

## Narrative Economy, Artistry, and the Literary Imagination

The Biblical narrative is of exemplary purity of line, sobriety and terseness. Not one superfluous word, not one useless gesture. The imagery is striking, the language austere, the dialogue so incisive, it leaves one with a knot in one's throat.<sup>1</sup>

—Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*

Generations of scholars have recognized the artistic qualities of the Hebrew Bible, praising the biblical narrators for the depth of their writing style in spite of the terse nature of their work. But while historical criticism has ostensibly applauded the efforts of the narrators in its quest to uncover authorial intentions and origins in history, historical critics have often fallen short of addressing literary questions. Form criticism, particularly in the work of Hermann Gunkel, served as a possible foundation for narrative criticism by focusing on scenes, characters, and narrative structure, leaving historical critics with road maps to the literary world of the biblical text. However, many scholars have viewed this road as one of many potential paths for new discoveries, limiting the form-critical discussion to genre and tying places and alleged composite characters to tradition history.<sup>2</sup>

I write, not to resurrect the quest for the historical author, but to look for evidence of the narrator's voice within the text and to examine the ways in which the narrator responds to potential reader questions and assumptions. By examining the narrator's anticipation of the reader's response and the way the narrator intrudes in the text, I construct a more complete picture of the

1. Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (1976; 1st Touchstone ed.; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 80.

2. François Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives: A Practical Guide* (San Francisco: International Scholars, 1999), 2.

narrator's worldview. The significance of narrative obtrusions lies in the fact that they bring the narrator, the text, and the reader together at crucial points within the narrative where the narrator has broken or reframed the text and inserted a comment that specifically attempts to influence the reader's response. Therefore, narrative obtrusions serve as important intersections in interpretation.

Far too often, various interpretive strategies have separated the text, narrator, and reader, creating new divides in biblical studies. Historical critics focus on the origins and intentions of the author. Scholars influenced by the New Critics concentrate on the text. Reader response began as a reactionary hermeneutic to the textually oriented New Critics and shifted the focus from the text to the reader. Although some scholars may not see the value of combining redaction criticism and narrative criticism and others may think that reader response and narrative criticism cannot work together, I utilize some of the best parts of these methods and show their compatibility with narrative criticism by examining narrative economy, textual unity, and literary artistry and imagination. To discover the scholarly origins of narrative criticism and lay a foundation for my methodology, in this chapter I focus on the history of narrative criticism, contrasting narrative criticism and historical criticism while examining the former's relation to reader response.

My exploration of the portrait of the biblical narrator and my review of the history that led to the formation of narrative criticism begin with renowned biblical scholar and form critic Hermann Gunkel. In his *Legends of Genesis* (1901), Gunkel both paved the way for narrative criticism and created a few obstacles for it to overcome.<sup>3</sup> Literary critic Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946) defined the biblical narrator and helped redefine the concerns of biblical scholarship by bringing literary analysis into the discussion.<sup>4</sup> Next, I examine Jewish interpreters and modern canonical critics as proponents of textual unity, a foundational point for narrative criticism since this methodology connects narrative cohesiveness with narrative artistry. The methodology of narrative criticism began in New Testament studies in the 1970s and culminated in two works that brought narrative criticism in full force to biblical studies in the 1980s: literary critic Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981) and

3. Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History*, trans. W. H. Carruth (New York: Schocken Books, 1964; repr., Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, 2006); trans. of *Die Sagen der Genesis* (Chicago: Open Court, 1901). See also Gunkel, *Genesis* (HAT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901).

4. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (50th anniversary ed.; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

the collaborative work of New Testament scholar David Rhoads and English literature professor Donald Michie, *Mark as Story* (1982).<sup>5</sup> I build on this foundation by discussing other narrative scholars and by highlighting various insights on narrative omniscience and obtrusiveness in their work.

### NARRATIVE CRITICISM

The relatively recent method of narrative criticism marks a new journey in the field of biblical studies, an expedition that diverges in many different directions as it explores new strategies in an attempt to lead scholarship beyond historical concerns. Narrative criticism embraces the textual unity of canonical criticism, while historical criticism holds fast to textual divisions that arose from multiple sources and editors.<sup>6</sup> Narrative criticism admits the existence of sources and redactions but chooses to focus on the artistic weaving of these materials into a sustained narrative picture.

Although historical critics and narrative critics disagree on the level of artistry displayed by the biblical narrators, they both recognize the narrators' succinct style, creating an opportunity to show that narrative comments previously characterized as simple asides may reveal an obtrusive narrator working within the text, attempting to influence the response of the reader. The comments made by these often silent narrators merit more discussion than scholarship has afforded them since they offer a window into the worldview of the narrator. The possibility that narrative economy and narrative unity make the text a work of art as narrative critics suggest demands that scholars wrestle with the question of whether a narrative obtrusion diminishes the artistic prowess of the biblical narrator.<sup>7</sup>

5. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); David M. Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982; 2nd ed., with Joanna Dewey, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). Just as Auerbach did not have a background in biblical studies, Alter's academic roots lie in modern European literature. See also Mara H. Benjamin, "The Tacit Agenda of a Literary Approach to the Bible," *Prooftexts* 27 (2007): 254–74.

6. David Norton, *A History of the Bible as Literature* (rev. ed.; Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). In writing about narrative criticism, Steven Weitzman notes, "However newfangled it seemed in the 1980's, the 'literary approach' to the Bible, the attempt to understand it as a work of aesthetic and not just religious or historical value, is as old as most other methods of biblical study" ("Before and After *The Art of Biblical Narrative*," *Prooftexts* 27 [2007]: 191–210).

7. Weitzman describes the artfulness of narrators with regard to the way the Bible "orchestrates sound, repetition, dialogue, allusion, and ambiguity to generate meaning and effect." He also notes that the close reading style of Alter had as "its chief objective the elucidation of their [the narrators'] artistic design" ("Before and After," 191, 196).

Ironically, historical criticism has often gone by the moniker “literary criticism” despite being almost entirely different from the method practiced in the study of English literature. Therefore, I follow the lead of Cheryl Exum and David Clines in referring to historical criticism as *Literarkritik*, noting the significant accomplishments that occurred in the Graf-Wellhausen Hypothesis and Noth’s *The Deuteronomistic History* while pointing out the differences between *Literarkritik* and new forms of literary criticism.<sup>8</sup> Clines and Exum explain that “the ‘new’ literary criticism of the Hebrew Bible, whatever form it takes, has almost nothing in common with *Literarkritik*. It is not a historical discipline, but a strictly literary one.”<sup>9</sup> Narrative criticism represents one of the first waves of this new literary criticism; but its foundations in form criticism also represent the road less traveled, a path laid out by Gunkel that biblical scholars have only recently begun to traverse.

François Tolmie praises Gunkel for bringing “narratological analysis” into biblical studies but quickly points out that the discipline largely ignored this method.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Gunkel contributes to the portrait of the narrator by showing the narrator’s terse nature and objectivity in the opening chapters of Genesis.<sup>11</sup> For example, the narrator never addresses potential questions of modern readers such as what Adam and Eve thought before eating the fruit. Gunkel traces the origin of this concise style of biblical narrative to an oral context where a storyteller used performance art to provide the emotions missing in the text. During Gunkel’s time, biblical scholarship generally proved unfavorable to literary concerns. Narrative issues have probably always rested on the periphery of biblical studies; but a literary critic, limited by the circumstances of World War II, renewed literary interest in the Bible and proclaimed the Hebraic narrators’ artistic equality to Greek counterparts like Homer.

8. J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 143; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 11–12.

9. Ibid. Clines and Exum define “the new literary criticism” as “all the criticisms that are post-structuralist . . . the theoretical approaches that have come into the limelight in literary studies generally in the 70s and 80s [including narrative criticism], and that can be expected to influence the way we read the Hebrew Bible in the present decade” (p. 12).

10. Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives*, 2. In her introduction to *Mytharion: Comparison of Tales from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (AOAT 32; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), xii–xv, Dorothy Irvin discusses the lack of methodological development in narrative studies of the Old Testament beyond Gunkel, noting that his students Hugo Gressmann and Walter Baumgartner focused on areas other than narrative and folklore.

11. Gunkel, *Legends of Genesis*, 60–61.

ERICH AUERBACH AND *MIMESIS*

Forcibly exiled from Germany because of World War II, Auerbach found refuge in Istanbul, where the limitations of its libraries compelled him to deal with primary texts. One of the first among many scholars to connect narrative artistry with narrative economy, Auerbach studied the return of Odysseus alongside the binding of Isaac. In the Aqedah, Auerbach discovered a beautiful example of the economy and artistry of the Bible. In writing about the beauty of biblical narrative, Auerbach describes Old Testament characters as “more fully developed” and “much more distinct as individuals, than are Homeric heroes”; he concludes that “Achilles and Odysseus are splendidly described in many well-ordered words, epithets cling to them, their emotions are constantly displayed in their words and deeds—but they have no development, and their life-histories are clearly set forth once and for all.”<sup>12</sup> While the Bible presented characters free to grow and change, Homeric characters remained inextricably melded to their destiny. By generally omitting comments about the thoughts or emotional state of a character, the biblical narrator drew readers into the text.<sup>13</sup> Alter observes that “Auerbach stressed the background-fraught sparseness of biblical narrative both as the key to the sense of depth in its representation of reality and as the explanation for the endless interpretation the Bible has engendered.”<sup>14</sup> This intricate link between the narrator’s economy and artistry brought literary questions to light.

Alter believes that Auerbach’s essay “Odysseus’ Scar” “could be taken as the point of departure for the modern literary understanding of the Bible” since Auerbach’s work challenged the inaptly named literary criticism of the Hebrew Bible to make way for the truly literary analysis of biblical scholarship.<sup>15</sup> Even though he was not a biblical scholar, Auerbach encouraged others to view biblical characters as literary figures, challenging Gunkel’s idea of composite characters, which focused on historicizing constructions of a figure rather than a character’s literary function.<sup>16</sup> He also promoted the idea of textual unity, a tradition among Jewish exegetes that later became a foundational point for the canonical criticism often associated with Brevard Childs and subsequently an important building block in the formation of narrative criticism.<sup>17</sup>

12. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 16–18.

13. For more comparisons between Homer and the Bible, see Shmuel Abramski, “קדמוניות חידושי,” *בית מיקרא* 7 (1963): 122–27.

14. Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 87.

15. *Ibid.*, 66–67.

16. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 16–18.

## THE UNITY AND ECONOMY OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Although canonical criticism has its roots in Childs's *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970), others preceded Childs in expressing a belief in the unity and sacredness of the text. The idea of textual unity enhances the proposal that the biblical narrators acted as meticulous artists rather than rambling raconteurs. Edward Greenstein lists the "classical midrashim" along with Martin Buber's *On Judaism* (1919) as well commentaries on Genesis by Benno Jacob (1934) and Umberto Cassuto (1941) as the Jewish precursors of the canonical criticism that arose among Christian scholars in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> These Jewish and Christian scholars deemed acceptance of a unified text as aiding in the comprehension of the Bible.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, historical criticism challenged the artistry and sacredness of the text. Therefore, some may argue that claims about narrative unity represent efforts to make divine inspiration the vehicle for proving the hallowed nature of the text. However, many who hold fast to a belief in the sacredness of the text often object to classifying the Bible as literature, preferring to continue their quest to prove its historicity.<sup>20</sup>

17. Gerald T. Sheppard notes that Childs does not approve of the term "Canonical Criticism" even though "he may still be regarded by other scholars as [one of] its leading practitioners" ("Canonical Criticism," *ABD* 1:861–66). Homer's works have also created questions about narrative unity, dividing scholars into Analysts and Unitarians as they attempt to answer the Homeric Question. See Jacqueline de Romilly, *A Short History of Greek Literature*, trans. Lillian Doherty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 7–9.

18. Edward L. Greenstein, *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (BJS 92; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 36. See Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1967); Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (2 vols.; Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961–64; repr., 1989; Hebrew, 1944–49); Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis, Augmented Edition*, ed., abridged, and trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (1974; New York: Ktav, 2007); trans. of *Das erste Buch der Torah, Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1934). For more on the connection between Jewish interpretive tradition and literary studies of the Bible, see Weitzman, "Before and After," 193.

19. Benjamin ("Tacit Agenda," 257) notes that Buber and Franz Rosenzweig "did not deny the claims made by higher criticism, but aimed to limit its significance for communities and readers of faith." For more on the Bible and Jewish scholars, see S. David Sperling, ed., *Students of the Covenant: A History of Jewish Biblical Scholarship in North America* (Confessional Perspectives Series; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

20. John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 136. The Biblical Theology movement also championed the idea of textual unity, but it went further than the scope or position of our study by claiming the unity of both testaments. See Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 36. The generation of scholars that included Gerhard von Rad characterized the Old Testament as history, but G. Ernest