



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 17 September

How To Read Bible Stories – Narrative Analysis

This session is all about reading the Bible from a literary perspective; that is to say reading biblical texts considering its narrative elements such as plot, characters and settings. We'll explore what happens when we analyse biblical texts using literary techniques and see how they enhance our understanding of the stories in the Bible.

I will begin by talking about some of the theory behind reading the Bible from a literary perspective and then we'll explore the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:4b–3:24) using this technique.

Firstly, it's helpful to expand on the title of today's talk.

'How to read': these words imply that there is one correct way of reading the Bible, and I want to argue the opposite today – that there are many ways of understanding biblical texts. Indeed, we should think not of reading the Bible from a specific perspective, but actually that as people engaging with biblical texts, we all bring our own perspectives and have our own interpretations of what these texts mean. This approach might well be accused of being liberal nonsense as many Christians prescribe to a notion of biblical inerrancy, where the Bible is a single source of irrefutable truth. There's no problem if that's what you believe. but even within fundamentalist Christian communities there is no universal agreement on many important contemporary issues – there are multiple perspectives.

'Bible': it occurs to me that the term Bible might be problematic too; which Bible am I talking about? Which translation? Which denomination? Today, I don't think it's important to discuss these issues – put simply, if you regard a text as biblical then you can apply the principles that I am talking about in today's session to analyse it.

'Stories': again this term is problematic as we tend to think of 'story' as the opposite to 'fact'. It occurs to me that some people here might consider the Bible to be completely literally true and so referring to 'Bible stories' might suggest that I don't believe in them as completely factual accounts of things that happened. I use the term 'story' here not to enter into a debate about the historical accuracy of Bible stories but to acknowledge that even if you do believe that all of the Bible is true, it is written as a narrative account and subjecting it to narrative analysis allows for a more detailed understanding of the text.

Furthermore is the issue of genre: much of the Bible is written in the form of a story, but what about other genres of biblical writing: poetry (Gen. 1:26–28), worship song (psalms), erotic literature (song of songs), gospel (a genre of in its own right) and letters to church leaders? The narrative techniques I talk about today are specifically helpful to analyse bible stories, but this is not to say that you couldn't adapt them to explore other genres of biblical writing.

Narrative or literary analysis: theoretical background

(The terms narrative and literary are interchangeable and simply refer to analysing a text as a story)

It is important to point out that the narrative analysis of biblical text is not new.

1500 years ago, the Rabbis interpreted the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament using narrative techniques, looking at how Hebrew grammar and specific words added new meaning to the text. However, the Rabbis were mainly concerned with examining the text at a verse-by-verse level rather than exploring how a wider unit of text functioned as a story. The Rabbis also focussed on theological or moral interpretation of biblical text, whereas a modern literary analysis might focus upon understanding the story itself from a non-religious perspective.

For example, in the Midrashic writings, the early interpretations of Hebrew Bible undertaken by Rabbis, the character Jacob in the book of Genesis was understood in terms of his name. The name Jacob, *y'aqobh*, sounds like the Hebrew for 'he grabs the heel', which was a figurative term for someone who was deceptive. And in the stories of Jacob's life there are many occasions where he acted as a deceptive character, though the Rabbis were less interested with exploring the character of Jacob in the wider narrative of Genesis. Compare this to the narrative critical analysis of Jacob by Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books) which explores Jacob this way.

Development of narrative analysis

Biblical scholarship began in the 1700s as a discipline that was distinct to theology and it was primarily concerned with exploring the historical dimensions of the Bible, exploring questions such as:

- Who wrote it?
- When was it written?
- How was it edited into its existing form?
- What types of writing/oral tradition has the text been created from – folk song or folk tale or genealogy or . . . ?

Indeed, if you look at scholarly Bible commentaries from before the 1970s, you'll notice that they are obsessed not with what the text says or means in a religious context, but how it was authored.

However, there is simply not enough data to confirm a lot of historical critical scholarship conclusively; how can we be sure that a specific verse originated from a specific folk tradition? How can we really know that an editor intended to change a specific word?

In light of these kinds of problems, biblical scholars started to move towards examining the final form of the text; that is to say they started analysing the bible using narrative critical techniques.

Within literary criticism are a range of approaches: Feminist, Structuralist, Psychoanalytic, Postcolonial, Ecological, Poststructuralist.

Today, the techniques we'll be looking at are some basic principles of narrative analysis. That is to say, when you read a Bible story, consider the following:

Setting

- When is it set?
- Where is it set - what is the location?

Character

- Who is in the story?
- What do we know about them (name, gender, age, occupation, . . .)?
- What personality traits do they have, how do they behave?

Plot

- What events happen in the story (list the details)?

How is the story told?

- What is the basic structure of the story? (eg introduction, conclusion etc.), can you break the story down into smaller sections? (acts / scenes for example).
- Who is the narrator? Is it a character? Is the narrator anonymous? Is the narrator reliable? Is the narrator omniscient or do they find things out with the reader?
- Are there any underlying themes, abstract ideas or ideologies?

We'll apply these questions to Gen. 2:4b–3:24, the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Most will know this story, or at least be familiar with some of it. Today, the aim is to read the story with fresh eyes, pretending that you have no prior knowledge of it. To do this, I have taken the text out of the Bible and reproduced it in a 'normal' format to encourage you to read it as a story – we're used to reading the Bible on wafer thin paper in double columns with small text, but if you convert the text so that it reads like a regular story this can be a really helpful way to read it afresh. If you do this, you might want to consider things like paragraph divisions and chapter headings: these have both been added according to the particular translation you are reading so are later additions and linked to interpretations of the text.

Activity: read the text below considering the narrative elements above (plot, character, etc.)

There are no right or wrong ways to interpret the text, but doing this will help you understand it more deeply. You'll notice that the terms sin and fall do not feature in the text at all (except perhaps in the chapter headings added in some translations) Adam and Eve do not eat an apple and it is not made clear that the snake is the devil; these are all later interpretations!

Genesis 2:4b–3:24, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Another Account of the Creation

4 In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, 5 when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; 6 but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— 7 then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,[b] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. 8 And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9 Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

10 A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. 11 The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; 12 and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. 13 The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. 14 The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

18 Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” 19 So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man[c] there was not found a helper as his partner. 21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones

and flesh of my flesh;

this one shall be called Woman,[d]

for out of Man[e] this one was taken.”

24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

The First Sin and Its Punishment

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” 2 The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” 4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,[f] knowing good and evil.” 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

8 They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God

among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." 13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." 14 The Lord God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

15 I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel."

16 To the woman he said,

"I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you."

17 And to the man[g] he said,

"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'

cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

19 By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return."

20 The man named his wife Eve,[h] because she was the mother of all living. 21 And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man[i] and for his wife, and clothed them.

22 Then the Lord God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— 23 therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Footnotes

[b] Genesis 2:7 Or formed a man (Heb. adam) of dust from the ground (Heb. adamah)

[c] Genesis 2:20 Or for Adam

[d] Genesis 2:23 Heb. ishshah

[e] Genesis 2:23 Heb. ish

[f] Genesis 3:5 Or gods

[g] Genesis 3:17 Or to Adam

[h] Genesis 3:20 In Heb. Eve resembles the word for living

[i] Genesis 3:21 Or for Adam

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