Introduction

Narrative critics of the Hebrew Bible can describe the biblical narrators as "laconic," "terse," or "economical." Although these narrators view their stories from an omniscient perspective that gives them godlike knowledge of the events in the narrative, the narrators generally remain in the background, allowing the story to proceed while relying on characters and dialogue to provide necessary information to readers. On those occasions when the narrators add notes to their stories, scholars characterize such interruptions as asides. A narrative interruption occurs when the narrator steps out of the shadows and remarks on the story, perhaps by providing a historical reference or information about a character. Occasionally, the narrator may intrude in the text to comment on a situation. Jerome T. Walsh states that "sometimes the narrator will, so to speak, step out of the flow of the narrative to address the reader directly; the technical term for this is 'breaking frame,' and it changes the narrator's voice from that of a storyteller to that of a commentator on the story."[1] While most of these omniscient comments aid reader understanding, some of the interruptions reveal the narrator actively attempting to shape the response of the reader. Obtrusions are omniscient comments employed by the narrator to address potential issues in the text that will create problems for the reader, either because of questions the narrator believes the reader may ask or because of the assumptions the narrator fears the reader may have.

Though narrative obtrusions are relatively rare, Robert Alter suggests that "special attention" be given to them.[2] Those exceptional cases in which biblical narrators exchange the veil of reticence for the mantle of obtrusiveness create issues for readers.

Readers may or may not recognize intrusions, but they are affected by them. Exegetical issues also arise. The exegete must determine whether the narrator is truly being obtrusive or is simply acting as an omniscient. Narrative motive must also be considered. If the narrator is usually terse, the reasoning behind a narrative interruption may not be so obvious. Determining how the deletion of an obtrusion affects the narrative reveals the narrator's impact on the story. This study explores the voice and motivations of the narrator by

1. Jerome T. Walsh, *Style & Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001), 125.

2. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 184.

arguing that some intrusive elements, often characterized as redactions or asides by biblical scholars, are actually narrative obtrusions in which the narrator forcefully enters a narrative to reshape the text and sculpt the response of the reader.

Obtrusions serve as a key entry point into the world of the narrator and also highlight a significant intersection between the worlds of the narrator, the text, and the reader. In particular, this study seeks to amplify the narrator's voice in this discussion. While reader response puts a spotlight on the text and the reader, this study considers the way the narrator responds in advance to the reader by inserting obtrusions to prevent the reader from arriving at an unacceptable conclusion.[3]

The significance of this project lies in the fact that it builds on a solid foundation of narrative criticism by seeking to understand how the character of the narrator may be glimpsed in obtrusions. For instance, in *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach highlights the differences between biblical narrators and Homer, showing how the lack of emotions and adjectives in the biblical text creates feelings of suspense.[4] The story of the binding of Isaac displays both the usual laconic style of the narrator and the narrator's intrusiveness. Auerbach notes the economy of the biblical narrator throughout the text. However, the narrative obtrusion at the beginning of the Aqedah cannot be ignored. By revealing that Abraham's binding of Isaac will ultimately be a test, the narrator shuts off many potentially unwelcome interpretive avenues. Figuring out why the narrator wanted to foreclose these possibilities at the beginning of the story while leaving others open throughout the narrative gives a sense of the biblical narrator's role in the text.

Meir Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* has provided additional detail about the narrator by exploring the gaps created by the narrator.[5] Different types of gaps may occur in narrative. In some cases, the narrator relies on the reader to fill in missing details. In other cases, a gap may be present in a story because the narrator fails to recognize it or because the narrator believes that the missing details are irrelevant to the story. Readers, however, may notice

3. Whenever I refer to a reader response as unacceptable or questionable in this study, I am attempting to reconstruct the perspective of the narrator and am not making any personal judgments about the reader's ability to interpret the text.

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).

5. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading,* Indiana Literary Biblical Series (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) e-book online, http://www.netlibrary.com/Details.aspx (accessed December 15, 2011).

these gaps and ask questions about them. Some gaps are so wide that they are apparent to many readers of a text. Other gaps may be so subtle that they are perceived by only a handful of readers. The narrator's skillfulness in negotiating these gaps has a tremendous effect on reader response. The fact that the narrator closes some gaps with obtrusions while leaving other gaps open raises additional questions about the narrator's expectations of the reader.

This project also goes beyond earlier scholarship by redefining the nature of narrative interruptions. By identifying selected obtrusions in the Former Prophets and bringing them together, the present study defines various levels of omniscience, examines the narrator's relationship with the reader, and seeks to determine narrative intent. Finally, this study addresses some of the perceived deficiencies in narrative criticism by proposing a methodology for identifying obtrusions. I also cite examples from ancient Near Eastern literature to show that these issues are not limited to Hebrew writing.

Chapter Outlines and Limitations

Chapter 1 reviews the history of narrative criticism, examining this methodology's relationship to several other exegetical methods, most specifically historical criticism and reader response. Although scholarship has often referred to historical criticism as literary criticism, historical critics rarely engage in literary analysis—in spite of the great potential in form criticism. Nevertheless, redaction criticism presents an opportunity to bridge the gap between these methods. In this study I use a broad definition of redaction, recognizing that redactions may have arisen at any time from the oral telling of a story to final edits, but I make no attempt to date these potential redactions. Furthermore, my search for the narrator's voice in the text focuses on comments made directly by the narrator; I discuss only briefly the comments that narrators may put in the mouths of characters.

After exploring the connections between redaction and narrative criticism, I challenge in chapter 1 the idea that reader response and narrative criticism cannot work in concert. Since omniscient comments and obtrusions represent the narrator's preemptive actions to anticipated responses by the reader, I create a forum to examine the conversation between the narrator and the reader. To achieve greater focus, I distinguish readers as ancient or modern.

This reconsideration of narrative criticism's relationships with redaction criticism and reader response creates a strong foundation for my methodology in chapter 2. I discriminate between omniscience and obtrusiveness by examining the essentiality and location of a potentially obtrusive comment. The narrator's goals in responding to the reader further aid in this delineation.

Omniscient comments convey necessary information designed to assist reader understanding, whereas obtrusive statements attempt to form the response of the reader. The existence of obtrusions also raises the issue of how gaps function in a narrative and why the narrator chooses to foreclose some gaps with omniscient comments or obtrusions while leaving others open. My approach also relies on reception history, since readers' discomfort with a passage may reveal the initial struggle faced by the biblical narrator. To round out the methodology, I consider the possibility that certain passages may seem obtrusive based on the choices of individual scholars in their translations and interpretations. Such a caveat is necessary in considering the anomalous nature of obtrusions.

To achieve more specificity, I employ my methodology in chapter 3 by examining a fine example of obtrusiveness. In Judg. 14:4, the narrator describes Samson's desire for a Timnite woman as being "of the Lord" and thus opens the door for hostilities between Samson and the Philistines. The narrator breaks the frame of the story and inserts a comment about the divine to address a reader's question or assumption about Samson's choice. Statements about God often prove more obtrusive than general comments about history or characters. In yet other cases, the narrator may obtrude in order to protect the divine or another favored character in a narrative. In chapter 3, I also consider various responses to Judg. 14:4 by ancient commentators and modern scholars.

In chapter 4, I explore further the way the narrator envisions the reader and forecloses potential reader questions and assumptions. As an initial reader of a text, the narrator may theologize a popular story and add commentary; however, the narrator may object to responses in which the reader behaves similarly. This chapter considers additional ways in which the narrator may obtrude in the text. Although obtrusions such as Judg. 14:4 break the frame of a text, the narrator may employ non–break-frame obtrusions by adding a comment after a break in action. I conclude the chapter with an examination of David as a reader and narrator of his own story, examining his skill in reinterpreting events and revealing the problems that arise when he leaps into the gap in Nathan's parable.

Chapter 5 is a selective study of omniscience and obtrusiveness in ancient Near Eastern literature, particularly in the literary traditions of the Hurro-Hittites, the narrative poetry of Ugarit, the various genres of Mesopotamian literature, and the first-person narratives of ancient Egypt. I contrast the limited omniscience of ancient Near Eastern gods with the all-knowing God of Jewish and Christian tradition, arguing that the biblical narrators more closely resemble ancient Near Eastern deities because they often lack knowledge. In this chapter,

the connections between narrative criticism and reader response are further solidified by the argument that narrators compose their responses to readers based on the type of reader envisioned. Narrators, such as the Hurro-Hittites, trust their readers to understand the story they are telling and only use neutral omniscience, while the Mesopotamian narrator Kabti-ilāni-Marduk uses obtrusions and other sophisticated literary devices. The chapter also examines the various manifestations of the voice of the narrator, exploring an emerging type of indirect free speech in Ugarit and considering the reader elevating asides employed by first-person Egyptian narrators. I consider a wide range of obtrusiveness, showing how narrators invoke the gods and even challenge the gods.

The range of obtrusiveness explored in this study, however, is limited to localized obtrusions in narratives and does not examine grand obtrusions that govern entire books or extended story lines that continue in multiple books. Such examples show that obtrusions not only break frame but can also reframe an entire series of narratives. For example, Judges 2 is a major obtrusion that reframes all of the stories in the book. Additionally, the story of the demise of the house of Eli carries over a good number of narratives, reappearing when Doeg kills the priests of Nob (1 Samuel 22) and finally ending with Abiathar's banishment (1 Kgs. 2:26-27). Although local obtrusions may affect other stories, they are less influential than broad obtrusions that reframe larger texts and narratives.

By distinguishing omniscience and obtrusiveness in local narratives and reconsidering the nature of narrative asides, I provide a unique view into the world of the narrator. Amid the vast amount of biblical scholarship that focuses on textual issues in historical criticism and the multitude of voices represented by reader-oriented approaches, this study brings the often silent and generally laconic voice of the narrator back into view. As the narrator wrestles with the text and attempts to force a particular perspective on the reader while foreclosing certain questions, this study struggles with the atypical actions of the narrator and hopes to open the door to more discussions.