the verbs for *stoning* and *marching out* in verse 13 refers not only to the “sons of worthlessness,” but to the whole of the city’s people.⁵⁶

Verse 14 serves as a bookend to verse 8 in that the narrator reports of the return message the elders and the noblemen send to Jezebel completing the cycle she initiated with her letters. We observe that even though the letters Jezebel sent went out under Ahab’s royal seal, the elders and nobles return mail their letter with the final bit of information about Naboth’s death to

⁵⁴ See Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 155 for the full discussion.

⁵⁵ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 155.

⁵⁶ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

Jezebel and not Ahab. This is a bit of storytelling magic in which the writer is expecting readers to *read between the lines* and conclude that the elders and noblemen knew who was in charge all along.⁵⁷

Davis offers a concluding observation about the activity and tone of verses 8-14. There is a pervading *heartlessness* of this whole affair on “how matter-of-fact it all is. Here is what the queen wrote; here is what her toadies did. All that mattered was that Naboth was dead (a fact mentioned five times in vv. 13-16).”⁵⁸

Verses 15-16—The narrator places focused attention on the flow of narration as our story continues. Verse 15 begins with the *waw*-consecutive וַיְהִי which is coupled with a temporal Qal infinitive construct (וַיִּשְׁחַץ) producing an acute sense of the movement from the planning and outworking of the murder plot to this time after the death of Naboth.

Now that Naboth’s death is confirmed Jezebel assumes an air that all in her world has been resolved. If we are to read ahead to 2 Kings 9:26 we will read that even Naboth’s sons have been eliminated by Jezebel. She has covered all the bases.⁵⁹ Jezebel approaches Ahab and commands him to “Arise, take possession of the vineyard” (קוּם וְרָשׁ אֶת-כַּרְם). This closely echoes what she directed him to do in 21:7 where she chided “Arise, eat” (קוּם אֲכָל). McKenzie asserts that this “confirms that she orchestrated the events”⁶⁰ of this chapter.

In what follows we realize that neither Ahab nor Jezebel have accurately reported the reality of what has actually happened. Hamilton notes “Ahab does not tell Jezebel why Naboth

⁵⁷ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274 also makes this observation.

⁵⁸ Davis, *1 Kings*, 305.

⁵⁹ Davis, *1 Kings*, 304.

⁶⁰ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

would not sell him the vineyard (cf. v. 3 with v. 6) and Jezebel does not tell Ahab how Naboth died (cf. vv. 9-14 with v. 15)”⁶¹ Jezebel characterizes the whole affair in terms of Naboth’s refusal to sell the land after Ahab’s offer. She does not mention Ahab’s additional proposal of an exchange for another vineyard.

Beal and McKenzie advance the idea that Jezebel’s thinking and actions in this matter are part of some rationale about Naboth’s death that “probably refers to some legal precedent upon which the legal charade rests.”⁶² Their argument is as follows: (1) regarding the seizure of Naboth’s vineyard, “Had such a confiscation been illegal, the whole charade seems pointless: why purport to follow the law only to flout it in the end?”⁶³ (2) various OT texts (2 Sam. 16:4; Ezra 10:8; cf. Ezek. 45:8; 46:18), by way of description, suggest that “in cases of treason the deceased offender’s property cedes to the crown”⁶⁴ and (3) that the idea here is that Naboth’s refusal (יָסָר) was an offense before his king and Naboth should have known better; he is getting what he deserved.⁶⁵ In this way Jezebel’s plot was technically operating according to Israelite law and custom.⁶⁶

Verse 16 opens with the same construction of the *waw*-consecutive וַיֵּלֶךְ paired with temporal Qal infinitive construct (לֵךְ) indicating the continuance of the movement of the plot. What is different here in verse 16 is that the narrator now focuses on the flow of Ahab’s end of

⁶¹ Hamilton, *Handbook on the*, 439.

⁶² Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275.

⁶³ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275.

⁶⁴ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275. Davis, *1 Kings*, 308, n.9 wrongly argues against this assertion stating that there is no evidence.

⁶⁵ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

⁶⁶ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275.

the story. Now that Naboth's death has been confirmed, we are told that not only Ahab "arose" (וַיָּקָם), but did so with the purpose of *going down* (לָרֶדֶת) to Naboth's vineyard. The purposefulness of his visit is confirmed by the Qal infinitive construct לְרִשְׁתּוֹ ("in order to take possession of it"). The command-compliance cycle is now complete: Jezebel commands Ahab, "Arise, take possession" and Ahab complies by rising, going down, and taking possession.

McKenzie offers a stunning observation on what has transpired here. He declares that Ahab's "possession (רִשְׁתּוֹ) of the vineyard is a reversal of Israel's possession of Canaan, to the extent that doing right and obeying the law are requirements for conquering it (Deut. 4:3; 6:18; 8:1)—all the more so if Ahab is trying to usurp YHWH'S role of controlling fertility as suggested by his plan for a vegetable garden in light of Deuteronomy 11:10-17."⁶⁷

So it seems that the murder plot of Ahab and Jezebel has come to the desired end of the schemers. We shall soon see, however, that all that has transpired thus far constitutes only half of the story. As Yahweh and Elijah reenter the greater Ahab narrative (1 Kings 16:34-22:40) in the second half of this story (vv. 17-29), Beal reminds us that the assurances of Ahab and Jezebel will prove illusory noting, "YHWH is the key witness to the charade and through his prophet will expose it."⁶⁸ The editorial addition of a *setumah* at the end of verse 16 closes the first half of the story of Naboth whose name continues to pop up beyond the grave.

Part Two

Verses 17-19—Beginning with verse 17 the second half of this story now switches focus from the murder plot to Yahweh's response by way of Elijah.

Jezebel may have thought that the business of the seizure of Naboth's vineyard was over,

⁶⁷ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

⁶⁸ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275.

but the narrator of the story indicates otherwise. With verse 17, and for the third straight verse, we have the *waw*-consecutive וַיְהִי declaring the continuance of narrative flow; this story is not over. We read “Now it happened that the word of Yahweh came to Elijah the Tishbite.” Two key figures are reintroduced to the story: Yahweh, from whom we will soon learn nothing can be hidden and Elijah, his prophet. The phrase “the word of Yahweh” (דְּבַר־יְהוָה), with respect as to its *coming* to Elijah, has been used before in 17:2 and 18:1. The prophet Elijah is reintroduced (cf. 17:1) here, once again, as “the Tishbite” who is something of an absolute figure.⁶⁹

Even though it is apparent that Ahab and Jezebel figure that they have successfully pulled off their caper, Leithart notes that they, “miss the most important factor in the situation: there is a God from whom no secrets are hid, a God before whom all the thoughts and intentions of the heart are opened and revealed.”⁷⁰

In verse 18 we observe that Yahweh’s directive to Elijah is of the same command-compliance vein employed by Jezebel. Yahweh says, “Arise, go down...” (קוּם וְיָרֵד) whereas in verse 7 Jezebel said, “Arise, eat” and in verse 16 she ordered “Arise, take possession.”⁷¹ This is part of a compositional strategy on the part of the narrator to maintain a narrative flow and to highlight the differences between some of the characters’ affections and actions.

We take note of some of the other devices employed by the writer to catch our attention. First, in verses 15-16 the narrator uses a Qal infinitive construct prefixed with a preposition

⁶⁹ DeVries, *1 Kings*, 257 wrongfully asserts that “Elijah is introduced as someone unknown, but also unacquainted with Ahab.” One only needs to look ahead to verse 20 where Ahab describes Elijah as “my enemy,” an echo of a similar moniker used by Ahab of Elijah in 18:17—“you troubler of Israel.”

⁷⁰ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 156. See also Davis, *1 Kings*, 310 and House, *1, 2 Kings*, 233 for similar comments.

⁷¹ Many commentators make this same observation including: Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 156; McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186; Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275; and Davis, *1 Kings*, 310 n.15.

indicating purpose (לְרִשְׁתּוֹ) stating Ahab went to *take possession* of Naboth's vineyard. Here in verse 18, Yahweh tells Elijah to call on Ahab who is *taking possession* (לְרִשְׁתּוֹ —the same infinitive form) and then confront Ahab regarding his *taking possession* (לְרִשְׁתּוֹ) by means of murder. This is a stylistic choice to connect what happened in verses 15-16 with what is now happening in our story.⁷²

Second, Yahweh instructs Elijah to call on Ahab who is identified as “the King of Israel.” In 21:1 Ahab's moniker was “king of Samaria” which was an indicator of his birthplace. Here in verse 18 the mention of Samaria indicates that Samaria is his main residence while *king of Israel* serves as a title.⁷³

Verse 19 shows us that Yahweh is truly running this game. He provides Elijah with the message he is to deliver, which our narrator indicates with the formulaic “Thus says Yahweh.” These words provide a foundation of authority for what the prophet is about to utter.⁷⁴ This formula introduces two messages to be delivered by Elijah: one a rhetorical question and the other a death sentence.

In the first instance, Elijah lets Ahab know by means of a rhetorical question of his and his wife's two-step process in securing Naboth's vineyard: murder and seizure. In the second case, Elijah passes on Yahweh's measure for Ahab's sin: a sentence of death. Beal characterizes the two utterances of Elijah, under the banner of the authoritative “Thus says Yahweh,” as providing both the *reason for judgment* and the *judgment* itself. First, the *reason for judgment*: Ahab has not only wrongfully confiscated another man's property; he has murdered to do so.

⁷² See Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275-276 for more discussion about this literary construction.

⁷³ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 273 and 276.

⁷⁴ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 276.

Second, the *judgment*: as Yahweh promised, “it shall be life for a life” (Deut. 19:21), so it is to be for Ahab. Beal concludes, “What was suffered by Ahab’s victim will now be dealt out to Ahab himself.”⁷⁵

Wiseman observes that Ahab had broken two prohibitions of the Decalogue: (1) murder (Deut. 5:17) and (2) the coveting of his neighbor’s property (Deut. 5:21).⁷⁶ And it is safe to conclude that the reason the hammer falls on Ahab is that Yahweh holds him responsible for the death of Naboth acting as the manipulator of Jezebel.⁷⁷

Elijah prophesies the end of the Omride dynasty providing the grisly details of Ahab’s and his house’s end. It is an end outworked for Ahab in 1 Kings 22 and for his wife and heirs in 2 Kings 9-10.

Verses 20-26—The *waw*-consecutive וַאֲחָב signals narrative continuance as Ahab delivers a greeting of personal invective to Elijah (20a). The scene shifts from Yahweh’s engagement with and instructions given to Elijah to Elijah’s encounter with Ahab. It does so in typical Hebrew narrative with no or limited detail.

No temporal information is given indicating how much time has passed between one episode to the next. The story lacks any mention at the beginning of verse 20 of Elijah complying with Yahweh’s directive of *arising* and *going down* (cf. 21:18) to the vineyard. But the narrative does continue on because the narrator assumes the reader knows that Elijah will carry out Yahweh’s commands. Furthermore, there is no reference to Elijah voicing Yahweh’s rhetorical question and issuance of the death sentence with its gruesome details of verse 19. Instead, Elijah

⁷⁵ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 276.

⁷⁶ Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 184.

⁷⁷ This is the conclusion of McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

launches into some additional details (20b-24) of the dire consequences of Ahab's evil for his family and himself.⁷⁸

Ahab's first words to Elijah are expressed in the form of a rhetorical question (following Yahweh's rhetorical question in 21:19), "Have you found me my enemy?" This is something of an echo of what Ahab said to Elijah in 18:17 with another rhetorical inquiry asking, "Is this you who troubles Israel?"⁷⁹ Beal adds that when Ahab addresses Elijah as the *troubler* of Israel in 18:17, it was in the context of "national covenantal failure" and that the context in 21:20 "reveals Ahab's awareness of personal sin."⁸⁰

Elijah responds to this pejorative question with a clever retort of his own indicating that he has *found* Ahab (20b). This expression should not be understood to simply indicate that Elijah has merely *located* Ahab; it indicates that Ahab's sin has been found out and that Elijah has been fully informed of it by Yahweh on what Ahab has done.⁸¹ We are to conclude that no sin will escape Yahweh's discovery.⁸²

The narrator employs a Hithpael infinitive construct with a second person suffix (הִתְמַכְּרָךְ) to highlight the reflexive idea of Ahab *selling* himself—that is, giving himself over to evil. The narrator has used this type of language before about doing/committing evil in the eyes of Yahweh before in the rebukes of Jeroboam (1 Kings 14:8-9) and of Baasha (16:7).⁸³

⁷⁸ Davis, *1 Kings*, 308, n. 10 has an excellent discussion of what is going on in this type of Hebrew narrative.

⁷⁹ Hamilton, *Handbook on the*, 439 and House, *1, 2 Kings*, 233.

⁸⁰ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 276.

⁸¹ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

⁸² DeVries, *1 Kings*, 257.

⁸³ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

In 21:20b Elijah spoke of Yahweh in the third person, but beginning in verse 21 and running through 22, Elijah speaks on behalf of Yahweh in the first person.⁸⁴ There is a sense here, as Beal suggests, that since there is no marker in the narrative indicating a shift of perspective, “Elijah simultaneously speaks on his own and as YHWH’s mouthpiece.”⁸⁵

Three vivid verbs in verse 21 reveal what Yahweh has in store for Ahab and his house. Yahweh will: (1) *bring* (מָבִי) disaster, (2) *burn* (וַיַּעֲרֶתִי) Ahab with a relentless pursuit, and (3) *cut off* (וַיַּכְרֶתִי) Ahab’s house from continuing.

Grisanti asserts that verse 22’s construction of וַיַּתֵּן plus two accusatives (the two expressions of *house*) results in וַיַּתֵּן signifying “to make” with a “factitive nuance.”⁸⁶ In this moment Yahweh, as a point of reference, tells Ahab that his house will vanish just like those of Jeroboam (1 Kings 14:7-11) and Baasha (16:2-4) before him.

Yahweh, in verse 22, lists the reason for his judgment of Ahab: it is because of the anger he provoked in Yahweh and the sin in which Ahab caused Israel to sin. This concept of *causation* is indicated in two ways. First, by reading אֲלֵהֶלַעַם as על - , thus rendering “because of the anger” which Beal prefers.⁸⁷ The BHS critical apparatus also notes this option as a valid alternate reading. Second, the Hiphil perfect 2ms verb הִכְלַעְתָּ speaks to Ahab’s active role in spawning sin in Israel.

Verse 23 returns to the third person voice and Elijah conveys Yahweh’s words.⁸⁸ Elijah

⁸⁴ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 276 identifies this as an “immediate oracular word.” See also Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 184.

⁸⁵ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 276.

⁸⁶ Michael A. Grisanti, “וַיַּתֵּן,” in *NIDOTTE* 3:209.

⁸⁷ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 271.

⁸⁸ So Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 156 and House, *1, 2 Kings*, 233. Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 276 argues for viewing this shift in perspective to be ambiguous and suggests that this third person voice could be the narrator. But surely, the

indicates that Yahweh has a special word directed at Jezebel. She is, as McKenzie observes, “directly and uniquely threatened.”⁸⁹ No other Israelite queen received such a condemnation. One could argue that since she has seized the role of a man, acting as king, she will therefore be treated as one of the men in Ahab’s royal house.⁹⁰ In verse 24 Yahweh announces that the entirety of Ahab’s house will suffer a violent end by being eaten by dogs no matter where they may be found—in the city or out in the field.

Beal, McKenzie, and the ESV treat verses 25 and 26 as a parenthesis in which the narrator, as McKenzie notes, “highlights Ahab’s uniqueness in evildoing in a reiteration or interpretation of 16:31-33.”⁹¹ These two verses make note of Jezebel’s seduction of Ahab in no way to reduce the spotlight on Ahab, on the contrary, this inclusion of Jezebel’s influence accentuates Ahab’s guilt. The narrator also adds mention of how Ahab is complicit in reinvigorating the worship of false gods in the homeland.⁹²

As was the case in 21:20, the narrator here in verse 25 employs the use of the Hithpael stem in a perfect 3ms form to indicate reflexivity that this has been Ahab’s doing—*selling himself* to do evil. Additionally, Jezebel is singled out as an agent of causation (אֲשֶׁר־הִסְתָּה) — “because she lured/incited”) regarding the incitement of Ahab’s heart to give himself over to evil. McKenzie notes that the expression “to do evil in the eyes of Yahweh” is used in

immediate context of the switch between 1st and 3rd person points of view has demonstrated how closely the reader is to grasp that Yahweh’s words coming from his voice or from Elijah are still *his* words.

⁸⁹ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

⁹⁰ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

⁹¹ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

⁹² DeVries, *1 Kings*, 258.

Deuteronomy to indicate the worship of false gods.⁹³ The sense of idol worship is also the case with the use of the reflexive verb הִתְמַלֵּךְ (“he sold himself”).

The suggestion of following after false gods conveyed in verse 25 is born out in 26 where the narrator relates the abominable affections and actions of Ahab by the use of the complementary Qal infinitive construct (לֵלְכָת) “to go” after idols. The narrator provides a look at the depth of Ahab’s depravity when his idol worship is compared to the abominable Amorites who serve as a synecdoche for the nations listed in Genesis 15:19-21. When the evil of these nations was fulfilled, they were disposed of by Yahweh (cf. Lev. 18:24-30).⁹⁴ The image is of total depravity.

McKenzie curiously suggests that this parenthesis highlighting Ahab’s complete devotion to evil offers the narrator the opportunity to comment on the mercy of Yahweh extended in verses 27-29 as “a subtle complaint that the mercy is not entirely just.”⁹⁵ This assertion misses two realities. First, structurally the second act of this story (21:17-29) unfolds like this:

Word of Yahweh to Elijah: judgement on Ahab himself, 17-19

Ahab’s reaction: resistance, 20a

Sold out to evil: disaster for Ahab’s house, 20b-24

Sold out to evil: perversions of Ahab’s reign, 25-26

Ahab’s reaction: remorse, 27

Word of Yahweh to Elijah: postponement of judgment on Ahab’s house, 28-29⁹⁶

Ahab’s reaction of remorse makes structural sense as a flip side of the coin that is his reaction of resistance in verse 20a. Second, why should one be surprised that Yahweh would lavish mercy and forgiveness on a repentant heart? It makes no sense when McKenzie asserts that the report of

⁹³ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 186.

⁹⁴ DeVries, *1 Kings*, 258.

⁹⁵ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 187.

⁹⁶ Davis, *1 Kings*, 309.

Yahweh's mercy by the narrator is meant to be understood as unjust.

Beal asserts that the narrator is, in this parenthesis, exposing both the murder of Naboth as well as Ahab's cultic sins.⁹⁷ The *setumah* at the end of verse 26 closes this paragraph.

Verse 27—The construction of a *waw*-consecutive (וַיְהִי) with the temporal preposition and the temporal Qal infinitive construct (כִּשְׁמֹעַ) is an echo of the same finite verb plus infinitive construction used in verse 15.

In verse 15 we had, “And it happened when Jezebel heard...” Here we have, “And it happened when Ahab heard...” In verse 15 Jezebel moved quickly to orchestrate the sin of the wrongful seizure of Naboth's vineyard after she realized the murder plot against him. Here in verse 27, Ahab is moving quickly to repent of his sin after receiving a prophetic death sentence.

Ahab takes to heart the message of אֵת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה (“these words”) from Yahweh delivered through his vessel, Elijah, leading him to repent. The genuineness of what is heartfelt for Ahab inwardly is reflected in the outward expression of tearing off his clothes, replacing them with sackcloth, and beginning a fast. To these outwards signs of what is going on in the inner heart Yahweh responds as he does in 2 Kings 22:11, 19 and Jonah 3:6—receiving repentance.⁹⁸

We do take note that even though Ahab does repent, his Sidonian princess, Jezebel, does not.⁹⁹ Ahab sleeps in a sackcloth and walks about in a state of dejection just as David did (2 Sam. 12:13, 16).

Beal and McKenzie are suspicious of the genuineness of Ahab's repentance.¹⁰⁰ However,

⁹⁷ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 277.

⁹⁸ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 277 and Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 156.

⁹⁹ Hamilton, *Handbook on the*, 439.

¹⁰⁰ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 277 and McKenzie, *1 Kings 16-2 Kings 16*, 187.

the close proximity of Yahweh's speech to Elijah (v. 29) indicates that this is a real change of heart for Ahab. We have already observed earlier in the second act of chapter 21 (vv. 17-29) that Yahweh cannot be fooled and no one can hide anything from him. Many other commentators read Ahab's repentance as genuine.¹⁰¹

The *setumah* at the end of this sentence indicates that the MT editors strongly thought that this single sentence needed to be set apart as its own paragraph. The gravity of what transpires justifies this decision.

Verses 28-29—Davis and House take special notice of Yahweh's lavish mercy doled out to Ahab.¹⁰² The narrator relates (v. 28) that Yahweh has yet another word for Elijah. What is different this time is it is one, as DeVries avers, that comes "without a summons to action."¹⁰³

Davis characterizes Yahweh's speech in verse 29 as "a mixture of delight and excitement."¹⁰⁴ Ahab's repentance and humility undoubtedly qualifies as the most God-honoring thing he does in the entirety of the pages devoted to telling his story.¹⁰⁵ But we note that it is not long lasting. Davis summarizes the situation succinctly, "In verse 29 Yahweh postpones the judgment against Ahab's dynasty or household but he does not cancel it."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ So House, *1, 2 Kings*, 233; Hamilton, *Handbook on the*, 439; Davis, *1 Kings*, 313; and Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 184. Davis, 315 best captures what is going on here characterizing Ahab's repentance as "sincere at the moment but not lasting."

¹⁰² Davis, *1 Kings*, 313 and House, *1, 2 Kings*, 233.

¹⁰³ DeVries, *1 Kings*, 258.

¹⁰⁴ Davis, *1 Kings*, 314.

¹⁰⁵ House, *1, 2 Kings*, 233.

¹⁰⁶ Davis, *1 Kings*, 314.

Literary Analysis of 1 Kings 21

This story is particularly rich with its deep dive into the lives and motivations of several well-known characters. It also makes use of a couple of Hebrew narrative devices to help with the dialogue—with direct speech framing and voice perspective changes—and with narration—involving plot movement in a unique use of the *waw*-consecutive. We will investigate this narrative's setting, characterization, and plot arc, each in turn in order to grasp this text's theological meaning. We begin with the *setting* of this story.

Setting

The first verse of chapter 21 tells us that we are in Jezreel where Ahab had established a second palace and his neighbor, Naboth, had a vineyard. Careful readers will remember that we are first alerted to this royal residence when Elijah outran Ahab's chariot to Jezreel after the contest on Mt. Carmel (cf. 1 Kings 18:45-46). As already noted above, temporally, this story is set immediately following the Aramean wars.

Jezreel is, as Davis records, located “about twenty miles north-northeast of Samaria and a little over eight miles (mostly) east of Megiddo.”¹⁰⁷ Beal additionally writes of Jezreel's strategic location on a ridge situated at the eastern point of entry to the Jezreel Valley.¹⁰⁸ Jezreel was, as Beal further notes, a “strongly fortified base for cavalry and chariotry with a moat, tower (2 Kgs 9:17) and guarded gate (2 Kgs 9:31)” and that “it also had a royal residence but no monumental buildings.”¹⁰⁹

This is evidently Ahab's second residence¹¹⁰ and, as Hamilton suggests, a “winter palace

¹⁰⁷ Davis, *1 Kings*, 302. See also, Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 273.

¹⁰⁸ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 273.

¹⁰⁹ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 273.

¹¹⁰ Ahab's main residence being in Samaria (cf. 1 Kings 21:18).

in the warmer Jezreel Valley.”¹¹¹ Adjacent to Ahab’s royal residence is the vineyard owned by Naboth the Jezreelite. Beal makes the observation that chapter 21 “introduces each main character by birthplace: Naboth is a Jezreelite (v.1), Elijah is the Tishbite (v. 17), Ahab is the ‘king of Samaria’ (cf. 2 Kgs 1:3). As he is later identified by his official title of ‘king of Israel’ (v. 18), we conclude that Samaria designates his birthplace.”¹¹²

Naboth’s vineyard also serves as an important physical setting for several scenes of this narrative. The first is the attempted purchase of the land by Ahab of Naboth (21:2-3). The next instance comes when Yahweh directs Elijah to approach Ahab who is in the now dead Naboth’s vineyard with his word of judgment (21:17-24).

As to the daily manner of the characters involved in this story it emerges to be a clash between the capricious demands of an idle and morally bankrupt king and his pagan wife (Ahab and Jezebel) and a principled and content Israelite (Naboth). Yahweh enters the narrative as Israel’s covenant God who dispenses justice. Elijah serves as Yahweh’s onsite covenant prosecutor. These characters will now be formally addressed.

Characterization

Beal identifies Naboth as the *central character* based on the fact that his name is repeated seventeen times in these twenty-nine verses of chapter 21 including six times after he is murdered.¹¹³ This is an interesting take on this narrative, but it seems to make more sense to identify Ahab as the protagonist *villain* and Yahweh as the antagonist *hero* over the course of the

¹¹¹ Hamilton, *Handbook on*, 437.

¹¹² Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 273.

¹¹³ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 272.

two-act structure of the story (vv. 1-16 and 17-29).¹¹⁴ In this way the reader is able to acknowledge the justice being done by Yahweh demonstrating his absolutely sovereign and omniscient will. Let us take a look at each of the figures appearing in this story in turn. We will also see that Ahab is a fully *round* character in that when confronted with his sin by Elijah (21:20b-24) he repents of his ways (21:27).

AHAB

In the strictest sense our story begins with Ahab's return to Samaria after his encounter with Yahweh's prophet who condemned Ahab's release of Ben-hadad in 1 Kings 20:43.¹¹⁵ Readers of 1 Kings are already familiar with Ahab having encountered him initially in 1 Kings 16:29-34. There we learn he reigned for a stable twenty-two years and where the text, as Davis posits, "holds a prophetic rather than political view [and] avers that Ahab was uniquely evil."¹¹⁶ The narrator asserts that Ahab made an altar for Baal and constructed an Asherah and "did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:33b). It is, as Chisholm notes, this "audacity to make Baal worship a state-sanctioned religion"¹¹⁷ as seen here and in 21:25-26 that helps define Ahab's motivations.

Ahab reemerges in chapter 18 greeting Elijah, who has spoken Yahweh's word of drought, labeling him the *he who troubles Israel* (עֹבֵר יְשַׁרְעֵל; 1 Kings 18:17). In the meantime Ahab has allowed his pagan wife, the Sidonian princess Jezebel, to compound his idolatry with

¹¹⁴ So also Davis, *1 Kings*, 301.

¹¹⁵ DeVries, *1 Kings*, 252 argues for this division of the text.

¹¹⁶ Davis, *1 Kings*, 198.

¹¹⁷ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Interpreting the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2006), 115.

persecution by murdering a measure of Yahweh's prophets (18:4).¹¹⁸ In chapter 20 Ahab allows defeated Aramean king Ben-hadad to live when he was *devoted to destruction* per Yahweh (20:42).

When we get to our chapter 21 readers already have a good description of who Ahab is and what motivates him. House observes that up to this time Ahab and his many sinful affections and actions did not include any oppressive or brutal treatment of his own people.¹¹⁹

Ahab approaches his neighbor Naboth and makes an offer on his vineyard indicating that he intends to convert it into a vegetable garden. The offer reveals Ahab, as Wiseman affirms, to "have acted lawfully and in a straightforward manner."¹²⁰ The phrase לְגַן־יִצְקָל ("for a garden of vegetables") is a negative image that guides readers to connect Ahab's use of it with Egypt.¹²¹ The *vegetable garden* image serves to symbolize a desire to actively pursue the re-Canaanitizing of Israel.¹²² We can safely conclude that the use of this phrase appears to be a rhetorical strategy by the writer of this narrative to alert readers that something that is not right is brewing and to stay tuned for more.

Efrat asserts that "Whenever simple, daily tasks are mentioned this is important in shedding light on the character."¹²³ When Naboth refuses his offer to buy the vineyard, Ahab returns to his palace סָר וַיֵּשֶׁב and "he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and would eat

¹¹⁸ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 133.

¹¹⁹ House, *1, 2 Kings*, 231.

¹²⁰ Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 181. See also Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274 who makes the same observation.

¹²¹ See p. 142 above on how Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274 connects this image with Deut. 11:10.

¹²² See p. 143 for a fuller discussion as advanced by Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 154.

¹²³ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (New York: T & T Clark, 1989), 79.

no food” (21:4). The king is in a bad mood and Efrat observes, “he has been deeply wounded by the refusal, but takes no action other than lying down, turning his face away and refusing to eat.”¹²⁴ These simple actions, or perhaps better stated, *inactions* on the part of Ahab begin to build a character profile.

Another way one can recognize traits in a character is to take note of the narrator’s presentation of his *gestures*. Efrat affirms that readers benefit from this because a character’s gestures “have expressive value and indicate something about the inner state of the person involved.”¹²⁵ We note this when Ahab lies down on his bed a turning away his face (21:4). Efrat characterizes this bodily movement of orienting his face towards the wall as revealing a measure of sorrow and depression.¹²⁶ House has a different take and identifies Ahab’s response as one that is spoiled and immature.¹²⁷ Leithart is equally direct describing Ahab’s bodily movements in term of *crumpling* and his affections in terms of *pouting*.¹²⁸

Later in chapter 21 when Ahab is confronted by Elijah bearing Yahweh’s message of condemnation (21:20b-24) the narrator presents a rapid and sudden change in this sparse Hebrew narrative in the form of Ahab’s repentance (21:27).¹²⁹ The narrator intends that we receive Ahab’s repentance as both deep and genuine because Yahweh himself, as Bar-Efrat notes, “provides evidence of Ahab’s humility”¹³⁰ in 21:29a (“Have you seen how Ahab has humbled

¹²⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 79.

¹²⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 84.

¹²⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 84.

¹²⁷ House, *1, 2 Kings*, 232.

¹²⁸ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 155.

¹²⁹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 90-91 further explains that “In short stories, like most biblical narratives, there is virtually no technical possibility of gradual [character] development.”

¹³⁰ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 91.

himself before me?”).

This last development in the life of Ahab is how we can classify him as a fully rounded character who within this brief narrative moves from returning home after the Ben-hadad affair in a sullen and vexed mood which descends into a virtual state of emotional paralysis after being turned down by Naboth to a man who, for a brief moment, stands before Yahweh in humble repentance. Outside of the bounds of these few verses Ahab remains a dastardly figure in the whole of God’s salvation history.

But we have seen how a careful portraiture by a skilled writer can evoke deeper understanding of theological truth in the crafting of a character. First, in Ahab’s case we learn how a king can abuse his role by withdrawing from his duty. In this instance by allowing his pagan wife to act as “king” and murder one of his subjects while he pouts in bed. He emerges as a passive oppressor. Second, careful presentation of his daily tasks and bodily gestures helps frame Ahab as this shameful oppressor. Third, the neatly crafted narrative arc of Ahab aids in our interpretation of the presentation of the doctrines of repentance and of Yahweh’s forgiveness and justice. Ahab’s repentance does not wipe out God’s judgment on Ahab’s line; it is still to be wiped out. God will not tolerate sin.

YAHWEH

We move on to the boss of Ahab’s earthly nemesis (Elijah) who really serves to function as the antagonist hero of this story.¹³¹ This is, of course, Yahweh who appears by way of reference in 21:3 when Naboth rejects Ahab’s offer to buy his vineyard by appealing to Yahweh’s provision of the land to his family by covenant assignment. Yahweh next arrives on

¹³¹ See Davis, *I Kings*, 301.

the scene to provide his word to Elijah (21:17-19) to be spoken to Ahab. Finally, he speaks to Elijah commenting on the humble repentance of Ahab (21:28-29).

A solid argument can be made to classify Yahweh as the antagonist hero who ultimately steps in to the narrative demonstrating that this is his world after all by charging Ahab with his sin, judging Ahab, and ultimately relenting, for a season, of his just punishment of Ahab after the king repents of his sins. Yahweh, like Ahab, is also a *round* character who relents from following through on bringing disaster to Ahab's line while he yet lives.

After Naboth has been killed with the outward complicity of the elders, nobleman, and *worthless fellows* (21:11-14), it appears that nearly all of Jezreel can be blamed for the murder of Naboth. By the time the narrative reaches verse 16, Ahab and Jezebel are entirely at ease with *taking possession* (לָקַחְתִּי; prep + Qal Inf constr + 3ms sfx) of Naboth's vineyard. Leithart shows us how the narrator demonstrates that Ahab and Jezebel "miss the most important factor in the situation: (namely that) there is a God from whom no secrets are hid, a God before whom all the thoughts and intentions of the heart are open and revealed."¹³²

Immediately after the seeming *closure* of verse 16 and the happy couple's land grab of Naboth's vineyard, the second act of this story begins with the arrival of Yahweh on the scene as somewhat of an absolute figure. He has been clearly present in the first act in the form of Naboth's faithful life and the referencing of Yahweh's ancestral land division (cf. Josh. 13:6-7; Lev. 25:23-28), but he now bursts on the scene in 21:17 to smash the assumptions of the royal couple.

The writer has composed his narrative in such a way to gain our attention with some wonderfully ironic word play in verse 18. The first thing Yahweh says to Elijah is קָוֶה יְהוָה

¹³² Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 156.

(“Arise, go down”) to meet Ahab at the vineyard emphatically pairing two imperatives which, in a sense, mock Jezebel’s directive to her wimpy husband in 21:15 where she urges him קוּם וְרָשׁ (“Arise, take possession”) of the dead man’s vineyard.¹³³ This compositional strategy is intended to remind us of Yahweh’s supremacy in this dynamic.¹³⁴

The charges against Ahab brought forth by Yahweh through Elijah interpret the sin of Ahab according to the deep reality of his connection with the sinful reigns of Jeroboam and Baasha. Beal notes that in the charge brought forth “the oracular word substantively repeats the words spoken to the dynasties of Jeroboam and Baasha. Ahab has ‘done evil’ (v. 20; 14:9; 16:7) ‘in the eyes of YHWH’ (v. 20; 14:8; 16:7), and has ‘provoked YHWH and ... caused Israel to sin’ (v. 22; 14:9; 16:2, 7).”¹³⁵ The resulting judgment is that Yahweh promises to *bring* disaster (v. 21; 14:10), *utterly burn up* (v. 21; 14:10; 16:3), *cut off* Ahab’s house (v. 21; 14:10); and lay bare their corpses before the dogs and birds (v. 21; 14:11; 16:4).¹³⁶

The narrator has presented the character of Yahweh as an absolute sovereign whose reign exhibits omniscience, asserts universal kingship over earthly kingship, reveals a God who will not tolerate evil, but who is fully accepting of genuine repentance. Yahweh is committed to full justice and will punish evil both here and now and in an ultimate sense. All property is ultimately his to dispense or reclaim as he sees fit.

¹³³ This rhetorical strategy is also noted by Davis, *1 Kings*, 310 and Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275-76.

¹³⁴ So Davis, *1 Kings*, 310 and Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 156.

¹³⁵ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 276.

¹³⁶ See Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 276 for more discussion.

NABOTH

The figure of Naboth is of central importance to this narrative which is why many editions of the Bible and interpreters of this passage call the first sixteen verses, “Naboth’s Vineyard.” Beal mentions that Naboth is named seventeen times in this story including six times after he has been murdered and twice in Yahweh’s judgment language.¹³⁷ Leithart takes note of the pun the writer employs with Naboth’s moniker which in Hebrew is נָבוֹת which is quite close to the plural for prophets (נְבִיאִים).¹³⁸ Just as Jezebel put down the prophets in 1 Kings 18 so shall she do the same to Naboth here. Naboth is also identified as a *Jezreelite* six times and Beal asserts that this serves as “a reminder that the king seeks the ancestral inheritance held in that city.”¹³⁹

Naboth is a *foil* to Ahab offering a sharp contrast to the affections and actions of the king of Samaria. The first words out of Naboth’s mouth in response to Ahab’s offer to buy his vineyard or provide another of equal value are “Far be it for me by Yahweh that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you” (21:3). With this brief bit of dialogue, the narrator has provided a substantive glimpse into the type of man that is Naboth. Leithart characterizes Naboth as “a paradigmatic Israelite, the tender of the Lord’s vine, an Israelite who clings to the Lord’s gift” and whose objection to the king’s offer “is theological [because] it would be ‘profanation to Yahweh.’”¹⁴⁰ In verses 3 and 4 Naboth always refers to the vineyard as an inheritance (נַחֲלָה) of which Beal writes indicates he thought of it as “land bestowed per covenantal allocations (Josh.

¹³⁷ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 272.

¹³⁸ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 156.

¹³⁹ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 272.

¹⁴⁰ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 154.

13:6-7).”¹⁴¹ Naboth’s refusal to sell is likely grounded in the legal texts that address the matter of patrimonial land holdings such as Lev. 25:23-28; Num. 26:52-56; and Deut. 25:5-10 which acknowledge Yahweh as the ultimate owner of the land.¹⁴² In direct contrast to this Ahab and Jezebel only used the word *vineyard* (כֶּרֶם) on eight occasions ranging from verses 2-16 relegating it to a “tradeable commodity.”¹⁴³ The portrayal of Naboth as a principled figure who stands on the grounds of Torah teaching with an unbending resolve demonstrates that he is to be considered a *flat* character.

Careful reading of verses 2-6 in this chapter reveals how important dialogue is in the business of character portrayal. When Naboth declines to sell his property, he does so on theological grounds. He appeals to the name of Yahweh and the code of *ancestral inheritance* (נַחֲלַת אֲבוֹתַי) in 21:3. When the pouting Ahab responds to his wife’s inquiry about his bad mood, he omits any reference to Naboth’s argument being grounded in theological reasoning (cf. 21-5-6). Ahab merely reports that Naboth says, לֹא-אֶתֵּן לָּךְ אֶת-כֶּרְמִי (“I will not give to you my vineyard”).

This brief portion of dialogue and narration is a glowing display of the best of both *showing* and *telling* in stories.¹⁴⁴ The first bit of insight we have into the figure of Ahab is

¹⁴¹ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 273.

¹⁴² Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 154, Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274, Davis, *1 Kings*, 302, Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 181, DeVries, *1 Kings*, 256, and Hamilton, *Handbook on*, 438 all agree on this point.

¹⁴³ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 273.

¹⁴⁴ There is a long running argument in literary critical circles regarding the business of *showing* vs. *telling*. Abrams writes, “A broad distinction is frequently made between alternative methods for characterizing (i.e., establishing the distinctive characters of) the persons in a narrative: showing and telling. In *showing*, the author presents the characters talking and acting and leaves the reader to infer what motives and dispositions lie behind what they say and do. In *telling*, the author intervenes authoritatively in order to describe, and often evaluate, the motives and dispositional qualities of the characters.” Abrams, *A Glossary*, 24.

provided by the author of the Kings at the beginning of the Elijah narrative in 1 Kings 16:29-34. It is there we are *told* that Ahab has done more evil in the sight of Yahweh “than all who were before him” (16:30), has taken a pagan Sidonian princess, Jezebel, for a wife and is now serving and worshipping Baal (16:31), has constructed an altar and house of worship for Baal in Samaria (16:32), erected a wooden Asherah (16:33a), and “did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings who were before him” (16:33b). This is important information about the *character* that is Ahab that only an author with a third-person omniscient point of view could possess. This information helps build the portrayal of who Ahab is.

When we get to 1 Kings 21:2-6 we already have an established sense of who Ahab is from the *telling* of his commitment to evil at the beginning of this narrative to his subsequent episodes in the following chapters. In 21:2 Ahab makes his offer for Naboth’s vineyard. Naboth responds, with a bit of *showing* dialogue saying Yahweh “forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers” (21:3) thinking theologically.¹⁴⁵ Then the narrator does something that really helps to *show* us this theological side of Naboth. In verse 4 the writer records that when Ahab returned home he was *vexed and sullen* because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, “I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers.” Close readers will note the emphasis the narrator places

Since the first quarter of the 20th century following the thinking of novelist Henry James and literary critic Percy Lubbock the idea of *telling* in the crafting of stories has been considered something of a *violation of artistry* as only the *showing* of characters has been met with approval in most circles (cf. Abrams, *A Glossary*, 24).

That was the case until Wayne C. Booth published his *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Booth, of the Chicago School of literary criticism, advocated for the appreciation and embracing of both *showing* and *telling*. One of the examples Booth provides in defending the use of *telling* comes from the book of Job where the author *tells* us with great authority in 1:22 that “in all of this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong” and in 2:10 “In all this Job did not sin with his lips.” This kind of *telling* is a very effective and authoritative means of storytelling where the author provides us with information only he can know, as Booth asserts, by “going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of the character’s mind and heart.” For more see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3-20. The aforementioned quote from page 3.

¹⁴⁵ This dynamic of Naboth’s response is also noted by Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 154 and Hamilton, *Handbook on*, 438.

on reminding us that the land inheritance is for the man of Jezreel in accordance with Torah instruction. This second mention of why Naboth's affections and actions are thus vividly describes who he is: Yahweh's man.

In an equally interesting bit of *showing* narration in the following two verses we learn more about the figure of the dastard Ahab. When Jezebel inquires of Ahab why he is vexed and fasting (21:5), he replies that his offer to Naboth was rejected because he falsely reports that Naboth literally said, "I will not give to you my *vineyard*" (לֹא־אֶתֵּן לְךָ אֶת־כַּרְמִי). Once again, close readers will not miss the subtle, but important difference of Ahab's words to his wife: he strategically (or reflexively?) omits Naboth's theological grounding reason for not selling his *inheritance* which Ahab merely calls a *vineyard*.

JEZEBEL

The final character of our focused study is Ahab's wife, Jezebel. In 1 Kings 16:31 we learn that she is a pagan Sidonian princess. Afterward, in chapter 18, Elijah forces the contest at Mt. Carmel and Yahweh's fiery consuming of the entire contents of the altar, Elijah orders the prophets of Baal to be seized and executed (18:40). Upon hearing of this, Jezebel promises vengeance against Elijah who flees for his life (19:1-3). This backstory provides an understanding of Jezebel who is totally committed to Baal and evil. By definition, she is a *flat* character with a uniquely singular vision in her devotion to wickedness.

When Jezebel reappears in 21:5 the narrator employs a literary device where one character (Jezebel) makes an assertion about another character's (Ahab's) emotional state by way of a question providing reliable evidence of his mood.¹⁴⁶ She asks, "Why (is) it that your spirit so resentful and you are not eating bread?" clearly aware of Ahab's pouty fast (cf. 21:4).

¹⁴⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 61.

Leithart makes the case that Jezebel's intervention into the narrative in 21:5 is really fueled by Ahab's perfect knowledge of what his wife is capable of doing. He asserts:

Ahab knows that Jezebel persecutes prophets of Yahweh and that she will not sit while her will is thwarted. Ahab's self-pitying passivity is perhaps an implicit plea for Jezebel to do something to make his hurt go away. Whatever his intentions, Ahab is responsible for Jezebel's plot.¹⁴⁷

This stunning contention of Leithart argues for a very clever narrator whose depictions of Ahab and Jezebel's affections and actions paints a royal couple who is genuinely conniving and thoroughly wicked.

After Ahab falsely characterizes Naboth's rejection of his buyout offer in 21:6, Jezebel's response is remarkably direct in verse 7. A wooden rendering of the Hebrew is "You now, yourself make/do kingship over Israel" (אַתָּה עַתָּה תַעֲשֶׂה מְלֹכָה עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל).¹⁴⁸ The use of the second person pronoun אַתָּה for emphasis is key in this context. If Leithart is correct in insisting that Ahab is in some profound way really behind Jezebel's murder plot, then the double use of "you" in this sentence is disturbingly prescient. Beal characterizes this response as one that emphasizes the reality of the king's status in Samaria, namely that he, as sovereign, is entitled to act in any way he wishes.¹⁴⁹ Davis characterizes this as a profoundly Phoenician world view which is, of

¹⁴⁷ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 155. Against Hamilton, *Handbook on*, 438, with respect, who suggests an alternate reading of the dynamic between Ahab and Jezebel. He insists, Jezebel sees matters a bit differently than does her husband, Ahab. "Here is a classic case of spouses who bring fundamentally different, and mutually exclusive, core values to their marriage and home. Ahab accepts that he cannot have what is not his, however much he desires it. Jezebel's philosophy is that if you have enough power, you can have whatever you want, and use whatever means necessary to get it."

Hamilton is right about Jezebel's worldview, what he misses is that—in the most insidious way possible—it is also Ahab's worldview. He merely and underhandedly uses Jezebel to affect the outcome he desires.

¹⁴⁸ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274, suggests, "Now you yourself are king" and DeVries, *1 Kings*, 257, "You now: you are going to perform majesty over Israel."

¹⁴⁹ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274.

course, diametrically opposed to Yahweh's.¹⁵⁰

Whether one characterizes Ahab as the driver behind Jezebel's intervention into this story or sees Jezebel as one who wears the pants in this royal marriage, her affections and actions and the result of them over the course of verses 8-14 are horrific. DeVries characterizes the dynamic present here as a case of an inherently autocratic Ahab who is loath to take any direct action against one of his subjects; he is married to Jezebel "who has been trained in the absolutist traditions of the Phoenician city-states."¹⁵¹ Likewise, Davis imagines a bit of dialogue emanating from Jezebel's Phoenician worldview extending beyond her comments in 21:7 where she schools Ahab: "Ahab are you a king or a wimp? No local-yokel grape picker is going to stand in the way of *this* regime! Your problem, Ahab, is that you still think of a king as subject to the law; you must get it through your head that what the king wants *is* the law."¹⁵²

What happens next is truly diabolical. Jezebel, the committed Baalist and worldview Phoenician, orchestrates a murder plot against righteous Naboth by appealing to Torah. The injustice outworked upon Naboth is both *religious* (קְרָאִי-צוֹם; "Proclaim a fast," 21:9; cf. Deut. 9:9) and *legal* (two witnesses bring a charge against him, 21:10; cf. Deut. 17:6-7; 19:15; Num. 35:30).¹⁵³ Jezebel writes letters to the elders and nobles of Jezreel in Ahab's name (21:8). Beal notes that these elders (הַזִּקְנִים) and nobles (הַהֲרִיִּם) comply with an all too "ready complicity against their compatriot [suggesting] the power Jezebel exercises (or the fear she arouses), and the degree to which the law can be compromised in Omride Israel."¹⁵⁴ The narrator ironically

¹⁵⁰ Davis, *1 Kings*, 303.

¹⁵¹ DeVries, *1 Kings*, 257.

¹⁵² Davis, *1 Kings*, 303.

¹⁵³ See Davis, *1 Kings*, 304 for more about this irony.

¹⁵⁴ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274.

notes in 21:14 that these same “leaders” of Jezreel know well to whom they should send messengers reporting Naboth’s death, namely Jezebel and not Ahab whose seal was on the initial correspondence.¹⁵⁵ The narrator reports Jezebel’s letters being composed in what Leithart terms, *a command-compliance*

pattern usually reserved for Yahweh’s commands to his prophets. When Yahweh speaks to Elijah, the prophet obeys, and his obedience is described in exactly the same words as the commandments. Elijah obeys to the letter—and so do the elders and nobles of Jezreel. As it is written, so it is done.¹⁵⁶

The narrator reports that these elders and nobles followed Jezebels’ directives by using slavishly repetitive language in verses 11-13. The charge that is brought forward against Naboth by שְׁנֵי אֲנָשִׁים בְּנֵי-בְלִיעַל (literally “two men, sons of Belial”= *two worthless men* [so ESV and NASB 1977]) is “You have cursed God and king” (cf. 21:10, 13). The actual clause in the MT reads בֵּרַכְתָּ אֱלֹהִים וּמֶלֶךְ (literally, “You have *blessed* God and king”). The typical rendering of *you cursed* (cf. ESV, NASB 1977, and RSV) “euphemistically reads on ideological grounds, ‘you blessed.’”¹⁵⁷ The sense here is that euphemism calls for the opposite.¹⁵⁸ This would then make Naboth, in effect, as House observes, guilty of both *blasphemy* and *treason*.¹⁵⁹

After the deed is done, the elders and nobles send a messenger to Jezebel saying, “Naboth has been stoned and is dead” (21:14). This is a matter of objective and observable reality. In 21:15, Jezebel reports with a slight alteration to Ahab that, “Naboth is not alive, but dead.” Alter

¹⁵⁵ See Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 274.

¹⁵⁶ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 155.

¹⁵⁷ Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 271.

¹⁵⁸ See Davis, *1 Kings*, 304 for a helpful discussion how this literary device is also used in Job 1:5, 11; 2:5, 9; and Psalm 10:3.

¹⁵⁹ House, *1 & 2 Kings*, 232. See also Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 275

comments on the particular narrative strategy adopted by the writer in 21:13-15 where “dialogue-bound narration sets up a small but significant dissonance between the objective report and the terms in which the character restates the facts.”¹⁶⁰ Sternberg posits that since Jezebel has done all the heaving lifting in this murder plot for Ahab, she “continues to spare his tender conscience by watering down the brutal [reality of the stoning] into the generalized [report].”¹⁶¹ In short, what Jezebel has done with this little tautology is the strategic omission of the sordid fact that Naboth was stoned to death when we would typically expect a fuller report. Alter argues that this “dialogue-bound anticipation, then, helps to underline a note of characterization.”¹⁶²

Now that we have taken time to thoroughly grasp how a carefully crafted list of characters in this historical narrative enhances our appreciation and interpretation of the story, we can move onto how the author uses *plot* as a form of movement in storytelling.

Plot

One of the most helpful ways to trace the flow of a narrative is to trace the plot’s arc. The narrative before us in 1 Kings 21 is presented in the form of what boils down to two chapters or acts: Act I—Naboth’s Vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-16) and Act II—Yahweh’s Justice (1 Kings 21:17-29). The arc of this narrative’s overall plot unfolds in an upside-down U-shaped tragedy.¹⁶³ We will address each chapter in turn. The first half of the plot of 1 Kings 21 is traced in TABLE 5 below.

¹⁶⁰ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, revised and updated (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 97.

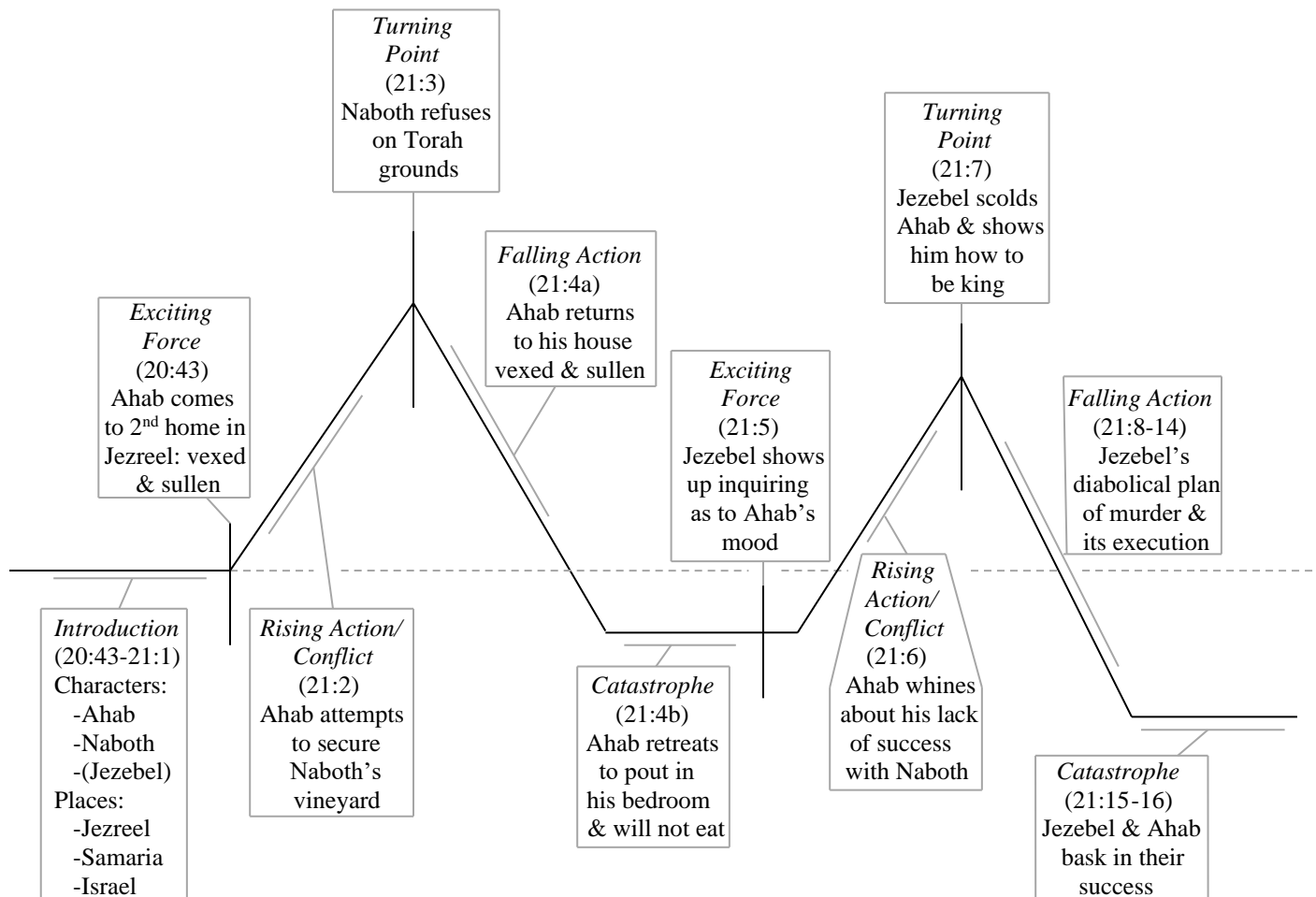
¹⁶¹ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 408.

¹⁶² Alter, *The Art of*, 98.

¹⁶³ See pages 52-3 above for more discussion.

TABLE 5

1 Kings 21 — Suffering & Justice
Act I: Naboth's Vineyard
1 Kings 20:43-21:16



This plot is advanced mostly by way of dialogue for the first seven verses and then by a combination of narration and dialogue from 8-16. There are two narrative arcs within these first sixteen verses. The first covers 21:1-4 and the second 21:5-16.

Narrative Arc 1—1 Kings 20:43-21:4

(1) Introduction/Exposition (creates a tone, provides the setting [time, place, etc.], introduces the characters and supplies some back story information)— 1 Kings 20:43-21:1— This story about Naboth’s Vineyard really begins with Ahab returning to his winter palace in Jezreel “vexed and sullen” (20:43) after the Aramean wars and his blunt encounter with the prophet who has condemned the release of Ben-hadad (20:35-42). This is the *exciting force* that gets the ball of our narrative rolling.¹⁶⁴

Jezreel serves as the setting for this story, but we learn that Ahab has palaces in both Jezreel and Samaria. A bit later we are reminded (21:7f) that Ahab is the king of Israel.

(2) Rising Action/Complication—(is set in motion by an exciting force and sustained by successive stages of conflict between the hero/protagonist and counter players or counter events leading up to a climax. This is the 'plot thickens' stage.)—1 Kings 21:2—In our narrative conflict is introduced when Ahab attempts to secure Naboth’s vineyard and convert it to a vegetable garden. Before this, Naboth’s inheritance was merely the last bit of land before the property that was the king’s second palace. Because of Ahab’s interest and of the weight of his royal personage, Naboth is faced with no ordinary choice: will he or will he not sell is the tension facing him and the readers of 1 Kings 21.

(3) Turning Point—(also called the *climax* of a story signifying the highest point of interest where the reader arrives at the greatest emotional response)—1 Kings 21:3—The answer to the question of whether or not Naboth will sell is answered with a firm “Yahweh forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.” The ground for Naboth’s decision is theological in nature and conjures up texts to the reader’s memory such as: Lev. 25:23-28 and Josh. 13:6-7.

¹⁶⁴ The *exciting force* is typically the beginning part of the *rising action*, but in this case, it is part of the *exposition*.

(4) Falling Action/ Resolution—(stresses the activity of the forces opposing the central character leading to resolution in narrative with a comic or U-shaped arc or disaster in a story with a tragic [inverted U-shaped] arc.)—1 Kings 21:4a—After his sales pitch is rejected, Ahab returns home to his house “resentful and vexed.”

(5) Catastrophe—(marks the tragic fall, usually with death of the central character coming as an unavoidable outworking of the action)—1 Kings 21:4b—Ahab lies down on his bed and turns his face away from the world in a grandiose pout. Ahab refuses to take any meals.

Narrative Arc 2—1 Kings 21:5-16

The action taking place here is closely related to what has gone on in the first four verses of this chapter and, therefore, needs no *introduction* or *exposition*. We begin with the *exciting force* of the introduction of Jezebel to this narrative.

(1) Exciting Force—1 Kings 21:5—Jezebel enters the narrative as a new character. We know her from previous encounters in 1 Kings. She is a pagan Sidonian princess, worker of evil, and committed Baalist (cf. 1 Kings 16:31—introduction as Ahab’s wife; 18:4-19—Jezebel cuts off the prophets of Yahweh; 19:1-2—she threatens Elijah; here in 21:5-21 where she outworks the plot to facilitate the “religious” and “legal” murder of Naboth; and 2 Kings 9:7-37 where she is executed). The plot in this second arc is energized by her appearance at the bedside of Ahab.

(2) Rising Action/Conflict—1 Kings 21:6—Ahab whines about his lack of success regarding his attempt to secure Naboth’s inheritance. The reader asks what will happen next?

(3) Turning Point—1 Kings 21:7—Jezebel scolds Ahab and tells him to eat something and to sit back and relax while she pulls on the trousers of this royal marriage so that she can secure the vineyard for Ahab’s vegetable garden. About all of this she literally says, “You now, yourself make/do kingship over Israel.”

(4) Falling Action/Resolution—1 Kings 21:8-14—This is the most substantive portion of this part of the narrative. It divides into two parts: Jezebel’s specific directives issued to the leading subjects of Jezreel—the elders and nobles—to *legally* and *religiously* effect the murder of Naboth and the robotic complicity of these men following her commands to the very letter.

Jezebel’s actions are: (1) She writes letters in Ahab’s name and with his royal seal to the elders and nobles of Jezreel, and (2) the letters contain specific directions—(i) proclaim a fast, (ii) set Naboth at the head of the people, (iii) set two worthless fellows opposite him, (iv) let these “sons of Belial” testify against Naboth saying “You have cursed (blessed) God and the king,” and (v) proceed to stone him to death.

The elders and nobles “actions” are: (1) they read Jezebels’ letters, and (2) the elders and nobles of Jezreel do exactly what Jezebel commands being good little lap dogs, they: (i) proclaim a fast, (ii) set Naboth at the head of the people, (iii) set two worthless fellows opposite him, (iv) have the worthless fellows testify against Naboth saying, “Naboth cursed (blessed) God and the king,” and (v) took Naboth outside the city and stoned him to death and notified Jezebel of the stoning and death.

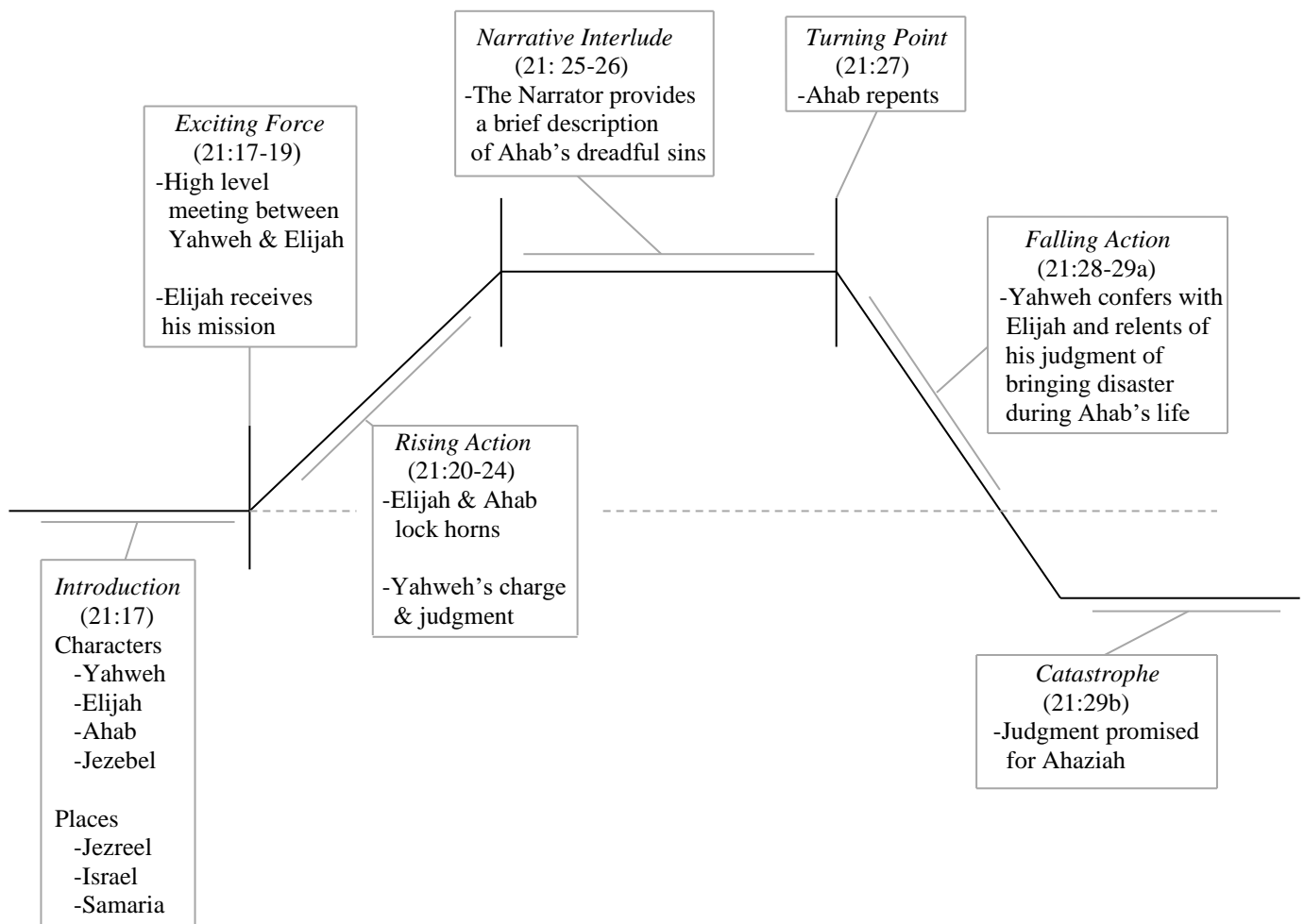
(5) Denouement—1 Kings 21:15-16—Jezebel and Ahab are back at the winter palace in Jezreel. Jezebel, upon hearing the report of the demise of Naboth sanitizes the account for Ahab, leaving out the bit about Naboth’s stoning. She encourages Ahab to take possession of the vineyard. Ahab is seemingly unconcerned about how Naboth died. He merely rises from his bed of pouting to take possession of his new vegetable garden. All is seemingly well in the court in Jezreel.

Whereas the first half of the overall narrative of 1 Kings 21 zeroes in on the suffering of Naboth and the callous affections of Ahab and Jezebel, the second half of the story highlights

Yahweh's justice. The second half of the plot of 1 Kings 21 is traced below in TABLE 6 below.

TABLE 6

1 Kings 21 — Suffering & Justice
Act II: Yahweh's Justice
1 Kings 21:17-29



The plot arc of this half of 1 Kings 21 formally reintroduces the figures of Yahweh and Elijah (who has been absent since the end of chapter 19). It is concerned with presenting Yahweh as the God from whom there are no secrets. He is fully aware of what has been transpiring.

Narrative Arc of 1 Kings 21:17-29

(1) Introduction/Exposition—1 Kings 21:17—Yahweh bursts onto the scene like a seemingly absolute figure. His word is coming in force to Elijah who has been absent since his dressing down by Yahweh in the wilderness in chapter 19. We, of course, know Elijah well. He first appears out of nowhere in 17:1-7—speaking on behalf of Yahweh about a coming drought as a result of Ahab’s wicked reign; in 17:8-16—Elijah aids the widow in Zarephath; in 17:17-24—he raises the widow’s son from the dead; in 18:1-40—Elijah forces the contest with the prophet of Baal at Carmel; in 18:41-46—Yahweh delivers rain and Elijah outruns Ahab’s chariot to Jezreel; in 19:1-8—he flees Jezebel; and in 19:9-18—Yahweh encourages Elijah.

The setting for this section is the winter court at Jezreel by narrative report and Yahweh’s heavenly courts by implication. As we shall see in verse 18, specifically, the action takes place within the vineyard of Naboth as Elijah is directed by Yahweh to do so.

(2) Rising Action/Conflict—1 Kings 21:18-24—The action kicks off with the *exciting force* (21:18-19) of the report of the high-level meeting between Yahweh and Elijah who receives his marching orders from Yahweh to go to Ahab at Naboth’s vineyard. Elijah asks a question and issues a curse. In an open display of Yahweh’s omniscience, Elijah’s first duty is to rhetorically ask Ahab if he has both murdered and taken possession. Elijah is then to issue a predictive curse promising that Ahab’s blood will be licked up by dogs.

After the meeting with Yahweh is over, conflict is introduced (21:20-24) when Elijah and Ahab renew their acquaintanceship and lock horns. As Yahweh’s man, Elijah, acting as a covenant prosecutor, issues a charge and the subsequent judgment. The charge is that Ahab has sold himself to do evil before Yahweh. The judgment is that Yahweh will bring disaster to Ahab.

The results of this judgment are threefold; (1) the end of Ahab's line, (2) that Ahab's house shall be like Jeroboam's (read: no more), and (3) that dogs shall eat Jezebel.

What happens next is the insertion of a narrative interlude by the author in 21:25-26.

(3) Narrative Parenthesis—1 Kings 21:25-26—Ahab's and Jezebel's sin is revisited.

(4) Turning Point—1 Kings 21:27—Ahab repents. In a narrative surprise Ahab receives the dire word from Elijah and tears off his clothes, puts on sackcloth, and begins a fast. These are outward expressions of contrition. Knowing who Ahab is we might find ourselves asking if this is for real.

(5) Falling Action/Resolution—1 Kings 21:28-29a—Yahweh confers with Elijah and verifies the legitimacy of Ahab's repentance. He relents from his judgment against Ahab sparing disaster during Ahab's lifetime.

(6) Catastrophe—1 Kings 21:29b—Ahab's house will still ultimately fall. The profound wickedness of this stable twenty-two-year reign will collapse under Yahweh's judgment.

Theological Implications

Six implications emerge from our study of this seminal chapter in the Kings. First, powerful sinners often count on no one (including God) to remember the victims whom they have preyed upon. But our God is an omniscient God who sees all and effects both temporal and final justice. No sin is hidden from God. Our story describes this in a clear narration (21:17-19) providing a concrete example of Moses's teaching in Numbers 32:23 regarding the certainty that every man's sin will surely be found out. All the efforts of Jezebel to obscure and hide the details and very existence of her murder plot have been clearly witnessed and judged by Yahweh. We will do well to learn this lesson.

Second, as is often the case, Yahweh uses prophets (cf. 1 Kings 20-22 where we

encounter several different prophets) to the focus attention on the importance of covenant keeping. Naboth is a wonderful example of someone who lives by faith and appeals to Yahweh's covenant teaching during his conversation with Ahab regarding ancestral inheritance likely referencing Leviticus 25:23 and/or Numbers 36:7. Yahweh employs Elijah as his mouthpiece to call out the sin of Ahab and Jezebel (21:17-19 and 20-24). Similarly today, called preachers speak for God in forthtelling God's Word admonishing us. Our time in personal Bible reading, reflection, and prayer affords each person the opportunity to keep covenant with our Redeemer.

Third, followers and lovers of God should expect to suffer because they are followers and lovers. This was the road traveled by Naboth who was murdered in spite of his covenant keeping. Jesus is the ultimate type of Naboth whose perfect obedience ended in an atoning death.

Fourth, sin has real consequences, but with repentance it also comes with God's genuine forgiveness. We might have to bear the consequences of our sin (as Ahab did), but this does not nullify the redemptive reality of experiencing "times of refreshing" (Acts 3:20) as a result of real repentance.

Fourth, there seems to be an ever-present temptation for people in powerful positions to sin by taking advantage of the "little guy." Whether this powerful person is a king or a mid-level municipal leader (like the elders in Jezreel), these people often make use of official institutions (like the courts) to inflict injustice for personal gain.

Fifth, the elegant composition by the writer of employing a construction of a *waw*-consecutive (using the same finite verb—וַיְהִי) with a temporal preposition prefixed to a Qal infinitive construct (the same in each instance—כִּשְׁמֹעַ) in verses 15 and 27 invites the close reader to sit up and take note asking why the narrator has done this and attempt to figure out

what is going on in verses 15 and 27. He is inviting a comparison. In each case we are told that something *happened* and someone came to *hear* something—Jezebel in 15 and Ahab in 27.

In verse 15 Jezebel receives the report of Naboth's murder by the gruesome means of stoning; in verse 27 Ahab receives the report of Yahweh's death sentence for his house and for him from Elijah. Jezebel takes this information to her husband and entreats him to seize Naboth's vineyard. The reason he can do this, says Jezebel, is "for Naboth (is) not living, but has died." She doubles up on Naboth being dead, but withholds the fact that she murdered him. She revels in hearing the report of Naboth's stoning. Conversely, Ahab, in a stunning turnaround for one committed to a lifelong program of evil, takes Yahweh's message to heart and repents—inwardly and outwardly—of his sin.

The implication here, so elegantly narrated for readers to unlock, is that the narrator wanted us to note by way of the same language in 15 and 27 that Ahab repented and Jezebel did not. Yahweh's word of doom for Jezebel in 21:23 did not melt her heart as did the prophecy aimed at Ahab. In reality, all over the world, some people repent and some remain hard-hearted to the end.

Sixth, the characterization of Jezebel throughout 1 and 2 Kings is that of a subversive Sidonian Baalist seeking every opportunity to upturn any covenantal fealty lovingly directed to Yahweh. We first see this in the parenthetical narratorial comment in 1 Kings 18:3b-4 where we learn that Jezebel is actively looking to snuff out the prophets of Yahweh. Her attempts at manipulation continue right up to the moment of her death where she dolls herself up in a vain attempt to seduce Jehu (2 Kings 9:30-37).

In our story Jezebel's motivation to systematically eliminate any worship of Yahweh is achieved manipulating both Torah and her husband to reach her goals. She makes sure two

witnesses speak against Naboth appealing to Deuteronomy's teaching (1 Kings 21:8-14).

Furthermore, after she successfully orchestrates the false prosecution and murder of Naboth, she misrepresents Naboth's murder to her husband by simply reporting that he is no longer alive, hiding her complicity (21:15).

The implications for readers of this masterful character portrayal alert us to the dangers of hardening our hearts against God and of following after a false god. We are called to recognize those who would appeal to Scripture or to the name of Jesus himself with false and manipulative motives attempting to deceive us and lead us away from God. We must be vigilant.

Chapter 6—A Narrative Critical Approach to Historical New Testament Story: An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study

Introduction

We last saw how the writer of 1 Kings 21 carefully wove together the facts of the events in the story of Naboth's Vineyard which involved a two-act structure and the appearance of some of the OT's most memorable figures including Elijah, Ahab, and Jezebel, not to mention Yahweh and Naboth himself. We now turn to the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch found in Acts 8:26-40 which involves the first recorded case of personal evangelism. We begin with our exegetical study before moving on to literary analysis.

A Narrative Critical Look at Acts 8:26-40—An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study

Background of Acts 8:26-40

This story, this historical narrative, is the second in the cycle of two stories involving Philip in Acts 8 who was introduced in 6:5 as one of the seven chosen to fairly administer the daily distribution amongst the burgeoning church. In the first story Philip evangelized the people of Samaria (8:5-25) after Christians were scattered (8:1-4) following the murder of Stephen (7:54-8:1). In Luke's narrative, Stephen and Philip function as a tandem. Both men were called in a service ministry, and yet, both were gifted gospel proclaimers (6:10 and 8:5) as well as performers of public signs and wonders (6:8 and 8:6). Stott characterizes the ministry of the two men as trailblazers for Gentile mission where "Stephen's contribution lay in his teaching about the temple, law and the Christ, and the effects of his martyrdom, while Philip's lay in his bold evangelization of the Samaritans and of an Ethiopian leader."¹

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, & the World: The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 144.

The early church began its mission in Jerusalem (Acts 6:8-8:3) and then moved on to Judea and Samaria (8:4-25) and finally to *the ends of the earth* (8:26-40) fulfilling in some sense the charge in Acts 1:8.² Witherington points out that “in the mythological geography of the ancient Greek historians and other writers as well, Ethiopia was quite frequently identified with the ends of the earth.”³

In Samaria Philip continued the early pattern of engagement in gospel proclamation for the growing church which focused on the conversion of a mass audience.⁴ In 8:26-40 (and also with Paul and Cornelius in chapters 9 and 10) Luke’s focus becomes that of personal conversion stories.

Literary Form and Structure

Luke writes in the fashion of other ancient Hellenistic historians, as Witherington notes, following “a procedure of arranging his data κατά γένος, by which is meant both by geographical region and therefor also by ethnic group.”⁵ Acts 8, with its Samaritans and an Ethiopian is a perfect example of this type of historiography.

Regarding the form of this pericope, Schnabel describes Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch as an *historical narrative*.⁶ Schnabel cleverly identifies the specific portions of this story as including:

geographical movement (vv. 26-28, 39-40), introduction of characters (v. 27), dialogue (vv. 30-36), and a *conversion report* (vv. 30-38, with the following elements: explanation of Old Testament Scripture, vv. 30-35a; proclamation of the good news about Jesus, v.

² William R. Larkin Jr., *Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 131.

³ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 290. See this for a helpful discussion regarding the list of authors involved.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 338.

⁵ Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 290.

⁶ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 421.

35b; baptism, vv. 36-38). The passage contains several short pieces of *direct speech* (of the angel in vv. 26b-d; of the Spirit in 29b; of Philip in v. 30d; of the Ethiopian official in vv. 31b, 34, 36d-e); the second part of the narrative is driven by the three questions that the Ethiopian is asking.⁷

This is a helpful list noting the narrative elements of plot movement, characterization, setting, and the instances of narration and dialogue. We will have more to say about this when we get to the literary analysis.

Translation



26—Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, this is a desert (road).”

27—And he rose and went. And, behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was over all of her treasury, who had come to Jerusalem in order to worship.

28—And he was returning and was sitting in his chariot and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

29—And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go to and join yourself to this chariot.”

30—And after running up, Philip heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and he said, “Do you even understand what you are reading?”

31—And he said, “How can I, unless someone will guide me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

32—And the portion of Scripture that he was reading was this,

As a sheep to slaughter he was led,

And as a lamb before him who shears him (is) silent,

So he does not open his mouth.

33— In humiliation his judgment was taken away;

His generation, who will fully relate (it)?

For his life is being taken away from the earth.

34—And the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I beg of you, about whom does the prophet speak this? About himself or about someone else?”

35—And then Philip opened his mouth and beginning from Scripture proclaimed unto him Jesus.

36—And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Behold water! What prevents me from being baptized?”

38—And he ordered the chariot to stop and they both went down into the water, Philip and also the eunuch, and he baptized him.

39—And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any longer, but he went on his way rejoicing.

40—But Philip found himself in Azotus, and passing through he was proclaiming the good news to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, 421.

26— Ἄγγελος δὲ κυρίου ἐλάλησεν πρὸς Φίλιππον λέγων· ἀνάστηθι καὶ πορεύου κατὰ μεσημβρίαν ἐπὶ τὴν ὁδὸν τὴν καταβαίνουσαν ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ εἰς Γάζαν, αὕτη ἐστὶν ἔρημος.

Bruce avers that this second part of the story about Philip “is told in a style which is in some respects reminiscent of the Old Testament narratives of Elijah.”⁸

The postpositive δὲ combined with the language of the first clause—a new character in the form of the Ἄγγελος ... κυρίου—helps announce a new narrative. Philip is prompted by the Ἄγγελος ... κυρίου to move to a new destination for his next evangelistic encounter (he had previously ministered in Samaria (Acts 8:5-25) where he had ministered with the help of Peter and John in handling the troublesome Simon the magician). The text is not clear as to whether Philip left for Gaza from Samaria or Jerusalem, but the phrase in 26b ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ εἰς Γάζαν favors a departure from Jerusalem.⁹ Luke records the presence of divine intervention on many occasions in the book of Acts (cf. 5:19; 10:3, 7, 22; 11:13; 12:7-11; 27:23).¹⁰

The pleonastic co-ordination of the two imperatives ἀνάστηθι καὶ πορεύου mirrors the Hebraic idiomatic template.¹¹ Philip is to “rise and go” κατὰ μεσημβρίαν. The κατὰ here indicates a spatial marker of direction—*toward*.¹² The phrase κατὰ μεσημβρίαν which should be rendered “toward the south” can also be read “at noon,” but this is unlikely since, as Bock notes,

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 174

⁹ So argued by Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 294. With this stated it should be noted that Stott, *The Spirit, the Church*, 159 seems to favor a departure from Samaria whereas Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 283 asserts that we cannot know for sure. In what may be the wisest take on this whole matter, Fernando goes on to note that “in this vividly written piece Luke is not interested in specifics of geography,” (283).

¹⁰ See Schnabel, *Acts*, 424 and Bock, *Acts*, 340.

¹¹ *BDF* §419 (5), 216.

¹² *BDAG*, 511 and so Bock, *Acts*, 340.

the “fact that travel did not take place in the heat of midday.”¹³ The participle τὴν καταβαίνουσιν is functioning as an accusative substantive.¹⁴ Luke is likely referring to what is known as Old Gaza which was destroyed in 98-96 BC by Alexander Jannaeus because of the use of the identifying phrase αὕτη ἐστὶν ἔρημος.¹⁵ This brief sentence— αὕτη ἐστὶν ἔρημος—is a good example of a narratorial aside where the narrator provides some additional information outside of the story by *telling* us something as opposed to *showing*.

27— καὶ ἀναστὰς ἐπορεύθη. καὶ ἰδοὺ ἀνὴρ Αἰθίοψ εὐνοῦχος δυνάστης Κανδάκης βασιλίσσης Αἰθιοπῶν, ὃς ἦν ἐπὶ πάσης τῆς γάζης αὐτῆς, ὃς ἐληλύθει προσκυνήσων εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ,

The construction of the aorist participle (treated as finite) ἀναστὰς with the aorist finite verb ἐπορεύθη is one of attendant circumstances and is best rendered “And he rose and went.”¹⁶ These are the same two verbs used by the angel of the Lord in verse 26’s speech and are used here to indicate Philip’s immediate obedience to the angel’s directive.

The interjection ἰδοὺ serves to indicate a sense of surprise that Philip is encountering another traveler on this desert road.¹⁷ This person is identified by three qualities: (1) he is a “man of Ethiopia,” (2) he is a “eunuch,” and (3) he is a “court official” of the queen of Ethiopia, specifically, her treasurer. We shall comment on each of these qualities in turn.

In identifying this man as an Ethiopian, Luke is telling us that he hails from Nubia which

¹³ Bock, *Acts*, 340. So also. Larkin Jr., *Acts*, 131.

¹⁴ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 619-21 for more discussion.

¹⁵ So argued by Schnabel, *Acts*, 424; Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 294; Stott, *The Spirit, the Church*, 160; Bruce, *The Book of*, 174; and Bock, *Acts*, 340.

¹⁶ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 640-45 for more discussion.

¹⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 341 and Fernando, *Acts*, 283.

is a kingdom south of Egypt.¹⁸ The fact that this man was Nubian likely indicates that he was dark-skinned.¹⁹ Bock and Witherington correctly read the inclusion of Philip evangelizing this man as evidence of the beginning of the gospel's spread among new ethnic groups and of the transcultural nature of the followers and lovers of Jesus and the growing church.²⁰

The Ethiopian man is recognized as a εὐνοῦχος. The question before us is how is Luke using the term here. The NT employs this word in three different senses. A εὐνοῦχος can refer to a man “who, without a physical operation, is by nature incapable of begetting children, *impotent male*” (cf. Matt. 19:12a).²¹ The term may also be employed figuratively of a man who is celibate because he refrains from marrying (cf. Matt. 19:12c).²² The third way in which εὐνοῦχος is defined is to describe a man who has been castrated.²³

In the context of this passage it is likely that εὐνοῦχος is being used in its literal sense since the term δυνάστης (*court official*) is used in the same clause.²⁴ Also arguing for this understanding of this meaning of εὐνοῦχος in this context is the irony of him reading from Isaiah 53 so close to 56:3-8 which promises the removal of the ban (cf. Deut. 23:1) of a eunuch's full participation in worship which obviously would have affected this man in his recent trip to

¹⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, 424; Bock, *Acts*, 341; Bruce, *The Book of*, 174; and Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 295.

¹⁹ So also Schnabel, *Acts*, 424; Bock, *Acts*, 341; Stott, *The Spirit, the Church*, 160; Schnabel, *Acts*, 424; and Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 295.

²⁰ Bock, *Acts*, 341 and Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 295.

²¹ *BDAG*, 409.

²² *BDAG*, 409.

²³ *BDAG*, 409.

²⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 341 and Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 296.

Jerusalem.²⁵ This pericope (Acts 8:26-40) along with Philip's evangelization of Samaria in 8:5-25 represents the beginning of the fulfillment of this promise of Yahweh made in Isaiah 56.

The eunuch as a δυνάστης, who is later said to oversee the queen of Ethiopia's treasury, is best understood not as a ruling sovereign in her court, but as a key functionary.²⁶ There is a possible bit of wordplay suggesting an additional layer of irony in this verse as it relates to the previous verse. In verse 26 we concluded that Philip was directed to travel down the road by the deserted old town of Γάζα. Here in verse 27 the eunuch is described as in charge of all of the queen's γάζα. So we have Philip (and the eunuch) traveling along a *desert* road, running past a *deserted* town, and encountering a man starved to hear the *treasury* of Yahweh's Word explicated. Luke is indeed a clever writer!

The eunuch served the queen of Ethiopia whose name is not mentioned, but was known by the title of Κανδάκη. Schnabel posits that this might have been Queen Nawidemak who ruled over Nubia during the first half of the first century AD.²⁷

The eunuch was on a return trip home after coming to Jerusalem to worship. The final clause in verse 27 contains the construction of the consummative pluperfect ἐληλύθει which emphasizes completed action²⁸ and the future participle προσκυνήσων which indicates the purpose of his visit.²⁹ The question here is whether or not the eunuch is a proselyte or a God-fearing Gentile. If we are to accept that he was literally a eunuch (as argued above) it is unlikely

²⁵ See Bock, *Acts*, 341; Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 296; Schnabel, *Acts*, 424-25; Bruce, *The Book of*, 174; and Fernando, *Acts*, 283 for helpful discussions of this dynamic.

²⁶ *BDAG*, 263-64.

²⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, 425.

²⁸ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 586.

²⁹ So Schnabel, *Acts*, 425 and Bock, *Acts*, 341.

that he was a proselyte.³⁰ What seems to be most important for Luke is to present this man as someone who believes on the promises of Yahweh as provided in Scripture and is living his life accordingly even if we might not be able to fully identify him.³¹

28— ἦν τε ὑποστρέφων καὶ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τοῦ ἅρματος αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνεγίνωσκεν τὸν προφήτην Ἡσαΐαν. The compound periphrastic construction of the finite imperfect (ἦν) and the two present participles (ὑποστρέφων and καθήμενος) yields the sense of an action having begun in the past and progressing for some time. This is not a casual reader of Scripture. The eunuch was *returning* and *sitting* in τοῦ ἅρματος αὐτοῦ (“his chariot”). The term ἅρμα is used only four times in the NT—three times in this pericope and once in Revelation 9:9 where it denotes a war chariot. The context here plainly conveys the sense of a traveling carriage which likely had a driver.³² That the eunuch had a driven carriage and possessed a scroll of the book of Isaiah suggests he was a man of some wealth.³³

The narrator tells us that the eunuch was reading the book of Isaiah. The imperfect ἀνεγίνωσκεν suggests, as Schnabel avers, that the eunuch “was involved in reading over an extended period of time.”³⁴ That the eunuch was reading the text of Isaiah out loud speaks to what was the custom in the ancient times as it aided the memory.³⁵

29— εἶπεν δὲ τὸ πνεῦμα τῷ Φιλίππῳ· πρόσελθε καὶ κολλήθητι τῷ ἅρματι τούτῳ.

³⁰ See Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 297 and Bruce, *The Book of*, 175 who have brief, but helpful discussions about this issue.

³¹ Larkin Jr., *Acts*, 133.

³² See BDAG, 132, Schnabel, *Acts*, 425 and Bruce, *The Book of*, 174.

³³ Fernando, *Acts*, 283 and Bock, *Acts*, 342.

³⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, 425. He also suggests that the eunuch had purchased the scroll in Jerusalem and had been reading and reflecting on the way home.

³⁵ So Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 297 and Bock, *Acts*, 342.

A new character is introduced in verse 29, namely the Holy Spirit. We also return to a bit of dialogue in our story.

Bruce suggests that the angel of the Lord in verse 26 and the πνεῦμα here in verse 29 are two ways for Luke to refer to the same person.³⁶ It does, however, appear more likely to treat the appearance of the angel of the Lord and the Spirit as two distinct persons reflecting the variety of ways in which God opts for directing those who proclaim the gospel.³⁷

The Spirit directs Philip with two imperatives to πρόσσελθε καὶ κολλήθητι (“Go to and join yourself”) echoing the double imperative command of the angel to “Rise and go” (ἀνάστηθι καὶ πορεύου) in verse 26 and the respective immediate obedience of Philip who “rose and went” (ἀναστὰς ἐπορεύθη) in verse 27. Fernando adds that this prompt obedience by Philip to directly approach a foreign official of some import would take a measure of boldness.³⁸

30— προσδραμὼν δὲ ὁ Φίλιππος ἤκουσεν αὐτοῦ ἀναγινώσκοντος Ἡσαΐαν τὸν προφήτην καὶ εἶπεν· ἄρά γε γινώσκεις ᾧ ἀναγινώσκεις; The temporal participle προσδραμὼν (“after running up”) sets the stage for Philip’s encounter with the eunuch.

The narrator confirms our thinking that the eunuch was reading aloud by stating that Philip *heard* (ἤκουσεν) the eunuch reading from the prophet Isaiah. Luke records Philip’s initial words to the eunuch with an emphatic construction of an interrogative particle (ἄρά) and the emphatic particle γε producing the sense of “even” or “indeed.” Our translation settles on “Do you *even*...” Philip has correctly grasped why he was directed here to this man and obviously means this as a loving inquiry. Nevertheless, this is a bold way to introduce oneself to a stranger.

³⁶ Bruce, *The Book of*, 175.

³⁷ Larkin Jr., *Acts*, 132. See also Bock, *Acts*, 342 who argues for the distinction between the angel of the Lord (26) and the Spirit (29).

³⁸ Fernando, *Acts*, 284.

The two indicative verbs γινώσκεις (“do you know”) and ἀναγινώσκεις (“you are reading”) are part of an elegant composition by Luke employing *assonance*. Note the repeated vowel sounds of κεις in each of the verbs.³⁹

31— ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· πῶς γὰρ ἂν δυνάιμην ἐὰν μή τις ὁδηγήσῃ με; παρεκάλεσέν τε τὸν Φίλιππον ἀναβάντα καθίσαι σὺν αὐτῷ. Philip’s inquiry is responded to by the eunuch posing a return question of his own.

The γὰρ in a question is left untranslated.⁴⁰ The verb δυνάιμην is a *potential optative* in the context of this sentence and indicates “a consequence in the future of an unlikely condition.”⁴¹ Luke uses the optative mood here to demonstrate that the eunuch knows he will not fully understand what he is reading unless he has an interpretive guide. The accusative τὸν Φίλιππον serves as the substantive of the infinitive καθίσαι.⁴²

The eunuch admits that he cannot correctly interpret the text he is reading unless he has the proper *guide* (ὁδηγήσῃ; 3s Fut Act Ind of ὁδηγέω). Witherington likens Philip’s role unto being a *hermeneutical key* helping the eunuch to understand to whom Isaiah was referring.⁴³ Bock affirms that “Philip serves as an interpretive guide to God’s wisdom, both to Scripture and God’s plan in Jesus. He fulfills the mission to which God has called this member of the church.”⁴⁴

³⁹ BDF, §488 (1b), 259.

⁴⁰ BDF, §452 (1), 236.

⁴¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 483-84.

⁴² Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 194-95.

⁴³ Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 297.

⁴⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 343.

32— ἡ δὲ περιοχὴ τῆς γραφῆς ἣν ἀνεγίνωσκεν ἦν αὕτη· ὥς πρόβατον ἐπὶ σφαγὴν ἤχθη καὶ ὥς ἄμυνός ἐναντίον τοῦ κείραντος αὐτὸν ἄφωνος, οὕτως οὐκ ἀνοίγει τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ.

The narrator now reveals to us from what portion of Scripture the eunuch is reading here in verse 32b-33. He is reading from Isaiah 53:7b-8a. The Greek text reports the quote from Isaiah in the form of verse which follows after the LXX.⁴⁵ Bock makes the subtle observation that the passage from Isaiah “is cited in a form like the LXX, but the sense reflects the MT.”⁴⁶ This nearly direct quote from the LXX has only a few emendations such as the use of the aorist participle κείραντος in Acts as opposed to the present κείροντος in the LXX.⁴⁷

Schnabel reminds us that this portion being read aloud by the eunuch is part of a larger portion running from Isaiah 52:13-53:12:

which speaks of a servant of Yahweh who suffers intense humiliation and affliction, who is deprived of justice and is treated like an outcast. He suffers willingly, silent like a lamb about to be slaughtered, without complaint. He is killed before he can have descendants, and he is buried. However, he is eventually vindicated by God and exalted and honored, even by kings.⁴⁸

The fact that Luke does not include any mention of this Servant’s ultimate exoneration or his atoning work is, as Witherington asserts, as if Luke “was deliberately avoiding a theology of atonement” because “the point at issue here is not the deeds of the Servant, but rather the identity of the Servant.”⁴⁹ Witherington is probably on to something here because focusing in Christ’s identity will help Philip in the initial roads of evangelism. Schnabel puts it this way noting that

⁴⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, 427.

⁴⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 343.

⁴⁷ Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 298.

⁴⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, 427.

⁴⁹ Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 298.

Luke “uses Scripture here to emphasize that Jesus is God’s agent.”⁵⁰

33— Ἐν τῇ ταπεινώσει [αὐτοῦ] ἡ κρίσις αὐτοῦ ἦρθη· τὴν γενεὰν αὐτοῦ τίς διηγέσεται; ὅτι αἴρεται ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς ἡ ζωὴ αὐτοῦ. The quote of Isaiah 53 in verse continues. The emphasis on the suffering and death serve to point out that these are God ordained parts of the earthly mission of the Christ as predicted in the OT.⁵¹

The death of the Servant is described as unjust; Luke writes “his justice was taken away” (ἡ κρίσις αὐτοῦ ἦρθη). Later in the verse the same verb (αἴρεται) is used to describe how his life was taken away/up from the earth. The whole concept of the Servant’s death is narrated as a *humiliation* (ταπεινώσει). Bock notes that in this context the use of ταπείνωσις denotes both the ideas of *submission* and *injustice*.⁵²

34— ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ εὐνοῦχος τῷ Φιλίππῳ εἶπεν· δέομαί σου, περὶ τίνος ὁ προφήτης λέγει τοῦτο; περὶ ἑαυτοῦ ἢ περὶ ἑτέρου τινός; The eunuch poses a follow up question which has been asked by readers of this text from Isaiah ever since, which is just who exactly is this Servant being narrated from 52:13-53:12. He inquires about the two logical options: does the prophet speak of himself or someone else? Bock notes that first century Jews “may well have considered three candidates for the subject of the text: (1) the prophet, (2) Israel, and (3) another individual such as Elijah or a Messiah.”⁵³

This verse begins with another construction of attendant circumstances pairing the aorist participle ἀποκριθεὶς with the finite aorist verb εἶπεν yielding, “And the eunuch answered Philip

⁵⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, 427.

⁵¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, 427. Against Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 298, who argues that the intention of verse 33 is difficult to grasp.

⁵² Bock, *Acts*, 343.

⁵³ Bock, *Acts*, 344, Schnabel, *Acts*, 427 and Bruce, *The Book of*, 176 also cover this ground.

and said...”

35— ἀνοίξας δὲ ὁ Φίλιππος τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τῆς γραφῆς ταύτης εὐηγγελίσατο αὐτῷ τὸν Ἰησοῦν. Our story returns to narration informing us of what Philip does in response to the inquiries of the eunuch.

The aorist participle ἀνοίξας partners with the finite aorist verb εὐηγγελίσατο in yet another construction of attendant circumstances producing, “And then Philip *opened* his mouth...and... *proclaimed*.” The aorist participle ἀρξάμενος indicates the result of Philip speaking.

We note that Philip *began* (ἀρξάμενος) with Scripture to *proclaim* the gospel (εὐηγγελίσατο) of Jesus. This means that Philip started with Isaiah 53 and moved on to other portions of the OT that point to Jesus as the Christ.⁵⁴ This idea of a general reference to OT Scripture and the topic of Messiah recalls another Lukan passage (Luke 24:44-47) where, in this instance, Jesus appeals to the OT (the Law and the Prophets) to proclaim about himself.⁵⁵ Philip does so, beginning with the image of a suffering Messiah which would have been unheard of in the first century.⁵⁶ That is, of course, excepting Jesus who referred to himself in terms of his suffering in Mark 10:45.

Luke does not mention the specifics of the conversation between Philip and the eunuch, but since it led to the eunuch becoming a believer we can assume certain important doctrinal matters were included. Fernando concludes that Philip likely covered the rest of Isaiah 53 “where the substitutionary nature of Jesus’ death is presented.”⁵⁷ Larkin wonders if Philip may have

⁵⁴ So Bock, *Acts*, 344, Schnabel, *Acts*, 428 and Bruce, *The Book of*, 177.

⁵⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 344.

⁵⁶ Stott, *The Spirit, the Church*, 161 and Fernando, *Acts*, 284.

⁵⁷ Fernando, *Acts*, 284.

turned over to Isaiah 56:3-8 sharing the anticipatory promise of a time where there would be no restrictions placed on believing eunuchs because of the Messiah.⁵⁸ Schnabel adroitly observes that since Philip's earlier ministry in Samaria (8:5-25) involved the call for repentance and God's offer of forgiveness for one's sin and the promise of salvation that he likely addressed these subjects in his evangelistic outreach to the eunuch as well.⁵⁹

36— ὥς δὲ ἐπορεύοντο κατὰ τὴν ὁδόν, ἦλθον ἐπὶ τι ὕδωρ, καὶ φησιν ὁ εὐνοῦχος· ἰδοὺ ὕδωρ, τί κωλύει με βαπτισθῆναι; This verse interrupts the narration about Philip's gospel proclamation to provide some new information about the immediate setting as they travel along in the eunuch's carriage.

The imperfect verb ἐπορεύοντο ("they were going along") indicates the continuance of their journey and gospel session. The narrator tells us that ἦλθον ἐπὶ τι ὕδωρ ("they came to some water") and the eunuch asks about being baptized. This narration requires a bit of *reading between the lines* from the reader of this story. We must presume two things have happened that have not been recorded in Luke's story: (1) some sort of real conversion has happened for the eunuch. The fact that the Western tradition adds verse 37 with its dialogue of Philip asking about a profession of faith and the eunuch responding affirmatively confirms that early copyists wanted this kind of information to be in the text.⁶⁰ And (2) there must have been some sort of discussion

⁵⁸ Larkin Jr., *Acts*, 135.

⁵⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, 428.

⁶⁰ The UBS translation committee, by way of an {A} rating has concluded that Acts 8:37 is a Western tradition (E) addition. The verse lacks support from the likes of well-attested witnesses such as $\mathfrak{p}^{45,74}$, (x), A, B, C, 33, 81, and 614. Instead, it is testified by a host of minor variants from E, some minuscules, and $\text{it}^{\text{gig, h}}$ and vg^{mss} . See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1985), 359-60 for more discussion. The actual text reads: εἶπε δὲ ὁ Φίλιππος, Εἰ πιστεύεις ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας, ἔξεστιν. ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ εἶπε, Πιστεύω τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ εἶναι τὸν Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν.

about the nature and importance of baptism. It is also possible that the eunuch had become familiar with the concept of baptism during his time in Jerusalem.⁶¹ With this stated, the current context of this pericope and that of the previous one of Philip's ministry in Samaria where Acts 8:12 talks about him preaching the good news about God's kingdom and the name of Jesus leading to many people believing and then very shortly thereafter being baptized argue for a similar pattern unfolding here.

The eunuch's inquiry about anything *preventing* (κωλύει) him from being baptized could be related to his understanding that he would not be permitted full inclusion into Judaism.⁶² This is where the speculation of Philip possibly sharing the information found in Isaiah 56:3-8 when Yahweh promises a time—employing vivid imagery—when right believing eunuchs will no longer be *cut off* (חָתָּךְ) from full fellowship.

38— καὶ ἐκέλευσεν στήναι τὸ ἄρμα καὶ κατέβησαν ἀμφοτέροι εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ, ὃ τε Φίλιππος καὶ ὁ εὐνοῦχος, καὶ ἐβάπτισεν αὐτόν. The narrator tells us that the eunuch *ordered* (ἐκέλευσεν) his driver to stop the chariot by the water indicating that Philip—in an unincluded bit of narration—did not offer any objections to a baptism taking place.

Philip must have discerned that any profession of faith in Jesus while traveling down this road was genuine because he proceeds down to the water with the eunuch and baptizes him.⁶³ The fact the narrator indicates that κατέβησαν ἀμφοτέροι εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ suggests an overtone of immersion as the mode of baptism.⁶⁴ Schnabel goes so far as to render ἐβάπτισεν as “he

⁶¹ Both Bock, *Acts*, 345 and Fernando, *Acts*, 284 suggest this possibility.

⁶² Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 299-300.

⁶³ Fernando, *Acts*, 284 and Bruce, *The Book of*, 177-78 both make this same argument.

⁶⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 345.

immersed.”⁶⁵

39— ὅτε δὲ ἀνέβησαν ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος, πνεῦμα κυρίου ἤρπασεν τὸν Φίλιππον καὶ οὐκ εἶδεν αὐτὸν οὐκέτι ὁ εὐνοῦχος, ἐπορεύετο γὰρ τὴν ὁδὸν αὐτοῦ χαίρων. The narrator continues with his *immersion* imagery relating that “they came up out of the water.” Upon doing so we experience a dramatic change in the movement of the story with a sudden appearance of the Holy Spirit and a change of setting for Philip.⁶⁶ Here we see the continuance of God’s direction of Philip’s ministry of gospel proclamation through the angel of the Lord and the Spirit (cf. 8:26, 29).

The verb ἀρπάζω meaning to *carry away* or *snatch* speaks to a dynamic of God being very present and at work in Philip’s life as we have seen throughout this pericope.⁶⁷ The lack of more time spent together prevents Philip and the eunuch from developing any real friendship as the narrator shares that the eunuch never saw Philip again. Even so, as the eunuch continues his homeward trip “he went on his way rejoicing.” The participle χαίρων shows that the result of all that has happened ends up with *rejoicing*.

40— Φίλιππος δὲ εὐρέθη εἰς Ἀζωτον· καὶ διερχόμενος εὐηγγελίζετο τὰς πόλεις πάσας ἕως τοῦ ἐλθεῖν αὐτὸν εἰς Καισάρειαν. The narration continues by providing some information regarding Philip’s new northbound destination: Azotus. This is the OT city known as Ashdod which, as Bock relates, was “restored by the Romans and given to Herod.”⁶⁸

The aorist passive εὐρέθη maintains a degree of autonomy from its active voice

⁶⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, 429.

⁶⁶ A few Western witnesses add πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπεπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν εὐνοῦχον ἀγγέλους δὲ κυρίου (“the Holy Spirit fell on the eunuch and the angel of [the Lord]”) in a likely attempt to promote contextual consistency. Metzger and the textual committee argue that the short reading appearing in the NA²⁸ text is preferred. See Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, 360-61.

⁶⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 346.

⁶⁸ Bock, *Acts*, 346.

denotation and retains something of an intransitive-deponent meaning.⁶⁹ Thus it is best to render this as *he* (Philip) *found himself*.

Just as we have seen in Samaria and Gaza, we are told that Philip continues his ministry of gospel proclamation moving all the way up to Caesarea. The only other time we hear of Philip is when he hosts a visit by Paul and company in his home in Caesarea where we learn that Philip's four daughters prophesy (21:8-9).

Literary Analysis

The story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 has close ties to the previous narrative account (8:5-25) because Philip continues to be the protagonist. In some real sense the two stories involving Philip represent the beginning of the outworking of the command by Jesus in 1:8 to the burgeoning church to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (ESV) since Philip proclaims the gospel in Samaria (8:5-25) and personally evangelizes an Ethiopian court officer on his way back home (for the Jews, the virtual *end of the earth*; 8:26-40). This story combines narration and dialogue and does not contain the typical conflict in its plotting in order to move the story along with an arch villain or calamitous circumstance requiring a focused turning point. We begin with a look at what the narrator is up to in this story.

Narrator

The story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch is narrated with evocative details involving: an angelic and Holy Spirit direction of Philip's movements and to whom he should speak, an enthusiastic convert in the form of an Ethiopian court officer who is reading the

⁶⁹ BDF, §313, 164-65.

Greek text of Isaiah 53, and a gifted Bible teacher who opens up the story of Jesus Christ.⁷⁰

As briefly noted above, the two stories involving Philip in Acts 8 represent a clear narratorial effort, as Witherington relates, to “portray in miniature a foreshadowing of the fulfillment of the rest of Jesus’ mandate (Acts 1:8) in Acts 8, for here we find stories both about a mission in Samaria and (with the eunuch) in Judea, but also in the case of the eunuch a mission that potentially would reach the ends of the earth, as the eunuch went on his way back to Ethiopia.”⁷¹

The narrator focuses on the portrayal of individual conversion highlighting the personal side of evangelism.⁷² Up until this episode in Acts the narration has exclusively told the story of mass conversions; this is so even with the first dealing with Philip ministering in Samaria (8:5-25).

The story of Philip’s evangelistic outreach to the Ethiopian eunuch bears no consequence on the overall movement of the plot in Acts. The Jerusalem church does not receive word of the conversion and baptism of the Gentile convert in order to comment on whether or not this action taken by Philip was proper.⁷³ Tannehill asserts that the narrator’s focus in this story is to highlight the importance “for what it anticipates and symbolizes rather than for its consequences. It is prophetic of the gospel’s reach.”⁷⁴

The narrator displays a keen interest in Gentiles who *worship* God or who are described

⁷⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, 421-22.

⁷¹ Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 290.

⁷² Bock, *Acts*, 338.

⁷³ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two: The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). 107-08.

⁷⁴ Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two*, 108.

as *devout*. We see this with both the Ethiopian who is pictured as a God worshiper (8:27) and Cornelius who is portrayed as *devout* and God-fearing (10:2). In both of these episodes the man involved in personal evangelism (Philip with the Ethiopian and Peter with Cornelius) receives a robust divine guidance as to how and where to proceed.⁷⁵

This bit of narration is included in Acts clearly as a means to tell the story of the fulfillment of the promise in Isaiah 56:3-8 of removing the ban on eunuchs from being cut off from full participation in God's assembly.⁷⁶

Genre

There are at least two ways to categorize the book of Acts. First, Pervo argues that Acts is a historical novel written by Luke composed as a “form in which to cast his vision of a utopia.”⁷⁷ It is Pervo's contention that Luke is not a truth-telling writer of his (purported) historical novel since he was “engaged in activity at least partly frivolous and he did not always tell the truth. In his defense, I mention Jesus, who was also sometimes frivolous and who told parables, fictional, sometimes entertaining, stories that crystallized the essence of his message.”⁷⁸ It has already been argued earlier in this work that the present writer embraces the historicity of God working in his creation and the historical reliability of the revealed Word of God. Pervo's posture is a stated materialism that is not even well-defended. As to his assertion that Luke's composition is a *historical novel* which purposefully deceives with lies, we look to Sir Philip Sidney who asserts of the poetic maker that “he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to

⁷⁵ Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two*, 111.

⁷⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, 425 and Fernando, *Acts*, 283.

⁷⁷ Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 138.

⁷⁸ Pervo, *Profit with*, 138.

affirm that to be true which is false.”⁷⁹ One suspects that Pervo’s willingness to confuse the materialism that denies the historicity of Scripture’s narrative accounts with what he asserts are the unreliable fictive stories (such as Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch) of Luke might be grounded in the Enlightenment’s (and the subsequent literary criticism of poetic making and of biblical literature as well) focus on severing any connection of the supernatural to the empirical world by denying Aristotle’s principle of imitation.⁸⁰

Second, although Acts contains speeches and elements of biography it is perhaps best to think of Luke’s work as a historical narrative that recalls events of the recent past having to deal with the burgeoning church of Jesus Christ.⁸¹ Bock adds that the book of Acts, akin to the Maccabees, is a “sociological, historical, and theological monograph.”⁸² Acts is a historical narrative containing and making artistic use of all of the elements of narrative.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is a historical narrative containing dialogue and narration. Philip fills the role of the protagonist hero while the eunuch is something more of a *foil* to Philip in that he highlights, with respect to biblical and theological knowledge, all the ways in which he is unlike Philip. The conflict—the eunuch’s lack of understanding as he reads Isaiah 53—is quickly resolved in this minimal plot with Philip’s exposition of the Old Testament’s teaching about Jesus.

Setting

Because of what transpires in the previous pericope involving Philip’s ministry in

⁷⁹ Sir Philip Sidney, “The Defence of Poesy,” in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 235.

⁸⁰ See Abrams, *The Mirror*, 272-85 for more discussion on this topic.

⁸¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, 38.

⁸² Bock, *Acts*, 8.

Samaria (8:5-25) there is some question of where our story begins: Samaria or Jerusalem. That the narrative does not really tell us for sure is an indication that the narrator's interests lie in communicating matters other than Philip's point of departure.⁸³ If we were pressed to make an assertion, a case can be made that the travel language in the second half of 8:26 describing a trip ranging from "*Jerusalem to Gaza*" supports setting the beginning of this story with Philip having returned to Jerusalem from Samaria for a season before being directed by the angel of the Lord.

Jerusalem is also part of this story by way of reference since the Ethiopian eunuch is said to have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to worship (8:27). At the close of this narrative (8:40) we are told that Philip travels from Gaza through Azotus (Ashdod) preaching the gospel through various unnamed towns and ultimately ending up in the coastal town of Caesarea (where Paul visits him and his four daughters in 21:8).

In what appears to be purposeful, the narrator sets the bulk of this story in an undisclosed stretch of a desert road on the way to old Gaza which had been destroyed circa 98-96 BC. Many argue for "Old Gaza" because of the narratorial addition of the phrase "This is a desert (road)" in 8:26.⁸⁴ We do not learn much about the physical conditions along the way of this desert road except that there is a body of water large enough to conduct a baptism (8:36) and that this was a surprise find (ἰδοὺ ὕδωρ, 8:36). The clauses κατέβησαν ἀμφότεροι εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ ("They both went down into the water") in 8:38 and ὅτε δὲ ἀνέβησαν ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος ("And when they came up out of the water") in 8:39 strongly suggests this body of water was deep enough for a baptism by immersion. While Philip travels on foot, the Ethiopian is wealthy enough to travel by way of a

⁸³ Fernando, *Acts*, 283 argues this point.

⁸⁴ So argued by Schnabel, *Acts*, 424; Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 294; Stott, *The Spirit, the Church*, 160; Bruce, *The Book of*, 174; and Bock, *Acts*, 340.

chariot (8:28).

Characterization

This story contains the depiction of four characters and calls for the implicit understanding of some who are unnamed. We grasp that the wealthy Ethiopian who travels by way of a chariot does so with the help of an unmentioned driver. The employer of the Ethiopian is briefly referenced in 8:27, namely the queen of Ethiopia known by the title of Κανδάκη. Similarly, we gather that Philip had countless encounters with folks as he evangelized his way through the various towns on his way home to Caesarea.

PHILIP

The protagonist of our story is Philip; he is the figure with whom we most readily identify and through whom the story is told. The presence of Philip is an ongoing development in the book of Acts. We first learn about him in 6:1-6 as one of the seven chosen to help ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ (“in the service/ministry of the daily [distribution]; 6:1). The reason Philip and the others were chosen is because they are described as being of “good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (ESV; 6:3).

After Saul’s witness to Stephen’s murder, Christians scattered throughout the areas of Judea and Samaria (8:1-3). The very next sentence Luke writes is to announce, not that these Christians went into hiding, but they proceeded to preach the gospel (8:4). Beginning with verse 5 and running through 25 we are told that Philip traveled to Samaria to proclaim Jesus Christ. In the remainder of the story relating his ministry in Samaria we become acutely aware that Philip, called to a service ministry, was, as Tannehill avers, one “richly endowed with characteristics of prophet and preacher of the word previously attributed to the apostles.”⁸⁵ From a human

⁸⁵ Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two*, 108.

perspective it is Philip who displays a heart for expanding the preaching of the gospel first to Samaria which is verified by the visit of Peter and John.

In the story of our focused attention (8:26-40) we note at least five more important events and characteristics concerning Philip. First, in 8:26 Philip receives direction from the angel of the Lord and also from the Holy Spirit in 8:29 only to be snatched away by the Spirit (8:39) very much in the fashion of Elijah and Ezekiel (cf. 1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16; Ezekiel 11:24).⁸⁶

Second, when Philip realizes that the Ethiopian is reading from Isaiah 53 and the eunuch inquires as to the identity of this Suffering Servant, he begins with Isaiah 53 and proceeds with the rest of γραφή (8:35) to proclaim the gospel (εὐηγγελίσατο) about Jesus.⁸⁷ We have already observed the ministerial success Philip had in Samaria and are not surprised to read about it here. Philip is a genuine gospel preacher able to discern what is needed in a moment of evangelistic outreach and correctly interpret the Scripture.

Third, Philip's ministry, as divinely directed, is one that carries an alien authority coming not from within him, but from God.

Fourth, Philip does not concern himself about the potential problems that could arise from baptizing a Gentile who is a eunuch to boot. His work in Samaria received apostolic approval, but there could be problems working with one who is not permitted full membership into the assembly of Israel (cf. Deut. 23:2). But the narrator does not concern himself with these matters since none of what Philip is doing is of his own accord, but his movements and actions come as the result of divine direction.⁸⁸ Philip is the human agent of beginning to bring the

⁸⁶ Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two*, 108.

⁸⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 344-45.

⁸⁸ Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two*, 108.

witness of Jesus to Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Fifth, Philip is a bold minister of the gospel in both his obedient nature to immediately act when he receives divine direction and when he encounters the Ethiopian. As he approaches the eunuch's chariot and hears him reading Isaiah 53 out loud, Philip does not politely introduce himself. Instead, he must have discerned, in the moment, the spiritual dynamic before him (something close readers must read between the lines grasping the broader context) and consequently, he dives right into his encounter involving both evangelism and discipleship.

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

Tannehill notes that the Ethiopian eunuch constitutes “a very strong representative of foreignness within a Jewish context.”⁸⁹ This is a telling assertion since it speaks to several of the Ethiopian's characteristics: (1) he is a foreigner hailing from the virtual end of the earth, and (2) he is an active God worshipper and reader of Scripture with a heart inclined to go deeper with God.

We will explore each of these traits in turn. First, not only is the Ethiopian a foreigner, but he is identified through geography. But he is *foreign* in several ways beyond geography. Of his exotic place of origin Witherington writes “in the mythological geography of the ancient Greek historians and other writers as well, Ethiopia was frequently identified with the ends of the earth.”⁹⁰ So we ask what coming from the ends of the earth would mean for this man. Likely it meant that he had dark skin and was likely a Gentile.⁹¹ Because he was a eunuch he was

⁸⁹ Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two*, 108.

⁹⁰ Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 290.

⁹¹ So Witherington III, *The Acts of*, 295; Bock, *Acts*, 341; Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two*, 108; and Schnabel, *Acts*, 424.

undoubtedly a Gentile and not a proselyte.⁹² Even though he was a eunuch he still made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem presumably limited to the Court of the Gentiles in the temple or perhaps a synagogue.⁹³ Furthermore, Tannehill reminds us of the prohibition in Deuteronomy 23:2 blocking such a person from full admittance as a Jew.⁹⁴

All of this—a man who is ethnically different, who is a eunuch, and a Gentile—prompts us to recognize what a unique individual he was. None of this stopped him from the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When Philip encountered him, he was reading the book of Isaiah out loud. This is the portrayal of a man who passionately wants to know more about God.

Second, even though the Ethiopian faced some serious roadblocks in becoming a God fearer, he pursued it anyway. We lack any backstory as to how he came to faith in the promises of Yahweh, but we can conclude that the same Spirit mentioned in directing Philip has worked the wonder of regeneration in this man's life. All we know is that he traveled a great distance to follow the commands of Scripture and that he desires to know more about God and how to follow him more completely. As we noted earlier, the fact that he is reading Scripture out loud indicates he was following an ancient practice thought to aid in the process of memorization.⁹⁵

The Ethiopian expresses the sincere conviction of one who truly belongs to God by asking for help in interpreting the Scripture he is reading. What happens next requires a bit of reading between the lines, but we can make some legitimate conclusions based on what part of the story the narrator has provided for us in conjunction with the rest of Luke-Acts and the NT.

⁹² So Bock, *Acts*, 342; Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two*, 109; and Schnabel, *Acts*, 424. Against Fernando, *Acts*, 283 who wrongly argues that he is a proselyte.

⁹³ Bock, *Acts*, 342.

⁹⁴ Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation—Volume Two*, 109.

⁹⁵ See page 198.

After Philip provides some biblical and theological teaching about who Jesus is, the eunuch—who has professed saving faith in such a way that Philip can discern its genuineness and apparently has grasped the doctrine of baptism and the importance of obeying it—upon seeing a nearby pool of water asks to be baptized.

The new-to-life-in-Jesus Ethiopian may be a foil to the confident and God-honoring Bible teacher that is Philip, but one wonders how long this will last. We are only told that when Philip was carried away by the Holy Spirit that the eunuch did not respond with doubt or fear, but “went on his way rejoicing” (8:39). One can only speculate that things were about to be very different in Ethiopia.

GOD, GOD the HOLY SPIRIT, and ANGEL OF THE LORD

There is no direct mention of God the Father in this story, but there is an oblique reference to him in the possessive genitives Ἄγγελος ... κυρίου (“an angel of the Lord”) in 8:26 and πνεῦμα κυρίου (“the Spirit of the Lord”) in 8:39. It is the *angel* who speaks direction to Philip as to his next mission and the Holy Spirit who carries Philip away, but, in context, we clearly understand that κύριος is used as “a designation for God ... like a personal name.”⁹⁶ We clearly grasp that behind all of this personal direction for Philip is the decisive initiation of the triune God being manifest here in the form of the Father and the Holy Spirit. In this story the Holy Spirit is both an instrument of direction and a force of action snatching Philip away from the Ethiopian to Azotus. It is the agent of heaven in the form of the *angel* who speaks God’s direction to Philip (8:26) on behalf of and at the behest of the throne of heaven.

Plot

The plot arc in this story is a bit unusual since there is no conflict in the traditional sense.

⁹⁶ BDAG, 577.

There is no Jezebel plotting murder. There is no villain. The conflict present here comes in the forms of calls to obey direction issued from heaven and that of questions posed seeking answers. It is not as exciting as the presence of a good old-fashioned villain like the Red Dragon in Revelation 12, but these moments of decision and the conflict they present to Philip and the Ethiopian are the stuff of real-life facing people every day. The arc of the plot is represented in TABLE 1 below. This is a U-shaped comic arc with a happy ending.

Acts 8:26-40 - Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

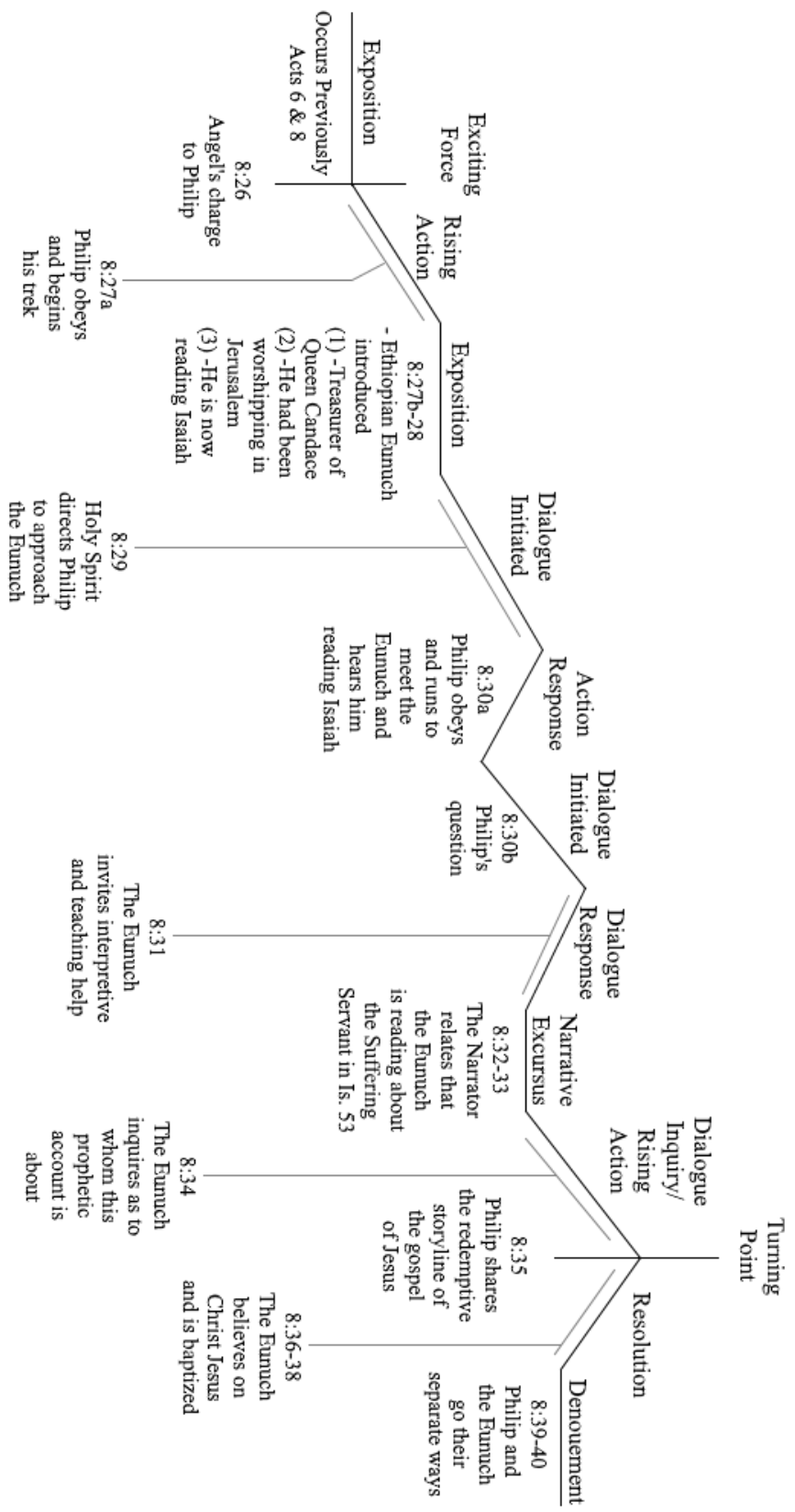


TABLE 1

Narrative Arc of Acts 8:26-40

The plot of this story is advanced through dialogue and narration. It is an account of a personal encounter between two very different persons who share a love for God.

(1) Introduction/Exposition—Acts 6 and 8:5-25—There is no formal exposition for this story since it picks up immediately following the first half of Acts 8 and the narrative of Philip's ministry in Samaria. We initially learn about Philip's call to service ministry in Acts 6:1-6. The narrator of 8:26-40 assumes that readers are familiar with this information and presents this story as a continuation. Verse 26 likely suggests that the beginning of this story is set in Jerusalem when Philip receives his directive from the angel of the Lord.

(2) Rising Action—Acts 8:26-27a— The angel's charge to Philip in verse 26 is the *exciting force* to initiate the movement of the plot. The action gets going when Philip immediately obeys the direction of the angel and hits the road. We begin to learn a little about the makeup and nature of Philip. The very same two verbs used by the angel directing Philip to *rise* and *go* (ἀνίστημι and πορεύω) describe what he does without hesitation. This bit of narratorial *telling* is carefully crafted to help us understand Philip's motivations and actions.

(3) Exposition—Acts 8:27b-28—It is here we find an actual bit of narrative exposition in the form of a modicum of backstory for the Ethiopian eunuch as to his station in life, his religious devotion, and his recent movements. In one brief sentence we learn that this man's nationality is Ethiopian, his medical condition is of a eunuch, his vocation is that of a court official for the queen of Ethiopia—the Candace, and that he was entrusted with the oversight of her treasury. All of this is important in placing this man in this first century setting as it connects with the greater theme of his life as a God fearer. In the next sentence we learn of his pilgrimage to Jerusalem and that he is now traveling home on a desert road in the middle of nowhere reading

his Bible—Isaiah 53 to be exact—seated in his personal chariot. The personal information tells us about his circumstances, but the narration about his passion for loving God sets the stage for learning about this man’s spiritual journey as he journeys from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

(4) Dialogue Initiated—Acts 8:29—Instead of the more traditional *rising action* part of a story which anticipates some measure of conflict resolution to keep the plot moving along, the “action” here in verses 29-31 is conveyed mainly through the initiation of dialogue by a character and leading to a dialogue response from another figure. In this case it is the Spirit’s guiding direction to Philip and his response—not of return speech, but of immediate action (an echo of his response to the angel in 8:27a) and Philip’s question to the eunuch and the Ethiopian’s response (vv. 30-31).

The action picks up in verse 29 with the reader understanding that Philip has been traveling for some time in response to the angel’s direction of verse 26 and of Philip’s immediate departure on the desert road. He must have had the Ethiopian’s chariot within his line of sight when the narrative picks up in 8:29 with the Holy Spirit’s double imperative charge to *go and join himself* (πρόσελθε καὶ κολλήθητι) with the eunuch’s chariot.

(5) Action Response—Acts 8:30a—This is not the normal narrative moment of conflict resolution through falling action. Instead, we have an answer in the form of a physical action. Philip, in keeping with the pattern already established, responds to the direction of the Spirit by *running up* (the temporal participle προσδραμών) to the chariot and *hearing* (ἤκουσεν) what the Ethiopian was reading aloud, namely the book of Isaiah.

(6) Dialogue Initiated—Acts 8:30b—A new sequence of initiated dialogue and (this time) response begins with a bit of discernment on the part of Philip. We surmise this as readers

because of the nature and substance of his question. The very first thing that comes out of Philip's mouth upon striking up a conversation with the Ethiopian is not a polite greeting or an introduction but a very personal question. Philip asks the eunuch if he is grasping the meaning of what he is reading. Something is obviously happening between the lines here and close readers understand that the gravity of what Philip is asking is right in the moment and not a matter of offense for this important man.

(7) Dialogue Response—Acts 8:31—Again there is no real *turn* here leading to a falling of the action; just a simple dialogue response in the broader ebb and flow of conversation that echoes rising and falling action in typical plot movement. Instead of getting all huffy with the question posed by this stranger on the road, the Ethiopian responds directly to Philip's question with a rhetorical question of his own stating that someone like him needs a measure of interpretive guidance. And in a moment of his own discernment, the eunuch perceives that Philip is just such a man who can help him in his quest for meaning. As a result, the eunuch invites Philip to jump up on his chariot and help.

(8) Narrative Excursus—Acts 8:32b-33—The give and take of conversation between the two men gives way to an occasion for the narrator to tell us just exactly what the Ethiopian was reading. The narrator tells us that the eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53:7-8.

(9) Dialogue Inquiry/Rising Action—Acts 8:34—As the two men are sitting together in the chariot, the Ethiopian continues the conversation by asking Philip who Isaiah is writing about. The eunuch wonders if it is about the prophet himself or another. We note here that Philip surely recognized that this man was not from Judea or Samaria and he did not hesitate for a second with fulfilling his divinely directed ministry. The question posed by the eunuch serves to break out of the give and take of dialogue we have experienced thus far in this story; now there

comes some good old fashioned rising action leading to a moment of a turning point where a character will be faced with making some sort of decision which will shape the outcome of the narrative.

(10) Turning Point—Acts 8:35—Philip receives the inquiry made by the eunuch and decides to interpret Isaiah 53 before moving onto how the rest of the OT teaches about Jesus. In effect, Philip is tracing the storyline of the redemptive arc of God's plan of salvation through the work of his Son.

(11) Resolution—Acts 8:36, 38—A lot happens in between the question in verse 35 and what is happening in 36. Verse 36 picks up with the journey continuing *κατὰ τὴν ὁδόν* with the Ethiopian eyeballing a body of water and inquiring about being baptized. Now we have read earlier in this book (2:38) about how people come to Jesus in faith by repenting and then being baptized. Somewhere along this desert road the gospel has been shared through Philip's teaching regarding what Scripture has to say about Jesus and this has been met with a genuine profession of faith by the Ethiopian who knows he now needs to seal his conversion through the obedience of baptism. Philip obliges this impulse and the eunuch is baptized.

(12) Denouement—Acts 8:39-40—In what appears to be rapid succession the narrator informs us that as soon as Philip rises out the water, he is snatched away by the Spirit only to find himself near the coast of the Mediterranean in Azotus. Meanwhile, the Ethiopian is not unsettled by this. Rather when he realizes that Philip is no longer present, he rejoices and continues on his journey home.

Theological Implications

Five implications arise from our study of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. First, Philip is following the command of Jesus to make disciples of *πάντα τὰ ἔθνη* (Matt. 28:19);

specifically from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). Philip had just been to Samaria (8:5-25) and has now encountered the virtual end of the earth in the form of the Ethiopian on the desert road. The call to take the gospel message everywhere demonstrates that the burgeoning Christian church is transcultural.

Second, the missionary and evangelistic outreach by the church of Jesus is initiated and empowered by the direction of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:8; 8:29).

Third, beginning with Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian we now observe, going forward, that gospel proclamation is directed at both mass gatherings (the mode before this) and personal encounters.

Fourth, the best way to proclaim the message of Jesus is by diving into the biblical text and by expositing it systematically, which promotes the opportunity to make theological and doctrinal conclusions that explain the meaning of what is being studied. The questions asked by the Ethiopian and the systematic teaching and exposition offered by Philip allowed the Ethiopian to make a profession of faith (read between the lines of our story) and to request to be baptized (8:36).

Fifth, the narrator's clever compositional strategy—employed on two different occasions in 8:26-27 and 8:29-30—of depicting divine directional guidance through double imperatives is met with immediate obedience in each instance by Philip. This narratorial artistry allows Luke to portray two things by way of storytelling: (1) the sovereignty of God who directs and guides all things including missional and evangelistic outreach and (2) the ongoing tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility—in this case Philip's proactive obedience to God's directing will.

Chapter 7—A Narrative Critical Approach to Imaginative Old Testament Story: An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study

Introduction

In the last chapter we observed how chroniclers of biblical history recorded their stories by employing the tools of the poet /maker in artistically crafting a narrative with a plot, characterization, setting, and other pertinent literary devices. We now turn to the use of imaginative literature in Scripture.

We have already noted that one of the major reasons so much of Scripture is composed of stories is that the art of storytelling has a universal reach across time and the various societies all over the world. The writers of the Bible often appeal to the use of fiction in order to communicate God's theological and ethical truth.

As a quick reminder, the term *fiction* is denoted by the *OED* as the “narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters.” Furthermore, fiction is, as Abrams reminds us, “any literary narrative ... which is invented instead of being an account of events that happened.”¹ When a maker of poetry writes fiction, his industry is communicating principles and ideas which are true within the conceptual framework of the secondary world he sub-creates. We can only tell imaginative stories in this world, which involve conflict that is eventually resolved, because of the fall of Eden.

The writers of biblical imaginative literature herald the message of God's revealed truth through their stories, persuade readers by means of the literary devices of storytelling, actively involve readers by engaging their imaginations, pattern their secondary imaginary worlds of sub-creation from the model of the primary world of the Creator, and teach theological truths and

¹ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 64.

ethical ideals. In other words, they are about the business of writing Scripture just like any other biblical author.

We begin with two examples of biblical fiction in the OT turning first to the fable of Jotham in Judges 9:8-15 and then to the *mashal* of Nathan he told to David in 2 Samuel 12:1-4. From there we move in the next chapter to the NT and a parable of Jesus, namely, the Rich Man and Lazarus from Luke 16:19-31, and then to the visionary literature of John in Revelation 12:1-17.

In each case we will provide a wooden translation for the purpose of close study. This will be followed by exegesis and comment and then by literary analysis. This work will allow us to draw some theological implications of the message of the story.

A Narrative Critical Look at Judges 9:8-15—An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study

Background to Jotham's Fable

By the time Jotham climbs Mount Gerizim in order to shout out his fable, all of his brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal, have been murdered by Abimelech (Judges 9:1-6). In 9:7, in a new paragraph, the narrator tells us that Jotham, the last remaining son, was told that Abimelech had been made king at Shechem. Jotham then climbs up Mount Gerizim (with Shechem below it) and shouted out to the lords of Shechem below, telling them to listen to his story which begins in 9:8.

Translation

As mentioned above, this is a wooden translation in order to preserve the Hebraic flavor of this composition. A lively debate exists as to whether this speech by Jotham should be considered poetry or prose with little final agreement.²

² Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC, volume 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 316 argues for poetry, as does Hamilton, *Handbook on*, 135. Additionally, the BHS text presents Judges 9:8-15 as if it were in

¶

8—The trees went purposefully to anoint over them a king. And they said to the olive tree, “Reign over us.”

9—But the olive tree said to them, “Should I give up my fatness which by me gods and men are honored, and hold sway over the trees?”

10—And the trees said to the fig tree, “You come, reign over us.”

11—But the fig tree said to them, “Should I give up my sweetness, my good fruit, that I should go to hold sway over the trees?”

12—Then the trees said to the vine, “You come, reign over us.”

13—But the vine said to them, “Should I give up my wine which gladdens gods and men, that I should go to hold sway over the trees?”

14—Then all the trees said to the bramble, “You come, reign over us.”

15—And the bramble said to the trees, “If in faithfulness you are anointing me to (be) king over you, come, take refuge in my shadow, but if not, may fire go out from the branches and devour the cedars of Lebanon.”

Exegetical Notes and Comment

Jotham’s fable immediately follows the account of Gideon’s death (8:29-35) and the scandalous mass murder of seventy of Jerubbaal’s sons as orchestrated by Abimelech (9:1-6).

Jotham escapes this horrific fratricide and upon receiving word of the extent of these ceremonial murders having taken place in Orpah ascends Gerizim (9:7) and begins to spin his tale (9:8-15).

Webb importantly notes that “as a rhetorical device the fable allows the speaker who has an unpopular point to make to gain a hearing for himself by approaching his subject obliquely and in an interesting manner.”³

8—הָלֹךְ הָלְכוּ הָעֵצִים לְמַשֵּׁם עָלֵיהֶם מֶלֶךְ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְזֵיתָ (מְלוּכָה) עָלֵינוּ—The emphatic construction of a Qal Inf absolute placed in front of the same verb in finite form (Qal Perf 3cp) acts as an intensifier.⁴

verse form. Conversely Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 272-73; Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, WBC, volume 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 227 and 234; and Jack M. Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 381 make the case for reading Jotham’s fable as prose narrative.

³ Webb, *The Book of*, 254.

⁴ See Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 252-53, hereafter *PVP*; Webb, *The Book of*, 272; and Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 382 for more.

Thus the rendering “The Trees *went purposefully*...” Sasson asserts that this cognate construction is employed “to convey movement with a goal.”⁵

The construction of the preposition + Qal Inf construct לְמַשֵּׁחַ indicates purpose—“in order to anoint.”⁶ The Qere reading of the verb מָלַךְ as a positive long form Qal imperative is preferred.⁷

9—וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם הַזֹּאת הַחֲדָלְתִּי אֶת־דִּשְׁנִי אֲשֶׁר־בִּי יִכְבְּדוּ אֱלֹהִים וְאֲנָשִׁים וְהָלַכְתִּי לְנוֹעַ עַל־הָעֵצִים—The interrogative particle + Qal Perf 1cs construction הַחֲדָלְתִּי does not convey a future sense as observed in the ESV and NASB 1977.⁸ The preposition בְּ in the construction אֲשֶׁר־בִּי is best understood as causal (“because of me”).⁹ The Piel Impf 3mp verb יִכְבְּדוּ as used with a non-specific subject is understood as, Webb notes, “effectively passive.”¹⁰

The preposition + Qal Inf construct pairing לְנוֹעַ indicates purpose.¹¹ The meaning of the verb נוֹעַ is somewhat elusive. *HALOT* suggests that when this verb is used with the preposition עַל that it conveys the sense “to sway over” as seen here in 9:9.¹² Rahlfs A opts for the Pres Act Inf ἄρχειν (“to rule”) while Rahlfs B translates with the Pres Pass Inf κινεῖσθαι (“to hover”).

10—וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָעֵצִים לְתֹאנָה לְכִי־אֵת מַלְכִּי עָלֵינוּ—The *waw*-consecutive וַיֹּאמְרוּ is understood to be

⁵ Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 382.

⁶ *PVP*, 242.

⁷ So Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to*, 571 and Butler, *Judges*, 230.

⁸ Both Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 383 and Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such a Great Salvation* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000), 121, n.4 argue this case.

⁹ Butler, *Judges*, 230.

¹⁰ Webb, *The Book of*, 272.

¹¹ *PVP*, 242.

¹² *HALOT*, 681.

temporal (“Then they said”).¹³ The Qal Impv fs + 2fs independent pronoun לְכִי־אַתָּה is an emphatic construction best rendered “You come.” The rest of this verse echoes much of the second half of verse 8 with the new edition of the second candidate the Fig Tree (תִּזְאִנָּה).

11—וַתֹּאמֶר לָהֶם הַתִּזְאִנָּה הַחֲדוֹלָתִי אֶת־מִתְקִי וְאֶת־תְּנוּבָתִי הַטּוֹבָה וְהִלְכָתִי לָנוּעַ עַל־הָעֵצִים—It should be noted that the *waw*-consecutive construction וְהִלְכָתִי indicates *purpose* and is translated “that I should go.”¹⁴

As was the case with 9:9 and the Olive Tree, the Fig Tree passes on the offer of kingship knowing his calling and identity.

12—וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָעֵצִים לִגְפֹן לְכִי־אַתָּה (מְלוּכִי) עֲלֵינוּ—As was the case with verse 10 the imperative plus the second person pronoun produces the emphatic “You come.” The Qere reading of the Qal Impv fs מְלוּכִי is preferred and thus rendered “reign” as we see in the ESV and NASB 1977.

13—וַתֹּאמֶר לָהֶם הַגִּפֹּן הַחֲדוֹלָתִי אֶת־תִּירוֹשִׁי הַמְשַׂמֵּחַ אֱלֹהִים וְאֲנִשְׂאִים וְהִלְכָתִי לָנוּעַ עַל־הָעֵצִים—The article fronting the Piel participle (הַמְשַׂמֵּחַ) is a substantive rendered “which” as in “which gladdens.” As was the case with verse 11, the *waw*-consecutive construction (וְהִלְכָתִי) indicates purpose, “that I should go.” In concert with the previous two candidates, the Vine declines the offer to become king.

14—וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָל־הָעֵצִים אֶל־הָאֶטֶד גֵּד אֶתָּה מְלוֹךְ־עֲלֵינוּ—This verse echoes the language of the entreaties in verses 10 and 12. The difference here is the addition of “all” (כָּל).

15ab—וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֶטֶד אֶל־הָעֵצִים אֲם בְּאַמַּת אֶתֶם מְשֻׁחִים אֲנִי לְמַלְכוּת עָלֵיכֶם בָּאוּ חֲסֹו בְּצִלִּי—The introduction of the element of conditionality (אֲם) is a departure from the first three encounters with the Olive Tree, Fig Tree, and the Vine. This is in keeping with the 3/4 structure of the story. Block asserts

¹³ So also Webb, *The Book of*, 272.

¹⁴ So Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 374.

that the selection of the noun אֱמֶת, here rendered “faithfulness” (ESV and NASB 1977, “truth”) “involves covenant commitment.”¹⁵

15c—וְאִם-אֵין תֵּצֵא אֶשׁ מִן-הָאֵשׁ וְתֹאכַל אֶת-אֲרֶגֶז הַלְבָנוֹן—The apodosis of this conditional sentence promises a curse if the condition of the protasis is not met in good order. The third person singular verbs תֵּצֵא (“may it go out”) and וְתֹאכַל (“and devour”) are jussive in meaning, if not in form, conveying the sense of wishing an indirect command.

Literary Analysis

We will begin with a brief discussion of the *genre* of this story before engaging in a full discussion of this story’s plot, characterization, and setting.

Genre

In the strictest sense the fictional narrative shared by Jotham is what Sasson labels a מִשַּׁל which “covers a broad literary typology that includes proverbs, parables, and fables.”¹⁶ Most interpreters identify Jotham’s speech in Judges 9:8-15 as a *fable*. A *fable*, writes Abrams, is

a short narrative, in prose or verse, that exemplifies an abstract moral thesis or principle of human behavior; usually in its conclusion either the narrator or one of the characters states the moral in the form of an epigram. Most common is the beast fable, in which animals talk and act like the human types they represent.¹⁷

Often fables will present inanimate objects as characters speaking and behaving like human figures.¹⁸

Bar-Efrat takes a step back and identifies this text as a biblical *simile* which has expanded

¹⁵ Block, *Judges*, 318

¹⁶ Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 374.

¹⁷ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 5-6.

¹⁸ See Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 203 and Block, *Judges*, 316.

and grown into a story.¹⁹ A *simile* is where “a comparison between two distinctly different things is indicated by the word ‘like’ or ‘as.’”²⁰ Bar-Efrat adds that biblical similes “are often supplemented by the stylistic device of exaggeration; in these cases, they fulfill the additional function of intensification and reinforcement.”²¹

The question we pose at this time is why did Jotham address the “lords of Shechem” in the form of a fictional story in the guise of a fable as opposed to bringing forth his covenant lawsuit with formal charges as a prosecutor. The Bible contains both *historical* and *fictional* narrative. Estes asserts that when biblical authors communicate through the means of fiction their composition is

a subset of narrative in which the imaginative stories in the Bible have been composed in order to communicate aspects of spiritual or ethical truth. Just as factual, historical narrative is frequently employed in the Bible to teach what God wishes to reveal to humans, so the genre of fictional narrative is used for the same purpose.²²

Ryken further pursues this idea of the *imagination* as deployed in Scripture affirming, “It is apparent that Jesus and the writers of the Bible trusted literary forms to express religious truth. In particular, they operated on the literary premise that the imagination (‘image making’) serves as a powerful vehicle for expressing truth.”²³

We can thus proceed with the understanding that Jotham’s fable is indeed a bit of fiction that is intended to communicate a moral truth. This fable is communicated as a narrative and we

¹⁹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 210. See also Caird, *The Language and Imagery of*, 160, who also treats Judges 9:8-15 as a *simile* broadly and *fable* more specifically.

²⁰ Abrams, *A Glossary of*, 67.

²¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 210.

²² Estes, “Fiction and Truth in,” 389.

²³ Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1989), 42.

are well-served by analyzing the narrative components present in Jotham's story.

Setting

This fable is set in the secondary world of a fantastic country peopled by the Trees and other plants. The Trees desire to anoint a king over themselves. In the primary world of reality, the setting of Israel is one in which Jotham finds himself—a lone survivor of his brother, Abimelech's murder raid which eliminated all of his brothers. Abimelech intends to have himself installed as king even though Yahweh is already King of Israel. We can safely assume that Jotham's fable and all of its fantastic figures of this secondary world (the trees, vine, fig and olive trees, and bramble) have their primary world counterparts which is made evident in Judges 9:16-21.

The fantastic world of the trees functions very much like the real world and appears to be in close proximity as is witnessed by its storytelling temporality. The connection of this fanciful secondary world to the primary world is made through the mention of one of its commodities—the cedars of Lebanon.

Characterization

In Jotham's fable he acts as the narrator and storyteller. This makes him an important figure in this circumstance, but not a character. In this story we have an example where inanimate objects become *personified*.²⁴ Each of the five characters (the Trees [הָעֵצִים], the Olive Tree [זַיִת], the Fig Tree [תְּאֵנָה], the Vine [גִּפְנֵי], and the Bramble [אֶשְׁמֹל]) who appear in this narrative are personified plants. The Trees (a collective figure in this narrative), for instance, both talk and walk (הֵלְכָה) through their country in search of a king to anoint.

²⁴ Abrams, *A Glossary*, 69, identifies the device of *personification* as the case where “either an inanimate object or an abstract concept is spoken of as though it were endowed with life or with human attributes or feelings.”

The Trees are on a quest to locate and anoint a king over them. Webb notes that this is a choice they are making by themselves in direct contrast to one of the provisions laid out in the law of kingship (Deut. 17:14-20) in Deuteronomy 17:15 which specifically names Yahweh as the one who will choose the king.²⁵ A character trait of the Trees that emerges in this brief story is that they prove to be extremely unwise in their selection of the Bramble as their king after they have been rejected by the three most significant plants of the ancient Near East. They proceed with a purposeful determination to anoint a king to rule over them, and one gets the sense that they will not be deterred in their quest.

In a bit of irony it could be argued that the Trees could be identified as *both* the protagonist and the antagonist of this story.²⁶ The Trees do qualify as the chief characters of our brief narrative, but they and their poor judgment emerge to cause them to be their own worst enemy.

There are ultimately four candidates for the kingship of the country of the Trees; three of them cohere into a group of desirable figures. The fourth is a questionable individual. The first three candidates—the Olive Tree, the Fig Tree, and the Vine—represent what Block terms “the three most prized species of domestic plants in ancient Palestine.”²⁷ Each of these figures passed on the idea of becoming a king since they already knew their identity as productive servants in their world and the thought of לָנֹזֵז עַל־הָעֵצִים (literally, “to wave over the trees”) seems silly.²⁸ The

²⁵ Webb, *The Book of*, 275.

²⁶ A *protagonist* is the chief character in a work attracts the greatest amount of our interest. He is often the “hero” of the story. The *antagonist* is pitted against the protagonist and is usually the “villain.” Sometimes a story might have a protagonist villain as in the case of *Macbeth* where the eponymous figure fills this role. The antagonist hero is Macduff. See Abrams, *A Glossary*, 159 and Holman and Harmon, *A Handbook*, 30 and 407 for more.

²⁷ Block, *Judges*, 317.

²⁸ Block, *Judges*, 317-18 has a very helpful discussion about this matter.

fact that each plant provides the same response says something about the narrator's goal in this fable: either he is speaking against the idea of human kingship or against rising to kingship through murder, as Abimelech has done, which lacks nobility.²⁹

Each of these three characters possesses traits unique unto himself. The Olive Tree was a tall tree that was typically pruned to stand at about thirty feet high.³⁰ The Olive Tree produces the oil used in anointing kings which was thought to *honor gods and men* (cf. Judges 9:9).³¹ The Olive Tree knows all of this and is motivated to see that his oil is used to see a king anointed who was chosen by God.³² The Olive Tree turns down the Trees who have come calling knowing that he has his own specific calling to keep producing his *fatness* (דִּשְׁוֹן) by which he means his oil and is his part in the broader ceremonial use in society. Block suggests that the Olive Tree “would rather honor others than be narcissistically anointed with its own oil.”³³

The Fig Tree has broad leaves producing a deep shade which is an image of the provision of security (cf. 1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4).³⁴ The Fig Tree has something of an imagination which we see when he metaphorically refers to his “good fruit” (וְאֶת־הַטֹּבָהּ הַטּוֹבָהּ) as *my sweetness* (אֶת־מִתְקִי) in 9:11. This describes why he is valuable as a commodity.³⁵ He therefore refuses to stop producing figs. The lesson we learn here from the Fig Tree is that a country, as Butler notes,

²⁹ This is Block's idea. Block, *Judges*, 318.

³⁰ Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 382.

³¹ So noted by Butler, *Judges*, 240.

³² Webb makes this observation. Webb, *The Book of*, 275.

³³ Block, *Judges*, 318.

³⁴ Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 383 and Butler, *Judges*, 240.

³⁵ Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 383 and Webb, *The Book of*, 275.

“needs a fig’s sweetness more than it needs a king’s bitter rule.”³⁶

The Vine refuses to stop making his wine because it *gladdens gods and men*. His wine, like the figs before him, is a valuable commodity produced from his fruit.³⁷ The Vine indicates this high value of his fresh wine by using the term תִּירֹשׁ instead of the more generic יַיִן.³⁸

Since all three of the treasured plants turn down the Trees and their offer of kingship the narrator tells us that they proceeded to the Bramble with the same language, “You come, reign over us” (9:14; cf. 9:8, 10, 12). This תְּצַח is a *buckthorn* likely of the family of *Lycium Europaeum*.³⁹ This type of plant was, as Sasson records, “generally too squat, their leaves too small, and their branches too sharp to afford shelter to any but the smallest of creatures.”⁴⁰ This is a wild plant as opposed to the other three which are cultivated.⁴¹

As is often the case with Hebrew historical and fictional narrative, it is quite sparse and lacking in a more expansive bit of plotting and character development. This is very much the case with the figure of the Bramble. The answer given by the Bramble to the entreaty of the Trees to reign over them as king is somewhat puzzling in its brevity. With this stated, it remains our job as readers and interpreters of this story to grasp the motivation and reasons for why the Bramble says and does in his speech and actions. All we know of him is right in front of us in the form of a brief speech directed to the Trees as a response to their offer of kingship. He says, “If

³⁶ Butler, *Judges*, 241.

³⁷ Webb, *The Book of*, 276.

³⁸ Block, *Judges*, 318.

³⁹ HALOT, 37.

⁴⁰ Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 384.

⁴¹ Webb, *The Book of*, 276.

in faithfulness you are anointing me to (be) king over you, come, take refuge in my shadow; but if not, may fire go out from the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.”

Interpreters by no means form any sort of consensus as to what is going on here. Block suggests that the Bramble accepts the offer of the Trees immediately in three parts: (1) with *flippant formality*, (2) with the invitation to take refuge in his shadow (which is inherently absurd since he can provide no shade or cover due to the fact that he has only thorns), and (3) in the case that the Trees might be gaming him, the Bramble invokes a curse.⁴²

Sasson asserts that the Bramble acts “with a combination of pride yet lack of confidence that rings psychologically true, [and that] the thorn reveals its contradictory, even conflicted attitude by at once doubting the sincerity of the trees (... ‘if in good faith’) and inviting them back under its shade.”⁴³ Sasson also concludes that the Bramble’s suspicious nature causes him to bind the Trees to their offer by way of issuing a curse.⁴⁴

Webb correctly identifies the images of *shadow* and *fire* embodying a riddle-like quality in the sense that the concept of *shade* (protection) was a familiar image for the responsibility of kings (cf. Lam. 4:20 and Psalm 91:1). But, at the same time, one questions how the Bramble, being such a small plant, could provide any real shade. Then there is the question of why, as Webb inquires, is the Bramble “prone to burst into flames.”⁴⁵ Webb avers concerning these questions about *shadow* and *fire* and their elusive answers that the point of all of this is to grasp the dangerous nature of the Bramble due to his unpredictable and potentially destructive nature.⁴⁶

⁴² See Block, *Judges*, 318-19 for more.

⁴³ Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 383.

⁴⁴ Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 384.

⁴⁵ See Webb, *The Book of*, 276 for this quote and the other ideas.

⁴⁶ Webb, *The Book of*, 276.

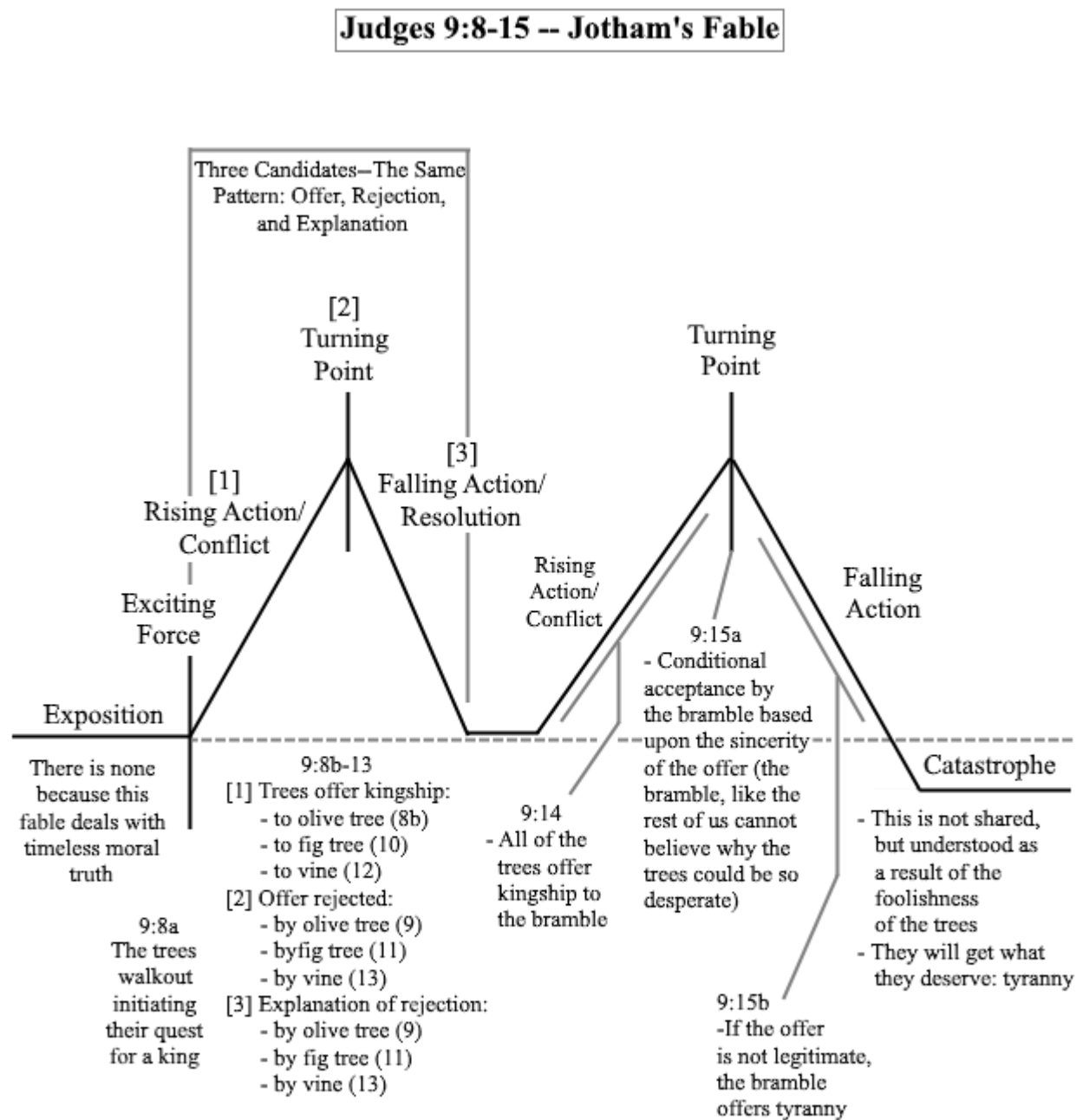
Each take on the nature of the figure of the Bramble offered by the three scholars above has some measure of what the Bramble's motives are, but the present writer would like to suggest a more immediate and visceral portrayal of Bramble. The first words to come out of the Bramble's mouth are posed in the form of a conditional clause casting doubt on the legitimacy of the offer. This speaks to the Bramble realizing and perhaps being knowledgeable about how the Trees have been making the rounds in their search of a king; and by now it seems *any* king will do. Whereas all the other plants knew their identity and place in the world; it seems that the Bramble also knows his station. He is incredulous at being recruited. It is as if he knows that he should not be asked to be king because he, by nature, is not qualified. He mockingly offers that the Trees take "refuge in my shadow" fully knowing his short stature only allows him to provide shade for the smallest of plants and creatures. Only the increasingly desperate Trees fail to see this. The Bramble is peeved by all of this tomfoolery and responds with a bit of defensiveness offering up a promised curse to reign fire down on the cedars of Lebanon (a metaphor for the "lords of Shechem").

Thus far we have noted the *setting* and *characterization* of this sparse narrative. We now trace the story's movement by discussing its *plot*.

Plot

The plot arc of this story is represented in TABLE 1 below.

TABLE 1



Since Jotham's Fable, Judges 9:8-15, is unusually brief in its narrative arc it poses some difficulty in tracing its structure. The sparseness of its narration is owing to its form as a *fable*

which is primarily concerned with making its moral point clearly. With that stated we offer this trace of the narrative movement:

- (1) Introduction/Exposition—there is none present since this fable is concerned primarily with timeless moral truth. We learn about the characters (the Trees and the four candidates later.).
- (2) Rising Action/Complication—The Three Candidates
 - a. Exciting Force: (9:8a)—The Trees walk out in order to find a king
 - b. Rising Action/Conflict: (9:8b)—The Trees approach the Olive Tree and entreat him to become their king
 - c. Turning Point: (9:9)—The Olive Tree rejects the offer
 - d. Falling Action/Resolution: (9:9)—The Olive Tree explains who he is and why he should remain doing what he was intended to do

Nearly identical language is employed to advance the narration of the second (the Fig Tree) and third (the Vine) candidates in verses 10-13. The pattern is the same: offer, rejection of the offer, and an explanation as to why.

- (3) Rising Action/Complication—The Fourth Candidate
 - a. Rising Action/Conflict: (9:14)—All the Trees approach the Bramble entreating him to become their king
 - b. Turning Point: (9:15a)—The Bramble responds with conditional acceptance
 - c. Falling Action/Resolution: (9:15b)—The Bramble ironically invites the Trees to take refuge in his shade
- (4) Conditional Catastrophe: (9:15c)—The Bramble promises a curse of reigning down fire on the “cedars of Lebanon” (a metaphor for the lords of Shechem) if their offer turns out to be insincere

Since the element of conditionality serves as a controlling force at the conclusion of this narrative, we cannot say for sure how this story ends. But, once again, this is not the point of telling this fable. This fable does provide a formidable social commentary on the nature of

leadership. On the face of things, it is an attack on the scandalous way in which Abimelech has risen to power. While the first three candidates declare they have higher callings and identify with their callings, the desperate Trees seek out the base Bramble who is willing to accept only on his terms. As Wenham notes, “the comparison is at once unflattering to both Abimelech (the bramble) and to the citizens of Shechem (the trees).”⁴⁷ We also note our comments are based only on our interaction with this narrative and do not incorporate Jotham’s interpretation of the story (9:16-21).

Theological Implications

The lessons provided about the nature of leadership yield five implications that prove timeless in their application. First, there is much to be said for knowing one’s place and calling in God’s kingdom. We see this in the case of the Olive Tree, the Fig Tree, and the Vine. Their collective being and value is much like royalty, but it is the regal quality of being a fellow-heir of the true King. We can learn a thing or two from these plants who do not seek kingship, but rather seek to please and honor the King. We can also learn, by way of negation, to refrain from attempting to be something we are not called to be from the vainglorious Bramble who could never provide the *shade* (read “protection”) a king needed to display.

Second, it is well known that all of Israel’s neighbors viewed the concept of human kingship as a positive and helpful role in their various societies. The fable fashioned by Jotham seems to indicate the opposite. We get the sense that the Bramble’s reign will lead to a fiery destruction. Jotham’s sentiments are later echoed by Samuel in his response to the peoples demand for a human king (cf. 1 Sam. 8:4-18).

⁴⁷ Wenham, *Story as*, 53. See also Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), 159 and Block, *Judges*, 321 who reach the same conclusion.

Third, we are well-served by taking an honest inventory of our motivations as redeemed followers of King Jesus. As we serve him as sojourning pilgrims on this globe, do we seek our own self-serving interest by assuming a façade of false kingship or do we revel in the assignment given to each of us as those whose productivity gladdens and brings glory to the King.

Fourth, Jotham seems to be clearly speaking against the idea of a man usurping Yahweh as king, but he is also targeting the foolishness of those who aggressively seek to anoint anyone as “king.” At the same time, he disapproves of anyone who is a worthless candidate such as the Bramble (read, Abimelech).

Fifth, the carefully constructed characters in this fable engage the reader’s imagination by way of the depiction of their traits and motivations which results in making them more memorable and theologically significant. Regarding their *traits*, we note in the figures of the Vine and the Fig and Olive Trees that they are portrayed as quite comfortable in their own vocational calling and place in the world. They are not interested in the usurpation of monarchal authority. We also observe that the *motivation* of the Trees is to install a king, any fellow plant as king, over them. This motivation flies in the face of the reality that they already have a King lovingly reigning over them who is sovereign over the universe.

A Narrative Critical Look at 2 Samuel 12:14—An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study

Introduction

The surprise visit of Nathan to David after his adultery with Bathsheba is highlighted by one of the most effective pieces of imaginative literature in Scripture. The short *mashal* by Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:1-4 is the next focus of our study.

The encounter between the prophet Nathan and King David in 2 Samuel 12:1-15a is one of the most memorable in the Old Testament. It is the מִשַּׁל fashioned by Nathan (12:1b-4) that

captures the imagination of the reader. A question that may be asked is why did Nathan tell this parable to David instead of bringing forth a more direct prosecutorial accusation of his crimes. Yairah Amit suggests that “The Bible makes plain that it ascribes great importance to stories and their presentation as a means of persuasion.”⁴⁸ As David listens to Nathan’s story about the poor man whose lone ewe-lamb is taken away he feels for the man and condemns the rich man. Amit concludes that “a story itself can be a means of persuasion and tell us much about its rhetorical functions in the biblical world. Since biblical literature sought to convince its audience (readers and listeners), the device of stories was employed.”⁴⁹ The purpose of this study is to grasp the meaning of the text through exegetical analysis and translation, perform a literary analysis of the key elements of the narrative (genre, setting, plot, characters, etc.), and draw out the theological implications of this text so that we may evaluate the veracity of Amit’s assertions.

Translation

The following translation is purposely wooden for the sake of exegesis.

- 1—And Yahweh sent Nathan to David and he came to him and said to him, “Two men were in one city, one rich and another poor.
- 2—The rich man had flocks and cattle, very many,
- 3—but the poor man naught of all things except one little ewe-lamb, which he bought. And he nourished her, and she grew up with him and with his sons all together. She ate from his morsel and drank from his cup and lay in his bosom. And she was to him like a daughter.
- 4—Now a visitor came to the rich man, and he kept back from being taken from his sheep or from his herd in order to prepare for him who wandered to come to him; but he took the ewe-lamb of the poor man and prepared her for the man who had come to him.

Some Prolegomena and Exegetical Notes with Comment

There is some discussion as to the scope of this pericope. Some scholars argue for 2

⁴⁸ Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1.

⁴⁹ Amit, *Reading Biblical*, 2.

Samuel 12:1-14,⁵⁰ some others for 11:27b-12:25,⁵¹ furthermore some for 12:1-31,⁵² and one for 11:1-12:31.⁵³ The story of David and Bathsheba runs from 11:1-27 and it seems best to treat this as its own self-contained episode. The present writer is persuaded to view 12:1-15a as the appropriate frame for the encounter that Nathan has with David. It begins with Yahweh sending Nathan to David (12:1a) and concludes with Nathan returning home (12:15a).

It is important to note in the overall plot structure that the Bathsheba episode is the causative force leading to our pericope. The writer of the Samuel narrative is an elegant artist. In 11:1-27 the verb *שָׁלַח* is used twelve times (vv. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 [3x], 12, 14, 18, 22, and 27).⁵⁴ David, Joab, and Bathsheba all do some *sending*. In David's case he is the subject of the verb *שָׁלַח* seven times in 2 Sam. 11. As Chisholm notes, "David is seemingly all-powerful. He sends people where he wills (vv. 1, 3-4, 12, 27), and by merely sending a message he can accomplish his desires (vv. 6, 14)."⁵⁵ The numerous repetitive uses of the verb *שָׁלַח* puts a spotlight on David's sovereignty. Now in 12:1, it is Yahweh who *sends* Nathan; Yahweh exercises his *sovereignty*. Arnold notes the irony, "David had sent, first in order to commit adultery, and then in order to

⁵⁰ So Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, NAC volume 7 (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 1996), 368-73; David Toshio Tsumura, *The Book of Second Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 185-87 selects 12:1-15; and Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 235-39 selects 12:1-15a.

⁵¹ So P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 292-309; A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, WBC volume 11 (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 157-164; and J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: Volume 1—King David (II Samuel 9-20 & I Kings 1-2)* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica 20; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 71-88 opts for 11:27b-12:15.

⁵² So Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 279-286 and Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1999), 149-161.

⁵³ Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 522-553.

⁵⁴ So noted by Davis, *2 Samuel*, 149. Brueggemann, *First and*, 279 and Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 532 also observe the many uses of the verb *to send*.

⁵⁵ Robert B. Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 50.

cover up his crime. Now just when it appears David has gotten away with it and the story is over, Yahweh does some sending of his own.”⁵⁶

Perhaps the most important critically interpretive issue in this text is whether or not Nathan’s story should be considered a fictional or historical narrative. Davis and Baldwin argue that what Nathan shares with David is akin more to a case study. Baldwin avers, “There is nothing to suggest that it is a parable, and David, the supreme judge, who could be expected to pronounce on hard cases, paid attention to the details.”⁵⁷ Davis suggests that since Nathan did not begin his account with an announcement that he was sharing a parable that readers should, as David did, receive it as an historical narrative.⁵⁸ Respectfully stated, this will not do.

Estes offers a corrective affirming, “By using realistic language that conceals the fact that the story is indeed a parable, Nathan imaginatively draws David into the conflict and without a word invites the king to give a legal judgment on the case.”⁵⁹ Fokkelman decisively argues for reading 2 Samuel 12:1b-4 as fiction stating:

As a message to David, the parable is true, fictional, and fictitious. The king has positively perceived the report’s fictional character, i.e. its literary and sometimes even poetic make-up, but has not been misled by this knowing that a prophet in action is a poet in action. Its fictitious aspect, on the contrary, remains completely hidden to him, and this is how the truth can penetrate him deeply and engage him. While David imagines the story to have really occurred, the truth is already working on him. From Nathan’s point of view, fiction, made functional and attractive by literary devices, is the ideal vehicle for the truth and, as theologians say, for revelation.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 532.

⁵⁷ Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 236.

⁵⁸ Davis, *2 Samuel*, 150.

⁵⁹ Daniel J. Estes, “Fiction and Truth in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature,” *Themelios* 35.3 (2010): 387-99. This quote from p. 391.

⁶⁰ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 81.

McCarter, Bergen, Brueggemann, Arnold, Anderson, and Tsumura all agree with Estes and Fokkelman that the story Nathan tells is a parable and therefore fictive.⁶¹

There is something powerful about Nathan's imaginatively told parable that a mere case history could not match. To this notion Estes writes:

Because fiction writers are not constrained by the actual events of history, they are able to structure perception in ways that communicate their messages with optimal force. This structuring of perceptions usually moves in the direction of simplifying the issues that in real life are rather complex, so that the reader can view them more clearly. Instead of relying on detailed argumentation to make a point, the author draws simplified pictures of life that help the reader to see in a fresh way. Because of its ability to structure perception, fiction has the advantage of being able to present truth with a high degree of clarity.⁶²

We next proceed to some exegetical notes on the Hebrew text.

1—וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה—The continuative *waw*-consecutive announces that it is now Yahweh who is doing the *sending*. Some MSS add וַתֵּן הַנֶּבִיאָה⁶³ The second half of verse 1 through verse 4a contains some brief statements about the central characters involved (the *rich man*, the *poor man*, the ewe-lamb, and the visitor) listing some family connections and some basic geographical facts. We will learn some of the character traits (both moral and social) regarding the protagonist *poor man*.⁶⁴ Nathan begins to convey Yahweh's judgment against David (cf. 11:27b) with his parable about the two men in one city. These facts introduce the basis elements of the story's setting and characters. The men are unnamed being אֶתְּךָ עֲשִׂיר וְאֶתְּךָ רִאשׁ. The attributive Qal ptc ms

⁶¹ See McCarter, *II Samuel*, 299 and 304; Bergen, *I, 2 Samuel*, 369-70; Brueggemann, *First and*, 279-80; Arnold, *I & 2 Samuel*, 532; Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 160; and Tsumura, *The Book of*, 186-187.

⁶² Estes, "Fiction and Truth," 393.

⁶³ So pc MSS. The LXX reads "Ναθαν τὸν προφήτην."

⁶⁴ See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 80 for more.

רָאשׁ is used *literally* as is in keeping with how the word verb רוש is used in the Prophets.⁶⁵

Arnold notes that this is the second appearance of Nathan in David's overall story (cf. 2 Sam. 7:2-17) with very little introduction.⁶⁶

2—The text provides some background on the *rich man* who, we are told, has many flocks and cattle. There is some discussion that the adverb הַרְבֵּה, used here with מְאֹד, is employed adjectivally.⁶⁷ We read “*The rich man had...*” as repointed and thus לְעֵשִׂיר in order to, as Anderson says, “to balance לָרֵשׁ ‘the poor man’ in v. 3.”⁶⁸ The description of the rich man is sparse.

3—This verse provides a lengthy description of the *poor man*. This man lacked the material wealth of the *rich man*, but his loving heart caused him to treat his ewe-lamb כְּבָתָּה. Regarding the adverb + nms construction of אֵין־כֵּל, *BDB* recommends the rendering “naught of all things” or “there is nothing.”⁶⁹ The verb תֵּאֱכַל is an example of the frequentative use of the imperfect indicating actions repeated in the past.⁷⁰ Where we had either no verbs or *to be* verbs before, we now have action verbs.⁷¹ Bergen makes a clever observation in noting what he calls “a not-so-subtle lexical linkage between the beloved lamb and Bathsheba.”⁷² In 12:3 the text compares the

⁶⁵ See W. R. Dommers, “רוש,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols., Willem A. VanGemeren, editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1085.

⁶⁶ Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 532.

⁶⁷ See Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction*, 592.

⁶⁸ Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 158. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 294 also makes note of this. Both men appeal to GKC §126d.

⁶⁹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979; orig. 1902), 482.

⁷⁰ So noted by Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 159 from GKC §107e. Tsumura, *The Book of*, 187 notes that all three imperfect verbs—to eat, to drink, and to lie “express habit.”

⁷¹ Alter, *The Art of*, (1981), 80.

⁷² Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 370.

poor man's ewe-lamb to a *daughter* בַּת and she slept שָׁכַב with him. These two words together sound a great deal like בַּת-שָׁכַב; *bat* + *šākab* and *bat- šeba*'.⁷³

4—When we get to this verse we finally dispense with matters of setting and character description and experience the story's unfolding plot. When the *rich man* treated his visitor to a hearty meal, he was doing so in accordance with ancient Near Eastern practices in hospitality; his theft of the *poor man's* ewe-lamb broke both ANE and Torah protocols.⁷⁴ Brueggemann notes that the verb לָקַח (*to take*) is the same one used as in 1 Samuel 8:11-19 "to anticipate the self-centered king, because only kings take."⁷⁵ This is also just as the king had *taken* (וַיִּקְחֶהָ) Bathsheba in 11:4.⁷⁶

Literary Analysis

We now embark on a literary analysis of this parable by studying the elements of this narrative. This will primarily focus on the setting, characters, and plot, but will take note of other literary devices of import as they occur in the text.

Genre and Structure

In spite of the protestations of Davis and Baldwin who wrongly insist on categorizing this story as a case history presented to David, we are convinced that this is a מִשְׁל and, therefore, a fictional account.⁷⁷ Many scholars further identify this story as a *juridical* parable.⁷⁸ A juridical

⁷³ Bergen, *I, 2 Samuel*, 370.

⁷⁴ Bergen, *I, 2 Samuel*, 370.

⁷⁵ Brueggemann, *First and*, 280. Tsumura, *The Book of*, 187 also makes this connection with 1 Sam. 8 and a king *taking*.

⁷⁶ So noted by Davis, *2 Samuel*, 150.

⁷⁷ See the discussion above.

⁷⁸ So McCarter, *II Samuel*, 299 and 304-305; Bergen, *I, 2 Samuel*, 369; Brueggemann, *First and*, 280; and Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 160.

parable, as Anderson says, “disguises a real-life violation of the law as a parable told to the guilty person in order to lead him to pass a judgment on himself.”⁷⁹

Fokkelman observes that this brief parable (only 61 words) is composed with a “stylistic compactness... with an elementary vocabulary and extremely simple narrative elements.”⁸⁰ As we shall see, the power of this story is not found in the elements of its narrative structure, *per se*, but in the actual *turning point* of the narrative.⁸¹ More on this below. The story is presented from a third person omniscient point-of-view.

Setting

The physical setting for this parable is only identified as a generic *in one city* (בְּעִיר אֶחָת) in 12:1. No specifics are given as to its location; this is Anytown, Israel. The absolute nature of this *one city* aids the narrator and Nathan in highlighting the universal message of the parable’s moral lesson.

There is also a timeless quality to this brief story as it jumps right into an extended moment of exposition ranging from 1b-3—the bulk of the story. This is all about establishing a mood and not specifying any matters of temporality.

⁷⁹ Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 160.

⁸⁰ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 76.

⁸¹ This is a rhetorical term also referred to as the *climax* of the narrative. In a short story, a novel, or a brief story such as this parable the “*climax* designates the turning point in the action, the crisis at which the rising action reverses and becomes the falling action.” See Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 98.

Characterization

The central figures in this narrative are the *two men* (12:1) who are more particularly described as the *rich man* and the *poor man* (12:2-4), the ewe-lamb (12:3-4), and the visitor (12:4). The “flocks and cattle” (צֹאן וּבְקָרָה) of verses 2 and 4 serve as *agents* or minor characters who are, as Berlin writes, “not important in their own right, but function as pieces in the background... as aids in characterizing the major characters.”⁸² Fokkelman notes that in 12:1b that the *rich man* and the *poor man* “stand together as neighbours (‘two men’)” whereas the end of the verse “introduces the opposition poor/rich and dissects the two as ‘one... one’, but still places both of them next to each other.”⁸³ The *rich man* is briefly described by his many material possessions (12:2). Brueggemann observes “the rich man is not very interesting. It does not take very long to describe and dismiss him.”⁸⁴ Bergen suggests that because the *rich man* had “flocks and cattle” that he might have been a shepherd like David.⁸⁵ We learn more about his traits in the narration of his miserly moral character revealing that he did not want to butcher one from his large herd to feed his visitor (12:4) and by his actions when he seizes the lone ewe-lamb from the *poor man* (12:4).

Much more is said about the *poor man* in 12:3. The only bit of property he had was his lone ewe-lamb. In contrast to the *rich man*, Davis affirms of the *poor man* that he “has far more than flocks and herds; he has a family circle and the warmth of home life.”⁸⁶ The verbs of habit

⁸² Berlin, *Poetics and*, 85.

⁸³ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 72.

⁸⁴ Brueggemann, *First and*, 279.

⁸⁵ Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 370.

⁸⁶ Davis, *2 Samuel*, 150.

(eat, drink, lie) speak to a stable and loving home provided by the *poor man* for the ewe-lamb and his sons. The ewe-lamb has been carefully selected which is indicated by the relative clause אֲשֶׁר קָנָה in v. 3.

The visitor (12:4) is present in this story merely to move the plot along. Like the flocks and cattle, he is an agent. He serves the purpose of allowing the reader (and David) to take stock of the *rich man's* dark heart and actions. The ewe-lamb (12:3-4) is the love of the *poor man's* life. She is nourished and grows up in a rich home full of love and warmth.

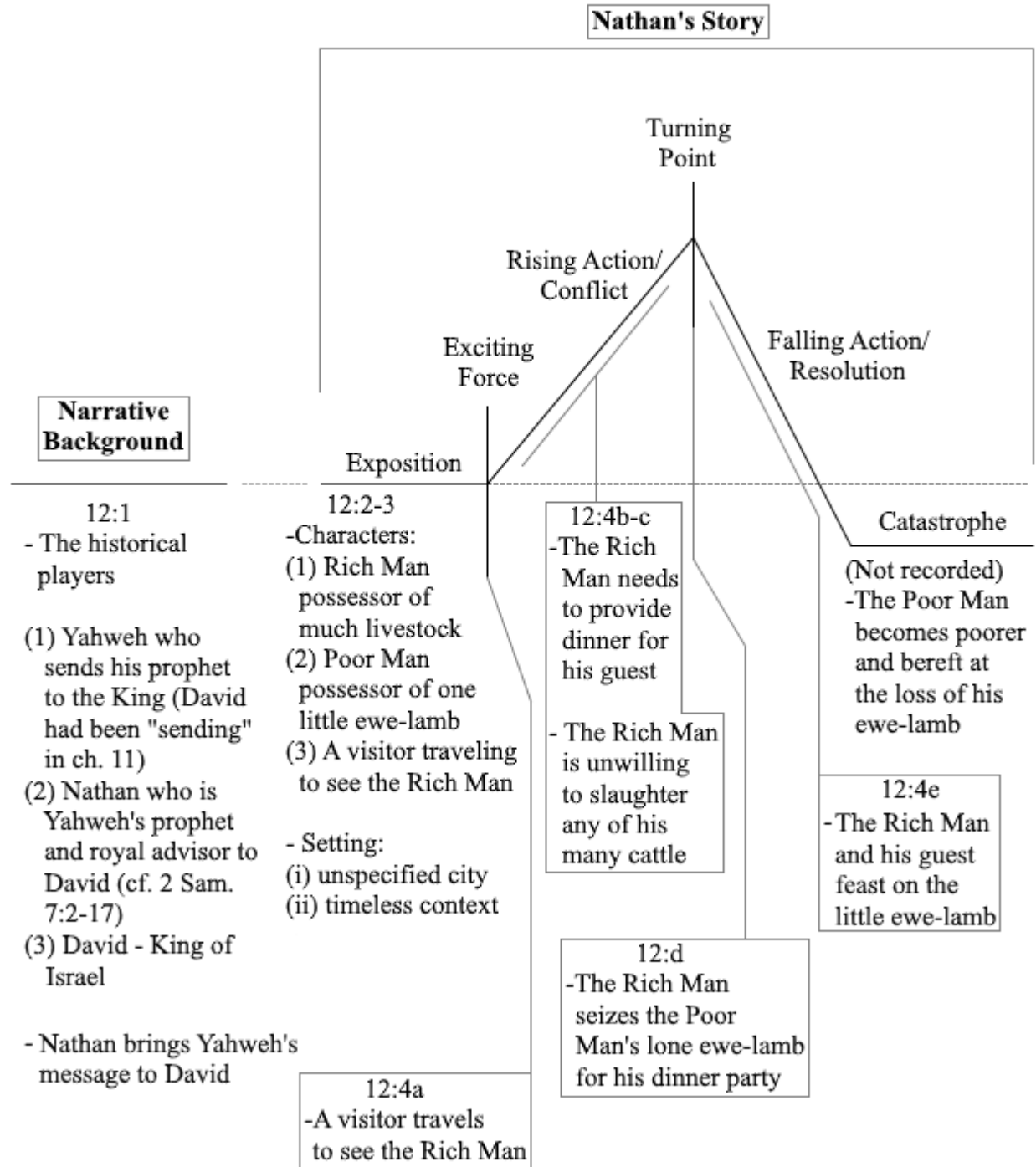
Fokkelman writes about a how the characters in the parable parallel and connect with figures in real life. For Nathan and David it is a matter of the rich, poor, lamb, and herds while on the level of the story being told and the listener/reader the correlation is to David, Uriah, Bathsheba, and the harem.⁸⁷

Plot

The plot arc of this story is represented in TABLE 2 below.

⁸⁷ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 78.

TABLE 2

2 Samuel 12:1-4 - Nathan's Story

The plot of any narrative is characterized by several elements. The first is the

introduction or exposition which creates a tone, provides the setting (time, place, etc.), introduces the characters and supplies some back story information.⁸⁸ In this parable the exposition represents the bulk of the text running from 12:1-3. Alter notes that the exposition is “pretemporal, statically enumerating data that are not bound to a specific moment in time: they are facts that stand before the time of the story proper.”⁸⁹

The rising action or complication stage of the plot is set in motion by an exciting force and sustained by successive stages of conflict between the hero/protagonist and counter players or counter events leading up to a climax. This is the *plot thickens* stage. In our story this is very brief and there is only one element of conflict. The exciting force which sets the action in motion is the arrival of the visitor at the *rich man's* home and the practice of hospitality recognizes that this man is to be fed.

The action rises with the conflict facing the *rich man*; what will he do in order to provide dinner for his guest. The conflict is resolved when the *rich man* who is disinclined to butcher one of his own herd seizes the lone ewe-lamb of the *poor man*. This is, of course, a morally despicable decision which is the turning point of the story. The rising action after the climax of the seizure of the *poor man's* ewe-lamb gives way to the falling action of the dinner party for the *rich man* and the visitor.

Typically, a narrative will include a *denouement* (for a “happy ending”) or *catastrophe* (for a “tragic ending”). The catastrophic ending including a scene of a lamenting *poor man* and family is not included since Nathan's goal is to raise the ire of David to react in judgment and ultimately judge himself.

⁸⁸ See Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook*, 165 for more.

⁸⁹ Alter, *The Art of*, (1981), 80. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 72 also makes note of this calling the introduction “static.”

Theological Implications

Six implications immediately emerge from our study of this parable. First, God has ordained that a significant portion of his divine revelation is meted out in the form of historical and fictional narrative. In addition to this fiction, we take note of Jotham's fable, the fable in 2 Kings 14:9-10, the depictions and stories of Dame Wisdom and Dame Folly in Proverbs 8-9, and of course, the parables of Jesus to name but a few.

Second, stories like this one promote strong heart emotions and affections that lead them to powerfully communicating the will of God in revealed truth. David's visceral response to Nathan's story provides evidence of just such an emotional response as the very first person to hear this tale.

Third, the grace of Yahweh never lets up and doggedly pursues and unveils the sin of sinners whether they be noble or common. We may sin, but it will always be found out in this world or the next.

Fourth, it seemingly is the way of men in power to *take* as we see in this text (and in 1 Sam. 8:11-19). The trappings of a status of power are very seductive indeed where even a man after God's own heart commits adultery and murder and tries to cover it up.

Fifth, genuine followers of God, when appropriately convicted, can be reached as to the reality of their sin.

Sixth, this story is evidence that a piece of imaginative literature can both pack a theological punch and succeed with a very simple plot. The bulk of this story is focused on Nathan's expositional setup running from the second half of the first verse through verse 3. His briefly locates the physical setting in "one city" with "two men" (v. 1). The first man, the *rich man*, is described with only a modicum of basic information (2). But in the *poor man* is afforded

an extended introduction in verse 3 where Nathan provides a close look at who this figure is. We learn much about the *poor man's* home life and his tenderhearted affection for his lone ewe-lamb. All of this has the effect of establishing a mood regarding the *poor man's* "rich" home life dramatically increasing the desired result for readers: moral outrage at the callousness and indifference of the *rich man*.

The careful composition of this extended introductory portion of this brief story aids in its packing a theological punch in identifying the sin of and judgment needed for the *rich man*.

Putting This All Together

We began with Amit's assertion that "The Bible makes plain that it ascribes great importance to stories and their presentation as a means of persuasion."⁹⁰ He also spoke of the literature of the Bible seeking to convince readers and listeners of the truth of God's message through the power of stories.⁹¹ We ask, after our study of 2 Sam. 12:1-4, if such a claim can be corroborated. The answer is an overwhelming yes. But it is a qualified "yes" in the sense that God has also chosen to persuasively make his case for truth through the mean of texts such as Pauline arguments, poetry, and legal texts. Whether prescribing or describing, biblical literature makes its case through a variety of persuasive means. With that stated it does seem that the reach of stories (historical or fictive) is universal.

⁹⁰ Amit, *Reading Biblical*, 1.

⁹¹ Amit, *Reading Biblical*, 2.

Chapter 8—A Narrative Critical Approach to Imaginative New Testament Story: An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study

Introduction

In the previous chapter we looked at how storytellers in the OT fashioned spectacularly moving stories in order to make a theological point by way of writing fiction. We now turn to two examples of NT fiction. First, we study a parable of Jesus from Luke 16:19-31 and then a piece of visionary literature from the Revelation of John in chapter 12.

In each case we will provide a wooden translation for the purpose of close study. This will be followed by exegesis and comment and then by literary analysis. This work will allow us to draw some theological implications of the message of the story.

A Narrative Critical Look at Luke 16:19-31—An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study

The NT contains many parables of Jesus which represent stories from his imagination or those gathered and retold from other sources. The key element of them to note is their fictive quality. Here we take a look at the parable the Rich Man and Lazarus from Luke 16:19-31.

Introduction

Most scholars classify the account of “The Rich Man and Lazarus” as a *parable*. A παραβολή, as used in the Gospels, possesses a broader meaning than its usage in English.¹ A παραβολή is a “narrative or saying of varying length, designed to illustrate a truth especially through comparison or simile ... in the synoptics the word refers to a variety of illustrative formulations in the teachings of Jesus.”² This word is akin to the Hebrew term לְשׁוֹן הַמִּשְׁלָּה. The

¹ K. R. Snodgrass, “Parable,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall, editors (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 593.

² BDAG, 759, 2. a.

Hebrew concept is far more likely to be in the mind of Jesus.³ Snodgrass identifies four distinguishable forms of parables: (1) a *similitude* (an extended simile; comparison), (2) an *example story* (presenting a positive or negative figure whose affections and actions are to be imitated or avoided), (3) a *parable* (an extended metaphor), and (4) an *allegory* (a series of related metaphors).⁴

“The Rich Man and Lazarus” is an *example story*⁵ with a tragic arc.⁶ This narrative employs the device of *reversal*.⁷ The initial state of poverty for Lazarus and the wealth of the Rich Man in this life are reversed in the afterlife. The plot is moved along mostly through dialogue which represents all of the narrative beginning from verse 24.

There is some discussion if this parable is rooted in an historical account or a work of fiction—either by Luke or Jesus. An Egyptian folk tale of reincarnation references a *father* recalling how “a rich man had had a sumptuous funeral while a poor man had simply been buried”⁸ when the reincarnated man took him to the land of the dead. Bauckham concludes that this parable has some parallels to the Egyptian story of Setme and Si-Osiris, but that it cannot be

³ So Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 34-36.

⁴ Snodgrass, “Parable,” 593.

⁵ So Stein, *The Method and Message*, 38 and Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC, Vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 421; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 632; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke—Volume 2: 9:51-24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 1363; and Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990), 205.

⁶ So also James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 208.

⁷ See Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1203-06; Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 188; and Marshall, *The Gospel*, 632 for more discussion of how Luke employs the theme of *reversal* in his gospel.

⁸ For more see Marshall, *The Gospel*, 633 who provides a helpful and extensive discussion of the parallels between this Egyptian work and our parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

asserted that Jesus is using it as a source for his story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.⁹ Stein discusses the similarities between the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11-12 as grounds for some to argue that Luke 16:19-31 is an historical account.¹⁰ In the midst of all of this interesting discussion of pagan mythic origins and the potential for a historical background many scholars conclude that the parable is a work of fiction originating with Jesus.¹¹ This is because the language used is quite familiar (cf. “a certain man,” etc.) to the world of the imaginative literature of Jesus and that the descriptions of the afterlife are more fanciful in their depiction than one would expect of an actual description because no man has any actual experience (This does not discount an actual afterlife of heaven and a Hades!).¹²

The audience for this parable is the Pharisees as can be seen by Luke 16:14 and the editorial comment of 17:1.¹³ It should be concluded that Jesus is the storyteller of this parable.¹⁴

We begin by providing a translation of the text and then move onto a brief discussion of exegetical and grammatical matters. A substantive literary analysis is followed by a summary of

⁹ Richard Bauckham, “The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels,” *New Testament Studies* volume 37 (1991): 225-46. This is also the conclusion of Josh Stigall, “‘They have Moses and the Prophets’: The enduring demand of the Law and Prophets in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.” *Review and Expositor* Volume 112(4) (2015): 542-54. Stigall investigates the Egyptian myth alongside Greek and Roman stories about the underworld concluding that although such stories were likely part of the 1st century popular consciousness, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus was influenced by other Scripture.

¹⁰ See Stein, *Luke*, 422 for more discussion especially note 221 at the bottom of the page.

¹¹ I say fiction meaning the sense of “any literary *narrative*, whether in prose or in verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that in fact happened.” See M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, sixth edition (Forth Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), 64 for more.

¹² So Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1363; Stein, *Luke*, 422; and Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 111.

¹³ Marshall, *The Gospel*, 634 and Stein, *Luke*, 421 also make this observation.

¹⁴ So Marshall, *The Gospel*, 634 and Hultgren, *The Parables*, 115.

theological implications. The translation below of this story is purposefully wooden in order to preserve some of the original language's flavor and for grammatical comment.

Translation

19—"Now there was a certain rich man, and he was clothing himself in purple and fine linen being glad splendidly every day.

20—"And a certain poor man of the name of Lazarus was laid at his gate having been covered with sores,

21—and desiring to be fed with what was falling from the table of the rich man. But even the dogs were coming and were licking his sores.

22—Now it came to be that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels unto the bosom of Abraham. Now also the rich man died and he was buried.

23—"And in Hades, after lifting up his eyes, being in torment, he saw Abraham from far away and Lazarus in his bosom.

24—"And he called out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and may cool my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.'

25—"But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you received your good things in your life, and Lazarus likewise bad things; but now here he is being comforted, and you are in agony.'

26—"And in all these things, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who wish to cross from here to you may not be able and no one may cross over from there to us.'

27—"And he said, 'Then I entreat you, Father, that you may send him to my father's house—

28—for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, that also they may not come to this place of torment.'

29—"But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets, let them hear them.'

30—"But he said, 'No, Father Abraham, but if someone from the dead might go to them, they will repent!'

31—"But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should be raised from the dead.'"

Exegesis and Comment

19—The construction ἄνθρωπος ... τις is a typical way for Luke to introduce a parable of

Jesus.¹⁵ This is a rhetorical strategy to tip off the reader as to what is coming next. The καθ' is

used with the accusative of *time* and is rendered "every;" thus καθ' ἡμέραν is "every day."¹⁶ One

¹⁵ So noted by Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1365 and Stein, *Luke*, 423.

¹⁶ *BDAG*, 512, 2. c.

of this parable's central themes, namely that of *wealth*, is introduced here.¹⁷

20—In direct contrast to the Rich Man we are introduced to Lazarus; this is the only parable to provide a name for one of its characters.¹⁸ Lazarus comes from the Hebrew, *Eleazar* (אֵלְעָזָר) which means “He (whom) God has helped.”¹⁹ The selection of the name אֵלְעָזָר/Lazarus by Jesus is notable because it was a highly recognizable name for the Jews. Those who shared this name include: Aaron's son, Eleazar (Exod. 6:23), a priest officiating at the dedication of the rebuilt wall (Neh. 12:42), and perhaps most notably, Abraham's beloved servant (Gen. 15:2).²⁰

There is also a sense of *reversal* in that Lazarus's name means *he whom God has helped* because the Rich Man does not help, but God does in receiving him in heaven.²¹ The pluperfect ἐβέβλητο is the equivalent of the aorist plus the imperfect which is rendered “(he) was laid”²² and suggests he was crippled.²³

21—The verb ἐπιθυμέω, used here as a present participle, can convey the sense of an unfulfilled wish²⁴ and here “refers to a strong desire, often involving food.”²⁵ Lazarus's desire χορτασθῆναι

¹⁷ See Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1360; Stein, *Luke*, 420; and Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, Volume One: The Gospel according to Luke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 131-32 for more discussion.

¹⁸ So noted by Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1362-1363; Stein, *Luke*, 423; Marshall, *The Gospel*, 635; and David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 669.

¹⁹ So Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1365; Stein, *Luke*, 423; Marshall, *The Gospel*, 635; Garland, *Luke*, 669; and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 252.

²⁰ See Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1366 for more discussion.

²¹ Also noted by Stein, *Luke*, 425; Marshall, *The Gospel*, 638; and Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1372.

²² Noted in *BDF*, §341 (1) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 177-78.

²³ So Stein, *Luke*, 423; Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1366; and Marshall, *The Gospel*, 635.

²⁴ So Stein, *Luke*, 423 and Marshall, *The Gospel*, 635. See also *BDAG*, 371-72. Cf. Luke 15:16.

²⁵ Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1367.

ἀπὸ τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τοῦ πλουσίου, likely meant that he would have been happy with any bread used as *finger towels* to dry the hands of diners and then thrown under the table.²⁶ Dogs (κύων) in Jewish society were considered as “impure, disgusting scavengers.”²⁷ A κύων is “an unclean animal.”²⁸ That the dogs were licking (ἐπέλειχον) Lazarus made him ceremonially unclean, another indignity in his tormented life.²⁹

22—The setting of the story changes; we are no longer at the gate of the Rich Man’s house, but at an undefined set of locations regarding each man and we gather some measure of time has passed.³⁰ The aorist infinitive ἀποθανεῖν is frequently used by Luke (twenty-two times) in his gospel and in Acts, but only once in Mark and never in Matthew.³¹ The adjective πτωχὸν functions as a substantive. The imagery of the deaths of the two men is stunningly different: the rich man is buried, but Lazarus is carried away by angels. The theme of opposition continues.

The image of τὸν κόλπον Ἀβραάμ serves as a locative metaphor for the afterlife. It is the “warm, secure place of high honor—since Abraham was the father of the Jews—where the poor beggar Lazarus is taken by the angels.”³² Or put another way, Abraham’s bosom was an image for the place of the righteous dead used in opposition, by the Jews, to Hades which was the

²⁶ Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1367; Marshall, *The Gospel*, 635; and Stein, *Luke*, 423.

²⁷ Stein, *Luke*, 423. So also Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1367.

²⁸ *BDAG*, 579.

²⁹ See Johnson, *The Gospel of*, 252; Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1367; and Stein, *Luke*, 423 for more discussion.

³⁰ Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1367 makes a brief reference to this setting change.

³¹ Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1367.

³² *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 5.

location of the wicked dead.³³ In this parable Jesus employs Abraham as an eschatological figure providing rest to the righteous dead he cradles.³⁴ In an interesting discussion, Christian traces the understanding of the image *Abraham's bosom* from Greek and Jewish thought to its use in the early church.³⁵ The early bishop Hippolytus (ca. 170-236) speaks of Hades as the place where “the souls of the righteous and the unrighteous are detained.”³⁶ This speaks to the ongoing development of the doctrine of heaven from the early church to now. Regarding the destination of Lazarus, Hultgren confidently writes “The poor man is carried away by angels, escorted into heaven with their aid.”³⁷

23—In the New Testament Hades (ᾗδης; in this verse we have the dative ᾗδῃ) is where one finds the dead; final judgment is experienced in Gehenna.³⁸ The present participle ὑπάρχων is an example of the stative active voice indicating *being*.³⁹ The verb is an historical present and translates “he saw.”

24—The parable shifts from narration to a *direct* discourse.⁴⁰ Abraham appears on the scene in what Blomberg describes as a “unifying figure who explains the judgments meted out to the

³³ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 203.

³⁴ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 5. Daniel Berchie and Samson Dakio, “Luke 16:19-31: Intermediate State of the Soul,” *Philosophy Study* volume 5, number 2 (February 2015): 107-19 wrongly spend an inordinate amount of time discussing what the metaphor of Abraham’s bosom has to say about the intermediate state of the soul as compared to a final eschatological state. They, thereby, miss the importance of the *concrete* nature of the image of reversal.

³⁵ Ed Christian, “The Rich Man and Lazarus, Abraham’s Bosom, and the Biblical Penalty *Karet* (‘Cut Off’),” *JETS* 61.3 (2018): 513-23.

³⁶ Christian, “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” 517.

³⁷ Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 113.

³⁸ So Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1370 and Marshall, *The Gospel*, 636. This assertion is from Jeremias.

³⁹ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 412-13 for more discussion of the stative use of the active voice.

⁴⁰ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 203.

other two men.”⁴¹ The aorist participle φωνήσας is one of *attendant circumstance* and expresses the force of a finite verb when paired with an actual finite verb, in this case εἶπεν.⁴² The noun δακτύλου is a *partitive genitive* expressing a part of the whole.⁴³ In this sentence we have “the tip of his *finger*.” The noun ὕδατος is a *genitive of place* and so we translate “in water.”⁴⁴

25—Note that the article used with the adjective acts as a substantive; thus, τὰ ἀγαθὰ and τὰ κακά are rendered “the good things” and “the bad things.”⁴⁵ Abraham addresses the Rich Man as τέκνον indicating that even though he was physically a “son of Abraham” that apart from any repentance he would be judged like any other man.⁴⁶

26—The reality of the *great chasm* (χάσμα μέγα) reflects that the “reversed fortunes of the two men after death are a necessary consequence of their respective conditions in this life, nothing can happen after death to change them.”⁴⁷ This is a turning point for the Rich Man who no longer pleads for his own case and moves on to that of his brothers.⁴⁸ Theθεν suffix of the adverbs ἐνθεν and ἐκεῖθεν answer the question “from where?” and are classified as adverbs of place.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 203.

⁴² See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 640-45 for more discussion.

⁴³ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 84-6 for more discussion.

⁴⁴ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 124.

⁴⁵ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 231-33 provides an exhaustive discussion of the many uses of the definite article including this particular case.

⁴⁶ Stein, *Luke*, 425.

⁴⁷ Bauckham, “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” 231. Christian, “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” 520-23 also argues this posture.

⁴⁸ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 203.

⁴⁹ *BDF*, §104 (1), 56.

27—This verse begins the second part of the parable. The Rich Man ironically asks if Lazarus could be sent to his *father's house*.

28—The Rich Man reveals the object of his request to send Lazarus: he has five brothers in need of warning. The ἵνα clause indicates the purpose of the warning. The Rich Man believes that with additional information that his brothers can avoid his judgment.⁵⁰

29—The verb λέγει is an historical present and reads, “(he) said.” We have rendered the imperative plus pronoun, ἀκουσάτωσαν αὐτῶν, as “Let them hear them.” Wallace helpfully points out that one should not think of the “let them” in terms of permission. Rather it carries the force of “they must hear.”⁵¹

30—The Rich Man begs Abraham to let his brothers see what he thinks is greater than the witness of Scripture, namely a dead man, and that this will convince them to repent.

31—Abraham concludes his dialogue by stressing that if anyone fails to heed the message of Scripture, then nothing can persuade such an unrepentant heart.

Literary Analysis

The point of view in this narrative is relayed from a third-person omniscient narrator who knows everything needed to know to inform his readers. We shall first review the setting of this text and then move on to character analysis—observing their basic traits as revealed in the narrative— and then conclude by tracing the plot.

Setting

The text begins with a formula specific to a great many of Jesus' parables: “a certain man was” (specifically in this case: Ἄνθρωπος δέ τις ἦν πλούσιος [“And there was a certain rich man

⁵⁰ Stein, *Luke*, 425.

⁵¹ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 485-86.

...]). The “indefinite pronoun in Greek has parallels in Hebrew introductions to rabbinic parables and weighs against the suggestion that real individuals were in view.”⁵² So it seems we are dealing with a fictional story.

The location of the narrative is undefined, but conveys the sense of Anywhere, Judea. Temporally, we traverse the span of action in this life and spill over into the afterlife. This parable is the only one to depict events in this life and the afterlife.⁵³ The circumstances portrayed present a couple of traditional Jewish themes: (1) the representation of the rich in a negative light⁵⁴ and (2) the traditional images of the place of the righteous dead (Abraham’s bosom) and the place of the wicked dead (Hades).⁵⁵

Characters

This is what Blomberg identifies as a simple three-point parable having three main characters. Often, these characters “include an authority figure and two contrasting subordinates. The authority figure, usually a king, father or master, typically acts as a judge between the two subordinates, who in turn exhibit contrasting behavior.”⁵⁶ A complex three-point parable will contain more than three main characters while still exhibiting the triadic structure of a simple three-pointer.⁵⁷ The parables of the Seeds (or the Sower) in Mark 4:1-9, 13-20 and of the Good Samaritan are examples of complex three-point parables.

⁵² Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 205.

⁵³ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 204 and Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1362 also make this observation.

⁵⁴ So also Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 155.

⁵⁵ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 203 also observes this.

⁵⁶ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 171.

⁵⁷ See Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 213-14.

This is the only parable in the NT in which the characters have names.⁵⁸ Characterization in parables is notable for their *thin descriptions* and lack of any real narrated motivations or background information.⁵⁹ The addition of the use of specific names in this parable likely has to do with, in this specific case, aiding the reader in providing an actual “picture of the person.”⁶⁰ The use of the name Lazarus, as Blomberg suggests, is “probably meant to be seen as one who had faith in God. His very name means ‘God helps’ (from the Hebrew Eliezer).”⁶¹ The characters in this parable “do not seem to symbolize ‘spiritual counterparts’ but simply represent other people in identical situations—certain rich men, certain poor men, and those who dwell in the presence of God.”⁶²

Darr, writing as a reader-response critic, advocates for identifying the *narrator* as an additional character in Luke’s gospel.⁶³ This means that the author Luke is to be seen as something distinct from the third-person omniscient voice of the narrator in the parable and thus, another character.⁶⁴ This idea allows Darr to advance his real agenda of advocacy for reader-response criticism in which he denies the author as determiner of the text’s meaning and elevates the reader as he who determines meaning. The argument is reductive and pure sophistry.

Study TABLE 1 below for a representation of the relationship as outworked in the parable

⁵⁸ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 204; Stein, *Luke*, 422; and Bock, *Luke—Volume 2*, 1362 make this observation.

⁵⁹ Snodgrass, *Stories with*, 17.

⁶⁰ Snodgrass, *Stories with*, 17.

⁶¹ Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 205-06.

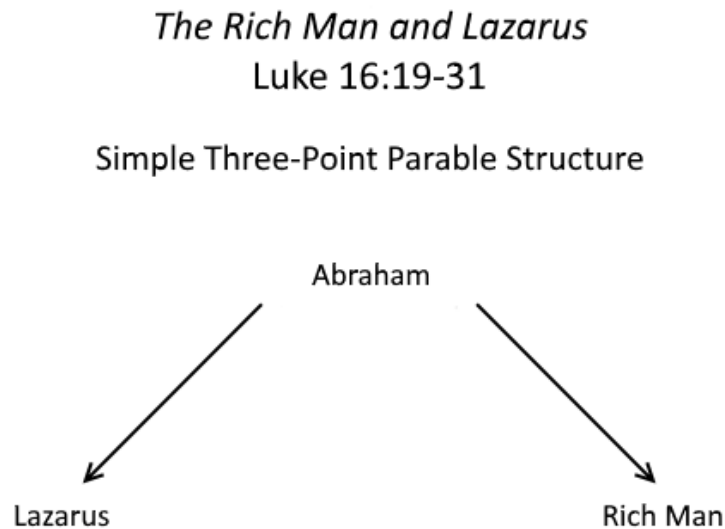
⁶² Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 204.

⁶³ John A. Darr, “Narrator as Character: Mapping a Reader-Oriented Approach to Narration in Luke-Acts,” *Semeia* volume 63 (1993): 43-60.

⁶⁴ Darr, “Narrator as Character,” 43-7.

of “The Rich Man and Lazarus.”

TABLE 1⁶⁵



- The Rich Man—the protagonist villain who remains unnamed. He is handsomely clothed (“in purple and fine linen,” 16:19) and is well fed (he “feasted sumptuously every day,” 16:19). He obviously owns a fine home because Lazarus waits at his gate (16:20). In our sparse parable we realize that this man has paid no attention to the needs of the poor (let alone Lazarus at his front door) and has lived in unbelief as is revealed by his condemnation to Hades. He holds to the belief not that Yahweh is the king of the universe and readily revealed in the Scriptures, but that if he and his living brothers could only see the signs of evidence of the afterlife he could have been saved and they will be saved.
- Lazarus—the antagonist hero of the story who utters no dialogue. He does not have to because his obvious faith and redemption speak for him as his provision is the promise of

⁶⁵ This is Blomberg’s diagram, see Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 203.

salvation and not mere food and shelter. In this life, he is poor (16:20), likely infirmed (he “was laid” at the Rich Man’s gate; 16:20), and diseased (he was “covered with sores,” 16:20). His condition of malnourishment is confirmed through his plea that he “desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table,” (16:21). His humiliation is completed when we learn that “even the dogs came and licked his sores” (16:21). That he ends up in Abraham’s bosom as borne by angels testifies to the blessedness of this poor believer and the efficacy of God’s redemptive hand.

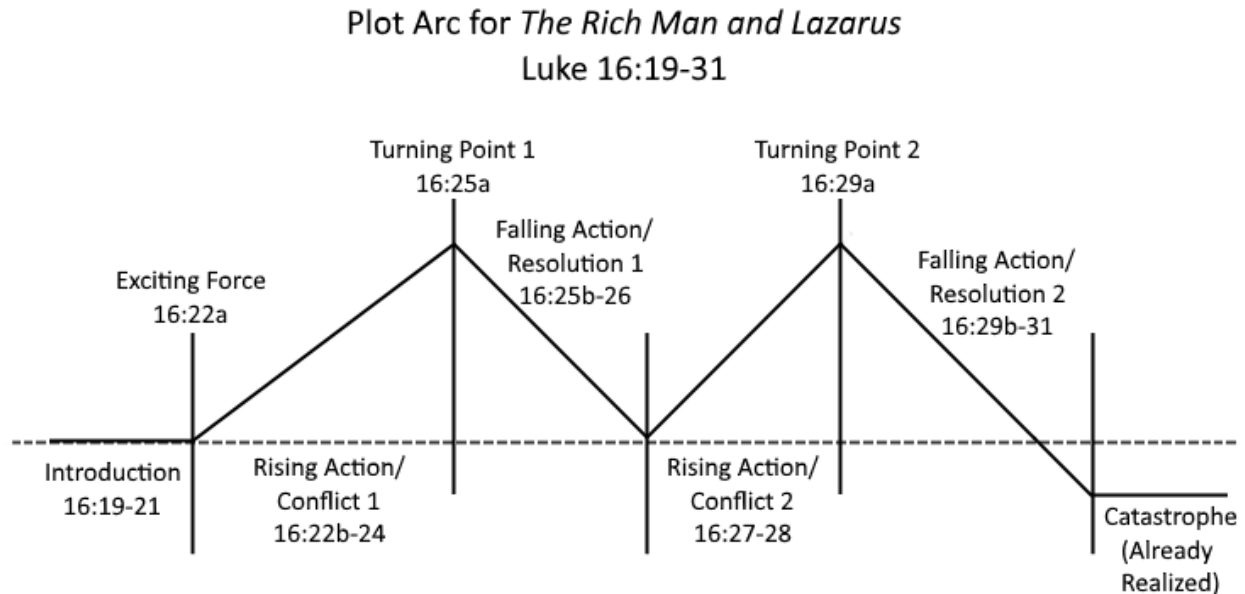
- Father Abraham—the authority figure in this *monarchic* parable.⁶⁶ He does not appear until verse 23. He is an obvious spokesman for Yahweh who authoritatively utters theological realities: (1) There is no traffic between heaven and hell. Once one has passed from this life to the next there is no altering of one’s destiny. (2) He also reminds the Rich Man that Yahweh’s message of redemption and condemnation is powerfully and convincingly available in the Scriptures (“They have Moses and the prophets,” 16:29). (3) The message of Scripture is understandable (“let them [the brothers back on earth] hear them [the Scriptures], 16:29). (4) Stony hearts that will not receive the hope of Scripture’s redemptive message would not be convinced by a visitation “if someone should be raised from the dead,” (16:31).

Plot

A diagram of the plot in this narrative is presented in TABLE 2.

⁶⁶ This is an alternate moniker to describe this category of parable. See Blomberg, *Interpreting*, 171-172 for more.

TABLE 2



The plot of this parable follows a tragic arc in which the authoritative father figure in the form of Abraham issues prophetic statements of judgment that assess the profound differences between the affections and actions of the two subordinate figures (the Rich Man and Lazarus). Abraham is the *unifying* figure in this narrative, but the Rich Man is the protagonist and Lazarus his foil.

The plot is advanced mostly by way of dialogue which begins at verse 24.

(1) Introduction/Exposition (Luke 16:19-21)—The story begins with the formulaic “Ἄνθρωπος δέ τις ἦν πλούσιος” signaling that a parable is following. Jesus, as the storyteller, assumes that we will recognize that this narrative is set in Everytown, Judea.

The exact location is immaterial to grasping the meaning of the parable. We are introduced to two of three characters: the unnamed Rich Man with his lavish wealth and lifestyle who is detached from the plight of others, and the poverty stricken, diseased, hungry, and humiliated Lazarus.

(2) Rising Action/Complication (22-24)—

a. Exciting Force: 22a—Both men die.

b. Conflict 1: 22b-24—Lazarus, in a reversal of station, is conveyed by angels to heaven at Abraham's side. The Rich Man, experiencing torment in hell, takes note of Father Abraham and Lazarus who are in heaven across a "fixed chasm" between heaven and hell. The Rich Man does not know it is *fixed*. In his condemned state, the Rich Man, in "anguish in this flame" pleads for relief in the form of a drop of water from the tip of the finger of Lazarus. The irony of this scene is that the Rich Man expects personal care from Lazarus in the afterlife when he did not even know him sitting outside his gate on earth.

(3) Turning Point 1 (25a)—Abraham decisively responds. The text reveals the break in the direction of the narrative with εἶπεν δὲ Ἀβραάμ. This is not a continuation of the arc the Rich Man was hoping for in the form of accommodation, rather it is the beginning of a two-part prophetic utterance of the theological reality facing hard-hearted souls like the Rich Man.

(4) Falling Action/Resolution 1 (25b-26)—Abraham directly, but lovingly (he addresses the Rich Man with the intimate moniker τέκνον) reminds the Rich Man of the reversal of the estates for Lazarus and him. Abraham also informs the Rich Man that it is too late for repentance. When one passes from life to the afterlife there is no trafficking from hell to heaven: one's estate is fixed.

(5) Rising Action/Conflict 2 (27-28)—It appears that the Rich Man accepts his condemnation, but still attempts to negotiate on behalf of his brothers back on earth. He now turns his pleas to their behalf. He fancies that a "ghost visitation" from Lazarus will convince his brothers of the reality of the Rich Man's plight and move them to avoid hell themselves. Has he forgotten the

chasm Abraham just referenced? Is he, as a former man of wealth and influence thinking that his brothers only lack the evidence to avoid hell?

(6) Turning Point 2 (29a)—Just as we experienced the plot twist before in verse 25a, the Rich Man's pleas and attempts to bargain are met with a decisive turn in tone and substance by Abraham with λέγει δὲ Ἀβραάμ. This is not the language of negotiation, but words of focused forth-telling of God's truth.

(7) Falling Action/resolution 2 (29b-31)—Abraham replies to the Rich Man by affirming that his brothers have full access to the Scriptures already. Abraham entreats the brothers to ἀκουσάτωσαν αὐτῶν. The Rich Man stubbornly relapses to a visit from dead Lazarus as the evidence needed to evoke repentance in his brothers. Abraham replies that the truth, hope, and warning of condemnation found in the Scriptures are just as powerful, efficacious, and spectacularly convincing as ghost visitation. He concludes that the evident materialism of the brothers will preclude them from embracing the supernatural truth of revelation or, for that matter, a visitation from the dead.

(8) Catastrophe—This is not provided in the narrative in the form of something like, “And then the Rich Man retreated into the perdition of facing the eternal wrath of almighty God forever.” It is not the point of the parable to neatly tie off the ending of a story with such material. It is, however, already evident that the eternal state of the Rich Man is established and final. This is the tragedy of this unrepentant and stony heart; it is too late for him.

Theological Implications

Four theological implications emerge from this parable. First, an unbelieving and unrepentant heart does not develop as a result of any lack of a miraculous sign, but from a hardened heart. Second, heaven and hell really do exist and there is no traversing from one state

to the next. The reality of reward and condemnation is fixed. Third, the self-inflated *first* really do end up last and the suffering *last* wind up finishing first in glory.

Fourth, the narrator's clever use of irony serves to drive home the teaching on the theology of the afterlife. The central doctrine established in this parable regarding heaven and hell is that once anyone passes from this life to the next is that your estate—whether redeemed or condemned—is fixed. There is no moving from one eternal destination to another (and by implication no communication), and yet, for the purpose of making this point, Jesus fashions his parable as a dialogue between two parties—one in heaven and the other in hell. This clever device makes this parable's message all the more memorable in very concrete terms.

A Narrative Critical Look at Revelation 12:1-17—

An Exegetical, Literary, and Theological Study

Introduction

Chapter 11:15 effectively records the end of history on earth. Chapter 12 begins a whole new section of the book which can be broken down from chapters 1-11 and 12-22. Both of these divisions relate the same central theme which Hendriksen describes as “the victory of Christ and His Church over the dragon and his helpers.”⁶⁷ Chapters 12-22 explain with greater detail what has already been introduced in 1-11.⁶⁸

Chapter 12, as Resseguie notes, “follows an A, B, A' pattern with two interrelated conflicts: parts 1 and 3 (A, A') describe the strife between the dragon and an unnamed woman (12:1-6, 13-18), and part 2 (B) tells of the war between Michael and the dragon (12:7-12).”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Hendriksen, *More Than*, 151.

⁶⁸ Beale, *The Book of*, 622.

⁶⁹ Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 169.

This hostility on the part of the dragon unto the woman serves as a framing device for the inserted middle story of the war in heaven.⁷⁰

Chapter 12 consists of three scenes: 12:1-6—relaying a cosmic struggle, 12:7-12—depicting a war in heaven, and 12:13-17—narrating struggles on earth. John sets his narratives in two (this world and the one above) of his three-storied world.⁷¹

Exegetical Notes and Comment

The OT allusions in this story are rich highlighting the one of Revelation's central themes, which is ongoing war between God and his people and Satan. This study will engage with important grammatical, syntactical, and symbolical matters of images and the terms used. The first scene (12:1-6) presents, as Tabb affirms, a “major image of the church as the new Israel.”⁷²

1— Καὶ σημεῖον μέγα ὤφθη ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, γυνὴ περιβεβλημένη τὸν ἥλιον, καὶ ἡ σελήνη ὑποκάτω τῶν ποδῶν αὐτῆς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς στέφανος ἀστέρων δώδεκα, —The imagery of the σημεῖον (sign or portent) is the language of heavenly visions. The aorist passive verb ὤφθη is understood in its active voice sense meaning to “*become visible, appear*.”⁷³ This speaks to the sight of the visionary and the *signs* he sees. Beale notes that the signs seen here, which are also seen in 11:19, are “in the same heaven... which is the otherworldly dimension in which he receives all of his visions.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 169.

⁷¹ See Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 18-19 for more discussion.

⁷² Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, NBST 48 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 105.

⁷³ *BDAG*, 719.

⁷⁴ Beale, *The Book of*, 625.

The woman is identified as a *great sign* (σημεῖον μέγα), whereas the dragon is merely introduced by a *sign* (σημεῖον). This is an obvious choice by John to indicate a strong contrast between the woman and the dragon.

The rich imagery feels and reads like myth. Osborne smartly calls the imagery used here that of *international myth* because the elements of this story are so common that they are found in just about every religion in the ancient world.⁷⁵ In Egypt the “mother goddess Isis is pursued by the red dragon Set or Typhon and flees to an island, where she gives birth to the sun god, Horus.”⁷⁶ In the lore of many ancient nations is the story of a usurper who is fated to be killed by a yet unborn prince frustrating the usurper’s plans of destroying the babe at birth. This same prince is rescued from certain death and hidden away until he can ascend to the throne.⁷⁷ Schreiner persuasively argues that “John is not reproducing these myths, but they were in the air, and John adapts what was common in the culture for his own purposes and sets it into the storyline of biblical (OT) revelation.”⁷⁸ Beale asserts that John’s goal in employing material from these Egyptian, Babylonian, Ugaritic, Persian, and Greek myths is *polemical* in nature since he would undoubtedly claim “that his is the authentic story from which the others are bastardized reflections.”⁷⁹

The twelve stars represent the twelve tribes of Israel and God’s control over the heavens.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 454.

⁷⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 454.

⁷⁷ Caird, *The Revelation of*, 147.

⁷⁸ Schreiner, “Revelation,” 659.

⁷⁹ Beale, *The Book of*, 624-625.

⁸⁰ See Beale, *The Book of*, 626 and Osborne, *Revelation*, 456 for more discussion.

2— καὶ ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα, καὶ κράζει ὠδίνουσα καὶ βασανιζομένη τεκεῖν. The phrase “and having in the womb” is an idiom for *pregnant*.⁸¹ The birth pangs of the woman represent persecutions undergone by those faithful during the OT times and of the messianic line.⁸² The labor pains of the woman serve as a representation of the suffering that is born by the believing people of God in the OT and throughout history.⁸³

3— καὶ ὤφθη ἄλλο σημεῖον ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, καὶ ἰδοὺ δράκων μέγας πυρρὸς ἔχων κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ καὶ κέρατα δέκα καὶ ἐπὶ τὰς κεφαλὰς αὐτοῦ ἑπτὰ διαδήματα, The introduction of the dragon as merely “another sign” stands in opposition to the “great sign” referring to the woman. Osborne suggests that he is not *great* because there is no heavenly good in it.⁸⁴ The physical description of the dragon contains, as Beale says, “a mosaic of OT imagery [which] is used to draw the contours of this monster—all the imagery of evil kingdoms who persecute God’s people.”⁸⁵

4— καὶ ἡ οὐρὰ αὐτοῦ σύρει τὸ τρίτον τῶν ἀστέρων τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἔβαλεν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν γῆν. Καὶ ὁ δράκων ἔστηκεν ἐνώπιον τῆς γυναικὸς τῆς μελλούσης τεκεῖν, ἵνα ὅταν τέκη τὸ τέκνον αὐτῆς καταφάγῃ. The verb σύρει (3s Pres Act Ind) is an historical present vividly describing the action of *sweeping away* as it occurs.⁸⁶ The use of this *present* tense verb is notable since all the other verb in verses 3 and 4 are aorists.

In the ancient world the image of a dragon’s tail is often used as a weapon as is the case

⁸¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 457.

⁸² Beale, *The Book of*, 629.

⁸³ Caird, *The Revelation of*, 149.

⁸⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 456.

⁸⁵ Beale, *The Book of*, 632.

⁸⁶ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 526-532 for more discussion of the historical present.

here.⁸⁷ This image of the horns, etc. is likely an allusion to Dan. 8:10 which relates “an end-time enemy persecuting the forces of God.”⁸⁸ Specifically and historically for Daniel, Antiochus IV is in mind here with John making use of the image to highlight, as Beale suggests, applying it in an “escalated way to the devilish power behind Antiochus” referring “to the persecution of God’s people.”⁸⁹

The dreadful posture of the dragon *standing before* (ἔστηκεν ἐνώπιον) the woman at the birth canal is the typical posture of a dragon waiting to devour a victim.⁹⁰

5— καὶ ἔτεκεν υἱὸν ἄρσεν, ὃς μέλλει ποιμαίνειν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ. καὶ ἡρπάσθη τὸ τέκνον αὐτῆς πρὸς τὸν θεὸν καὶ πρὸς τὸν θρόνον αὐτοῦ. This brief description of Christ’s life and activities is what Osborne calls an *abbreviation* or what Beale terms a *telescoping* since there is no narration of Christ’s life, ministry, and death, but includes only mention of his birth, coming kingship, and ascent to the very throne of God.⁹¹

The prepositional phrase ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ should be read as “*with* a rod of iron” interpreting the preposition ἐν as an instrumental use.⁹² The talk of Christ’s rule over the nations with a rod of iron is an allusion to Psalm 2:9 and is messianic in nature. The rod iron imagery also appears in Revelation 2:27 and in both cases references Psalm 2:9’s shepherd’s club dashing nations to pieces in judgment. In Revelation it serves as an image of striking down God’s

⁸⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 460 makes this observation.

⁸⁸ Beale, *The Book of*, 635.

⁸⁹ Beale, *The Book of*, 636.

⁹⁰ So Osborne, *Revelation*, 462.

⁹¹ See Beale, *The Book of*, 639, Tabb, *All Things New*, 106, and Osborne, *Revelation*, 462 for a fuller discussion.

⁹² Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 372.

enemies.⁹³

6— καὶ ἡ γυνὴ ἔφυγεν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον, ὅπου ἔχει ἐκεῖ τόπον ἡτοιμασμένον ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα

ἐκεῖ τρέφωσιν αὐτὴν ἡμέρας χιλίας διακοσίας ἐξήκοντα. Caird describes the escape of the woman to a safe house as the “first consequence of the crucifixion and ascension of Christ.”⁹⁴

The symbolism of this flight to the safety of the desert by the woman describes how God watches over the church today in the midst of our own persecution.⁹⁵ The thought that the desert can be both a place of testing and trial and also one of divine protection and comfort is advanced by many scholars.⁹⁶

Beale makes a compelling case to understand the 1260 days as a period of time ranging from the resurrection of Christ (12:5) until his last appearance (14:14-20).⁹⁷

The second scene, 12:7-12, presents a behind the scenes look at the war in heaven between the forces of good in Michael and his angels and of evil in the form of the dragon and his angels waging war.

7— Καὶ ἐγένετο πόλεμος ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, ὁ Μιχαὴλ καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ τοῦ πολεμῆσαι μετὰ τοῦ δράκοντος. καὶ ὁ δράκων ἐπολέμησεν καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ, The setting is once again in heaven, but now a war has been waged. The verb πολεμέω (wage war) is used to describe what both parties—Michael’s and the dragon’s—are prosecuting. Both parties are described as *angels*.

The genitive article plus the infinitive πολεμῆσαι expresses a loose relationship with the

⁹³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 462 and Mounce, *The Book of*, 234 have helpful discussions of this dynamic.

⁹⁴ Caird, *The Revelation of*, 151.

⁹⁵ So Beale, *The Book of*, 642.

⁹⁶ So Osborne, *Revelation*, 464, Beale, *The Book of*, 645-46, and Mounce, *The Book of*, 234.

⁹⁷ Beale, *The Book of*, 646-47. Against Osborne, *Revelation*, 464 and the futurist posture pointing to a time of persecution as the close of history.

other elements of this sentence.⁹⁸ The prepositional phrase μετὰ τοῦ δράκοντος denotes a close association: the war is being fought *with* the dragon.⁹⁹

This verse vividly alludes to Daniel 10's imagery of Michael's battle with the princes of Persia and Greece.¹⁰⁰

8— καὶ οὐκ ἴσχυσεν οὐδὲ τόπος εὐρέθη αὐτῶν ἔτι ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ. The outcome of the hostilities is reported as the dragon's forces are vanquished. The result is that the dragon and his angels are displaced from heaven.

The negative correlatives οὐκ ... οὐδὲ preponderates in this verse resulting in the οὐδὲ carrying greater syntactical importance. The result of the defeat in the war in heaven by Satan and his forces means that they no longer (οὐδὲ) have any place in heaven.¹⁰¹

9— καὶ ἐβλήθη ὁ δράκων ὁ μέγας, ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὁ καλούμενος Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς, ὁ πλανῶν τὴν οἰκουμένην ὅλην, ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν γῆν, καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ μετ' αὐτοῦ ἐβλήθησαν. It is here for the first time in the book of Revelation that the dragon is specifically referred to as Satan (and the *serpent* and *devil*).¹⁰²

This verse offers a more precise explanation of why there is no longer any place for the dragon in heaven; it is because he was cast out (ἐβλήθη) to the earth.

10— καὶ ἤκουσα φωνὴν μεγάλην ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ λέγουσαν· ἄρτι ἐγένετο ἡ σωτηρία καὶ ἡ δύναμις καὶ ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν καὶ ἡ ἐξουσία τοῦ χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ, ὅτι ἐβλήθη ὁ κατήγωρ

⁹⁸ BDF, 206; §400 (8).

⁹⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 377-378.

¹⁰⁰ See Beale, *The Book of*, 651-52 for a very helpful summary discussion.

¹⁰¹ BDF, 230-231, §445 (1).

¹⁰² Osborne, *Revelation*, 472.

τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἡμῶν, ὁ κατηγορῶν αὐτοὺς ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός.

Verses 10-12 are thought of as a hymn.¹⁰³ Osborne states that “the hymn here interprets the significance of 12:7-9 for the people of God.”¹⁰⁴ It contains three parts: (1) the loud celebration of God’s salvation, Christ’s established authority, and the casting out of the accuser (12:10), (2) the expansion of God’s victory to include the saints as conquerors, even in death (12:11), and (3) the implications of this victory for heaven and earth (12:12).¹⁰⁵

The *loud voice* most assuredly comes from heaven and as Beale notes, “can be the voice of God, Christ, or an angel (1:10-11; 7:2-3; 8:13; 11:12; 14:7, 9, 18; 16:1, 17; 18:2; 19:17; 21:3).”¹⁰⁶ The reason (ὅτι) for all of this celebrating is because the *accuser* of the saints has been thrown down.

Schreiner has a summary comment that exquisitely frames what has transpired:

A loud voice in heaven proclaims that God has now accomplished salvation. God’s kingdom has come, inaugurated through Christ’s death and resurrection. Victory over sin is not restricted to the personal or the existential; there is also cosmic conflict, a heavenly war. The kingdom has invaded this present evil age through Jesus Christ, who has accomplished salvation.¹⁰⁷

The verb ἤκουσα (“I heard”) is a dramatic aorist indicating an event that happened rather recently.¹⁰⁸

11— καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐνίκησαν αὐτὸν διὰ τὸ αἷμα τοῦ ἀρνίου καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς μαρτυρίας αὐτῶν

¹⁰³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 473.

¹⁰⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 473.

¹⁰⁵ See Osborne, *Revelation*, 473 for more.

¹⁰⁶ Beale, *The Book of*, 657.

¹⁰⁷ Schreiner, “Revelation,” 663.

¹⁰⁸ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 564-65 for more discussion.

καὶ οὐκ ἠγάπησαν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτῶν ἄχρι θανάτου. The preposition διὰ used with the accusative τὸ αἷμα indicates the sense of “by the force of” to highlight to work of Jesus on the cross.¹⁰⁹

There is a twofold explanation for the victory of the saints as conquerors over the accuser: (1) it has been accomplished by the blood-bought sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and (2) by everyday testimony of believers who live their lives in Christ Jesus.¹¹⁰

12— διὰ τοῦτο εὐφραίνεσθε, [οἱ] οὐρανοὶ καὶ οἱ ἐν αὐτοῖς σκηνοῦντες. οὐαὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν, ὅτι κατέβη ὁ διάβολος πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἔχων θυμὸν μέγαν, εἰδὼς ὅτι ὀλίγον καιρὸν ἔχει.

The grounding reason for *rejoicing* in verse 12 is found in the twofold victory of the conquering saints in verse 11. The three primary regions of Revelation: heaven, earth, and the sea appear here; earth and the sea refer to the realm of evil.¹¹¹ The victorious saints are symbolic residents of heaven as blood-covered souls who will ultimately enjoy their citizenship in that country. The earth-dwellers and those of the sea like the serpent face “woe” (οὐαὶ) in their *wrath*.

The final scene, 12:13-17, takes place on earth involving, once again, the woman and the dragon. The defeated dragon, now an earth-dweller, rages against God, the woman, and her seed. He will seemingly stop a nothing in his schemes to destroy her.

13— Καὶ ὅτε εἶδεν ὁ δράκων ὅτι ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν γῆν, ἐδίωξεν τὴν γυναῖκα ἣτις ἔτεκεν τὸν ἄρσενά. The verb εἶδεν is used in the sense of actual sight and not visionary sight here. The ὅτι clause (“that he had been cast to the earth”) which is typically an expression of direct discourse is a *declarative* clause (instead of recitative) within a patch of indirect discourse.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ BDF, §222, 119.

¹¹⁰ So also Beale, *The Book of*, 663, Osborne, *Revelation*, 476, Mounce, *The Book of*, 239, and Schreiner, “Revelation,” 663. And against Caird, *The Revelation of*, 156 who denies these two reasons as being valid.

¹¹¹ This is Osborne’s observation. Osborne, *Revelation*, 478.

¹¹² See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 456-58 and 538-39 for a full discussion of this nuanced bit of grammar.

The upshot of the dragon's realization of his new estate on earth is to begin a renewed pursuit of the woman (symbolizing the people of God) who had birthed the Lord and Savior of the universe. He is enraged and he is not very subtle.

The verb ἐδίωξεν can be rendered either *he pursued* or *he persecuted*. Beale suggests that no matter how an interpreter translates this word that both meanings are in mind.¹¹³

14— καὶ ἐδόθησαν τῇ γυναικὶ αἱ δύο πτέρυγες τοῦ ἀετοῦ τοῦ μεγάλου, ἵνα πέτηται εἰς τὴν ἔρημον εἰς τὸν τόπον αὐτῆς, ὅπου τρέφεται ἐκεῖ καιρὸν καὶ καιροὺς καὶ ἥμισυ καιροῦ ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ ὄφεως. Because of the dragon's pursuit, the woman realizes she must flee.¹¹⁴

The *two wings of the great eagle* symbolize deliverance by the divine hand. The presence of three articles in this phrase (αἱ, τοῦ, and τοῦ) should probably be understood as referring to an image from the OT involving eagles in Exod. 19:4 and Deut. 32:10-12.¹¹⁵ The Exodus text brings to memory Pharaoh's order to drown the Israelites. The wings allow the woman to be mobile and fly into the desert where she can seek God's protection at *her place* (τὸν τόπον αὐτῆς) provided for her. This is a place of spiritual refuge (*nourishment*) under God's provision (cf. 12:6).¹¹⁶

The period of time specified as *a time and times, and half a time* recalls the 1260 days of 12:6. Schreiner rightly concludes that "the stretch of time here refers to the interval between Christ's resurrection and his return."¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Beale, *The Book of*, 668.

¹¹⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 481.

¹¹⁵ This is the posture of Beale, *The Book of*, 669, Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 175, Osborne, *Revelation*, 482, Mounce, *The Book of*, 241, Schreiner, "Revelation," 665, Hendriksen, *More Than*, 158, and Caird, *The Revelation of*, 158.

¹¹⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 482.

¹¹⁷ Schreiner, "Revelation," 665. Against Mounce, *The Book of*, 241 who opts to see this interval refer to an actual three- and one-half-year period of nourishment and possibly training.

The construction ὅπου τρέφεται ἐκεῖ (“where she is being nourished there”) is of a pleonastic personal pronoun used in a relative clause. The ὅπου ... ἐκεῖ construction here is one of redundancy.¹¹⁸

15— καὶ ἔβαλεν ὁ ὄφιν ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ ὀπίσω τῆς γυναικὸς ὕδωρ ὡς ποταμόν, ἵνα αὐτὴν ποταμοφόρητον ποιήσῃ. John performs a little switcheroo replacing the word *dragon* with *serpent* because he is purposefully inviting his readers to think of an OT allusion to Leviathan an ocean-going serpent in the OT imagination.¹¹⁹

In this scene the serpent attempts to destroy the woman by overwhelming her with a flood in her desert retreat. The symbolism here is represented by Satan’s overwhelming persecutions, deceits, false teaching, and moral depravity to wash away the church in a flash-flood of sin.¹²⁰ John is not talking about the flooding of the Jordan River in AD 68, but employing figurative language.¹²¹

16— καὶ ἐβοήθησεν ἡ γῆ τῇ γυναικὶ καὶ ἡνοίξεν ἡ γῆ τὸ στόμα αὐτῆς καὶ κατέπιεν τὸν ποταμόν ὃν ἔβαλεν ὁ δράκων ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ. A new “character” is introduced in the form of the *earth* who anthropomorphically acts to rescue the woman from certain death by drowning by swallowing up all of the water. This is an allusion to the wilderness experience of Israel as they fled from Egypt. We are to read this story and remember how the *earth* swallowed up the charging Egyptians as they hounded Israel into the dry bed of the Red Sea (cf. Exod. 15:12).

¹¹⁸ BDF, §297, 155.

¹¹⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 483 and Beale, *The Book of*, 673.

¹²⁰ Schreiner, “Revelation,” 665.

¹²¹ So Mounce, *The Book of*, 241, Osborne, *Revelation*, 483, and Beale, *The Book of*, 671.

There is also the connection to the Korah incident (Num. 16:30, 32).¹²²

17— καὶ ὠργίσθη ὁ δράκων ἐπὶ τῇ γυναικὶ καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ποιῆσαι πόλεμον μετὰ τῶν λοιπῶν τοῦ σπέρματος αὐτῆς τῶν τηρούντων τὰς ἐντολὰς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐχόντων τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ.

The verb ὠργίσθη (3s Aor Pass Ind) is an example of a stative-active meaning in which the subject of the verb exists in the state indicated by the verb.¹²³ In this case: *he was angry*. Note how the text reports that the dragon was angry at the *woman*. To be sure, he is angry with God too, but he is in no position to do God any direct harm. So, he rages against the woman, but he cannot destroy her. The next best thing to do is to locate, persecute, and destroy her *seed* all over the world. These incessant attacks by Satan on the church will go on until the end of the world.

Literary Analysis

(1) Revelation 12:1-6: A Cosmic Struggle

NARRATOR

The point of view in this narrative is a third-person omniscient narrator who knows everything needed to know to inform his readers and hearers.

SETTING

This cosmic narrative begins with a scene in heaven above and ultimately concludes on this earth. The time is unspecified and plays out with a grand sense of timelessness, meaning that matters of specific temporality are not as important in this account as its substance. The only temporal reference has to do with the time spent by the fleeing woman in exile—1260 days (12:6). The heavenly scene is not described; we learn more about those in heaven through their regal and fantastic descriptions. There is one passing mention of the throne room of God (12:5)

¹²² These connections are also made by Mounce, *The Book of*, 242, Osborne, *Revelation*, 483-84, and Beale, *The Book of*, 675-76.

¹²³ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 412-13.

to where the male child is lifted.

Two earthly locations emerge. First, there is the unnamed birthing place which remains undescribed, but where we learn that the woman, dragon, and the male child are present. Second, the woman flees to the *wilderness* (12:6) which is described as a place of nourishment.

CHARACTERS

Two central characters, the protagonist woman and the antagonist dragon are linked by John's use of the term σημεῖον (12:1, 3). The appearance of the woman is described as a "great portent/sign" while the dragon's introduction is listed as "portent/sign." Here the use of the term σημεῖον refers to this great depiction of the heavenly reality.¹²⁴

The woman is clothed with the sun, has the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head (12:1). These are royal images depicting a ruler. Resseguie asserts that the description of these outer garments serves to characterize her inner traits.¹²⁵ Beale concludes that verses 2-6 "reveal that this woman is a picture of the faithful community, which existed both before and after the coming of Christ."¹²⁶ Resseguie notes that even though the woman rules in heaven, she resides on earth.¹²⁷ This woman is pregnant and near to giving birth when we first meet her (12:2). By the time the dragon is cast out of heaven (12:4) to earth, the woman who is residing on earth is ready to give birth while the dragon waits at the birth canal ready to pounce and devour the new born (12:4). The woman bears a son, a future ruler, who is caught up to God in heaven (12:5). In the meantime the woman flees to the desert and is sustained by God for a

¹²⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 456.

¹²⁵ Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 170.

¹²⁶ Beale, *The Book of*, 625. So also Hendriksen, *More Than*, 152.

¹²⁷ Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 170.

specific time of his choosing (12:6). Resseguie sums up the woman declaring, “Although [she] rules the heavens, her home is on the earth. . . . From a heavenly perspective or above point of view she is a transcendent queen of splendor who rules the cosmos, but from an earthly or below point of view she lives on the margins of society, the wilderness, and is vulnerable to the dragon’s destructive designs.”¹²⁸

The villainous dragon first appears in the cosmic setting. He is described as being red, which is, of course, the color of blood (12:3)—often the hue of evil characters.¹²⁹ His seven crowned heads indicate that he is a world ruler.¹³⁰ Seven is a well-known biblical number suggesting that which is complete or the idea of totality.¹³¹ The ten horns present an image of destructive power.¹³² The term δράκων was a recognizable word for OT readers for, as Beale notes, “the evil sea monster that symbolizes evil kingdoms who oppress Israel.”¹³³

The action of the dragon sweeping down one-third of the stars of heaven with his tail is a report of great cataclysm. This is an image of the dragon’s attempt to wreak destruction, disorder, and darkness upon the cosmos, but we also note that two-thirds of the stars remain in the heavens.¹³⁴ And if this is not dreadful enough, this insidious figure plans to wait at the birth canal of the woman so that he can devour her new born child (12:4).

The third character in this first scene is the new born male child (12:5). He is slated to

¹²⁸ Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 170.

¹²⁹ Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 171.

¹³⁰ So Hendriksen, *More Than*, 153 and Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 171.

¹³¹ Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 171-72.

¹³² Hendriksen, *More Than*, 153.

¹³³ Beale, *The Book of*, 632.

¹³⁴ Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 172 has a lively discussion about this matter.

rule the nations of the world with an *iron rod*. This is an allusion to Psalm 2:9’s messianic ruler who is, as Mounce cites, “to receive the nations as an inheritance ... as a shepherd defends his flock against the wild beasts of prey, so Christ will strike the nations that oppress and persecute his church.”¹³⁵ These are images of Christ’s resurrection and ascension.¹³⁶ The aorist passive verb ἡρπάσθη (“he was caught up” or “snatched up”) speaks to divine agency and is suggestive of God as a *hidden actor* in our narrative.¹³⁷ The male child serves as a *foil* to the dragon.¹³⁸

PLOT

A diagram of the plot of this scene is shown in TABLE 4.

¹³⁵ Mounce, *The Book of*, 234.

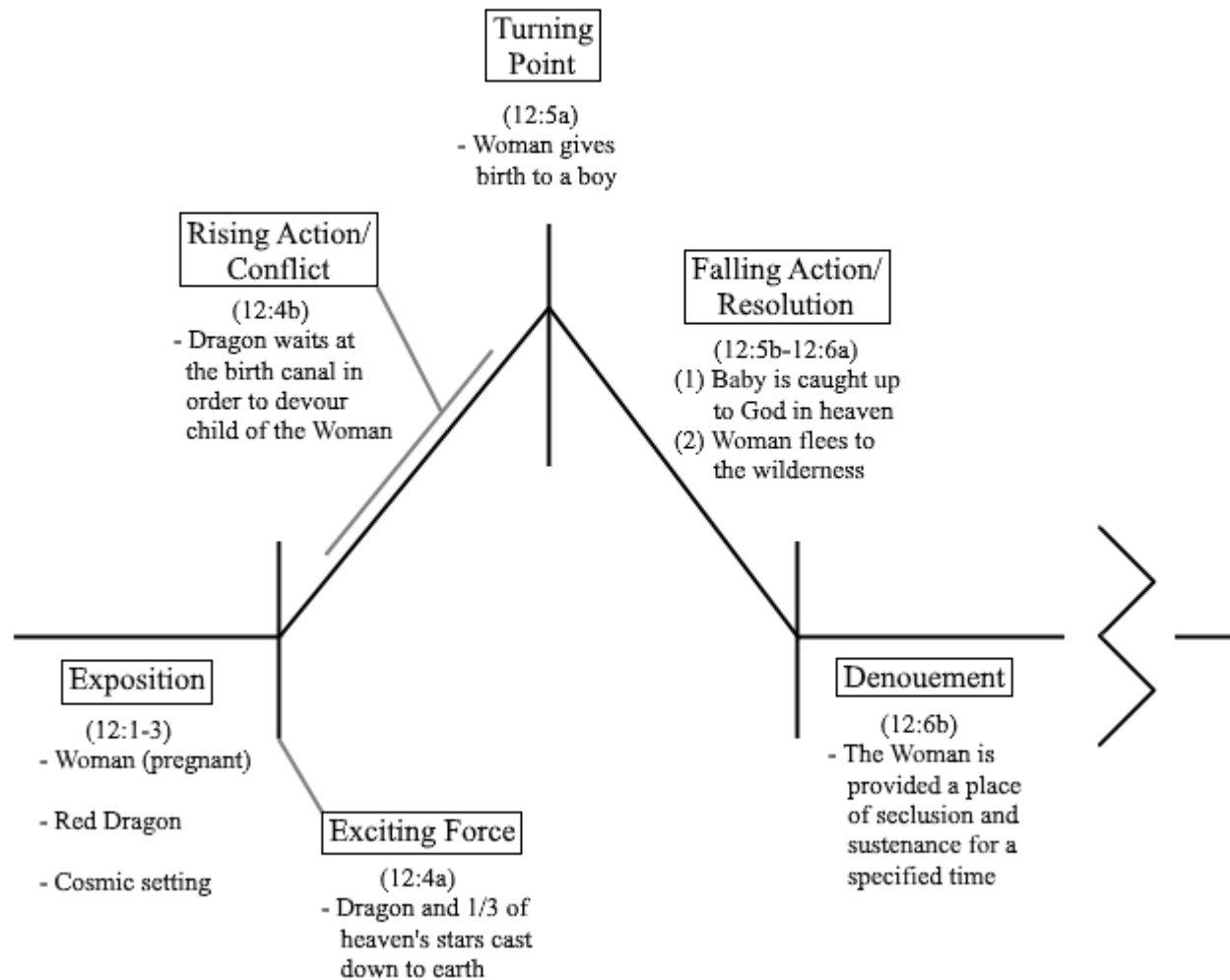
¹³⁶ Beale, *The Book of*, 639.

¹³⁷ Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 172 makes this observation as well.

¹³⁸ A *foil* in a narrative is a character who “through contrast underscores the distinctive characteristics of another.” Holman and Harmon, *A Handbook*, 216.

TABLE 4

Revelation 12:1-6 – A Cosmic Struggle



This plot follows a comic arc¹³⁹ in which we are introduced to the great woman who rules the heavens from earth only to have her existence upended by the craven plans of the dragon who has come to earth to devour her new born son. However, the babe is safely delivered and snatched away by God to heaven while the fleeing woman lands safely in the desert and is nourished by God for a season.

¹³⁹ A comic arc unfolds with a “U” shaped story in which the leading figure begins on a level plain, experiences hardship, and is ultimately restored to his first or a better estate.

(1) Introduction/Exposition (Revelation 12:1-3)—creates a tone, provides the setting (time, place, etc.), introduces the characters and supplies some back story information. The setting is initially cosmic and, later on, earthly. The text begins with the dramatic entrance of the woman (σημεῖον μέγα) and the dragon (σημεῖον). The woman is dressed regally. Her earthly residence is the *wilderness* where she is nourished making us think of how the Israelites were provided for after the exodus.

The dragon rules by way of usurpation. He is a caricature of the real reign of God who possesses actual power and authority. He endarkens one-third of heaven and is bent on further destruction in his attempt to destroy the woman's child.

The new born babe of the woman is safely delivered and caught up to heaven and is set to rule to the world as Messiah.

(2) Rising Action/Complication (12:4)—is set in motion by an exciting force and sustained by successive stages of conflict between the hero/protagonist and counter players or counter events leading up to a climax. This is the *plot thickens* stage. In this narrative it looks something like this:

a. Exciting Force: 12:4a—the dragon's tail, symbolizing destructive power, casts one-third of the stars of heaven to earth as he undermines God's order in the cosmos.

b. Rising Action/Conflict: 12:4b—the dragon begins his program of usurpation of the divine program by waiting at the birth canal of the woman as she gives birth to her male child so that he may devour the new born boy.

(3) Climax/Turning Point (12:5a)—a moment in the narrative where a central figure(s) makes a choice that shapes how the plot will unfold to a conclusion. In this story it is the moment when the baby boy is born of the woman. The dragon's plan to end things before anything began is

foiled.

(4) Falling Action/Resolution (12:5b-12:6a)—stresses the activity of the forces opposing the protagonist/hero leading to resolution in the narrative with a comic or U-shaped arc or disaster in a story with a tragic arc. The potential disaster having been averted with the successful delivery of the baby resolves into his being caught up to heaven by God. In the meantime, the woman flees to the desert.

(5) Denouement (12:6b)—marks the unraveling of the plot and explanation of the “happy ending.” In our narrative it is the establishment of a place prepared for the woman by God where she is to be both tested and kept safe during an appointed time.

(2) Revelation 12:7-12: War in Heaven

NARRATOR

The narrator interrupts his story to provide a symbolic depiction, that as Hendrickson observes, “shows us the effect of Christ’s birth.”¹⁴⁰ He continues to report from his perch with an omniscient point of view. He does provide some privileged information about Christ’s exaltation in describing his victory over Satan (vv. 10-12). This is relayed by John stating he heard a voice proclaiming its message from heaven. This bit of monologue is the only spoken words in our story.

SETTING

This new section continues with the same heavenly setting of the first section (vv.1-6). This setting is different from the first six verses in which the action took place in the sky.¹⁴¹ The action here takes place at an unspecified heavenly battlefield.

¹⁴⁰ Hendriksen, *More Than*, 157.

¹⁴¹ Mounce, *The Book of*, 235.

The temporality of this section “interrupts the narrative flow”¹⁴² established in verses 1-6 in order to describe the war in heaven. With that established there is a *timeless* quality about this symbolic portrayal of the heavenly war.

At the close of this interlude, we are told that at the conclusion of the war Satan and his angels are *thrown down* (ἐβλήθησαν) “to the earth” in verse 9.

CHARACTERS

Several new figures are introduced in this episode of suspension from the narrative established in the first six verses. The narrator introduces “Michael and his angels” who are at war with the dragon and his angels (v. 7; cf. Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9). We note that it is Michael and his martial forces that initiate the attack (v. 7, τοῦ πολεμῆσαι). We should take note of a character who does not appear at this time as part of heaven’s martial force and that is, namely, Christ.¹⁴³ Later on, verses 9 and 10, in this narrative excursus, the dragon is further identified as: (1) “the ancient serpent,” (2) “the devil,” (3) “Satan,” and (4) “the accuser.” This figure is a deceiver (v. 9, ὁ πλανῶν) and accuser (v. 10, ὁ κατηγορῶν).

As notice is provided regarding the exaltation of Jesus, God (10) and Christ (10) and the Lamb (11) are introduced to this section. These figures are introduced in a soteriological sense speaking Christ’s victory over sin and death on the Cross (10-12).

PLOT

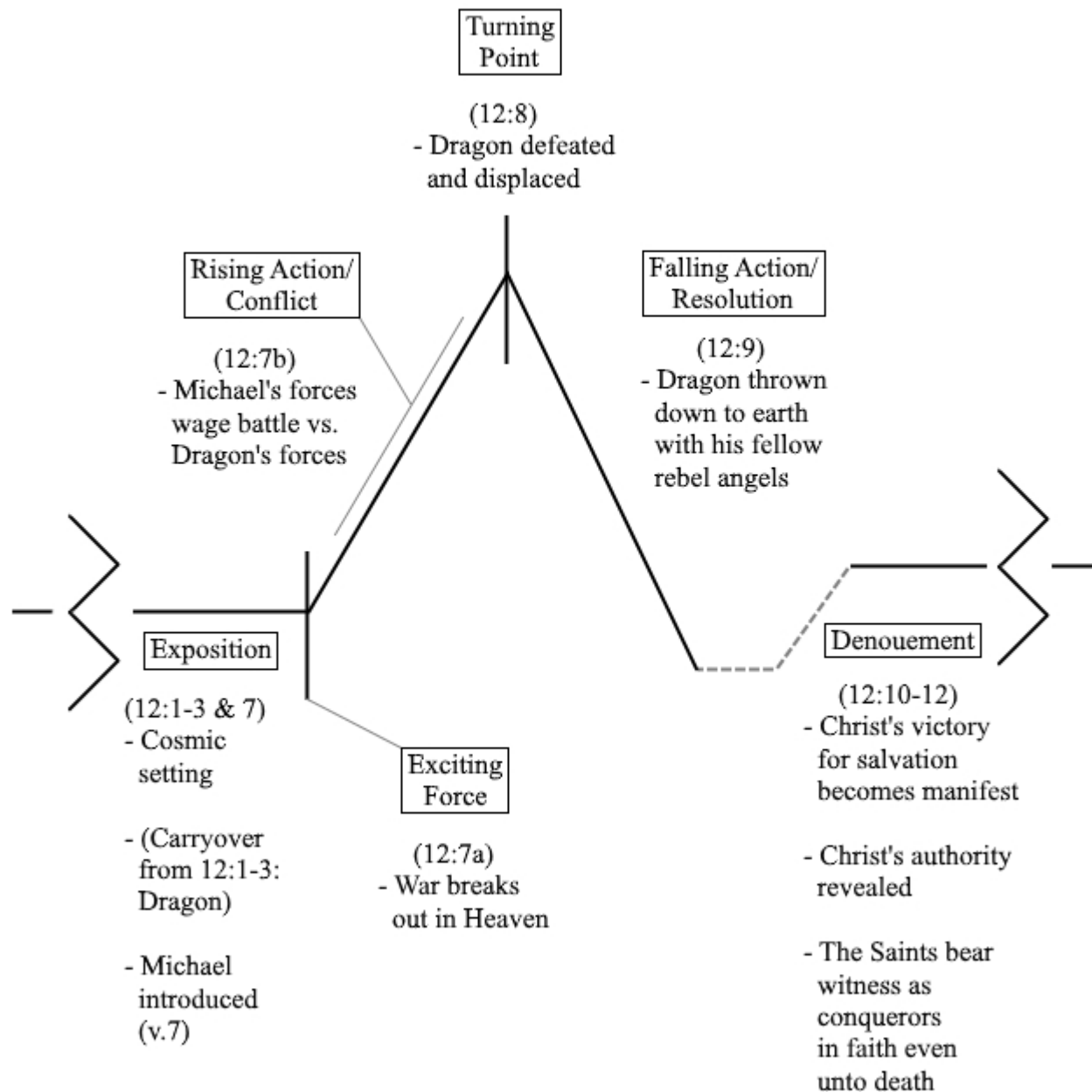
A diagram of the plot of this scene is shown in TABLE 5.

¹⁴² Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 172.

¹⁴³ Caird, *The Revelation of*, 153.

TABLE 5

Revelation 12:7-12 – War in Heaven



In this narrative John's vision reveals to him and us what has been going on behind the scenes, as it were. We are already privy to the dragon's dastardly attempts to usurp God's order through cosmic chaos and murder. Resseguie calls verses 7-12 an *embedded* narrative because

“the war in heaven interrupts the narrative flow and provides an above perspective on events that take place below.”¹⁴⁴ Verses 7-9 record a ferocious war taking place in heaven between Michael and his forces and the dragon and his angels. The dragon, who is now openly identified as Satan, is defeated and cast out of heaven. Resseguie notes the correlation between the war in heaven and Satan’s banishment from heaven, but he distinguishes between *correlation* and *cause*. Michael did not cause Satan’s expulsion from heaven; it is the “victory... won by Christ’s victory on the cross, not by Michael’s triumph in heaven.”¹⁴⁵ Schreiner puts it this way, “The kingdom has invaded this present evil age through Jesus Christ, who has accomplished salvation.”¹⁴⁶

(1) Introduction/Exposition (Revelation 12:1-3, 7)—Here the same cosmic setting continues at first. The dragon reappears and the angel Michael comes on the scene.

(2) Rising Action/Complication (12:7)—

a. Exciting Force: (12:7a)—War breaks out in heaven.

b. Rising Action/Conflict: (12:7b)—John narrates that Michael and his forces *wage war* against Satan and his angels and in a countering description asserts that Satan and his minions *wage war*. The verb used is πολεμέω in both cases (an aorist active infinitive [πολεμῆσαι] and a 3rd sg aorist active indicative [ἐπολέμησεν]).

(3) Climax/Turning Point (12:8)—The forces of Michael prevail against Satan and his angels because they did not prevail. As a result, they were displaced.

¹⁴⁴ Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 172.

¹⁴⁵ Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of*, 200. See also Beale, *The Book of*, 658.

¹⁴⁶ Schreiner, “Revelation,” 663.

(4) Falling Action/Resolution (12:9)—Heaven cleans house and Satan and crew are cast out. The dragon is identified by several other monikers. He is called the serpent of old, the devil, and Satan openly for the first time. We also learn of one of his character traits, that of a *deceiver*.

(5) Denouement (12:10-12)—A loud and heavenly voice proclaims (12:10) the outcome of the war in heaven: this cosmic war waged between the forces of Michael and Satan is a victory achieved at Calvary (12:11). The authority of Christ is revealed to silence the great accuser. This enables saints across the world to bear witness as conquerors in a life of believing on the promises of Christ Jesus even unto the point of death; there is victory.

(3) Revelation 12:13-17: Earthly Struggles

NARRATOR

In the third and final part of our visionary story the narrator picks up the action on earth. He proceeds with a third person omniscient point of view in verse 13 relating the dragon's realization that he has been cast down to middle earth. The story, once again, returns to narration only in its telling. The narrator's central theme of this third act of our story is of the dragon's relentless pursuit of the woman and her male child.

SETTING

The first part of this vision took place in *heaven*, and the second at a battlefield in *heaven* mainly with some mention of *earth*. Now here, the action takes place on earth. Although there is no specific language stated, one feels that the time of these events closely follows the dragon's expulsion from heaven. The Hebraic language of the beginning of verse 13 helps make this case: Καὶ ὅτε εἶδεν ὁ δράκων ὅτι ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν γῆν. The Καὶ at the beginning almost functions like the initial part of a *waw*-consecutive construction indicating narrative continuance where verses

6 and 12 left off.¹⁴⁷

CHARACTERS

The central characters who first appeared in verses 1-6 now return, namely the dragon, the woman, and the male child. The dragon, mentioned in verses 13, 16, and 17, is also referred to as the *serpent* in verses 14 and 15 interchangeably. The dragon/serpent *pours* (ἔβαλεν) water out of his mouth (15) and makes war on the woman's seed. The dragon's motivation is revenge. He rages against God who has thrown him down from heaven and against Christ who has defeated his attempt to destroy the "seed" (those redeemed souls of Christ's church on earth) of the Lamb.

In some sense the *earth* (ἡ γῆ) acts as a character as well. We are told in verse 16 that the earth helped the woman by swallowing up the river of water that had spewed out of the serpent's mouth. Additionally, mention is made, peripherally, of a *great eagle* (τοῦ ἀετοῦ τοῦ μεγάλου) who surrenders two of his wings to aid the woman to gain flight (14). Meanwhile, the woman flies off to the wilderness in retreat from the serpent's diabolical pursuit in order to be nurtured for a time.

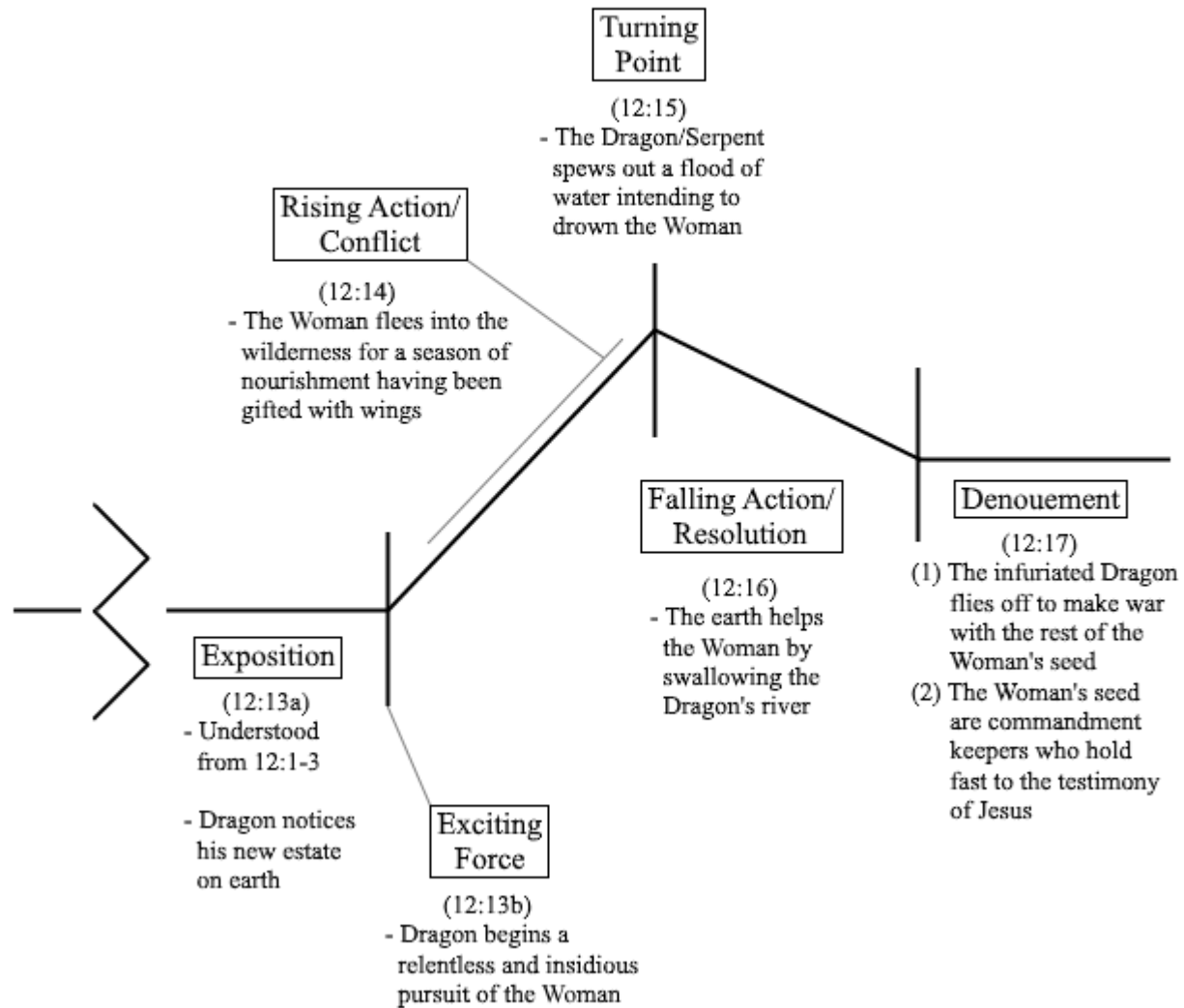
PLOT

A diagram of the plot of this scene is shown in TABLE 6.

¹⁴⁷ See Beale, *The Book of*, 668 for more discussion.

TABLE 6

Revelation 12:13-17 – Earthly Struggles



The ongoing battle between the forces of good—as represented by the woman—and of evil—as acted out by the dragon—continues earth. The hymn of praise in verses 10-12 gives way to the resumed conflict.

(1) Introduction/Exposition (Revelation 12:13a)—The two main characters—the woman and the dragon—from the first scene return to continue the battle of good vs. evil. The setting is now entirely on earth. The dragon has fully realized his diminished state.

(2) Rising Action/Complication (12:13b-14)—

a. Exciting Force: (12:13b)—The dragon begins an insidious and relentless pursuit of the woman. He remembers his defeat at the birth canal.

b. Rising Action/Conflict: (12:14)—The woman flees having been gifted a pair of eagle's wings. (The eagle wings are supposed to promote in the reader a recollection of Yahweh's deliverance of Israel by way of the same metaphor; cf. Exod. 19:4.) As was the case in the first scene (12:6) the woman retreats to the desert and is provided for during a specified length of time. Here the image is "a time and times and half a time."

(3) Climax/Turning Point (12:15)—The protagonist villain in this scene, namely the dragon/serpent spews out a flood of water intended to drown the woman.

(4) Falling Action/Resolution (12:16)—In what could be described as a personified and inanimate character, the *earth* rises to the occasion to rescue the woman by swallowing up the dragon's river. This saves the woman.

(5) Denouement (12:17)—This happy ending comes in two parts. First, realizing that he has failed again to destroy the woman, the dragon flies off to make war with the rest of the woman's seed (local churches throughout the world). Second, the woman's seed, a collective *flat* character, are described as commandment keepers who hold fast to the testimony of Jesus.¹⁴⁸

Theological Implications of Revelation 12:1-17

Four theological implications emerge from these seventeen verses. First, at this very moment it is very helpful to remember that our life in Christ Jesus and our walk through this world as elect exiles all takes place in a time of war. Satan possesses a relentless hatred for God and his people and is committed to wreaking as much havoc as he can even though he has

¹⁴⁸ As a final word on this pericope, the present author has not included 12:18 in this study since it is better thought of as connected to chapter 13.

already been defeated at Calvary. The battle is real, but we do not have to fear anything because God constantly watches over us, protects us, and sustains us.

Second, we can sometimes forget that there is more than just this earth. There is a whole big cosmos out there filled with God and his angels and the enemy of God and his agents. The reality of these two co-existing parties is that there is cosmic conflict. The best news of the universe is that Jesus has won this war between Michael and Satan by way of his death and resurrection. Satan still rages on, but he can no longer wield the power of the Accuser this side of Calvary.

Third, our life these days on earth means we still face the full attack of what Satan brings day in and day out with anything ranging from a quiet whisper inviting us to trust his promise for joy over what Jesus promises us to a right-cross on the chin that hurts so much it brings us to tears. Whether the attacks are subtle or in our faces they are real and insidious and will last until we take our last breath. But we face these ever-present attacks with the glorious news that Jesus has conquered sin and death and the measure of faith he gives us grants us the ability to live as conquerors too!

Fourth, John, as narrator, employs a series of literary and rhetorical devices in Revelation 12 in order to achieve various emotional and intellectual effects amongst his readers that will result in persuading them to endorse his theological message. Two such examples come to the forefront of this story.

In the first place, John makes use of *numbers* to aid in the building of his visionary world. Numbers serve as symbolic images to move the plot along and to identify the traits and motivations of the characters. In Revelation 12 the numbers three, three and a half, seven, and ten play important roles in the telling of the story and the development of its theology.

The number *three* is often used to express images of either the divine or that which is a counterfeit divine. In 12:10 God's coming (ἐγένετο) results because the accuser has been cast out of heaven and is described as the threefold—salvation, power, and kingdom. *Three and a half* can be thought of as a broken seven (with seven representing completeness and perfection). In this case the perfection of *seven* is disrupted. In Revelation 12:6-7 and 14 the *three and a half* is represented 1260 days and then as “a time, and times, and half of a time” and constitutes a time of protection and nourishment for the woman.¹⁴⁹

The number *seven*, as briefly mentioned above, underscores the concepts of completion or perfection. In Revelation 12:3, the seven heads of the great red dragon serve as an image of a counterfeit divine. The number *ten*, likewise, is an image of completion or totality. In Revelation 12:3 the ten horns of the dragon also feed the image of a counterfeit divine.

In the second place, the narrator *sets* part of his visionary story in the *wilderness* (ἐρημος) in 12:6 and 14 where it functions as a sanctuary for the woman. It is a place of divine assistance for “a time, and times, and half a time” (12:14). It a dwelling place of safety in an in-between time.¹⁵⁰

The rhetorical use of *numbers* combined with the literary device of *setting* helps John to craft his story filled with tension—the kind in which the dragon waits at the birth canal of the woman ready to consume her new born child. The *wilderness* provides a place of safety for the right amount of time so that the church of Jesus will be safe. The counterfeit dragon of seven heads and ten horns is outdone by Michael and the work of Jesus on the cross in defeating sin and death.

¹⁴⁹ In Daniel 7:25, three and a half, signified a time of persecution.

¹⁵⁰ See Resseguie, *The Revelation of*, 27-34 for more discussion on rhetoric and setting.

Chapter 9—Some Conclusions

Introduction

The genesis of this study began on two fronts of interest for the present writer. First, like just about everyone else that walks on this globe, I have had a lifelong love of stories of all kinds, but particularly those which are invented from the imagination. And second, a desire to suggest, what is hoped to be, a better way to go about studying the stories—both historical and imaginative—appearing in the Bible, which is known as the discipline of narrative criticism.

The challenge in doing this was formidable. It involved identifying what is currently lacking in the literary study of the Bible and developing an alternative approach retaining the best of the work of what many fine scholars had produced over the years while making some suggestions of my own in the hopes of devising a God-honoring method.

One needed to specifically identify what was unhelpful with the current practice of biblical narrative criticism before looking at what needed to be dismissed, retained, and subsequently added. It became immediately clear that this would be something of a cross-disciplinary study involving the topics of: literary criticism, literary theory, poetics, exegesis, hermeneutics, and theology.

We began this study by taking a look at a short story called “The Daily Dose” which prompted us to begin to think about how stories reach all of our lives in a universal way across the world. This acknowledgment led to inquiring about biblical stories—both historical and imaginative—and what they have to say, how they are made, how they should be studied as literature, how this relates to our exegetical work in such stories as a text, and how we should interpret them. In some real sense this study has been about the *making* and *meaning* of biblical stories.

The Existing Problems with Narrative Criticism

The discipline in biblical scholarship for the study of biblical stories is known as *narrative criticism* and we have taken to task the current way in which the majority of biblical scholars go about its practice. There are four things wrong with narrative criticism and the literary study of the Bible as it is presently outworked. First, the literary study of the Bible is fractured with no real cohesion or commonality of purpose. Most literary critics would subscribe to the idea that a work of literature has three key components in its makeup: the author, the text, and the reader. But even this is now being challenged with some literary theorists advancing the notion of a fourth component: the *context* of the author which stresses the background of historical, social, and political goings on in the author's real-world setting.¹ Whereas it was understood that the *author* determined the meaning of a literary work for centuries, literary theorists and critics now often suggest that it can be the *reader* or the *text* itself that is the deciding factor in assigning meaning.

Second, most narrative critics and literary critics deny the author as the determiner of meaning in biblical stories or of literature in general. Instead, many opt for a reader centered hermeneutic such as *reader-response criticism* (Powell, Resseguie, Fish, and Rhoads) in which the reader determines meaning or for a text centered reading such as New Criticism (T. S. Eliot, Wimsatt & Beardsley, and Gadamer) that treats literature as a language unto itself distinct from any genre classification whose elements are images, words, and symbols as opposed to plot, characterization, and setting. As a result, the text holds semantic autonomy apart from any influence of the author.

¹ Doug Estes, "Introduction: The Literary Approach to the Bible," 10.

Third, many biblical scholars and narrative critics have embraced the idea of studying biblical stories through the lens of modern linguistic theory, primarily through the auspices of structuralism (Brown, Resseguie, Paton). These scholars appeal to linguistics as the primary way in which to view stories instead of appealing to the elements of narrative (plot, character, setting, etc.) as the means of engaging literature, or in other words—studying literature as literature.

Fourth, most narrative critics are interested in only the literary aspect of the stories of the Bible (Rhoads, Powell, Resseguie) and avoid any serious discussion of the theological application of such a narrative.

With this knowledge our study attempted to construct a newer approach to *narrative criticism* by appealing to some forgotten or discarded, but long attested to, components of the literary study of literature in general and specifically of the Bible. In addition, we have attempted to address the issues of poetics (as it relates to both historical and imaginative literature), exegesis, and hermeneutics as they relate to the literary study of the Bible. The remainder of this chapter will briefly review our recommended program and conclusions.

*The Various Components of a Recommendation for a New Approach for Biblical
Narrative Criticism*

Introduction

We began by attempting to answer the fundamental question asking why do stories even appear in Scripture. We suggested a host of reasons that are helpful, but by no means exhaustive.

But before delving into this discussion we briefly reviewed the different *types* of stories appearing in the Bible. Most of the biblical writers share their stories through the genre of *historical narrative*. Simply stated, stories of this nature recount events that actually occurred in history. Another way in which stories are shared in the Bible is by way of *imaginative narrative*.

These are *fictional* stories which narrate imaginary events and portray imaginary characters. The writers of both historical narrative and imaginary literature in Scripture make use of the elements of narration such as plot, characters, and setting in an artistic expression. The main difference between biblical historical and imaginative stories is that the writer of fiction, in his pursuit of sharing God's truth like his historically bound counterpart, works independent of factuality. The focal point of contact in the Bible for stories of historical narrative and those rooted in the invention of the imagination is their commitment to speaking the truth of God's message to the world. We now look at why stories are told in Scripture and their various types.

First, it seems clear that God has seen fit to include stories in Scripture because they can be used as a means of *persuasion*. We observe this in instances such as Nathan's *mashal* with David (2 Sam. 12:1-4) where an imaginative story is fashioned to expose David's sins and in Genesis 44:18-45:2 where Judah relays a historical narrative to Pharaoh's viceroy (not knowing it was Joseph with whom he was speaking) about Benjamin, the lone survivor of his mother's two sons, and how important he was to their father, Jacob. His story was so powerful it brought tears to Joseph.

Second, biblical stories can *teach* theological truths and ethical principles. Jesus devises a powerful fiction in the form of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) to demonstrate that one can know about God and his will through us by looking to Scripture and that those of means should not oppress those who are in need by failing to take notice. Similarly, the historical narrative of 1 Kings 21 and the imaginative fable Jotham tells to Abimelech and the lords of Shechem address the issue of the abuse of authority and power to oppress others.

Third, we asked why God would even make use of *fiction* at all in his revealed Word. As we already mentioned there is a *teaching* function at play in fiction. There are four reasons as

well. First, since stories—with their conflict and resolution cycles—can only happen in a fallen world where there is real and ongoing conflict, stories help mitigate this tragic reality by lamenting and countering the Fall. Next, stories help portray and demonstrate truth under God’s heaven. Thirdly, they are a means of rhetorical persuasion to point readers to theological reflection. And finally, stories demand an active participation on the part of the reader—we are a people of the Book.

The Place of *Making* in the Business of Storytelling

Next, we looked at the topic of poetics and the elements of the study of narrative. Poetics has to do with how a story (or poetry) is *made* or constructed by the storyteller. In the context of this discussion, we used the term *poetry* to denote the product of poetic making (and not a form of verse composition).

Just as is the case with any kind of construction, there are rules and guidelines to follow. This is very much the circumstance with poetic construction. We settled in on Aristotle who was the first to write about poetic making and to develop a working idea of literary theory. Aristotle’s *Poetics* begins with a statement concerning the importance in the poetic making of stories regarding both the *artistry* of composition and of a work’s *emotional power* which ends up producing something beautiful.²

Aristotle characterizes the construction of poetry as it being *put together* (συνιστάναι) with an obvious *beginning*, a *middle*, and an *end* to the story. He speaks of fiction here, but we have seen that the construction of a historical narrative must play by the same rules. The way to

² “Concerning both poetry itself and its forms, each has a certain force of meaning, and how it is necessary to put together the stories if the making of poetry ought to be beautiful.” My translation from, *περὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς τε καὶ τῶν εἰδῶν αὐτῆς, ἥν τινα δύναμιν ἕκαστον ἔχει, καὶ πῶς δεῖ συνίστασθαι τοὺς μύθους εἰ μέλλει καλῶς ἔξαιν ἢ ποιήσις*. Aristotle, *Poetics*, I, 1447a, ll. 8-10; 28.

build this tri-partite house of poetry is achieved by the poet/maker closely observing the world around him and *imitating* it. This focus on mimesis affords the poet the opportunity to echo the happenstance of real-life events and persons as he envisions the secondary world he is forming in his imagination. Aristotle placed a premium on the active fashioning of the narrative sequence of events in a plot. In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle clearly distinguished between the two types of poetic making: historical and fictional.³

We next learned from Tolkien who introduces the concept of *imagination* as involved in the mental process of fashioning images to produce a story which successfully expresses “the inner consistency of reality.”⁴ Tolkien proceeds to call this imaginative work of storytelling *sub-creation*, meaning that poet makers whose imaginations incorporate the devices of plots and characters that are believable do so following after God’s initial work as Creator.⁵ Furthermore, we subscribe to what Berlin notes, asserting that *poetics* “describes the basic components of literature and the rules governing their use. Poetics strives to write a grammar, as it were, of literature.”⁶

Another strategy to characterize this is by way of the image of the *construction of a*

³ “First then, concerning paradigm let us speak; for paradigm (is) similar to a bringing about, and the bringing about (is) a beginning.

Of paradigms that which is seen (is) two; for one is a paradigm which is that which is seen (is) to speak of things which happened before, and one to make up. And of this on the one hand (is) comparison” (παραβολή) “and on the other one ‘words’” (λόγος = *fables*). This is my rendering of:

πρῶτον μὲν οὖν περὶ παραδείγματος λέγωμεν: ὁμοιον γὰρ ἐπαγωγῇ τὸ παράδειγμα, ἢ δ’ ἐπαγωγῇ ἀρχή

παραδειγμάτων δὲ εἶδη δύο: ἓν μὲν γὰρ ἐστὶν παραδείγματος εἶδος τὸ λέγειν πράγματα προγενομένα, ἓν δὲ τὸ αὐτὸν ποιεῖν. τούτου δὲ ἓν μὲν παραβολή ἓν δὲ λόγοι, Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.20.2, 272.

⁴ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 139.

⁵ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 139.

⁶ Berlin, *Poetics and*, 15.

building.

In this case the elements of narrative are the *building materials* (plot, characters, setting, metaphor, etc.). The *rules* or *blueprints* for how this building is constructed are the components of literary theory; in this case, Aristotle's identifying the principles of *imitation* and the basic three-act structure (beginning, middle, and end) of stories. And finally, the *product* of this poetic making, the *house*, as it were, of a completed story. All the *materials* (the poetic devices) and the *blueprints* (the rules or grammar) come together to construct a whole product in the form of a story.⁷

With this understanding of how stories are made, we undertook the task of mapping out what a *biblical poetics* would look like. This involved three preliminary considerations. We grounded our observations in Steiner's assertion "that any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, that any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence."⁸ This means that the only reason any storytelling in the Bible—historical or imaginative—could even happen is because God inspires the writers to do so (cf. Eccl. 12:9-10 and Exod. 31:2-6; 36:1-2).

We next identified biblical stories as possessing what Tolkien called an "inner consistency of reality" signifying that they have a primary, real-world connection with readers. For *historical narrative*, stories such as the Gospels read as if they are imaginative tales with all of their marvels and fantastic qualities that enter history telling God's truth. For the *imaginative*

⁷ Booth, *The Rhetoric*, 93.

⁸ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 3.

stories of the secondary world, which are sub-created by artistic invention, their creativity points to the reality of the primary world as they tell God's truth.

A third building block of our attempt to construct a biblical poetics is grounded in Auerbach's assertion regarding storytelling that the Bible's truth claims are tyrannically exclusive asserting itself as the only real-world reality when it comes to history.⁹ In essence what this means is that when a biblical writer sits down to compose any type of story, he does so under the distinctive actuality that this narrative legitimately possesses truth claims above all other storytelling.

This prolegomena serves as the foundation for what the Bible has to say about poetic making itself. And for this we turn to Ecclesiastes 12:9-10. Daniel Estes avers that this frame narrative should be understood to provide a back story as to how Qohelet, as poet/maker, composed it.¹⁰

We have seen that biblical poetics begins with the literary building materials of plot, character, metaphor and others which then are employed in the making process with the poet/maker observing the reality around him and *imitating* it as he invents a secondary world (or in the case of historical narrative he collects data regarding the events and figures involved before plotting and describing the motivations and affections of the characters, etc.) telling his story, as a whole, in a beginning, a middle, and an end structure. These *materials* and *rules* come together in the poet's making to produce a *product* in the form of a story.

⁹ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 1-15.

¹⁰ Daniel Estes, "Well Crafted Proverbs," 49.

With a fuller understanding of our theory of poetics in biblical storytelling we then argued that the best way to completely grasp what narrative is communicating was to make sure one is pursuing the best possible hermeneutic and employing a God-honoring exegetical method.

The Place of *Meaning* in the Business of Storytelling

The province of grasping the *meaning* of a biblical story involves *hermeneutics* and *exegesis*. This portion of our study represents more of a declaration of principles than a full engagement with and argument for a hermeneutical posture and an exegetical methodology. With that stated, effort was taken to carefully explain why our study was preceding along the course it was sailing.

HERMENEUTICS

Any serious engagement with a biblical story (or any text for that matter) requires that one establish how he is going to go about deriving the *meaning* of what he is reading. In this matter of interpretation there are three key components: the poet/maker (*author*), the story (*text*), and the receiving audience (*reader*). Some critics assert that the *text* is possessive of semantic autonomy with respect to grasping meaning and that the *author* has no say in the matter of the *text's* meaning. Others assert that the *reader* assigns meaning as he engages with the text.

Our posture has been to point out how counterintuitive the above two approaches are. Regarding the written text, for example, it is merely an assemblage of the letters of the alphabet. Letters are lifeless symbols incapable of thinking or reasoning. This is unlike *meaning* which requires reasoning and thinking. A more subtle approach such as *reader-response criticism* asserts that any text has possible multiple meanings in which the reader assigns meaning. Thus, the plethora of interpretive reading communities such as: Marxist, feminist, post-modern, etc.

The obvious question that arises is how can anyone understand what an author is trying to communicate when one imports his own meaning to his reading of a story.

We uphold that the *author* is the determiner of meaning in a biblical story and that when he plays by the rules of established biblical poetics, readers can decode his message. Hirsch correctly avers, “*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent.”¹¹

EXEGESIS

We subscribe to the grammatical-historical exegetical method. In this way one approaches the text aware of the need to attend to matters of grammar, syntax, and semantics in order to aid in unlocking the biblical storyteller’s message. This effort is coupled with understanding the historical context of the text and the time of its composition. We demonstrated this in our exegesis of the several stories of this study.

Literary Analysis

One of the most important conclusions at which this study has arrived is that exegesis performed on a biblical story enhances the work of literary analysis. Literary analysis performed on stories divorced from exegesis will yield some interesting deductions, but limits he who is studying that biblical narrative to findings more appropriate to the English department than the pulpit or Bible study lesson. A robust pairing of the two produces a better understanding of the literary elements of the story. We trust this has been demonstrated in the pages above dealing with the historical narrative and the imaginative stories of Scripture.

The literary analysis advanced by this study is one that identifies what the narrator is doing, looks at the characters (their functions and motivations), analyzes the physical and

¹¹ Hirsch, *Validity in*, 8.

temporal setting, traces the movement of the plot by recognizing its elements of an exciting force to get things moving, conflict and resolution, a turning point, and a *denouement*, and any other literary devices that contribute to fleshing out the story.

Perhaps the boldest assertion of this study is its exhortation to study the literature of the Bible as literature and avoid appealing to structuralism as a means to analyze Scripture's stories. We demonstrated how viewing the literature of the Bible through the lens of modern linguistic theory impoverishes our appreciation and understanding of literature. The employment of linguistics offers much in our study of the Bible in the areas of morphology, phonology, grammar, syntax, and semantics and the work of many fine scholars enrich our engagement with Scripture. The danger arises when we buy into seeing linguistics as the primary system for engagement with literature which is considered a secondary system. The best way to study literature is *as* literature. In this way will we better grasp God's revealed Word because we are engaging with it in the form that has been handed down to us.

Some Final Thoughts

Throughout our study we have, from time to time, highlighted the importance and prominent place of the use of fiction in the Bible. We have argued that the imaginative stories of Scripture were written for the express purpose to convey particular features regarding spiritual and ethical truth (just as historical narrative does). Fictional stories possess the ability to evoke powerful emotional responses in the reader because of the very nature of their imaginative composition. This reaches the heart as well as the mind and often proves to be very persuasive in the author communicating his intended message to his readership. The fact that Jesus relied so heavily on teaching by way of fictional stories grounds this assertion.

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