MC101 Reading

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1984; Longman 1988) should be consulted for other devices that occur less frequently.

Hebrew poetry is not easy to read. This form requires one to slow down and reflect on the lines, their relationship, and their meaning. The effort is worth it. After all, so much of the Old Testament is poetic in form. Indeed, if all the poetry were gathered together into one location, the corpus would be longer than the New Testament.

The Conventions of Old Testament Stories

Although the Old Testament contains a considerable amount of poetry, it is written primarily in prose. Prose is closer to normal conversational language than is poetry. While cola and stanzas are the building blocks of a biblical poem, sentences and paragraphs are the stuff of prose. It is also true to say that prose, for the most part, is less "literary" than poetry. That is, there is less concern in prose for *how* something is said: the language is ordinarily not as "high" or formal, and fewer metaphors or other images are used.

It is a great mistake, however, to draw a sharp dichotomy between the prose and poetry of the Bible. Most of the narrative of the Old Testament is literarily shaped. Accordingly, the prose of the Old Testament resembles what we call the stories of literature and, not surprisingly, is amenable to a literary analysis.

A literary analysis applies the categories and methods of contemporary literary theory to discover the conventions of Hebrew literature. Alter (1983, 113–17) observed that

> every culture, even every era in a particular culture, develops distinctive
> and sometimes intricate codes for telling its stories, involving everything
> from narrative point of view, procedures of description and characteriza-
> tion, the management of dialogue, to the ordering of time and the organi-
> zation of plot.

A literary approach explores and makes explicit the conventions of biblical literature in order to understand the message it intends to carry. In the following few pages, we will outline the rudiments of a literary approach to Hebrew prose. This study should be supplemented by some of the more complete studies listed in the bibliography.

Genre. The concept of genre relates to both prose and poetry, though we have reserved a discussion of it until now. Genre is of crucial importance, since the reader's identification of a text's genre directs his or her reading strategy (see Osborne 1991 and Longman 1997 for hermeneutical surveys that take seriously the issue of genre).

The study of genre recognizes that there are many different types of literature. Authors choose a vehicle through which to send a message to the reader, and the choice of genre signals to the reader how to take the message. For

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example, if a text begins, "Once upon a time . . . ," the author has deliberately sent a signal to the reader through the use of a traditional formula. Educated readers and children know that they are to read or hear the story that follows not as a historically accurate tale but as a fairy tale.

The Bible, however, is an ancient text, distanced from us not only by time but also by culture. Genre is one of the conventions that, as Alter described in the quote above, is specific to culture. We must study each biblical book to discern its genre and the implications for its interpretation. In this introductory chapter, we trace the broad outlines of genre study for the interpretation of the Old Testament (see Longman 1987, 76–83; 1988, 19–36 for more detail). Each of the following chapters on the individual books of the Bible will include a discussion of the book's genre.

What Is a Genre? A genre is a group of texts that bear one or more traits in common with each other. These texts may be similar in content, structure, phraseology, function, style, and/or mood.

When writers produce their text, they write in a literary context. That is, they do not produce literary works that are totally new, unrelated to anything that has been done before. They write in a tradition, which they may indeed stretch, but never break. For instance, biographies vary considerably from one another, but by definition they are similar in subject matter—a person's life. Short stories may have different subject matter, but they are united by their relative length and fictionality.

When all is said and done, though, it must be admitted that genre is a fluid category (Longman 1985). This fluidity is seen on two levels. In the first place, one text may belong to different genres on the same level of abstraction. A psalm like Psalm 20 may be categorized with either the kingship songs or hymns. The Micaiah narrative (1 Kings 22; 2 Chron. 18) is simultaneously royal autobiography, battle report, and a story about prophetic efficacy.

In the second place, genres are fluid in that they exist at different levels of abstraction from the text. Since genres are defined by shared traits, there are different levels of genre, depending on the number of similarities with other texts. A broad genre will include many different texts that share a few traits in common. A narrow genre will contain a few texts with many traits in common.

Psalm 98 is a case in point. It is in the genre of "Hebrew poetry" by virtue of its parallelism, terseness, and imagery. On another level, it is in the narrower category of "hymn" because of its mood of unrestrained joy. On an even narrower level, it is a "divine warrior hymn" because it specifically extols God's power as savior in a military situation.

The Significance of Genre in Interpretation. The study of genre has many important implications for interpretation (Longman 1985). Nonetheless, two stand out as most significant: genre as a trigger to reading strategy, and genre as a second literary context.

Consciously or unconsciously, genre identification triggers expectations on the part of the reader. Indeed, it sets a whole reading strategy in motion. Consider the second stanza of Psalm 1:

> Not so the wicked!
>> They are like chaff
>> that the wind blows away.
> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
>> nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For various reasons, we immediately recognize these lines as poetry. We expect the use of images and repetitions.

In another passage we read, "In the twelfth year of Ahaz king of Judah, Hoshea son of Elah became king of Israel in Samaria, and he reigned nine years" (2 Kings 17:1). This time our immediate reaction is that the passage is historical narrative, and we recognize that the author intends to communicate historical or chronological information.

We might have the same initial reaction to the following words of Jesus: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector" (Luke 18:10). These words, however, are preceded by "Jesus told this parable." Here we have an explicit genre signal that invokes a reading strategy significantly different from the one we adopted for the 2 Kings 17 passage. Jesus' story is fictional. More specifically, it is didactic fiction—that is, it intends to impart a moral to the hearer or reader.

A second major benefit of the study of genre is that it provides a secondary literary context. This is summed up by Frye (1957, 247–48):

> The purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify
> . . . traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary
> relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context
> established for them.

In other words, the very practice of examining a collection of generically related texts will result in the illumination of each individual text. This result is particularly helpful for individual texts that are themselves difficult to understand but that may be elucidated by comparing them with clearer examples in the same genre.

For different reasons, then, it is important to discover the genre of a text. By prompting a reading strategy and ruling out false expectations and standards of judgment of text, genre classification represents an entree to the meaning of the text.

The Dynamics of Narrative. Space prohibits an extensive discussion of the dynamics of biblical narrative, but this short introduction may be supplemented by a number of recent studies (Alter; Longman; Berlin; Sternberg;

Trible). We will here deal with only a handful of selected topics, chosen because they reveal distinctive cultural conventions that provide an insight into reading strategy.

Narrator and Point of View. A description of the role of the narrator in a story is closely related to the issue of point of view. The narrator plays a pivotal role in shaping the reaction of the reader to the passage he or she is reading. The narrator achieves this response in a variety of ways, from presenting and withholding information from the reader to explicit commentary.

Narratives may be divided into first- and third-person types. In the former, the narrator is usually a character in the story and, as a result, presents a limited point of view. Third-person narrative refers to all the characters impersonally, and in this mode the narrator may display omniscience and omnipresence. Most narrative in the Bible is third-person omniscient narrative (the exceptions include, for example, part of Ezra-Nehemiah, Qohelet's "autobiography" in Ecclesiastes, and the "we" passages in Acts). Rhoads and Michie (1982, 36) describe the narrator's point of view in the gospel of Mark:

> The narrator does not figure in the events of the story; speaks in the third person; is not bound by time or space in the telling of the story; is an implied invisible presence in every scene, capable of being anywhere to "recount" the action; displays full omniscience by narrating the thought, feelings, or sensory experiences of many characters; often turns from the story to give direct "asides" to the reader, explaining a custom or translating a word or commenting on the story; and narrates the story from one overarching ideological point of view.

This summary describes the bulk of biblical narrative. The voice of the narrator is often the authoritative guide in the story, providing the point of view. The narrator directs the reader in his or her analysis and response to the events and characters of the story.

It has been pointed out that readers react to a third-person omniscient narrator with unconscious submissiveness. Rhoads and Michie note, "When the narrator is omniscient and invisible, readers tend to be unaware of the narrator's biases, values, and conceptual view of the world" (1982, 39). The choice of such a powerfully persuasive literary device fits in with the Bible's concern to proclaim an authoritative message.

Plot and Character. Plot and character are closely related and may be separated only for purposes of analysis. Henry James (quoted in Chatman 1978, 112–13) related the two elements by asking, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"

Descriptions of the dynamics of plot differ in detail among literary critics. The first and simplest is Aristotle's: he describes a plot as having a beginning, middle, and end. Brooks (1984, 5) defines plot in the following helpful way:

"Plot is the principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements—incidents, episodes, actions—of a narrative." Poythress (see Longman 1987, 92) provides a more sophisticated analysis of narrative, which may be represented graphically in the following way:

Figure 1
Analysis of Narrative
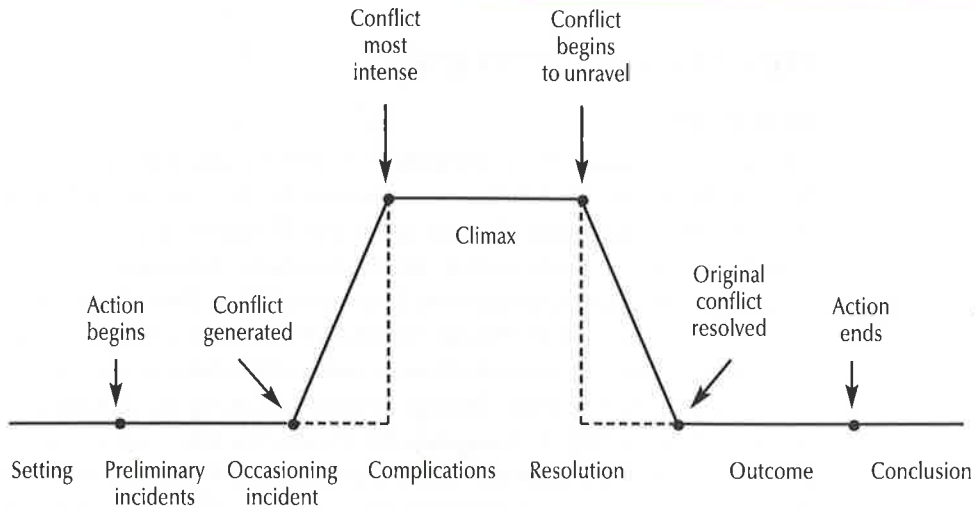
As a general rule, plot is thrust forward by conflict. The conflict generates interest in its resolution. The beginning of a story, with its introduction of conflict, thus pushes us through the middle toward the end, when conflict is resolved.

As one studies Old Testament stories, a helpful first step is to do a simple plot analysis. This study provides the frame for future analysis.

As mentioned above, characters form the gist of a plot. Some Bible readers will hesitate at this point. Should we treat David, Solomon, Ezra, Esther, Jonah—even Jesus—as characters? Such a move appears to equate biblical personages with King Arthur, Billy Budd, Felix Holt, or Captain Ahab and thus to reduce them to fictional beings.

To analyze David as a literary character in a text, however, is not to deny that he was a historical king or that the events reported in the books of Samuel and Kings are accurate. We must admit, however, that we have a selective account of the life of David and can agree that there is value in taking a close look at how the text portrays David and others. In other words, we must recognize that these accounts are shaped—that is, the Bible gives selective, emphasized, and interpreted accounts of historical events.

Conclusion. The prose narratives of the Old Testament are multifunctional. Most intend to impart historically accurate information while leading the reader to a deeper theological understanding of the nature of God and his relationship with his people. The stories, for the most part, are carefully crafted literary works. There are differences between, say, the Joseph narrative and Leviticus in terms of literary intent and sophistication, but in most places we can detect a self-consciousness not only in what is said but also in how it is said. A literary analysis, while only a partial analysis, is helpful toward getting at the author's meaning in a book or a passage of Scripture.

THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE

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Each of the following chapters concludes with a section devoted to the book's theological message. Since it is unusual for an introduction to include lengthy discussions of theology, allow us to explain. As stated above, we believe that the goal of Old Testament introduction is to prepare students to read its various books with understanding—that is, to provide the kind of preliminary background information that enables them to bridge the gap between the present time and the Old Testament's ancient context. In the study of the Old Testament there are three main areas where this bridging must take place: history, literature, and theology.

In the first place, each book was written in a specific historical context and