

Old Testament Narrative

I. Meaning in the Text

A. Levels of Signification

Level of meaning ¹	interpretive tool	
1. sounds	phonetics	
2. syllables		
3. words	grammar	grammar
4. phrases	syntax	dialectic
5. clauses		
6. sentences		
7. frames/speeches	poetics	rhetoric
8. scene parts or incidents		
9. scenes or episodes		
10. acts or phases		
11. sections/cycles		
12. book/composition		

1. *Poetics*: “the grammar of literature, the study of the techniques and devices an author uses to convey meaning in a text” (Waltke 2001, 33). *How* a text means.
2. *Narrative criticism*: “the application of poetics to narrative.” *What* the text means.

II. Story

A. What is a Story?

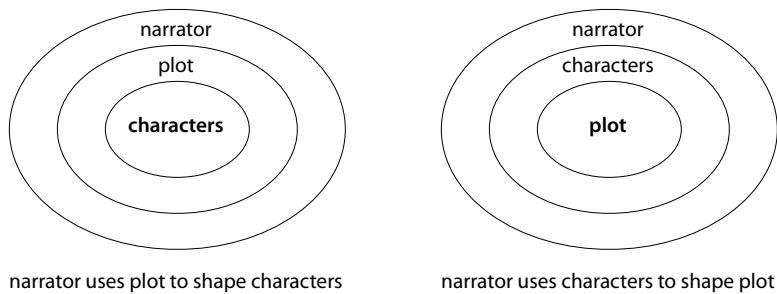
It is a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence—dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death, and so on. Qua story, it can have only one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next. (Forster 1990, 42)

1. Components of a Story

1. Plot
2. Characters
3. Narrator

Which is more important: plot or character?

1. Waltke (2001, 31), adapted from Fokkelman (1986, 4).



Aristotle exalted plot over character:

The most important of these things is the structure of events, because tragedy is mimesis not of persons but of action and life; and happiness and unhappiness consist in action, and the goal is a certain kind of action, not a qualitative state: it is in virtue of character that people have certain qualities, but through their actions that they are happy or the reverse. So it is not in order to provide mimesis of character that the agents act; rather, their characters are included for the sake of their actions. Thus, the events and the plot are the goal of tragedy, and the goal is the most important thing of all. (*Poetics*, 6:14-23)

E. M. Forster (1990, 85) disagreed, arguing that it is in character not plot that our lives unfold .

Today, some follow Aristotle, some Forster. Some read a book or watch a movie for its action content, others for its character development. Contemporary Western society tends to favor plot over character. In our own lives, we tend to be more interested in how the plot of our narrative is developing than in our own character development. Biblical narrative is closer to Aristotle, showing a preference for plot over character. Character portrayal is always subservient both to local plot and to the larger plot of salvation history.

2. Relationship of Story to Reality

As Aristotle pointed out long ago (*Poetics*, 1), any story is a *mimesis* (imitation) of reality. The manner in which the narrator represents reality is an important component of his narrative art.

B. Why Stories?

In the intellectual climate of the “modern” world stories were out of favor. But with the transition to postmodernism, stories have suddenly become popular. It is acceptable to ask someone to tell his or her story.

We tell stories for a different reason than we recite history. Stories have a different impact on us than does history.

1. We enter into the world of the story.
2. Stories can disclose a different reality: positively characters or events may inspire us; negatively they may delude us.
3. Stories are subversive: story shapes our worldview, which affects how we think (mindset) which governs how we act. Stories affect actions (i.e., they have practical effects) but this is indirect and subversive. The Church often dismisses stories because they aren’t practical, but stories can actually effect a far greater change in our daily actions than a list of five things to do Monday morning.

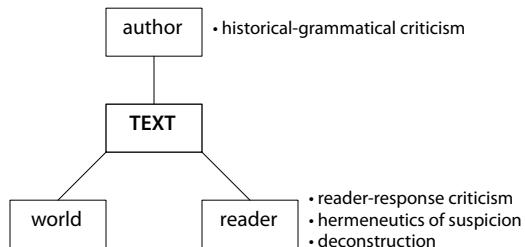
$$\text{story} \rightarrow \text{worldview} \rightarrow \text{mindset} \rightarrow \text{actions}^2$$

2. cf. “Story, Symbol, Praxis: Elements of Israel’s Worldview.” chapter 8 in Wright (1992).

C. The Sad Neglect of OT Stories

Reasons for the neglect:³

1. Emphasis on doctrinal teaching and preaching.
2. Emphasis on the ancient author or the ancient world of the text. A biblical text mediates between three communities: it was written by an ancient *author*, it represents (imitates) an ancient *world*, and it is read by a modern *reader*.



Narrative criticism, by contrast, focuses on the text.

III. Narrator

A. The Narrator as Bridge

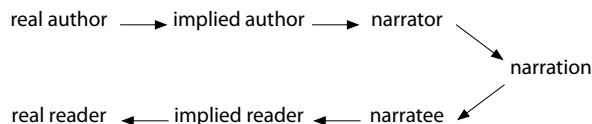
The narrator bridges the gap between past and present, converting a past event into a present text:

past	→	present
event	→	text
story	→	discourse
reality	→	mimesis

Narrative analysis reveals the texture that the narrator adds to his text, and seeks to draw meaning from that texture.⁴

B. Authors and Readers

Actually multiple real and hypothetical people are involved in the production and consumption of a text:



real author: actual author of the book; often unknown; few OT books identify their author.

implied author: “hypothetical” author from whose viewpoint the book is written. He may or may not be the same as the real author; liberal scholars usually deny any identity between the two. Careful narrative

3. Cf. Frei (1974).

4. Cf. the title of Michael Fishbane's work, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (1975).

	analysis is used to reveal the implied author.
narrator:	the story teller; usually anonymous, but Ezra and Nehemiah are first-person narrators. The line between implied author and narrator can be fuzzy.
narratee:	“hypothetical” person to whom the narrator is telling his story.
implied reader:	“hypothetical” person for whom the book is written; the people whom the author had in mind as he wrote the book. Not necessarily the same as the narratee, especially if the book was written later than the narrative.
real reader:	you and I reading the book today; the author did not have us specifically in mind! It is important that the real reader place himself in the shoes of the implied reader.

Example: the Deuteronomistic History

In the Hebrew Bible, Genesis–Deuteronomy form the Torah (Pentateuch), and Joshua–Kings form the Former Prophets. These nine books form an unbroken sequence telling the history of Israel from the Creation down to the Babylonian Captivity.

real author:	unknown; lived any time between mid-6th century (Captivity, the latest events described in last chapter) and mid-2nd century (by which time we know the Hebrew Bible was fixed).
implied author:	someone living during the Exile, writing to explain why Israel and Judah were dispersed. He evaluates Israel's history against the standard of Deuteronomy. Hence he is called the Deuteronomist, or the Deuteronomic Historian, and his compilation is the Deuteronomistic History (DH).
narrator:	the individual stories in the DH are much older than the encompassing document.
implied reader:	people of Judah after the Fall of Jerusalem, either in Captivity in Babylon, or left behind in Judah, struggling to make sense of what happened.

This can be contrasted with the Book of Chronicles, which is the last book of the Hebrew Bible, in the Writings. The Chronicler wrote much later (the genealogies of 1 Chr 1-9 extend to ca. 400 BC). He reworked the DH to portray the faithfulness of Yahweh.

C. The Reliability of the Narrator

The narrator is assumed to be reliable in his evaluations and statements. It is assumed that he shares the Lord's perspective. He is also omniscient and omnipresent:

1. *omniscient* (all-knowing): the narrator has privileged access to information, which he shares with the reader. The reader thus may know things that the characters do not know. But the narrator does not relate all the things we would like to know; he is selective in using his omniscience.
2. *omnipresent* (all-present): the narrator has privileged access to all locations.

D. Narration vs. Dialog

Biblical narrators prefer to show their stories than tell them, prefer to tell their stories through dialog (direct speech) rather than straight narration. Straight narration is often concentrated in the introductions and conclusions. Sometimes the dialog will repeat the narration, or vice versa.

E. Overt vs. Covert Narrator

The narrator can make his presence felt overtly, but usually the Biblical narrator is covert.

1. The Overt Narrator

Occasionally the narrator reveals his presence overtly:

1. Self-reference: e.g., first-person narration by Ezra, Nehemiah.

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2. Reference to sources, e.g. the Book of Jashar (Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18); the book of the annals of King David/of Solomon/of the kings of Israel/of the kings of Judah (1-2 Kgs, 1 Chr) etc. It can be difficult to know if such statements are the work of the narrator, or of the implied author.
3. Indication of time between events and narration: “to this day”; “in those days.” It can be difficult to know if such statements are the work of the narrator, or are part of the ideological framework added by the later implied author, or are insertions added by a later editor to bring the work up to date.

In every instance this expression [“in those days”] creates distance between the narrator and the story and, as a result, between the reader and the story too. Distance is necessary in order to make it possible to consider the significance of the events. The reader is no longer borne along by the stream of incidents, and can observe them from above (Bar-Efrat 1989, 26).
4. Overt explanation, judgment, interpretation
Explanation is usually indicated by “because, that” (... בַּזֶּה):

the effect of the explanations, judgments and interpretations of the kinds cited above is to create distance and reduce the reader’s emotional involvement. A reader who is totally absorbed in the plot will be able neither to see the events dispassionately, nor to judge them and assess their significance. A certain emotional distance is a precondition for clear thinking, and without it it is impossible to grasp the ideas in the narrative. The explanations help in understanding the narrative, emphasizing certain points and influencing the formation of the reader’s opinion in accordance with the author’s ideas and values (Bar-Efrat 1989, 31).

2. The Covert Narrator

More usually in biblical literature, the narrator is covert; his presence is not obvious. This makes the narrative more realistic and exciting.

1. Description of characters, containing evaluation.
2. Non-neutral choice of words. In addition to Leitworter (key words) and Leitmotive (key ideas), the narrator’s covert presence can be sensed by his use of individual words that are loaded.

F. Plot Time

Since narrative is a representation of reality, any narrative features two different time-scales. A narrative “unfolds within time, and time passes within it” (Bar-Efrat 1989, 141).

Table 1. Narrative time-scales

story-time	discourse time	Chatman, Powell
represented time	representational time	Sternberg
external time	internal time	Bar-Efrat
narrative time	narration time	

Powell (1990, 38) categorizes five possible relationships between these two time-scales:

1. **Summary:** discourse-time is briefer than story-time.
2. **Scene:** discourse-time approximates story-time. Much OT narrative, being dialog, fits this category.
3. **Stretch:** discourse-time exceeds story-time. Not found in biblical narrative.
4. **Ellipsis:** discourse time stops while story-time continues.
 - a. *gap:* significant to narrative
 - b. *blank:* insignificant (terminology of Sternberg (1985, 235)).
5. **Pause:** discourse-time continues while story-time stops. Narrator takes a time-out, stepping off the story-line to describe or explain something to the reader.

G. Narration On and Off the Story-line

Hebrew narrative usually unfolds through a chain of verbs in a special tense, variously called “waw-consecutive,” “waw-conversive,” or “waw-relative” (*waw* is the Hebrew word [actually a single letter] for “and”; it is prefixed to these narrative verbs). This makes it easy to discern the story-line in Hebrew, and to discern when the narrator steps off the story-line by departing from the usual narrative verb form. In normal narrative, the waw-relative verb is the first word of a clause. The narrator moves off the story-line when he commences a clause with a noun or another verb form. Often these clauses are translated with an initial “now.”⁵

1. Initial stage-setting. Even whole books can begin with a waw-relative verb (e.g., Exodus), but sometimes the narrator commences an episode off the story-line with some stage-setting, presenting information he wants us to bear in mind when he moves onto the story-line.
2. Offstage comments: as if the narrator is an actor making a comment to the audience without the other characters hearing him.
3. Contrast: by beginning a clause with a noun, the narrator makes a contrast (this is not really off the story-line).

H. Point of View

A skillful author usually uses multiple points of view, changing both the location and the focal length through which he views the action he is describing. With multiple characters and a willingness to move both among them and from them outwards to a panoramic position, the author has at his disposal numerous viewpoints.

1. Focalization

1. internal focalization: perspective of character looking inside him/herself.
2. external focalization: perspective of a neutral observer.
3. zero focalization: narrator privileged with omniscience and omnipresence.

2. “Behold”

הִנֵּה *hinnēh* “behold” often indicates a shift in viewpoint from the omniscient narrator to an individual character’s perception (Fokkelman 1991, 50). The verb is always a participle, emphasizing ongoing current action. These narrated *hinnēh* clauses should not be confused with the use of *hinnēh* in dialog.

IV. Plot

Aristotle defined plot as “the mimesis of the action—for I use ‘plot’ to denote the construction of events” (*Poetics*, 6). E. M. Forster distinguished between story and plot:

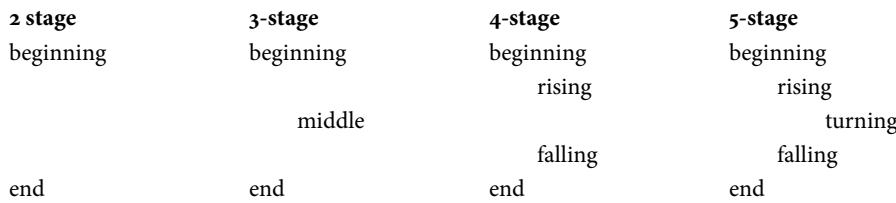
Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: ‘The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.’ This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: ‘And then?’ If it is in a plot we ask: ‘Why?’ That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel. A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cave-men or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. They can only be kept awake by ‘And then—and then—’ they can only supply curiosity. But a plot demands intelligence and memory also. (Forster 1990, 87)

5. see Longacre (1989, 64), especially Diagram 3 on p 81.

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Biblical narrative is rich in mystery; meaning is embedded in the text without explicit articulation. Extraction of this meaning requires careful reading and memory.

A plot has a beginning, a middle, and an end (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 7). At its simplest, the middle may be so brief as to be non-existent. Usually, though, the middle can itself be sub-divided into two or three to yield a 4-stage or 5-stage plot. Freytag (1863) described a plot as containing a rising action, a climax, and a falling action.



Alternatively the rising, turning and falling can be considered as a complication, a change/turning, and resolution.

Beginning: static, descriptive.

Story proper: dynamic.

Ending: resolution.

A. Structure

A narrative consists of acts and scenes. Scenes are often demarcated by change in time, place, or characters.

B. Compositional Relationship

The great key to the reading of Hebraic literature is sensitivity to pattern. (Rauber 1970)

The author guides the reader in understanding the text by arranging the components of his story in narrative patterns. David Bauer proposed 15 categories of compositional relationships:⁶

1. *Repetition*: recurrence of similar or identical elements.
2. *Contrast*: associates or juxtaposes things that are dissimilar or opposite.
3. *Comparison*: associates or juxtaposes things that are alike or similar.
4. *Causation and Substantiation*: order the narrative through relationships of cause and effect (causation is the movement from cause to effect and substantiation, from effect to cause).
5. *Climax*: movement from lesser to greater intensity.
6. *Pivot*: change in the direction of the material, from positive to negative or vice versa.
7. *Particularization and Generalization*: movement in the text toward explication that becomes either more specific or more comprehensive.
8. *Statements of purpose*: structure the narrative according to a movement from means to end.
9. *Preparation*: inclusion of material in one part of the narrative that serves primarily to prepare the reader for what is still to come.
10. *Summarization*: synopsis or abridgment of material that is treated more fully elsewhere.
11. *Interrogation*: question or problem followed by its answer or solution.
12. *Inclusio*: repetition of features at the beginning and end of a unit.

6. Cited by Powell (1990, 32).

13. *Interchange*: alternation of elements in an “a, b, a, b” pattern.
14. *Chiasm*: repetition of elements in an inverted order: “a, b, b, a.”
15. *Intercalation*: insertion of one literary unit in the midst of another.

The two most common patterns are parallel and concentric:

1. *Parallel*: A B C // A' B' C', creating two or more *panels*. If there are multiple panels, the focus is usually on the final panel which breaks the pattern.
2. *Concentric*: the focus is usually on the central element(s).
 - a. *concentric* pattern: A B C C' B' A'
 - b. *chiastic* pattern: A B C X C' B' A'

V. Character

A. Character Types

The novelist E. M. Forster (1990, 73) introduced the concept of “flat” and “round” characters:

1. Flat characters: “In their purest form, they are constructed around a single idea or quality” (Forster 1990, 73).
2. Round characters: complex and often ambiguous and changeable.

The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it—life within the pages of a book. (Forster 1990, 81)

Adele Berlin (1983, 23) adds a third type, and renames Forster’s categories:

1. agents (functionary): move the plot along.
2. types (flat character): limited stereotyped range of traits.
3. characters (full-fledged, round character)

B. Character Foils

A foil is a character whose primary role is to highlight another character.

C. Naming

D. Direct and Indirect Characterization

1. Direct characterization: narrator or another character provides evaluation of character. The narrator is considered to be reliable. Other characters are not necessarily so.
2. Indirect characterization: narrator allows character to emerge through dialog, actions.

E. Ambiguity

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Narrator provides only minimal information necessary to understand the story. This means Biblical characters are “fraught with background” (Auerbach 1953)

VI. Words and Motifs

A. Keywords

Martin Buber first articulated the significance of a leading word (*Leitwort*) or keyword:

By Leitwort I understand a word or word root that is meaningfully repeated within a text or sequence of texts or complex of texts; those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed or clarified, or at any rate made more emphatic. As noted, what is repeated need not be a single word but can be a word root; indeed the diversity of forms often strengthens the overall dynamic effect. I say “dynamic” because what takes place between the verbal configurations thus related is in a way a movement; readers to whom the whole is present feel the waves beating back and forth. Such measured repetition, corresponding to the inner rhythm of the text—or rather issuing from it—is probably the strongest of all techniques for making a meaning available without articulating it explicitly.⁷

B. Other Words

While not used with sufficient frequency as a leitwort, certain other words are nevertheless of major importance to the meaning carried by the story.

C. Motifs

Associated with the idea of a Leitwort is that of a Leitmotiv, a key idea (motif) that forms a pattern through the narrative.

D. Allusion

Sometimes the narrator intends an allusion to an earlier passage of Scripture, an echo of earlier Scripture.

E. Type-scenes

“a series of recurrent narrative episodes” e.g., “the annunciation of the birth of the hero to his barren mother; the encounter with the future betrothed at a well” (Alter 1981, 51).

7. Martin Buber, “Leitwort style in Pentateuch Narrative,” in Buber and Rosenzweig (1994, 114). Cf. Robert Alter (1981, 92).

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