

READING BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Judges

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The Proper Reading Attitude

In the Introduction I have explained how completely defenseless the text is against any form of abuse. For the text, the reader is either a blessing or a curse. Much depends on our attitude. We may decide to work on our open-mindedness, and constantly adapt our picture of the text while we are reading. Curiosity is a great asset, self-criticism is even better.

Reading properly is always active puzzle-solving: comparing elements, checking on a character's history, sometimes consulting an atlas or a Bible handbook. Asking questions is more important than committing ourselves to answers. Uncertainty means that one is still open for change and substitution; certainty may soon turn to hardening. Being able to work with such simple but basic narratological tools as plot, hero and points of view is much more important in the encounter with the Bible than being devout.

All this may also be formulated in negative terms: what are our biggest traps? To mention a few:

a. Our desire to know: after some reading and searching we like to have a finished interpretation in front of us and are (too) easily satisfied with a total picture based on only partial observation of the textual characteristics. In this way we commit ourselves, and forget to check our results rigorously against the text itself once more, some time during the procedure.

b. An insidious form of delusion is the spectacles we ourselves are wearing: our unspoken hopes, expectations; our preconceived notions about Moses, Jesus and ancient Israel; and especially our prejudices, beliefs and unshakeable convictions. Fixed ideas about aspects of faith and the world will influence, lead and regularly impede us, even unconsciously. The Bible is so complex that it differs by definition from any religious belief, no matter, how exalted our own creed or value scale may be. Only by keeping an open mind and by asking questions can we discover how different the Bible is. The Bible is not a picture book for our own ideas, which we open only if we want our opinions confirmed, or our vanity tickled. Nor is it a box of proof texts.

This book is an exercise in grasping the overall shape of a text, and in reading from within. There is an old rule that says: the whole is more than the sum of its parts. I have tried to make this insight truly operational, so that at many levels it becomes practical and manageable for readers. From the viewpoints of creation and knowledge, proper reading and literary experience, the whole has priority over the parts: it comes first in the writer's mind, and it is the beacon for which we set course while, in our reading, we travel past many details.

Ten Productive Questions

The following questions, ten groups rather than ten separate questions, will be useful while reading narrative texts

1. Who is the *hero*? What is your reason for thinking this (remember the criteria of presence, initiative, and the executor of the quest)?



¹ This is a slightly edited form of the conclusion of Fokkelman's book, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999. pp. 206-209.

2. What does the *quest* consist of? What is the hero after, i.e. what is his object of value? Does he attain his goal, and if not, why not?
3. Who are the *helpers* and *opponents*? Besides characters, factors, situations or personality traits also qualify. Are any attributes (objects) present? What do they contribute? Do they have a symbolic added value?
4. Can you feel the *narrator's* presence anywhere in the text? This will apply especially in the case of information, comments, explanations or value judgments on his part. Can you point to these instances of the writer speaking? Where is the writer less obviously present (for instance in his deliberate arrangement or composition of the material)? Does he usually make his own statements at strategic points in the text?
5. Does the narrator keep to the *chronology* of the events and processes themselves? If not, where does he deviate, and why do you think he does that? Try and get an idea of the discourse time/narrated time ratio.
6. Where are the gaps where *narrated time* has been skipped, and are there cases of acceleration, retardation, retrospect and anticipation? Assuming that the writer inserted them at the right points: why are they where they are? What is their relation with the context?
7. Is there a clear *plot*, or is the unit you are reading more or less without a plot of its own, because it forms part of a greater whole? What, then, is the macro-plot there?
8. Where are the *speeches*? Are there many of them? Have speeches been left out where you would expect them? What factors influence the character who is speaking, what self-interest, background, desires, expectations? *Congruence*: do the characters' words match their actions? If not, how come?
9. Is there any particular choice of words that strikes you? Any other characteristics of *style* or *structure*? Take them seriously, and keep pondering them, guided, for instance, by such questions as "what does this contribute to plot or characterization?"
10. *Boundaries*: what devices are used to demarcate a unit? (Consider the data regarding time, space, beginning and end of the action, entrances or exits of the characters.) Can you make a *division* of the text (divide it into smaller units)? By what signals are you guided? Try and find other signals or markers, which may possibly lead to a different structuration. To what extent does the division clarify your view of themes or "content?"