

B. THE IMPORTANCE OF STORIES

CHAPTER

15

Stories and Faith

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. (Psalm 78:1-4)

When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. (Deuteronomy 6:20-24)

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. (Isaiah 51:1-2)

Anyone who picks up a copy of the Hebrew Bible and thumbs through it for a few minutes will be struck by the number of stories that it contains. A careful reader will notice that the entire first half of the book is structured as a relatively continuous narrative that reaches from the creation of the world to the Babylonian exile. Christian Bibles extend the initial narrative through the restoration of Judah under Persian rule. This grand narrative is itself made up of hundreds of shorter stories. Some of these stories serve to advance the developing plot of the larger narrative, while others seem more like detours. Most have a common literary style. Many seem designed to teach a lesson or communicate a message to the audience. All are marked by the beliefs and values of the people who told them.

The origins of most of these stories are unclear. In their current form, they echo the interests and concerns of literate male elites who sought to promote the worship of Yahweh in ancient Palestine. Little insight is required, however, to see how many of these stories are rooted in the daily lives and concerns of the common people. This is to be expected, since stories are the primary means used by illiterate people in every society to pass on their beliefs and practices from generation to generation. Some of the stories that made their way into the Hebrew Bible could have been recited orally around campfires and in family gatherings for decades or even centuries before they were written down in their present form.

The next few chapters will explore the role of stories in the Hebrew Bible. The present chapter examines what scholars have learned about the purpose and functions of stories in traditional cultures around the globe. This is followed by a survey of some of the ways in which contemporary literary criticism can enhance our ability to make sense of the many stories that fill the Hebrew Bible. The value of literary approaches will become clear once we start looking more closely at specific stories. The next five chapters will explore the religious significance of five major blocks of story material in the Hebrew Bible: the creation stories, the ancestral narratives, the Exodus saga, the Deuteronomistic narrative, and a selection of post-exilic texts.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE STORY

The practice of telling stories is as old as the human ability to communicate. Every society has its collection of ancient tales that have been passed on orally for generations. Some are familiar to everyone in the culture, while others are limited to people of a particular clan, social group, or geographic area. Children hear the time-honored stories again and again as they grow up. In some groups the most important stories are passed on through a formal system of education. Occasionally this includes a provision that the stories be memorized in a certain form. Those who are especially adept at memorizing and reciting the stories are often given special honors for their role in preserving the traditions of the ancestors.

Tracing the history of these stories is notoriously difficult. Most offer few clues as to their origins, and their content invariably changes over time, with materials being dropped and added along the way. The process of evolution continues even after the stories are written down, as witnessed by the presence of multiple written versions of the same story. Scholars have labored mightily to discover patterns of development in stories and to relate passing references to historical events in their efforts to retrace the history of particular stories. But their reconstructions always include a fair amount of guesswork.

STORIES AND COMMUNITIES

Fortunately, we do not need to know how a story developed in order to examine the role that it might have played within a given community. The simple fact that a story was deemed important enough to pass on over time suggests that it spoke to a particular need or concern within the group. In situations where members of the community are available for consultation, scholars can ask what the story means to them and how it is used. Information gleaned from this process can then be compared with similar responses from other cultures. Repeated studies of this type have shown that stories fulfill a number of important functions within traditional societies.



Fig. 15.2. Images depicting the creation stories of the Mayan (above) and Haida (below) peoples.

1. *Explaining the nature of reality.* Traditional societies are keenly aware of the dangers and uncertainties of life. They know how easily bad weather or disease can ruin their crops, leaving them on the brink of starvation. They know how quickly a pack of wild animals can wipe out their herds or kill their families. They know how perilous is the process of childbirth and how powerless they feel when death takes their young animals and children before they reach maturity. They know that there are many forces in the world that they can neither control nor understand.

The thought of living with so much uncertainty and chaos would drive many modern people to despair. Fortunately, humans seem to have an innate drive to find meaning in the world around them and to interpret it as an orderly and friendly place. Contemporary Western cultures use the abstract language of science, philosophy, and theology to frame their explanations of the universe. Traditional cultures prefer the more concrete approach of stories. Stories provide answers to a wide range of human questions and concerns, including the origins of the universe and its inhabitants, the operation of the natural world, the reasons for pain and suffering, and the way people should live in order to maximize the benefits and minimize the sorrows of life. Stories help to domesticate the uncontrollable elements of human experience by placing them within a cosmic framework in which most events make sense. Typically this includes some kind of belief in an unseen reality that gives order and meaning to the complexity of human experience. In short, stories help humans to make peace with the difficulties and uncertainties of life and get on with their lives without being paralyzed by feelings of fear, longing, and regret.

On a more mundane level, stories are used to explain why things are the way they are. Some focus on the physical world—the origins of a constellation, an unusual landform, a favorite crop, a particular animal. Others explore human nature—why humans have the kinds of bodies that they do, why people are greedy or murderous, why women or men act in certain ways, why people have to die. Still others seek to explain a particular social custom—why people get married, why certain individuals or clans are designated as leaders, why a religious ritual is

performed in a certain way, why particular crops are raised as they are. Names are also a popular topic—how a particular person, place, or object came to be given the name that it holds. Virtually anything that calls for explanation in a traditional society can give rise to a story.

2. *Defining and preserving group identity.* Traditional societies are not known for their acceptance of diversity. Most have a strong sense of group identity that marks some people as *us* and others as *them*. These distinctions are typically reinforced by stories

that explain how the group telling the stories is related to those outside the group. Often these stories portray the *us* group as the first humans. In some stories they are the only humans, with all others being categorized as subhuman. Behind all such stories lies the assumption that distinctions between groups were established in the hoary past and cannot be changed. In this way stories help to preserve the identity of the group and protect it from change.

Stories also maintain group identity by preserving a record of the group's past. The past is vitally important to traditional societies. Where modern people believe in progress and expect that things will be better in the future, traditional societies often tell stories of a golden age in the remote past from which humans have subsequently declined. These kinds of stories lead people to



Fig. 15.3. (above) Statue depicting the legendary founder of Rome, Romulus, and his brother Remus being suckled by a she-wolf; (below) the heroes Arjuna and Hanuman join in battle in a scene from the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*.





Fig. 15.4. (top) Ancient Egyptian stories that placed the Pharaoh among the gods helped to legitimate his rule; (below) stories of gods and heroes like Herakles served to reinforce the ideals of masculinity within ancient Greek culture.

value the past more than the future and to focus on preserving the ways laid down by the ancestors rather than promoting change. Whether the stories about the group's past are historically true is irrelevant—as long as members are willing to accept them, stories that trace the group back to ancient times provide an aura of permanence and stability. This is especially important for groups that have

faced challenges or hardships that posed a threat to their survival. Stories that can incorporate these experiences into a meaningful pattern often play a vital role in helping group members to maintain or recover their sense of identity and security in difficult situations.

3. *Justifying and defending societal institutions and practices.* Every society has a set of institutions and norms that define how power is to be assigned and exercised, how economic goods are to be allocated, how men and women are to relate to one another, how societal problems are to be addressed, and so forth. Since a different system can always be envisioned, those who benefit from the current arrangement have a strong interest in justifying its existence and defending it against challenge. Stories about the past play a vital role in this process, especially in traditional societies. Most traditional societies have stories that relate the existing social institutions and practices to the fundamental nature of the universe. Some trace the current system to the actions or commands of the gods in the distant past. Others portray the earthly society as a mirror image of the system that governs the divine realm. Still others attribute the organization of society to distant ancestors who had more wisdom than people in the present day. The actual historical process by which the prevailing institutions arose is invariably obscured by such narratives. As long as people are willing to accept these stories, the current social arrangement is rendered virtually invincible. Who would dare to question the ways of the gods or the wisdom of the ancestors?

Stories also help to define how the various participants in the social system should conduct themselves. Many societies have stories about ideal kings, priests, warriors, and other leaders who are offered as role models for the current holders of these positions. Most also include stories that depict the evils that can arise when ordinary people refuse to accept the direction of their leaders. Stories that reinforce traditional male-oriented gender roles are especially common. Stories such as these help to motivate people to support the status quo and maintain the values of the society over time.

4. *Passing on beliefs and values to the next generation.* The training of children is a vital concern of every human society. Unless a society can pass on its core beliefs and

values to the next generation, it will lose its essential character. Societies differ widely in the things that they seek to teach their children, but they invariably use stories as a key part of their instructional program. Stories achieve their effect by appealing to the imagination and emotions rather than directly to the reasoning faculties. Children who would resist or fail to understand more didactic modes of instruction are always willing to listen to entertaining anecdotes that make the same point. In this way they are subtly socialized to accept the beliefs and values of their society. Narratives that offer role models of proper and improper behavior are especially useful in teaching children the expectations of their society.

But the social value of stories is not limited to children. In traditional societies, storytelling is a popular form of entertainment for adults. Some cultures have people who are specially trained to sing or recite well-known stories during social or religious gatherings. Stories are also recounted among friends or family while sitting around a campfire or traveling long distances by foot. As the ancient tales are told and retold, adults are reminded of the core beliefs and values that bind them together as a society. Stories learned in childhood take on deeper meaning when they are reviewed with the mind of an adult. In this way, narratives help to ensure that adults remain faithful to the traditions and pass them on accurately to their children.

EXERCISE 29

Look up the following passages and figure out how each story relates to the four functions of stories outlined above. Look for evidence of multiple functions for each account.

- Genesis 11:1-9
- Exodus 18:1-27
- Job 1:1-22
- Daniel 1:1-21

THE POWER OF STORIES

Why are stories so popular? Where do they get their power? How is it that a narrative—even a blatantly fictitious one—can speak to people in a way that other forms of communication cannot? Some of the answers have been mentioned already. Stories are easy to remember, making them well suited for cultures with low levels of literacy. Stories are entertaining and thus more likely to hold the attention of children (and adults) than other forms of instruction. Stories propose answers to fundamental questions about the nature of the universe and the meaning of life. The ones that do this especially well come to be valued for the psychological benefits that they bring to those who accept them. Finally, stories reinforce beliefs and values that people already hold for other reasons. Stories are valued because they give implicit support to the tenuous identities that people create for themselves and their societies.

But the real power of narrative lies at a deeper level than these initial observations would suggest. Stories arise from the human imagination, and they wield power by appealing to the imaginations of those who hear them. They create imaginary worlds in which the ordinary rules and limits of human existence are often suspended. In the world of fairy tales, for instance, animals can talk, magic is an ordinary occurrence, and everyone lives happily ever after. Even stories that use the real world as their model often include elements that lie beyond ordinary human experience, such as the ability to know what characters are thinking.

Stories draw the audience into this world by sketching only the most relevant features of the scenery and characters and leaving the rest for the audience to fill in. In this way the audience becomes emotionally invested in the narrative as cocreators of the world in which it takes place. Stories also invite people to identify with the characters and to imagine how they might handle the complications that arise in the course of the story. Through this leap of imagination, the audience is given a vision of what life might look like through the eyes and feelings of someone other than themselves. As the plot unfolds, the audience is led to explore ways of thinking and acting

that might not occur to them in their ordinary lives. The process engages their emotions as well as their reason. Out of such vicarious experiences can come new insights that can have a profound impact on the way people live in the real world.

This revelatory quality is what gives stories their power to shape the lives of people who hear them. It also helps to explain why they are so important in religious communities. Virtually all religions claim to offer some type of insight into a reality beyond the visible world. Some seek to lead people into direct experiences of this world through prayer, meditation, ecstatic dance, rituals, hallucinogenic drugs, and other practices. Others work on training people to think differently about the world around them through programs of education, counseling, and self-discipline. A good story has the ability to access both of these channels



Fig. 15.5. Traditional storytellers in India (top) and Africa (bottom) continue to pass on the time-honored stories of their culture to new generations of children.

at once by leading the hearer into imaginary experiences that produce valuable new insights.

Once they become familiar, of course, narratives can lose their power to enlighten. But the same can be said for any other channel of religious experience. The fact that stories are repeated again and again among people who know them by heart suggests that their value is not exhausted with the first encounter. Many tales have survived for generations or even centuries through oral recitation alone. This would not have happened unless people continued to hear them speaking with a fresh voice to each new generation. Some stories are so profound and universal in their implications that they retain their revelatory character even when transposed to a new cultural context (for example, the use of stories from the Hebrew Bible in Christianity and Islam). In short, stories possess a power that frequently transcends their simple and beguiling form.

INTERPRETING STORIES

Analyzing a story is a bit like conducting an autopsy—it yields many insights into the way the subject operates, but it can never replace a direct encounter with the living original. Literary analysis is useful for highlighting the artistry of a narrative and showing why it works as it does. Sociological analysis can point out some of the purposes that the story might have served within the group that preserved it. But analytical studies alone can never lead us into a full and rich understanding of a story. The only way to grasp the full significance of a narrative is to give ourselves the time and emotional freedom to enter into it and experience it firsthand. The next few chapters will give you many opportunities to do this with biblical narratives.

The problem with this approach, of course, is that everyone experiences stories differently. Stories are inherently ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretations. Even the most detailed narrative leaves much to the imagination of the audience, and many tales presume that the hearers will be able to supply substantial information about the beliefs and practices of the culture in which they arose. Few narratives offer any explicit declaration of their intent; virtually all require the audience to infer meaning from the way the story develops.

Further ambiguities arise from the diversity of the audience. Each person who encounters a story is a unique individual who brings a distinct personality and a life full of experience to the task of interpreting the account. When they reach a gap in the story, people make different decisions about what kind of material to supply. Some of these differences are trivial (for example, what color robe the main character was wearing), but some are significant enough to produce different understandings of the essential point of the story. All of these observations point to the same conclusion: there can never be only one correct interpretation of a story.

On the other hand, the range of possible interpretations is not unlimited. The language in which a story is told places broad limits on the ways in which it can be understood, and some interpretations are arguably more consistent with the details of the narrative than others. Nevertheless, we cannot escape the fact that meaning, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. This is true for religious stories as much as for any other kind of narrative. There is no method or system that one can follow in order to arrive at the “correct” meaning of a story in the Hebrew Bible.

The discipline of literary criticism is devoted to analyzing and discussing the form and content of works of literature, including stories. Through careful study of works from different eras, literary scholars have discovered that narratives have many common features that appear to transcend time and culture. These features work together to communicate the meaning of the story. Experience suggests that close attention to some of these features can help readers to identify clues that point to possible meanings for the story. The most important factors to be examined are the setting, the characters, and the plot of the narrative.

1. *Setting.* Most people think of the setting of a story as the time and place in which the narrative takes place. These factors make up the *physical setting* of the story. Some stories describe these elements in great detail, while others leave them largely to the imagination of the reader. In addition to enhancing the aesthetic value of the story, the physical setting often plays a role in advancing the plot.

Another aspect of setting that is most important when analyzing stories from the ancient world, including those

in the Hebrew Bible, is the *cultural setting*. The cultural setting refers to the beliefs, values, and practices that are taken for granted by the storyteller. In ancient societies, stories were told within a cultural framework that was familiar to everyone in the audience. There was no need for the storyteller to spell out the meaning of cultural references within the story, since the audience could easily supply the missing information. Modern readers, on the other hand, lack that cultural knowledge. For some narratives this is unimportant, since the cultural context is merely incidental. For others, however, a familiarity with the original culture is necessary in order to grasp the essential point of the story. In these cases interpretation becomes a cross-cultural experience that requires the reader to learn more about ancient cultures in order to make sense of the narrative. Without this information, the reader is left to fill in the gaps with modern cultural information or simply guess at how an ancient audience might have understood the story. This is a common experience for readers who are encountering the stories of the Hebrew Bible for the first time.

2. *Characters.* Characters are vital to every story, but the manner in which characters are depicted and used varies from culture to culture. Contemporary narratives make a serious effort to portray characters as well-rounded, realistic individuals who grow and change through their fictional experiences. In the ancient world, however, this was uncommon. Characters were usually depicted in flat, one-dimensional terms with little or no sense of personal development. Many are little more than cultural stereotypes or role models. Glimpses into their inner life are brief and limited to the point at hand. Motives and intentions, when mentioned at all, are usually framed in simplistic terms. Contemporary readers who attempt to imagine themselves into the minds and lives of such characters often find it difficult to understand their motives and actions, since the characters do not conform to modern literary expectations.

Fortunately, the ancient storytellers often include clues that enable us to test the validity of our interpretations of their characters. The most common way of voicing a positive or negative judgment on a character is by showing where the person's actions lead. Ancient storytellers are fond of painting bad endings for characters whose actions

they disapprove and happy endings for those whom they wish to commend. In other cases the storyteller will allow one character to make statements that evaluate the actions of other characters, though it is not always clear which characters' words can be trusted. Occasionally the narrator will break into the story and pass judgment directly on a character's actions. But there remain many cases in which characters are ambiguous enough to support multiple interpretations of their nature and actions. Sometimes the choices that one makes among the competing options can have a serious impact on the way one understands an entire story.

3. *Plot.* Most stories revolve around some kind of conflict in which one or more characters are put to a test. Sometimes the test comes through other people, while at other times the characters are forced to do battle with the forces of nature, oppressive social institutions, or the dark forces that haunt the human psyche. The ways in which the characters respond to this challenge make them role models—sometimes positive, sometimes negative—for audience members who might face similar problems.

Authors use a variety of plot devices to engage the minds and emotions of the audience and draw them into the story. Common plot devices include suspense (uncertainty about the outcome of the conflict); surprise (unexpected twists in events); dialogue (conversations among the characters that reveal their thoughts, feelings, and intentions); and dramatic irony (information given to the audience that is hidden from the characters). Most of the stories in the Hebrew Bible are heavily plot-driven. Some of the longer stories have plots that are as subtle and complex as anything in modern literature. Many have happy endings, but the Bible contains its share of tragedies, too. Careful attention to the manner in which the plot unfolds through the various scenes can yield insight into the storyteller's point of view and help the reader to make sense of subsidiary elements in the plot. In the end, however, the plots of biblical stories are similar to other narratives in containing ambiguities that can be resolved in different ways by different readers.

Even skilled readers who are attentive to the issues raised in this brief summary will disagree about the meaning of many stories. Nevertheless, those who pay careful attention to these factors will find it easier to discuss with

others the reasons for their differing interpretations. This is especially important when dealing with stories from another culture like the ones in the Hebrew Bible. The next four chapters offer many opportunities for learning to make sense of the biblical narratives.

STORIES AND FAITH

Before leaving the subject of stories, we need to look briefly at the relation between stories and religious faith. Some people worry that analyzing the biblical narratives as stories rather than as historical documents will undermine the faith of religious believers. This is an understandable concern for people who believe that a genuine faith must be grounded in real historical events. In this case, however, the concern is misplaced. When we examine the biblical narratives through the lens of literary analysis, we are not passing judgment on the historicity of the stories. The question of historicity is simply left to the side. Literary analysis is not interested in determining whether the events really happened as narrated; its goal is to uncover what the stories tell us about the literary creativity and religious faith of the people who told them.

A trip to a contemporary religious bookstore will show beyond doubt that faith can be expressed through many different literary media. This is exactly what we find in the diverse collection of books that we call the Hebrew Bible. Apparently the people who used and compiled these books did not think that history was the only form of narrative that could be used to express their message. Contemporary readers should be careful about coming to ancient narratives with rigid expectations that the authors had no intention of fulfilling.

CONCLUSION

Stories play an important role in virtually all religious traditions. They are used to explain the nature of reality, to define and preserve group identity, to justify and defend social institutions and practices, and to pass on beliefs and values to the next generation. Their popularity can be traced in part to their entertaining and memorable

format. But their real power comes from their ability to transport their hearers into an imaginary world where they are able to try out new ways of thinking and acting. In this way stories become vehicles of revelation and transformation.

Interpreting stories—especially stories from another culture—is a painstaking process that requires careful study and attention to detail. The process is complicated by the inherent ambiguity of stories and the diverse backgrounds and outlooks that readers bring to the task of interpretation. Readers will never agree on every element of their interpretation of a story, but a familiarity with literary criticism can help them to approach the process in a focused and disciplined manner.

EXERCISE 30

Read the following stories from the Hebrew Bible and think about how each one attempts to draw you into the narrative. Then choose one of them and write a short commentary describing the way in which the story uses (a) setting, (b) characters, and (c) plot developments to create an imaginary world that engages your mind and emotions. Finish with a couple of sentences summarizing what you see as the central message or primary effect of the story.

- Genesis 38:1-26
- Judges 4:1-24
- 1 Kings 21:1-28



Fig. 16.1. Giovanni di Paolo, *The Creation*