

BIBLICAL NARRATIVES: THEIR BEAUTY *AND* TRUTH

JO ANN DAVIDSON
Andrews University

The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel (Ps 103:6-7,
emphasis supplied).

The Christian canon contains many types of written materials, including poetry, letters, laws, apocalyptic, and narratives. Only in the last half-century, however, have biblical narratives begun to receive the stature they deserve. Previously, for more than a hundred years under the commanding influence of the historical-critical method, biblical narratives were generally regarded as the conflation of numerous fragmentary primitive sources, redacted “carelessly” or “sloppily” by later editors. Modern Western writing techniques were the standard for judging the ancient books. These extrabiblical criteria are presently conceded as inadequate.¹

A field of study has emerged in theology as sensitivity to biblical writing idioms and appreciation for the impressive narrative skills of the biblical writers has increased. Meir Sternberg pinpoints important issues of interpretation, such as being aware of what the biblical narrator wants to accomplish, and under what conditions he or she operates. Therefore,

both the universal and the distinctive features of his communication must be taken into account. Those features combine, in ways original and often surprising but unmistakable, to reveal a poetics at work. Whatever the nature and origin of the parts—materials, units, forms—the whole governs and interrelates them by well-defined rules of poetic communication.²

Not only content, then, but also the sequencing of biblical narratives is now being studied. Choice of vocabulary along with the juxtaposition of the narratives to each other is perceived as intentional.³ For example, the narrative of Judah and Tamar, formerly derided for its unexpected position within the eleven chapters of the Joseph sequence in Genesis, is now regarded as deliberate and meaningful. The NT narrative of the divorced woman at Samaria’s well (John 4), following immediately after Nicodemus’s seeking

¹Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 53.

²*Ibid.*, 2.

³Jack Lundbom, e.g., urges attention to the nature of Hebrew literary composition, and the many various devices that are ordered into a unified whole, and proposes that the reader needs to become sensitive to these component parts (*Jeremiah: A Study in Ancient Hebrew Rhetoric*, 2d ed. [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997]).

out of the Messiah late one night (John 3), is also perceived as intentional. Scholars are noting that “Viewed in isolation, an event may seem to have a particular meaning, but when it is placed in a narrative context, its meaning can change.”⁴

John Sailhamer urges sensitivity to the “intertextuality” and the connecting seams between the different narratives, which can illuminate the theological intent of the author.⁵ Biblical narratives exhibit an evocative choice of words placed within literary structures, that are laced with intertextual connections.⁶ As a result, many commentaries now seem inadequate for understanding the narratives. As Robert Alter notes, there is a difference between traditional commentaries and modern scholarship. This difference is evidenced in the fact that traditional commentaries generally see the text as “an interconnected unity, as the midrashic exegetes did, . . . assuming it is a patchwork of frequently disparate documents, as most modern scholars have supposed.”⁷

Biblical narratives are rightly acclaimed for their intricately constructed material manifested through a deceptively simple surface texture. Sailhamer, following the trend initiated by Erich Auerbach⁸ and James Muilenberg,⁹ contends that a “close reading” of the multiple narratives in the Pentateuch, for instance, reveals an unfolding coherent “macro-story” rather than an unsophisticated redaction of unrelated primitive myths.¹⁰ Discerning readers will discover a profound art of terse but elegant conciseness, challenging

⁴Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation. The Gospel according to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991): 1:3. He argues that “I am concerned with a text not as an isolated datum but as a functional member of the total narrative. I am also concerned with the meanings and suggestions of meaning which emerge when we note how part interacts with related part.”

⁵John Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 423.

⁶Even poetic books, such as the Psalter, are increasingly appreciated as purposely structured. Brevard Childs contends: “I would argue that the need for taking seriously the canonical form of the Psalter would greatly aid in making use of the Psalms in the life of the Christian Church. Such a move would not disregard the historical dimensions of the Psalter, but would attempt to profit from the shaping which the final redactors gave the older material in order to transform traditional poetry into Sacred Scripture for the later generations of the faithful” (“Reflections of the Modern Study of the Psalms,” in *Magnalia Dei, the Mighty Acts of God: Essays in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. F. M. Cross, W. E. Lemke, P. D. Millers Jr. [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976], 385).

⁷Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981, 11).

⁸Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953).

⁹James Muilenberg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *JBL* 88 (1969): 1-18.

¹⁰John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 34-37.

higher-critical assumptions. As G. B. Caird proposes, “Unitary perception [of the canon] is, to be sure, a well-attested phenomenon, but it is characteristic not of the primitive but of the creative mind in all ages.”¹¹ If there ever was “a period in human intellectual development to which the term mythopoeic could apply,” it must “already lie far in the past before ever the earliest document of the Old Testament was written.”¹² Caird can find nothing primitive in either the court history of David or the Pentateuchal record.

Not surprisingly, both Testaments work within the same tradition due to the fact that, except for Luke, the NT writers are also Hebrews. Therefore, their narratives could be expected to reflect similar stylistic features, though written in Greek. Indeed, the four Gospels and Acts display superior narrative expression. Karl Barth noticed these types of narrative features, observing that the central doctrines of Christianity are found within a careful reading of the Gospel narratives. Biblical revelation, he acknowledges, is often expressed in the form of a story or a series of stories instead of systematic doctrine,¹³ insisting that it is the biblical “macro-story” that defines theology and not the other way around.

Norman Perrin goes so far as to contend that the NT Gospel narrative is “the one unique literary form produced by early Christianity.”¹⁴ Meredith G. Kline also applauds NT narratives, building a compelling case that the Gospel of Mark exhibits the same literary structure as the book of Exodus.¹⁵ The smallest, seemingly insignificant details, previously ignored or ridiculed, are now combed for their perceptivity.

Newer commentaries acknowledge all four Gospels as literary masterpieces.¹⁶ For example, the Gospel of Mark, formerly scoffed at as immature and lacking depth,¹⁷ is now praised for its narrative expression. David Rhoads and Donald Michie argue that

¹¹G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 197.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Therefore, Karl Barth proposes, dogmatics becomes “much less of a system than the narrative of an event” (*Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-1969], ii 362, 321).

¹⁴Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 143.

¹⁵Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 172-203.

¹⁶E.g., George Mlakuzhyil, *The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1987), 370.

¹⁷E.g., Helen Gardner, who described Mark’s Gospel as having a “lack of literary quality as the product of honest uneducated sincerity” (*The Business of Criticism* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1959], 101-102).

The *Good News According to Mark* has proved the most enduringly powerful narrative in the history of Western civilization, perhaps in the history of the world. . . . It has thus succeeded on a literally unimaginable scale in the first aim of all narrative—the compulsion and maintenance of belief. . . . No earlier literary document bears the slightest resemblance to Mark's. One man, overwhelmed by a second man's memories of a colossal third man, preserves these memories as an urgent legacy to our race.¹⁸

Auerbach concurs, insisting that Mark's Gospel is a "revolutionary piece of writing recording the birth of a revolutionary spiritual movement from the depths of the common people."¹⁹ He believes that concern for literary form in the biblical materials is an essential element in understanding the radical nature of biblical narratives.²⁰

Rhoads and Michie detail how Mark artfully employs word repetitions, two-step progression, questions in dialogues, and episode framing, with similar episodes in a series of three. For example, word repetitions often occur within episodes in various ways—"words in commands or requests are repeated in the descriptions of their fulfillment; a character may quote the writings and repeat key words in commenting on them; or the description of a situation or problem may be echoed in the reaction to it."²¹ Another way in which word repetitions are used is for the purpose of bridging between episodes. The word repetitions "are verbal threads, which weave their way through the story, giving the fabric of the story an intricate design and unity it would not otherwise have."²²

The two-step progression is, according to Rhoads and Michie, "the most pervasive stylistic feature in the gospel." This narrative feature may be applied to, for instance, time and place references, such as "When it was evening, after the sun set," as well as to people and objects, such as the woman who was a "Greek, a Syrophenician by birth." In two-step progressions, the "first part is important, yet the emphasis often lies on the second step, which usually contains the more significant element."²³ Two-step progressions may also take the forms of antithetical parallelism, where a negative step is followed by a step in the affirmative, such as "came not to be served, but to serve and give his life"; pairs of questions, such as "What is this? A new teaching with

¹⁸David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), xi-xii.

¹⁹Auerbach, 35.

²⁰Ibid., 35-38.

²¹Rhoads and Michie, 46.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

authority?"; and pairs of imperatives, such "Keep watch, and pray that you don't come to a test."²⁴

Narrative dialogues often include "an extraordinary number of questions, mostly rhetorical." These are the types of questions that Jesus often poses to his disciples: "Why are you cowards? Don't you have faith yet?"²⁵

Rhoads and Michie note how framing devices create "suspense." A story is interrupted and the reader must wait through another narrative in order to learn how the first story turns out. "After being told that Jairus's daughter is near death, the reader must wait while Jesus heals the woman with the flow of blood before finding out what happens to the little girl." By framing the stories in such a way, they "illuminate and enrich each other, commenting on and clarifying the meaning, one of the other. . . . [T]he faith of Jairus for his daughter is comparable to the faith of the woman for her own healing."²⁶ Thus framing also plays a key role in bringing out the theological meaning of the Gospel.²⁷

Finally, Rhoads and Michie point to the threefold repetition of similar actions and events, noting that it is "Perhaps the most commonly recognized pattern of narration in Mark. Criteria for the identification of these series of three have included the repetition of narrative structure, verbal threads, a common theme, the continuation of a conflict, the involvement of the same characters, and the similarity of setting."²⁸ Some repetitions occur in direct sequence, such as Jesus praying before his arrest (Mark 14:32-42). Other times sequences occur at intervals, such as Jesus' three predictions of his impending death. "After each prediction, the disciples' response indicates that they do not understand. After each response, Jesus summons the disciples and teaches them the values of the rule of God implicit in his predictions."²⁹ Rhoads and Michie conclude that "a threefold series is no mere repetition of similar events, but involves a progressive development. Each incident uncovers more about the characters or conflicts, and the third fully reveals the dynamic of that entire series."³⁰

Joanna Dewey also insists that "Mark was a writer of considerable literary skill if not of elegant Greek; it is only by paying attention to the literary structure he created that we can hope to interpret his gospel properly."³¹

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 54.

²⁹Ibid., 54-55.

³⁰Ibid., 55.

³¹Joanna Dewey, "The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark

The structure of Mark's Gospel provides an interpretive key to his theology, with structural forms actually constituting the "major elements in its overall meaning, elements which are destroyed by the historical disintegration of the text."³² When understood in this way, narratives that initially seem to be problematic, such as Jesus' cursing of the fig tree, "make more sense when seen as part of a larger narrative sequence involving Christ's rejection of the Temple."³³

T. R. Wright even goes so far as to say that Mark's Gospel "should be seen as a form of theology, an interpretation of the significance of the raw material it has transformed. Mark's Gospel, in other words, is a prime example of narrative theology."³⁴

The other Gospel narrators are no less capable than Mark. Luke's narrative skills extend far beyond his careful observations as a physician. He is also recognized as a brilliant historian and Greek linguist. James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek appreciate Luke's unique style, finding that he uses various narrative elements that appear frequently in ancient history and biography, such as dramatic episodes, summaries, recapitulation and resumption (used to connect Luke and Acts), parallelism (the deaths of Jesus and Stephen), and interlacement ("focusing on one character, then another, and then back to the previous character"). Bailey and Vander Broek note that "What is obvious is that each evangelist used creativity in presenting Jesus as both source and paradigm for the church. Luke does this quite explicitly by writing two volumes, one featuring Jesus and one the early church."³⁵

Similarly, acclaim for the narratives of the Gospel of John remain unchallenged. Bailey and Vander Broek, who are two of many voices, note that

With literary artistry, the Johannine author fashions narrative scenes with fascinating exchanges between Jesus and his interlocutors (John 6), or forms dialogues and monologues that assume front and center stage in the overall drama (John 9; 14–17). Furthermore, the author's clever use of dramatic irony (John 18:33–38) and deliberately ambiguous symbols (e.g., water or bread) represents a highly developed literary style.³⁶

2:1–3:6, *JBL* 92 (1973): 401.

³²T. R. Wright, *Theology and Literatures: Signposts in Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 74.

³³*Ibid.*, 82.

³⁴*Ibid.* This need not suggest that Mark invented stories, but that he perceived the meanings in Christ's life and teaching, which he sought to express through his well-written and structured Gospel.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 95, 96–97. See also Tannenhill.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 95.

Thus all four Gospel writers masterfully employ literary devices to express their theology. Though ridiculed by earlier critical disintegration of the text, narrative details are vital for interpretation. The Gospel writers do not present their accounts of Jesus as random collections of miracle stories and teachings. Instead, the reader is confronted with theological expression of the highest quality.

Biblical narrative is not an inconsequential part of Scripture. Indeed it is a major literary form. God chose to reveal himself through intricately crafted narratives rather than systematic discourse. For example, the major Christian doctrine of the Atonement is never presented in didactic format. New Testament writers glean OT narratives and poetry to express their perspectives.

However, critical scholars, though confronted with the high quality of the ancient narratives, now argue instead that the high literary quality precludes historical accuracy. Biblical narratives are still defaulted, but for a different reason. It must be asked, Can biblical narratives be trusted? Does their high literary quality prevent historical trustworthiness?

It is striking to note how major critics such as Julius Wellhausen,³⁷ Hermann Gunkel,³⁸ and James Barr³⁹ comment on the historical content of OT narratives. Wellhausen, foremost champion of the Documentary Hypothesis, when speaking of the author of Genesis, writes: "He undoubtedly wants to depict faithfully the factual course of events in the coming-to-be of the world, he wants to give a cosmogonic theory. Anyone who denies that is confusing the value of the story for us with the intention of the author."⁴⁰

³⁷Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel: With a Reprint of the Article "Israel" from the "Encyclopedia Britannica,"* trans. John Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies, preface William Robertson Smith (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1885).

³⁸Hermann Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12,* trans. K. William Whitney Jr., foreword Peter Machinist (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

³⁹James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

⁴⁰Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels,* 6th ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1905), 296; trans. Albert Wolters and cited in Alvin Platinga, "Evolution, Neutrality, and Antecedent Probability: A Reply to Van Till and McMullen," *Christian Scholar's Review* 21/1 (1991): 80-109; reprinted in *Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics: Philosophical, Theological, and Scientific Perspectives,* ed. Robert T. Pennock (Cambridge: MIT, 2001), 197-240, 216. There is an abundant literature on this topic. See, e.g., Robert Clifford, "Creation in the Hebrew Bible," in *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding,* ed. R. J. Russell, W. R. Stoeger, and G. V. Coyne (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 151-175; Dianne Bergant and Carroll Stuhlmueller, "Creation according to the OT," in *Evolution and Creation,* ed. E. McMullin (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 153-175; Bernhard W. Anderson,

Gunkel, father of OT form criticism, concurs, noting that “People should never have denied that Genesis 1 wants to recount how the coming-to-be of the world actually happened.”⁴¹ Barr comments similarly, proposing that “most conservative evangelical opinion today does not pursue a literal interpretation of the creation story in Genesis. A literal interpretation would hold that the world was created in six days, these days being the first of the series which we still experience as days and nights.”⁴²

After describing how evangelicals, whom Barr refers to as “fundamentalists,” have moved away from a literal interpretation of Genesis history, he continues: “In fact the only natural exegesis is a literal one, in the sense that this is what the author meant.”⁴³ Barr presses the point even further, noting that

so far as I know there is no professor of Hebrew or OT in any world-class university who does not believe that the writer(s) of Genesis 1–11 intended to convey to their readers the ideas that: (a) creation took place in a series of six days which were the same as the days of 24 hours we now experience; (b) the figures contained in the Genesis genealogies provide by simple addition a chronology from the beginning of the world up to the later stages of the Biblical story, and (c) Noah’s flood was understood to be worldwide, and to have extinguished all human and land animal life except for those in the ark.⁴⁴

These words from scholars within the critical tradition remind that how one interprets a text should not override what the original authors had in mind.

Herbert Butterfield goes so far as to contend that Hebrew narrative writing presents “the very rise of historiography.”⁴⁵ Bible writers anchor the historical record within narrative texture, thereby effecting a major landmark in the development of the writing of history. Thus “the Bible is even the first to anticipate the appeal to the surviving record of the past that characterizes modern history-telling. . . . [M]ethod and rhetoric coincide: the distributed

“The Earth is the Lord’s”: An Essay on the Biblical Doctrine of Creation,” in *Is God a Creationist?* ed. R. M. Frye (New York: Scribner, 1983), 176-196.

⁴¹Hermann Gunkel, “Genesis,” in *Handkommentar zum Alten Testament*, ed. Wilhelm Nowack et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1896), 1/1; cited in Plantinga, 216.

⁴²James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 2d ed. (London: SCM Press, 1981), 40; cited in Plantinga, 217.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴James Barr, a personal letter to David K. Watson (23 April 1984), published in *Newsletter of the Creation Science Association of Ontario* 3/4 (1990/1991); cited in Plantinga, 217.

⁴⁵Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of History* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 80-95.

parts enhance the credibility of the whole, the present witnesses lend an air of truth to the evocation of the past from which they issued.”⁴⁶ Thus the repeated references to actual cities, rivers, mountains, trees, caves, and countries suggest that the writers meant the narratives to be understood as true history, seeming to invite the reader to verify the facts for themselves. Later biblical writers refer to earlier people, places, and events as if they actually existed and occurred. Jesus and the NT writers accept the historicity of the OT. In fact, all biblical writers rely on the certainty of OT historical events (e.g., the creation, Noah’s flood, and the exodus) to validate the certainty of future actions by God. Under inspiration, the Bible writers masterfully recorded God’s involvement in human history. In fact, the foundation of the covenant is based upon the fact that the history is true. The articles of the covenant are preceded by a relating of historical events in which God intervened in Israel’s behalf.

Arnaldo Momigliano stresses this point, noting that “The Hebrew historian only gave an authoritative version of what everybody was supposed to know.”⁴⁷ Sternberg argues that, as far as scope and strategy are concerned, Hebrew narrative “has no parallel in ancient times. . . . By incorporating the definition and command and observance, the narrative not only illegitimizes all thought of fictionality on pain of excommunication. It also uniquely internalizes its own rules of communication, whereby the remembrance of the past devolves on the present and determines the future.”⁴⁸ Sternberg notes that it is this “cultural imperative” that makes the biblical narratives “‘the greatest surprise’ in the whole story of history writing,” explaining how a people seem to appear out of nowhere to become “‘more obsessed with history than any other nation that has ever existed.’”⁴⁹

Bible writers intended for their narratives to be read as straightforwardly reliable. Regarding this intentionality, Sternberg notes: “In terms of the internal premises established by the discourse—the reader cannot go far wrong even if he does little more than follow the statements made and the incidents enacted on the narrative surface.”⁵⁰ Therefore, if scholars take seriously the voices

⁴⁶Sternberg, 31-32. Tremper Longman III concurs, proposing that “literary critics of the Bible all too frequently reduce the meaning of the biblical text to an aesthetic meaning. Literature, they say, does not refer outside of itself to external reality. . . . [T]he Bible intends to impart historical information to its readers, primarily concerning the acts of God for and among His people. . . . Biblical narrative, for the most part, intends to impart historical information” (*Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 68).

⁴⁷Arnaldo Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 195.

⁴⁸Sternberg, 31.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 51.

of the canonical writers, they should deny the modern argument that literary writing precludes historical accuracy. In spite of the fact that “to narrate is to explain,” it is significant that the biblical narratives often include specific external referents that can be verified. Luke, at the beginning of his Gospel, argues for the veracity of his historical narratives, noting:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-3).

It bears repeating that the assumption that literary writing always precludes historical accuracy is false. George Ladd cogently notes: “The uniqueness and the scandal of the Christian religion rests in the mediation of revelation through historical events.”⁵¹ There is no bifurcation between history and theology. Scripture narratives are rooted in a historical record and comprise a major portion of the system of truth the Bible contains.

The weakness found in many approaches to narrative studies comes from wresting the individual narratives from their original text and analyzing them without the control of the narrative sequences. Those who accept a holistic approach, in which the unity of Scripture is maintained, will find a rich field to work in. Narratives, along with the poetry, laws, letters, and prophecies of the Bible, build a grand mosaic of truth. Narratives help to increase the Bible’s veracity and impact, and convey theology not as doctrine, but as story. As Martin Buber proposes,

Scripture does not state its doctrine as doctrine but by telling a story and without exceeding the limits set by the nature of a story. It uses the method of story-telling to a degree, however, which world literature has not yet learned to use; and its cross-references and inter-connections, while noticeable, are so unobtrusive that a perfect attention is needed to grasp its intent—an attentiveness so perfect that it has not yet been fully achieved. Hence, it remains for us latecomers to point out the significance of what has hitherto been achieved, overlooked, neglected, insufficiently valued.⁵²

⁵¹G. E. Ladd, “The Knowledge of God: The Saving Acts of God,” in *Basic Christian Doctrines*, ed. C. F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 7.

⁵²Martin Buber, “Abraham the Seer,” *Judaism* 5 (1956): 296.