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NARRATOLOGY IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND ITS CONCEPT OF TIME

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Abstract

As a book, the Holy Bible includes a variety of genres. These ranges from apocalyptic to correspondences, poetry to prophecy, theology to a host of others and as a literature of different genres, it is largely made up of narrative. That explains why an overview of the structure of the Bible shows that it is mostly narrative in character, starting with the creation account, moving to the fall and culminating to the passion narrative and its consummation with the resurrection and ascension. All these brings us to the relative new field of narratology and now more than ever before than in recent times, few words have enjoyed so much use and suffered so much abuse as narratology and its partial synonym story. This work using the expository interpretive method brought to the fore a clear definition of the term using various narratological scholars and theorists. An analysis of it is conducted in the Bible within the purview of time and from whence a conclusion is made that more needs to be done to make narratology relevant in biblical studies.

Keywords: Narratology, Holy Bible, Interpretation, Concept, Time.

Introduction

The first observation to make is that narratology does not have a distinct and unique identity as a discipline in the classical sense of the term. Baroni (2017) attested to this when he stated that: "it seems to me that the main problem of narratology is that it has been unable to establish itself permanently in the institutions academia owing to heredity and it being a relatively young discipline." Therefore, narratology as a discipline is an interdisciplinary field of study and this is one of its greatest innovations. Hence, Rudrum (2002) observes that "narratological analysis did not confine itself to literary criticism, since such narrative is not merely a phenomenon of literature, nor even entirely verbal…" Narratologists have devoted attention not only to myths, folktales, and films, but also to paintings, history books, philosophical systems, comic strips, and any number of other narrative forms, literary and non-literary, verbal and non-verbal. In fact, the interdisciplinarity of contemporary critical theory owes a great deal to the narratologist. Arguably the main structure, within the Bible is best described as a narrative: an account of a series of important events. Thus, this study is of the opinion that the narratological aspect of the Bible need to be researched more and comprehended.

Its Definitional Maze and History

Narratology refers to both the theory and the study of narrative and narrative structure and the ways that these affect our perception. In this research, the field of narratology is

understood as that which is concerned with the study and analysis of narrative texts. It puts under investigation literary pieces of language and yields an understanding of the components of a text. A thing to note is that while in principle the word may refer to any systematic study of narrative; in practice its usage is rather more restricted. It is an Anglicization of French *narratologie*, coined by Tzyetan Todorov (1969). However, narratology is applied retrospectively as well as to work predating its coinage. Its theoretical lineage is traceable to Aristotle (Poetics) but modern narratology is agreed to have begun with Russian Formalists, particularly Vladimir Propp (1928), this is obvious in that whilst narratology as a theoretical school evolved initially in France, however, its origins lie much earlier in Russian formalism. There is a strong consensus among narratologists on the nature of the object of this discipline. Instances of these abound. We begin with Genette as quoted by Herman (2007) who claims that "one will define narrative without difficulty as the representation of an event or of a sequence of events," while Prince sees it as "the representation … of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one, two or several… narrators… to one, two or several narrates." For Abbot (2002), "narrative is the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse, story is an event or sequence of events (the action), and narrative discourse is those events as represented." Adding his voice to the maze, Rudrum (2002) stated that:

> Narratology is perhaps best understood as a term with a stricter and a looser sense. Broadly speaking, it is the name given to the critical and theoretical study of the numerous forms of narrative discourse, especially in literary and film studies. More precisely however, it designates a theoretical movement with its origins in the French structuralist thought of the 1960s and 1970s, to indebted-hence the extension of the term.

Scholars such as Roland Barthes (1966/77), Gerard Genette (1980[1972]), Seymour Chatman (1978), are among the founders of narratology as a discipline and as a method of research in the humanities and historically, the origins of narratology lend to it a strong association with the structuralist quest for a formal system of useful description applicable to any narrative content by analogy with the grammars used as a basis for parsing sentences in some forms of linguistics. This procedure does not however typify all work described as narratological today. Be that as it may, narratology seeks to make a fivefold discovery. Namely:

i. What the basic components (forms) are of stories;
ii. How those basic components are arranged (structure);
iii. The various media that are used to create and deliver stories;
iv. The uses that different individuals, groups, institutions, societies and cultures have for stories (functions); and
v. The ways that stories and the meanings that stories express change over time and from place to place (history and evolution).

Ryan (2007) argues that Gerald Prince, the narratological scholar regards the contemporary use of the term narrative as a hedging device, a way to avoid strong positions. It is captured thus: "One says 'narrative' instead of 'explanation' or 'argumentation' (because it is more tentative); one prefers 'narrative' to 'theory', 'hypothesis', or 'evidence' (because it is less scientific); one speaks of a 'narrative' rather than 'ideology' (because it is less judgmental); one substitutes 'narrative' for 'message' (because it is more indeterminate)." Furthermore, in order to effectively analyze and investigate narrative, a narratologist must have knowledge of

linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, evolution, the various media that are used to create and deliver narratives (literature, film, oral recitation, gestures, etc.), and the theory and criticism of those various types of media. This is quite obvious in that we see the French theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard invoke the "Grand Narratives" of a capitalized History, the psychologist Jerome Bruner speaks of narratives of identity; the philosopher Daniel Dennett describes mental activity on the neutral level as the continuous emergence and decay of narrative drafts; the political strategist James Carville attributes the loss of John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election to lack of a convincing narrative; and "narratives of race, class and gender" have become a mantra of cultural studies.

Narratology and the Scripture (Bible)

Lubeck (2005) in his classic work entitled "Read the Bible for a Change," clearly mentioned that the Bible is comprised of 44% narrative, 33% poetry, and 23% discourse. On this point, Eslinger (1990) believes that it is more like 70% narrative. Since a large portion of the Bible is made up of narrative, and since it has long been observed by Tilley (1985), that human experience itself is inherently narrative in form, the use of narratological exegetical tool can no doubt allow biblical narratives to assert a greater influence upon the form of biblical interpretation. This is because biblical narratives are not static texts but dynamics texts that seek to influence the reading in a verisimilitude of ways and as a theory for evaluating narrative texts, the discipline of narratology enables readers, as Bal (1999) commented, "to understand, analyze and evaluate narrative texts" along with their various rhetorical functions and dynamics.

In the Biblical studies, narratology is relatively an unexplored field in that Finnern (2014), argue that the first scholars that adapted the use of narratology to the New Testament (NT) narration in a stricter sense were the likes of Rhoads and Michie (1982), Culpepper (1983), and Kingsbury ([1986] 1988). Culpepper discusses point of view, narrative time, plot development and character (Jesus, God the Father, the disciples, the Jews and minor characters), as well as irony and symbolism in the Gospel of John. These books established a relatively solid methodological approach within Gospel research and have had a wide influence in English-speaking scholarship and thanks to them, there have been several studies on the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles from a more decidedly narratological approach since the dawn of this millennium. Concrete examples are the works of Eisen (2006), on the historical book of the Acts of the Apostles, Rose (2007), on the Gospel of Mark 1, and Finnern (2010), on the Gospel of Matthew 28.

A precise definition of narrative reveals that it is a story that is told by one to another which implies from a narrator to a listener. A good narrator can create an experience in the listener simply by relating the story while withholding the "moral of the story." Bal (1999), argue that Jesus is the narrator per excellent when he commented that "With his often-confusing parables, Jesus was the master of such open-ended narrative preaching and the rhetorical strategies of his parables concealed as much as they revealed (cf. Matt. 13:13-14)." In order to "get the point" of the story, the listeners wrestle with the various aspects by which the narrator presented the narrative-they become participants in creating the "meaning" of the story. Without knowing it, they are caught up in a powerful set of rhetorical dynamics within narratives involving a variety of factors. In fact, narrative analyses involve studying both the "what" and the "how" of the ways in which a narrative is presented by the author (and the

narrator of the story) to the listener. Therefore, interaction with biblical narratives can thus assist scholars and exegetes to discover a fresh sense of self-identity. This happens when a scholar or exegete of any narrative text enter into the world of biblical narratives and choose to identify with or against certain characters. This shows that scholars and exegetes can therefore enter the text as active actors and participants and not merely as aloof observers. This narratological approach has been coined "narrative criticism" by analogy with the other exegetical methods of interpretation.

Time in Narratology

According to Bridge (2007), narratives unfold in time, and the past, present, and future of a given event or action affect our interpretation of that action, while the characters who populate narrative texts move around inhabit and experiment different spaces and locations, allowing readers to construct complex worlds in their minds. Time, says Forster (1927), has indeed always played an important role in theories of narrative, given that we tend to think of stories as sequences of events. Genette as observed by Bal (1999) gave some thought to the question of narrative time: how is the story presented with respect to the narrative as a whole, with respect to the final result? Once again, several methodological choices are available to writers. In order to achieve the expected result, they can vary, namely:

- The order of the narrative;
- The speed of the narrative; and
- The frequency of events.

Skillful use of these techniques allows the narratologist to identify which narrative elements are being emphasized by the author and what the structure and organization of the text is. More so, the point in the story at which a narrative begins and ends can have a considerable effect on the reader. Beginnings are where we first encounter the narrative world and establish its key characteristics. And endings are where we move towards our final interpretation of the narrative.

Time involves both the time the particular narrative took place as well as the movement of time within the discourse itself. Time in narratology is always been looked with the following lenses, namely: 1) Order; 2) Duration; and 3) Frequency. We now examine the trio closely.

Order: this is the relation between the sequencing of events in the story and their arrangement in the narrative. A narrator may choose to present the events in the order they occurred, that is, chronologically, or he can recount them out of order. Our focus on whatever movement in the text we have reached will invariably be colored by our memory of what has gone before and our anticipation of what is to come. The order in which events are presented in the text is therefore crucial to our temporal experience of narrative. In this connection, Bal observes that order within the discourse is significant. This for him is because:

> Playing with sequential ordering is not just a literary convention; it is also a means of drawing attention to certain things, to emphasize, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of events, to indicate the subtle difference expectation and realization, and much else besides.

Often time, the order in which the events actually occurred does not match the order in which they are presented in the narrative. This mixing of temporal order yields a more gripping complex plot. Genette (1980) use to designate non-chronological order as *anachrony* and using the book of the Prophet Jonah, Heacock (2014), gave us a good anachrony when he wrote:

> The book of Jonah provides a good example of the use of anachrony within biblical narrative the book unfolds chronologically as the events narrated appear to unfold in real time. From the opening sequence, however, the reader encounters a major interpretive problem: identifying Jonah's motivation for his lack of obedience. Why did he not go immediately to Nineveh? The differences in chronological order between the story and discourse levels are not easily discernable. In 1:10b, however, the narrator inserts a brief comment that gives the reader a brief insight: Jonah had earlier admitted to the sailors that he was fleeing from Yahweh. Still, no indication of motive is given. Later, however, Jonah provides his own "flashback" statement (4:2) regarding his motives prior to his abortive flight to Tarshish. Again, after his encounter with the fish, he provides some additional justification for his behaviors that provides the reader more insight as to his motives. At the beginning of the book, however, and throughout much of its narrative chronology, readers are left in the dark. Why did Jonah flee from his mission? Jonah's extreme rage over the subsequent repentance of the Ninevites, his arguments with Yahweh and his eagerness for death send the reader seeking for bits and pieces of the scarce information concerning his motives provided within the discourse. These bits and pieces, however, are provided to the reader somewhat "out of order."

Duration: this is the sense that the relationship of duration between reading and story-time can vary immensely and the simplest measure of this variation is the number of words, sentences, or pages it takes to recount a given episode. Additionally, it consists of the speed at which events in the discourse are narrated to the reader. In the manipulation of elements selected from the story level the narrator can choose to compress discourse time, slow it down or speed it up by inserting large gaps into the narrative discourse. Clarifying this, Bridge (2007) mentioned that the main categories suggested by narratologists are descriptive pause, slow-down or stretch, scene and ellipsis, and thus the treatment of duration is an important way of foregrounding certain events and reducing the status of others. The insertion of a gap into the discourse-time as stated above is referred to as ellipsis, and it is of two kinds: a) explicit; and b) implicit.

Explicit ellipses occur when the narrator explicitly mentions the passage of time in the discourse. Heacock (2014) once again comes to mind here when he explained thus:

> Looking again at Jonah, the narrator mentions three days Jonah spent in the belly of the fish (2:17), and notes Jonah's single day's journey into Nineveh (3:4). While such insertions in the text explicitly indicate the passage of time, they can be either definite or indefinite. For example, the narrator does not indicate how it took for the plant to grow over Jonah's head as he sat outside

> Nineveh (4:6): an indefinite period of time. But in 4:7 there is a definite mention of time passage ("the next day" the worm ate Jonah's shade providing plant).

Implicit ellipses, on the other hand, are gaps in discourse-time not specifically mentioned by the narrator. They must be inferred by the reader. Heacock (2014) clearly brought this home by questioning:

> For instance, how long did it take Jonah to travel from his home to the port of Joppa? How long was he on the ship prior to the arrival of the storm? How long did the storm last? How long did it take him to travel to Nineveh after being vomited up by the whale? How many days/weeks/months did he sit sulking outside Nineveh? The text does not explicitly contain this information, but obviously certain lengths of time passed. What is important to note is that the author/editor deemed these details unimportant for achieving the rhetorical strategies of the discourse.

Frequency: this relates to the number of times an event taken from the story is narrated in the discourse. Usually this takes place on a 1= 1 correspondence level: what happened once in the story is related once in the discourse. But sometimes, an event is narrated more than once and there may be significant differences between the two accounts. More so, the number of times an event is narrated can influence the reader's interpretation of a narrative. Repetition involves more than one occurrence at the level of discourse of a single story event, while iteration involves the single telling of multiple events. Repetition can be used to portray more than one view of events in epistolary novels (i.e. novels told via exchanges of letters between characters), and in modernist stream-of-consciousness novels. In the French *nouveau roman*, events, scenes, and fragments of scenes are repeated in different configurations to far more unsettling effect as the repetitions cannot be attributed to the perceiving eye of a particular protagonist or group of protagonists.

Conclusion

From the aforementioned in this research, it has demonstrated that the narratological approach is characterized by its overriding concern with narrative structure, and the close attention it pays to the effects that this structure has on the shaping and unfolding of narratives. It scrutinizes the internal relations of a narrative component parts, and dissects how these relations are constructed in practically any given aspect of the narrative text which amongst others include plot, narration, and sequence of events. In line with Abbott (2007), this work affirm that narrative is an art of the opening and closing of gaps and that in those gaps lay whole worlds that the art of narrative invites us either to actualize or leave as possibilities. We also affirm that time affect reading at different levels. Time is indeed a component of the basic conceptual framework for the construction of the narrative world. This is seen in that the engagement with narrative is often linked to temporal parameters.

In the end, this study in the discipline of narratology has identified and explored certain basic elements of how narratives function. It also shows that all biblical narrative is mediated by a narrator and that understanding and exploring these concepts explored within this study can aid in the task of biblical exegesis.

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