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Biblical Story

"A good story is irresistibly persuasive."

—Yairah Amit[1]

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A Need for Reading Biblical Narrative

The proclivity to tell story is part of human experience. Ask someone to rehearse the events of their day, and the response is a "story." Jokes are told as "funny stories." Eager listeners tune in to hear "personal and political stories." Readers flock to newsstands for the latest international "story." Daily interaction occurs as personal traits engage a world of change. Conflict pinnacles and subsides; it mounts or is resolved. How one tells the story of their life says much about their worldviews and coping skills. People communicate effectively in narrative forms. In short, we are narrative beings; we like a good story and we like to tell good stories.

What makes a story "good"? What riveting features of a saga glue one's attention to the pages of a text? Subjective responses vary with personal taste; but a gripping story line and the style by which a story is conveyed acknowledge the background and shaping of *protagonists* (heroes, heroines) and *antagonists* (villains) readers can identify with.

1. Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 2.

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Audiences interface with the actions, emotions, challenges, etc., of the characters in their contexts. These experiences build a platform for sympathy, empathy, emulation, and the like. The more one can see herself or himself in the manners, celebrations, and struggles of the characters, the more an individual reader "enters the world of the story."

Given the penchant to good story, intentional ministry opportunity exists for Christian education emphases to foster reading the Bible as narrative. Raising a reader's sensitivity to the presence of narrative genre (and its qualities) in the Bible is the focus of this work. As narrative beings, knowledge and analysis of narrative components heighten appreciation for the prose elements of scripture. Heightening this awareness, however, is not without challenges.

In an era exhibiting less than optimum biblical literacy rates,[2] the diminished capacity to appreciate Holy Writ is in part due to a reader's unfamiliarity with what to look for in stories of the Bible. Passing acquaintance with general content of a few Bible stories may be present at varying levels in any given ministry setting, yet it is becoming rare to hear substantive discussion from pulpit, pew, or pupils on the components and crafting of biblical story. Culturally conditioned readers can demonstrate a general interest in "good story," while projecting a largely obscure awareness of their appreciation for the specific qualities of that story. Reflective of Stone and Duke's "embedded theology,"[3] a framework of presuppositions becomes more meaningful as basic assumptions are subjected to greater and more deliberate scrutiny. Thus, a general appreciation for good story may be acknowledged, but concrete commitments of reading

2. Van Wijk-Bos, *Ruth and Esther*, 7; see also Barna's June 14, 2005 report, "Christians Say They Do Best at Relationships, Worst in Bible Knowledge," a self-estimation of survey participant's biblical literacy levels and spirituality.

3. Stone and Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 28.

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remain veiled in one's personal analysis. To help alter this, a schematic is sought that will empower readers to identify, comprehend, analyze, and evaluate a text for personal and corporate meaning.[4]

Function, Power, and Biblical Stories

The presence of biblical stories testifies to the perpetuation of memories belonging to one era or group, providing a sense of identity, testimony, and historical continuity for subsequent generations of diverse audiences. One generation learns from another as telling "the story of the past is a mechanism for coping with exile and disruption."[5] For readers inheriting these narratives, the biblical stories entertain while simultaneously evoking response. The scrutiny of biblical narratives "reads the reader," and among many possible outcomes, imparts social mores, questions ethics, and offers character skills to deal with life. Readings elicit reactions that critique or inform the status quo, personal perspectives (faith, social, political, etc.), and the like.

These bare functions of story are relevant to contemporary Christian faith communities seeking to understand ancient biblical narratives for devotion and doctrine:

> The theological viewpoint that Christians form in the course of the life of faith is a distinctive set of many views, each relating in one way or another to the Christian message of God. Exactly what that message means is of primary concern to those seeking to understand their faith. In the church its substance is transmitted from generation to generation by means of

4. The relationship of learning levels or critical thinking emphases, as illustrated in Bloom's taxonomy, is in view.

5. Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel*, 697.

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> the language of faith, a loose-knit collection of stories and symbols.[6]

As theology and worldviews (for these communities) are often shaped and reframed through perceptions derived from chosen passages of scripture, it is incumbent upon these audiences to be intentionally aware of the genre they are reading, and the reading methods they employ. As sacred, authoritative literature, sensitivity to biblical genre and its respective components offers fruitful ground for consideration in the quest for spiritual meaning:

> The distinction between the Bible as literature and the Bible as scripture is largely artificial. The church can properly hear its Bible as scripture only when it reads it as literature.[7]

This risky venture is open to the critique of whether or not one imposes modern tools of literary analysis on an ancient story or if the reader studies a text inductively seeking to read/hear the material on its own merits.[8] Biblical[9] narratives construct written worlds open to exploration through a variety of portals (or entries into that story world). Biblical narratives creatively integrate a narrator's telling of story through a variety of characters (each who embody and reflect numerous traits), scenes and settings, challenges, reversals (setbacks), irony, triumphs, and the like. The Bible captures these human experiences in this means of literary communication, blending these compo-

6. Stone and Duke, 29.

7. Clines, "Story and Poem," 115.

8. Craig's review of Bakhtin's argument: the Esther story shares traits in common with other ancient literature (see *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*).

9. *Bible* and *biblical* are used in the Judeo-Christian sense of canon or sacred literature.

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nents (and more) to offer case studies of a sort,[10] for readers to explore beliefs, motives, and ethics. In this way, the biblical story is a mirror for reflection. The biblical story world (potentially) becomes a vicarious arena of self-expression, where story characters and the complexities of their persona form a significant platform for analyzing what is esteemed or neglected among confessing Christians:

> In general, the biblical story is designed to enable us to discover who we are. We do that by telling our own story . . . in the context of the Bible story. We find ourselves by setting ourselves in that other story.[11]

Toward the interests of spiritual formation (experience and growth in Christ; a process informed by qualitative biblical study), a means of reading scripture is proposed in this work enabling students of the Bible to more intentionally observe the mechanics of biblical story. The means of reading advanced in this project are not a grid imposed upon scripture; rather, the paradigm stems from the structure and content of a selected biblical story itself.

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Perspectives and Research Focus

Without claiming an objective-free perspective (bias) for reading, any particular lens impacts the potential for, and outcomes of, understanding a biblical story. To put it another way, how one reads either helps or hinders a close reading of the text. Understandably, *how* biblical narrative is read is the subject of various opinions, indicative of read-

10. Campbell observes, "The major attribute of a reader is the capacity to appreciate the artistry of the author or redactor, to spot the allusions to other threads in the biblical fabric. Authors and their products talk to us and meet our needs" ("Relishing the Bible," 813).

11. Goldingay, "Biblical Story and the Way It Shapes Our Story," 8.

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ing commitments, pedagogical concerns, theological and political persuasions, educational goals, depth of learning, etc. Any two (from among many) selected reading models illustrates the potential polarized challenges for the modern reader, though the reading options (inclusive of both stress and depth) generally range from those disposed toward the rigors of intense analysis, to practices preferring casual or less serious levels of reading.

Defining a pole of reading commitments as a "less serious level" may be a critique surfaced by the demands of good scholarship. Without overgeneralizing, devotional readings often pegged in this category likely represent the largest segment of contemporary readers in the North American, English-speaking context. Bridging the gap between these two camps (scholarly and devotional) is, in part, the goal of quality Christian ministry. In an entertainment age inundating readers and viewers with a plethora of "story" in various forms (literary and dramatic), the trained observer (student of scripture), who is called to responsible Christian leadership, finds an initial gateway into valuable, age-appropriate, and reader-experience (appropriate) dialogue on the basis of the literature itself. This work advances the idea that the text itself offers the primary platform for a method that invites readers to glean the benefits of exploring and appreciating biblical narrative.

Regarding more intense forms of biblical study, a cursory glance reveals inclination (in our era) toward the influential historical-critical camp.[12] It is conceded that grounding texts in real time periods is a vital and apologetic goal of solid historical-critical work; this is a valuable component in the quest for meaning, and an appreciated disci-

12. Segovia's work, for example, surveys three biblical study methods critiquing historical criticism's sway over literary-critical and social-critical readings (*Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View From the Margins*).

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pline assisting in the differentiating between texts deemed part of a time-honored canon versus the spurious. However, the literary crafting and power of biblical story itself may be less evident or devalued if historical minutiae are the sole goal of scholarship.[13] This outcome may be less the fault of the discipline itself, and more indicative of any particular reader's choice. At the risk of undue segregation between the fields of biblical criticism and biblical story,[14] a practical balance is sought that facilitates greater admiration of the latter as part of the entire reading schematic.

Balancing the contributions reading commitments make to informed Christian ministry naturally stresses the need for careful literary analysis. Motivated by observation on practical ministry interests where the largest segment of Christian readership resides, literary-critical analysis brings to the process of biblical research a vital connection between heart and head in the reading experiences of diverse audiences. This angle of discussion, however, should not be construed to mean historical-critical interests have been abandoned.

I further concede these reflections stem from my context-specific and subjective experience. With Wesley's quadrilateral in mind (scripture, tradition, reason, and experience), the reflections in this work prioritize the scriptures themselves as the initial source of information to draw upon. This is the hub of this particular examination. Whole

13. Ibid. Kallai also discusses this concern in biblical and literary history ("Biblical Historiography and Literary History," 339). The contributions of historical-critical readings are not denied (Goldingay, "Biblical Story," 5), but moving past entrenchment in a single method of reading fosters inclusion of supplemental reading methods to augment research. See also, Sailhammer.

14. Harvey sees the dichotomy as largely artificial (*A Handbook of Theological Terms*, 42–44). Ideally, contemporary readings are to represent a balance in appreciation for the historical as well as for the literary features of a text.

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works can be undertaken on various traditions of interpretation (scholarly commitments, faith-based lenses, etc.), as well as hermeneutical issues (philosophical interests stemming from or brought to a reading of the text). My concern though is to ask, "What can be gleaned from an analysis of a selected biblical passage and genre that sheds light on a potential reading method of scripture?"

Summarizing a Case for Reading Biblical Narrative

Our culture evinces a commitment to diversion where the most popular authors, actors, and actresses are applauded. Trivia buffs recite details of the hottest movie release. Excited engagement with the details of biblical story, however, is comparatively lacking. "Familiarity" makes an impact, so that in terms of practical application, diminishing interest in a biblical story is partly due to a reader's assumption of already knowing the story. Ignorance of what to look for accounts in some measure for the lack of "catch" or "hook"[15] to draw readers into a biblical story with equal interest as does the latest secular novel or drama. Yet, direct engagement with a biblical narrative and discovery of key components of the story's construction appeal to the narrative qualities of human communication, inviting detection of the building blocks of story—elements of communication readers are (unknowingly) familiar with. A guiding force of this work, then, is to observe what a text says (and how it says it) before asking what it means. This commitment prioritizes analysis before interpretation. This work asserts awareness of a biblical narrative's components leads to greater admiration for the apparatus and crafting of a story, enhancing

15. Richards and Bredfeldt, *Creative Bible Teaching*, 151–65.

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one's potential for exploring a text's message, meaning, and relevance to contemporary life and ethic.[16]

Reading methods impact potential self-discovery and bear on the quality of ministry, requiring careful assessment of biblical literature prior to arguing for theological stances or interpretive outcomes. In making observations, appraising the content of biblical books distinguishes (for discussion) the *how* (poetics) from the *what* (meaning) of a text, where poetics is concerned with the "artistic dimension or the way the text is constructed."[17] With a text's artistic character in mind, Brueggemann asserts rhetorical criticism is "a method that insists on *how* what is said is crucial and definitive for *what* is said."[18] Further, "In terms of theological interpretation, because the *what* is linked to the *how*, one cannot generalize or summarize but must pay attention

16. *Discovery* of a chosen biblical text's components shapes this approach, where *meaning* and/or *application* are negotiated and contextualized only after engagement with the text of scripture itself. Readers may be interested in issues regarding where meaning is found. Duval and Hays, for example, summarize this tension by noting polarized camps suggest a text takes on its meaning only when the reader assigns such meaning (reader response) versus those positions favoring a view where the writer has in mind a meaning to convey (authorial intent) (see *Grasping God's Word*, 176). Campbell's assessment of author, text, and reader is also interesting: "When we think through what happens when we meet a text, we are likely to give priority to one or two of those ingredients. . . . What deconstruction does is give priority to the reader" ("Relishing the Bible," 813). At some level, the Esther text asserts the concept that regardless of reader response, the edict still called for the death of the Jews. There was meaning already intended, whether or not readers accepted that meaning. Esther's dialogue in community with Mordecai (Esth 4) is an important feature calling readers to a close and accurate reading to grasp the message conveyed by the author.

17. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 154.

18. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 54.

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to detail."[19] Hermeneutical options that diminish valuable reading methods may unduly influence research toward accrual of facts about texts, rather than inductively discovering features of the biblical story itself. The imbalance misses the congruity of literary art bound up in a text. By contrast, meticulous, accurate observations on the poetics of prose are antecedent to interpretive outcomes and inform this project first and foremost as a narrowed study of select English translations of a particular Old Testament text: the book of Esther.

Four Key Movements in the Book of Esther

"Neglect" or "oversight" of some biblical stories begs identification of ignored texts to illustrate a need for narrative studies and the positive contribution inclusion makes to research and reading commitments. This pedagogical concern detects biblical books and genre emphasized in a (local church or academic) curriculum, identifies biblical texts and genre neglected in the same program of study, and illustrates one suggestion toward inclusion of marginalized texts and genre in a family of research or Bible study courses. The Old Testament Esther is a representative of such underestimation. She is an orphaned Jewess living in exile, deemed a dominated member of a powerful society that manages its constituents. Yet she is the driving force of positive change transforming her world as an agent of life. The experiences of the story's heroine (Esther) integrate a reader's background, a written text, a struggle for meaning, and a posture of personal resolve. The dynamic combination of these four primary movements shapes the contours of an approach to reading biblical narratives.

19. Ibid., 55.

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English translations offer access to the Masoretic (Hebrew) text, affording a means to peer into one possibility for reading a biblical narrative for a specific context of readers. This work will not entertain the later six Greek additions to the Esther scroll.[20] This analysis is an exercise offered under the rubric of observations "created," categorized, and compiled from the biblical text. While some interpretive outcomes will be explored, these interpretive results will not focus on questions of translation or on extensive text-critical matters; rather, the discussion capitalizes on outcomes pointing to a suggested reading method itself, and will be addressed only after engagement with the biblical story of Esther. These outcomes do not pretend to be exhaustive, nor the last word in any case; findings rather rest upon observations made on the story itself. If readers are prompted to the discovery of additional observations, or even critique, this effort will have been worth the journey. As a map to the design of this project, the artistic dimensions of the book of Esther will first be noted. A model for reading biblical stories (a model derived from the narrative of Esther itself) will subsequently be shown.

Esther's introduction, character development, actions, and speeches are traced as one entry into a specific story world. Her background, engagement with a written text, wrestling with meaning(s), and resolve to act represent four key movements of a biblically informed hermeneutic. The literary features in this story serve as one example for readers of Christian ministry contexts to explore the components, crafting, and clout of biblical stories. This reading method reacts to imbalanced study methods and the absence of specific Old Testament books from regular Christian reading commitments. As Esther is underestimated in her story world, narrative studies in Christian ministry contexts are

20. Note Levenson's commentary on *Esther*.

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at risk of minimalization in curriculum or program design. Yet, as Esther is confronted by a text, her character transformation models a reading method for students of scripture. The Esther story shows how curricula can intentionally complement dominant study methods with literary-critical readings, in pursuit of theological formation.[21]

Exegesis Versus Eisegesis

A tension confronting contemporary readers, whether acknowledged or not, is determining if one's approach to a biblical story is (1) to "read in" to the text in order to find support for what one already believes (or wants to believe); or (2) open to the scripture's "reading out" its own message(s) and informing a reader's theology. When reading, Craig contends, "the past can never be condensed, closed, or hegemonized in meaning,"[22] while Amit distinguishes *eisegesis* (reading into) from *exegesis* (reading out of):

> The Sages said that the Bible has seventy faces, or aspects, but that is not to say that they are all equally valid. Some faces illustrate what the story's interpreters wish to find in it, while others shed light on the integration of the story's components. The reader should be able to distinguish between interpretations that serve the needs of interpreter and his/her readers and interpretations that strive to remain faithful to

21. Amit cites Weiss' "literary synchronic approach, as opposed to the dominant historical diachronic one; it ignores the history of the text and its stratification, and concentrates on the story's meaning in relation to its formal design" (12). See also Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 96–97.

22. Craig, 20.

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> the significance that arises from the fashioning of the story.[23]

Though an entirely objective reading cannot be assumed, developing skills in analyzing biblical narrative increases the potential for acquiring informed hermeneutical practices. As a reader, one is not called to forsake one's identity under the assumption an objective examination of a text will result. Rather, one may "read" or be "read by" the text, where one's character makeup, skills or deficiencies, presuppositions, and the like are defined, coming under the scrutiny of engagement with a text. A reader's perspective is in turn subject to community dialogue. The challenge for meaning will then rest on a foundation of accurate, inductive observations on the writing, and lead to a call for commitment (putting what is learned into practice).

Esther models these elements as an "alien"; she is a woman in a male-dominated world and a Jewess displaced from geographic Israel. Yet, she (1) has a personal story held in relief to a larger story line; (2) engages a crucial piece of writing; (3) struggles in community with desired and realistic meaning(s) of an edict (see Amit above); and (4) resolves to act in solidarity with, and on behalf of, others subject to oppression.

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Moving Toward a Reading of Esther

This reading will suggest one means for local Christian education curricula to consider in movement toward theological commitments, social concerns, or other research and ministry implications emerging from the study of scripture. To that end, literary analysis bridges historical-critical interests and a lived theology. While the valuable contributions of historical-critical readings are not intended to be

23. Amit, 137.

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undermined, for the present, an emphasis will be placed on literary-critical issues. In part this emphasis is motivated by an observation that reading the text itself is the primary juncture into the field of biblical criticism.

The next segment offers a reading of English text(s) of the MT Esther,[24] with a literary-critical focus on her character development. Chapter 3 summarizes this reading's methodology, distilling particular findings. The final segment reflects on the general need for development of classes, courses, and conversation groups in reading biblical narrative. Appendices offer limited illustrations of the process itself.

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24. Scripture references are from the King James Version and *New International Version*. Using English translations does not minimize translations used by international students or readers; rather, a common translation available to all students in the particular, primarily English-speaking contexts of this project is sought. Lack of familiarity with Greek or Hebrew by general-studies undergraduate students or non-discipline majors suggests an approach of introduction for a wide spectrum of readers in a particular ministry context.

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