Introduction

The State of the Art of Biblical Narrative

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Among the most innovative and dynamic fields of study in recent days is the analysis of biblical narrative. Using a number of literary methodologies and approaches, the lengthy narrative sections of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament have been subject to fresh appraisal in recent decades, with impressive results. Not so long ago, historically orientated and form-critical approaches were the dominant paradigm, and a majority of questions posed by scholars were related to matters such as identifying sources, sifting through layers of redactional sediment, or hypothesizing about the diachronic development of various biblical texts. In part a reaction, but also something of a recovery operation, scholars and interested professionals of late have steadily been advocating a renewed appreciation for the intrinsic literary power of these ancient stories. With compelling plots, deft characterization, and an array of subtle and often sophisticated literary techniques, biblical narrative has an appeal that even moves beyond traditional faith communities and contributes to other forms of intellectual discourse and the study of cultural history. In the field of comparative literature, the Bible has a place alongside the great classics of the university curriculum, further enhancing an interest in the poetics of biblical narrative. Consequently, the study of Hebrew Bible and New Testament narrative has evolved into much more than a recovery operation or a protest movement, and its own set of approaches has generated a host of new perceptions and ways of reading that are increasingly commending themselves to different kinds of audiences.

This *Cambridge Companion* is a user-friendly resource for appreciating the world of biblical narrative and showcases some of the fine scholarship that is currently available in the field. Several other volumes in this series focus exclusively on methods and history of interpretation or as introductions to various sections of the Bible. By contrast, the emphasis in this collection both lies in textual analysis and close readings that illustrate the workings of biblical narrative and gives

examples of what narrative criticisms look like, along with an appraisal of the kinds of interpretive questions that are germane to the study of literary prose. It should be acknowledged that many commentaries in major series (such as the Old Testament Library and New Testament Library, Yale Anchor Bible, Hermeneia, and even the International Critical Commentary) increasingly utilize insights drawn from narrative criticism. Consequently, this volume helps to show how the study of narrative – with its unique emphases on the development of character, modulations in point of view, voice of the narrator, expository dialogue and oration, temporal indicators, and spatial movements – has influenced recent commentaries and other secondary studies, along with other interpretive trends and approaches currently in practice. An assumption shared by the contributors to this volume is that the literary study of biblical narrative is a complementary approach from which other methodologies and reading strategies can variously benefit. It is therefore envisioned that this *Cambridge Companion* will be a useful resource for working scholars and for anyone seeking an informed and up-to-date appraisal of how the study of narrative can be used alongside different modes of inquiry.

A feature of this volume is that the narratives of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are treated together. Most introductory works separate the two, and there are practical reasons for such a division. But because there are numerous points of continuity (as well as some creative divergences), approaching the New Testament narratives more organically and in continuity with the Hebrew antecedents has a certain value for the reader. Although treating the two Testaments (written in different languages, centuries apart) is not without its challenges, there are enough advantages to outweigh the obstacles. Even indirect analysis can underscore how New Testament narrative utilizes many similar literary techniques, and this illuminating area of study merits further discussion down the road. Furthermore, instead of a series of topical chapters dealing with matters such as characterization, point of view, irony, or spatial settings, in this volume the essays are organized around books of the Bible in roughly canonical order. Such a structure has some obvious strengths, as there is at least a degree of familiarity and ease of reference for the reader. Also, various topics can be addressed (whether *plot dynamics* in Genesis, *ironic reversal* in Exodus, or *character development* in the books of Samuel) as they actually appear in the unfolding of the text. Whatever the drawbacks of this kind of treatment, it nonetheless facilitates an awareness of the macroplot of the larger story into which the numerous books have been gathered. Recent narrative study

of the Bible has fostered a renewed appreciation of this larger storyline with all of its intricacy and artfulness, and this volume aims to reflect such advances and share that vibrancy with new generations of readers.

A natural place to start is in the beginning, for in many ways the book of Genesis sets the literary tone to come. The first eleven chapters narrate the beginnings of the cosmos and humanity and lead to the dispersal at the Tower of Babel, and then chapters 12–50 recount childless Abraham and Sarah's sojourn from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land of Canaan where there is an astonishing divine promise of land and offspring, followed in due course by the vicissitudes of the Jacob cycle and the account of Joseph sold as a slave into Egypt with its surprising denouement. The opening essay in Chapter 1 by Tremper Longman III functions as a synopsis of literary analysis of biblical narrative in general, and the book of Genesis in particular, featuring engagement with some prominent scholars (Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, Jan P. Fokkelman, David Clines, and Adele Berlin, among others) and a useful discussion of how the study of narrative poses alternative questions to other historical-critical kinds of approaches. The story of creation is inaugurated with a divine word that mitigates chaos, before moving to the spatial setting of the garden in the east and the tantalizing introduction of the serpent. Longman reflects on the early portrayals of humanity and the major events of fratricide, flood, and the founding narrative of the city of Babylon (Babel), which looms large in the later plot. He notes that the form of the story is significant, for the reader is shown not only the consequences of sin, but also God's efforts toward restoration. Such themes continue with the migration of Abraham, the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob's displacement from and return to Canaan, and the final images of a coffin in Egypt that calls out for a sequel.

Turning the page from Genesis, the initial sentences in the book of Exodus report the exponential growth of the Israelites in the land of Egypt, yet matters take an ominous turn as the people are enslaved by an unnamed new king. The divine promise in Genesis is thus imperiled, but in due course the reader encounters the birth of a child who will play a key role in the forthcoming storyline. A series of signs and wonders occurs in the land of Egypt, events that are a preface to the miraculous rescue that sets in motion the movement to Mount Sinai where laws of covenant are received along with instructions for building a sanctuary of worship for the liberated community. In Chapter 2, Adriane Leveen offers an overview of Exodus and focuses attention on several important facets of the text, including the complex career of Moses (starting with his infancy as he is saved from the waters of the

Nile by an ark, prefiguring his role in delivering the nation through the waters of the Red Sea). Leveen also invites the reader to wonder if the legal and tabernacle sections of Exodus are crafted with more literary artistry than is often supposed, and her analysis of the golden calf debacle has implications for interpreting the people of Israel as a collective character.

Navigating the wilderness narrative before and after Mount Sinai poses a number of challenges. The serious obstacles for the Israelites in this stretch of the story include a scarcity of resources in a foreboding desert, an array of military antagonists, as well as their own doubts, lack of resolve, and conflicted longings to return to Egypt rather than press on toward the land of Canaan. In Chapter 3, Carmen Joy Imes explores a large section of text – parts of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers – starting with a statistical reminder than only thirteen percent of the Torah takes place in Canaan, and so travel is an important motif. Along this road the reader encounters some strange places, intriguing characters, and memorable events ranging from talking donkeys and fiery snakes to water from a rock and rebels who are swallowed up by the earth. It turns out that wandering through the wilderness with various campsites and the tent of meeting is actually prime real estate for literary analysis, and Imes suggests that there is a more organized structure in this material than might be expected.

The books of Joshua and Judges recount the story of Israel in the land of Canaan, replete with options for faithfulness alongside numerous snares and temptations. After the death of Joshua there is no leader of any stature, adding another layer of challenge for the twelve tribes who have been delivered from Egypt and are struggling to take possession of their inheritance. In Chapter 4, Cameron B. R. Howard notes an essential coherence of the long narrative in this next phase of the biblical text: "A storyline can be traced through the Pentateuch and into these so-called 'historical books,' a roughly chronological account of ancient Israel that continues right through Joshua and Judges and carries on into 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, ending with an account of the destruction of Jerusalem and exile of Judah to Babylon." In her treatment of Joshua, she comments on the figure of Joshua himself, the theme of border crossing, and the remarkable characterization of Rahab, the Jericho prostitute who hides the two spies and misleads the king before cutting a deal to survive along with her family. Judges contains some gruesome accounts, but also some highly nuanced literary art, and Cameron's essay includes analysis of the shades of ambiguity in the infamous relationship between Samson and Delilah.

A controversial turning point in Israel's political history is the request for a king in 1 Samuel 8, a decision that casts its shadow over the remainder of the nation's tenure in the land. In Chapter 5, Stephen B. Chapman illustrates how the events before and after this decision are powerfully rendered on the narrative canvas of 1 and 2 Samuel. In the wake of the prophet Samuel, whose birth-story and career as a judge frame the request for a king, Chapman probes the two pivotal figures who dominate the landscape in quite different ways. Saul of Benjamin has undoubted potential, but his volatile reign poses awkward questions about how someone chosen by God can experience such a disastrous royal tenure. David of Judah rises to prominence amidst popular acclaim (and is perhaps the first rock star in world literature), but his reign is later engulfed by the flames of civil war and the virtual implosion of his house. Yet God has promised that David's house will endure, although that promise is sorely tested in the multi-voiced book of Samuel and beyond. Chapman concludes by returning to the beginning ("The Samuel narrative is one of the Bible's greatest literary achievements, a cornerstone of Western civilization, and a crucial scriptural text for the Christian tradition"), as he offers a few examples of the effect of these stories – with all their imaginative freight and rich artistry – on both faith communities and wider culture.

The consolidation and wealth of the Solomonic empire is the primary focus in the early chapters of Kings. But as Rachelle Gilmour notes in Chapter 6, despite the impressive achievements and construction of the Jerusalem temple during Solomon's administration, the ominous threat of exile can nonetheless be discerned even at early points in his reign: "The contrast between the glory and splendour of King Solomon's succession and reign at the beginning of the book of Kings and the 'exile' or captivity of King Jehoiachin by the Babylonians at the end," she writes, "points to one of the central themes of the book: the collapse of the monarchy descended from the line of David." Gilmour's synthesis of 1 and 2 Kings considers not only some of the major players (Jeroboam, Ahab, Manasseh, and Josiah) and events (the division of the kingdom, Assyrian demolition, and Babylonian siege of Jerusalem) in the book of Kings, but also some of the minor episodes and interludes that suggest that exile is not the end of the Israelite story. The final lines of 2 Kings 25 describe the survival of Jehoiachin, a Davidic heir previously taken into captivity but released by the Babylonian monarch who gives him a seat at the royal table in an ironic twist on David's own succession of Saul in the distant past.

A pair of short stories provide an opportunity for the reader to study narrative poetics on a smaller canvas, and in Chapter 7 Marian Kelsey surveys some literary issues in the books of Ruth and Jonah. First, a host of intriguing issues arise in the journey of Ruth from her nation of Moab to the land of Judah, including the role of direct speech, the motif of famine, allusive echoes to the story of Tamar in Genesis 38 and other ancestral episodes, and the ethnic hostilities that fester at the margins of this narrative. Kelsey reveals shades of comparison and contrast at the heart of Ruth's profile in the story. Second, the book of Jonah affords an opportunity for the literary interpreter to probe the fantastic portraits of the king of Nineveh and the great fish, the technique of delayed exposition, the role of the psalmic collage in chapter 2, and the ambiguous conclusion in the book's final sentence. The Jonah narrative also features intertextual conversations with other prophetic texts, and Kelsey suggests that this sequence of allusions "function together to illustrate Jonah's failure to assume the normal roles of a prophet, especially the roles of intercession and warning. In turn, the use of the allusions in Jonah creates a lens through which the reader then views the earlier stories: the reader understands the earlier stories differently in light of the book of Jonah."

The Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 586 BC left an indelible mark on the people of Israel, with the destruction of the temple and traumatic deportation that followed in its wake (2 Kings 25; cf. Jeremiah 52). Deep in the spatial and temporal settings of exile, the books of Esther and Daniel both manifest a high degree of narrative aesthetics, albeit, as Laura Carlson Hasler delineates in Chapter 8, in varying ways from other materials seen so far in the Hebrew Bible. The story of Esther takes place against the opulent backdrop of the Persian court, with a satirical portrait of the mighty Xerxes, and in the figure of Haman a complex allusion to the ancient grudge of Israel versus the Amalekites in the days of the Exodus can be glimpsed. If the book of Esther presents a vision of the subversion of imperial power – all without any overt mention of divine involvement – then the book of Daniel unfolds a series of episodes where younger Judahites participate in similarly risky enterprises. Replete with echoes of earlier narratives and rich with dialogue and miraculous surprise, the first half of the book sets the stage for a series of visions that radically depict the rise and fall of empires and eventual triumph of the disenfranchised. In Hasler's discussion, the reader can witness the several traditions and variant texts that indicate a vigorous interpretive wrestling as these stories developed and were used by different reading communities.

At first glance, 1 and 2 Chronicles may not seem to be the most fertile site for literary analysis, and the fact that it starts with the most extensive and exhausting genealogy in the Bible may not be overly appealing to some contemporary audiences. Its placement in the Christian Bible immediately following 2 Kings poses another problem, as some readers might demur that the Chronicler repeats lengthy sections of Israel's royal history while excluding the more salacious bits, such as the adulterous scandals, the murderous mayhem, and the prophetic intrigues of Samuel and Kings. But as the last book of the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles has its own artistic repertoire, with its selective retelling of stories heard elsewhere in the Bible, particular focus on the Jerusalem temple as the virtual center of the world, and unique emphases on speeches of foreign rulers and structural patterns of exile and return. In Chapter 9, Matthew J. Lynch reflects on a renewed interest in the storytelling techniques of Chronicles, concluding that these last books of the Hebrew Bible present a complex work of narrative art: "Appreciating its literary merits requires us to set aside some of our modern expectations about how a good story begins, how it proceeds, and how it retells. Chronicles *begins* with a long genealogy, one that asks us to share the joy of 'all Israel' as they find their place among God's people and the nations, and to anticipate some of the key themes and emphases in Chronicles (e.g., worship and the promises to David's house)."

Turning to the New Testament, what kinds of narrative-critical readings of the book of Matthew have been undertaken in the past, and what avenues can be further explored in the days ahead? In the past, literary interpreters have been drawn to significant episodes in the book and intrigued by the types of names included in the opening genealogy, the visit of Magi from the east, fulfilment of oracles from Israel's prophetic tradition, temptation in the wilderness and the Sermon on the Mount, parables of hidden treasure and moments of transfiguration, along with the layers of conflict and opposition en route to the centripetal and climactic passion narrative. In Chapter 10, Scott S. Elliott compares the literary milieu of Matthew with the other three Gospels, and provides a helpful overview of recent narratological approaches to this first book of the New Testament and its contours: "upon closer inspection, one finds in it a different sort of narrative. It is a narrative that is deeply infused with Jewish storytelling techniques, and reflects an image of early followers of Jesus characterized by a particular way of reading, interpreting, and understanding the Old Testament in relation to Jesus and vice versa, one that embodies and enacts a certain sense of divine presence and of time." There are a number of elements within

the gospel genre that are unique to Matthew, unfolding a portrait of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Davidic promise amidst rejection and misunderstanding.

Probably the earliest of the four canonical Gospels, the book of Mark is also the shortest, but it has a range of fascinating interpretive issues for the narrative critic, such as: the abrupt beginning with the tapestry of prophetic quotations and baptism by the Jordan, the sense of immediacy that pervades the early chapters, the motif of secrecy, and the technique of intercalation (that is, when a narrative unit is split by inserting another scene or episode, often with an ensemble of minor characters). Moreover, a freight of intertextual echoes conveys the impression that a new exodus is at hand, and the lengthy flashback sequence of Herod's alarm in Mark 6 has been a notable scene for narrative analysis. Of particular interest to literary theorists is the mysterious sense of an ending in 16:8: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." In Chapter 11, Elizabeth E. Shively and Kara J. Lyons-Pardue reflect on this fear factor and emotive register as part of Mark's literary enterprise, demonstrating how this thematic thread is woven into the larger narrative tapestry. They further consider the material in 16:9–20, and their concluding words are as provocative as the ending(s) to the narrative itself: "both ancient and modern audiences may share in the implications of Mark's key challenge, which is that the good news of Jesus's resurrection is to be met not with emotions that generate unbelief and inaction, but with emotions that elicit reverence, belief, and proclamation."

The story in Luke begins with a night shift in the Jerusalem temple and ends with a communion meal hosted by the risen Jesus after a journey to the otherwise obscure village of Emmaus. Addressed to a recipient with a Greek name, Theophilus, the book of Luke is the longest document in the New Testament, and presumably addressed to a predominantly Gentile audience. But by commencing the narrative with a supernatural encounter in the Jerusalem temple, the book of Luke shows (rather than tells) how the arrival of the Messiah is a story of atonement and reconciliation with implications for both the people of Israel and all of humanity. In Chapter 12, Raj Nadella provides an overview and wider perspective as "Luke deftly weaves in narrative elements from Greco-Roman literary traditions but also presents the gospel narrative as a historical account contemporaneous with Roman history in ways that have theological implications." He then moves in for a close-up on the pivotal section in Luke 10–19 that is sometimes referred

to as *the gospel for outsiders*, the centerpiece of which is the parable in 15:11–31 of a father with two sons. Luke has a number of unique parables, such as the mercy of a Samaritan to a wounded victim on the side of the road, and a rich guy clothed in purple who ignores a needy person at his gate. But Nadella's analysis of the parable of the prodigal sons inquires how the history of Israel – with the tropes of inheritance, rebellion, exile in a distant land, and chastised restoration – might be refracted through the lens of this story located in the multi-layered middle section of the book of Luke.

By most accounts, the book of John is the last of the Gospels to have been written, and in recent years there has been lots of literary interest in the prologue with its binaries of light and darkness, allusions to the wilderness in the Nicodemus dialogue, the Samaritan women and the type-scene of the woman at the well familiar from the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Genesis 29; Exodus 2), and the portrayal of Peter's threefold denial and restoration. In terms of structure, commentators frequently draw attention to the seven "I am" statements and prominent feasts such as Passover or Tabernacles. Furthermore, it is variously argued that there are seven signs in the first half of the book that include events like feeding the multitude (with memories of manna in the desert) and walking on water. What is the purpose of these signs, and how do they contribute to the overall configuration of the story? In Chapter 13, Tyler Smith discusses the complexity of John's sign language, noting that in Cana of Galilee "the actual transformation of water into wine is not emphasized; instead, John emphasizes what leads up to and what follows from the sign," and the equivocation of the parents of the man born blind when they are confronted by the authorities. Smith remarks, "Although the Johannine signs never seem to elicit the ideal belief response hoped for in the gospel's purpose statement – those who come to belief almost without exception go on to show shortcomings in their understanding of Jesus – they are nevertheless a key dynamic in the interplay between Jesus and those to whom he reveals himself." The reader is thus challenged to consider these signs as part of a drama of belief that is at work in this narrative.

Similar to Luke's prologue, the book of Acts is addressed to Theophilus, and it seems reasonable to assume that Acts is the sequel. In Chapter 14, Matthew L. Skinner surveys the unique story of Acts that traverses vast distances and diverse cultural settings: "Not only does the book tell a geographically expansive tale, but it also brings a wide spectrum of people onto the narrative stage: as Jesus' followers follow his command to bear witness to him near and far, they encounter

nameless people who rely on begging to survive and powerful Roman officials, zealous converts and insidious apostates, a seamstress and a fabric dealer, virtuous military officers and violent mobs, as well as audiences both superstitious and sophisticated. The sheer scope and variation within the plot mark Acts as a complex story that rewards those who interpret it with attention to its narrative dynamics." In the course of Skinner's analysis, numerous questions might arise in a reader's mind. For instance, is *persecution* a primary mechanism that drives the plot of Acts? Should it be approached as a classic underdog story, for how can a tiny and beleaguered group share a message that eventually reaches the imperial city of Rome in the closing verses of the last chapter? How should the conversion of Saul of Tarsus be interpreted, and how might the various minor characters (such as Gamaliel, the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip the evangelist, Gallio the proconsul of Achaia, or King Agrippa and his sister Bernice) be assessed from a literary viewpoint? Indeed, the open-ended conclusion of the story invites ongoing reflection on this expansive narrative.

To what degree can a story be reconstructed from the letters of Paul, and can such a story be subject to narrative-critical analysis? As a corollary, to what extent can stories within the letters be extracted and interpreted? When thinking about the application of literary tools to the Pauline correspondence, one could consider the issue of Thessalonica. In Acts 17 Paul visits the city for a brief period, where there is violence and hostility, and the reader may imagine that the Thessalonian believers merely drift from the scene. But when reading Paul's letter to this same group, it appears rather that they have flourished and have become a model for communities throughout the region. In Chapter 15, Lynn H. Cohick carefully outlines a theoretical framework that considers several different viewpoints, and then uses Paul's letter to the Philippians as an example. When hearing the letter against the backdrop of Acts 16, Cohick concludes that we "discover a shared story, and Paul's views of events that shaped both their paths. As readers today, we reconstruct that story to better understand Paul's message. Paul's letters make sense within the larger narrative of God's purposes told in the Jewish Scriptures, in creation and the promised new creation, and most assuredly in the Christ story. The meta-narrative of God's redemptive work in the world through Christ includes several substories that animate Paul's letters."

The book of Revelation has exercised enormous cultural influence, and from the outset a great story is promised: an imprisoned leader of the early Christian movement on the island of Patmos receives a visit by *one*

with eyes like blazing fire and the ruler of the kings of the earth, who commissions him to write seven letters before unveiling a kaleidoscopic vision with universal import. Is this text the exclusive domain of doomsday speculators with an eschatological abacus, or can Revelation be read as a narrative, and if so, what are some of the central literary features that the reader confronts in the book? In Chapter 16, David L. Barr reads the Bible's last book for its plot, and notes, "Narrative criticism seeks to consider consciously how the action is presented, how the characters are portrayed, how the storyteller is portrayed, how those who hear the story are imagined, how the time of the events in the story is measured, how the setting is located in space, how the story begins and ends, and much more." Suffused with allusions and images derived from the Garden of Eden, dreams of Daniel, and schematics of Ezekiel's temple, and populated with rebooted characters like Balaam and Jezebel, Barr samples recent studies of Revelation that have explored the question of whether an overarching narrative arc can be discerned: "Read as a narrative, the Apocalypse of John invites us to listen in on a hidden world – one far distant from ordinary reality. It is a world of monsters and mayhem, bloodied Lambs and spotless brides, of worlds vanquished and of worlds created anew. The full force of this narrative is best felt in an oral presentation, wherein the audience re-experiences John's visions." Readers are confronted with a fresh possibility that, instead of a straight-line progression, there is a spiral-shaped or even a spherical plot at work, as doors of perception are opened and Revelation can be viewed as a majestic coda to the biblical story.

As a collection, the essays in this *Cambridge Companion* provide a glimpse of the kind of work on biblical narrative that is available today, along with an introduction to the diverse forms and repertoire of techniques used by a cadre of ancient writers across spectrums of time and place. There is an invitation for both new readers and seasoned veterans to attend to questions of how a plot is developed, shades of indirect characterization through voice inflection or posture, nuances of dialogue that darken or illuminate scenes that are fraught with background, shifts in spatial landscapes or temporal horizons, ironic overtures and the generation of suspense, variations in point of view, intertextual echoes, and unfinalized endings that combine to provide a virtually inexhaustible literary experience. Vast stretches of narrative have not been treated in this volume, implying that there is much more that can be done in the future. By assembling this group of scholarly voices on various sections of a sprawling text, we hope to have offered a useful conversation about the imaginative depths and sophistication of biblical narrative.