

The Reemergence of Biblical Narrative

Thomas E. Boomershine

The purpose of this journal is to contribute to the reemergence of biblical narrative as a living narrative tradition through the development of biblical storytelling. It is a response to what Hans Frei has called "the eclipse of biblical narrative." In his now classic book, Frei tells the story of the development of historical criticism as an aspect of the Enlightenment.

As Frei tells it, prior to the eighteenth century, biblical narrative throughout the Western Christian tradition was read as being "realistic," at once historical and literal. The story of biblical narrative provided the basic framework for the understanding of the real world as a sequence of ages from creation to the final consummation. In this precritical reading, the narratives were read literally, that is, in their plain meaning, as historical descriptions of what took place. This literal reading was combined with figural interpretation in which earlier biblical stories were seen as figures or types of later stories.

This understanding of biblical narrative also embraced the experience of each community and person who read the story. The stories of persons and communities made sense by being understood in the figures of "that storied world" of the Bible. Frei quotes Eric Auerbach who argues that biblical narrative "seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history ... " (Mimesis, p. 15) Thus, the precritical reading of biblical narrative included a clear framework by which personal and communal experience was connected with the stories of the Bible.

With the development of the Enlightenment, the meaning of the narratives was divorced from their realistic/figural meaning and focused on their meaning as a reference source for knowing a reality beyond the story. Frei calls this shift "meaning as reference." In this period, meaning came to be equated with the reality to which the words of a story refer. In the theory of John Locke and his Deist followers, words refer to events in space and time and have meaning as "ostensive reference." In the theory of Christian Wolff and his Scholastic followers, the reality to which a word refers is an "idea" or teaching; thus, meaning as "ideal reference." (Frei, 101) The meaning of the story was thereby detached from the story itself and was connected with its value as a source of knowledge of the "reality" of the world of historical events and the world of ideas. The development of historical critical study of biblical narrative since the mid-eighteenth century has been based on this presupposition of meaning as reference.

Hans Frei calls this development "the eclipse of biblical narrative." To draw out the metaphor, the consequence of this shift to meaning as reference has placed biblical narrative behind a shadow that has cut off its light. One of the ironies of history is, therefore, that the emergence of the light of reason in the Enlightenment resulted in the eclipse of biblical narrative. In the aftermath of "meaning as reference," the narratives no longer have meaning as narratives but only as sources of history or theology. Furthermore, any possibility of figural meaning to the stories has been eliminated. One of the results of this development has been the divorce of the story of the Bible from the experience of persons and communities. Any direct connection between my/our story and the stories of the Bible has been rendered suspect and inappropriate.

A further result has been the divorce of the people from the biblical narrative tradition. Since the stories have meaning only as a reference source, only those persons who can handle the complicated systems of historical critical study are capable of meaningful interpretation of the stories. As a result, a chasm has developed between the clergy and laity of the church which is, in turn, a symptom of the even broader chasm between biblical scholarship and the church.

However, the reemergence of biblical narrative cannot happen through a return to the precritical world prior to the Enlightenment. This reemergence can only take place through the development of an approach that grows out of the paradigm of historical criticism. The foundational proposal of this journal is that the reemergence of biblical narrative can be facilitated by the development of biblical storytelling as a natural outgrowth of historical critical study. Telling the narratives of the Bible is both a natural conclusion of the foundational methods of historical critical study and a critique that indicates new directions in which those methods need to be pursued.

The sources of biblical storytelling in the basic methods of historical critical study can be identified in form criticism, redaction criticism, rhetorical criticism, and literary criticism. In each case, the new directions to which biblical storytelling points will also be outlined.

Form Criticism

The purpose of form criticism was to understand the formation of the narrative traditions of Israel and early Christianity by the processes or "laws" of oral tradition. Before the narratives were written down, they circulated as oral narratives. Through the study of oral narrative traditions in various cultures, it became clear that there were definite characteristics to oral tradition. Oral traditions had certain forms that remained consistent across the various strata of narratives. By identifying the characteristics of those forms, it was possible to trace the history of a particular tradition through its oral and written developments. It was also recognized that particular forms have specific functions in the life setting of the community: e.g., psalms of ascent were sung as the king or high priest ascended up the hill to the Temple.

The founder of form criticism was Hermann Gunkel. A steady emphasis in Gunkel's work was that the narrative traditions of Israel must be heard in order to be understood. That is, we need to enter into the oral tradition. However, form critical research since Gunkel has been pursued almost exclusively with the methods of documentary analysis. A major purpose of biblical storytelling is then to address the problem of how we, as persons formed by the cultures of literacy, enter into the oral tradition processes that formed the narratives.

In New Testament study, the pioneers of form critical research were Martain Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann. In both instances, but particularly that of Bultmann, form criticism was a tool for the analysis of the history of the tradition in relation to its theological and historical significance. There was no interest on their part in understanding the stories as stories. Furthermore, there was no emphasis on the need to hear the stories in order to understand them. Because of the way form criticism developed in relation to New Testament narratives there is an even greater need to enter into the oral character of the narratives.

Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism focused on the role of the final editors in the composition of biblical narratives. In form critical research, the contribution of the final editors was generally seen as the arrangement of the fully formed stories of the oral tradition into a long literary narrative. They were like craftsmen stringing polished pearls into necklaces. In the works of redaction critics Willi Marxsen and Hans Conzelmann, it was shown that the final editors shaped the narratives extensively. A major value of redaction criticism has been to study biblical narratives as whole books rather than as isolated individual traditions. Furthermore, in observing the character of their editing of the tradition, it is then possible to identify the theological tendencies of their revision. It thereby became possible to isolate and describe the theology of the final editors.

Biblical storytelling is a development of redaction criticism in that it focuses on whole books of the Bible rather than just as individual fragments of tradition. But instead of studying these narratives as documents, biblical storytelling approaches them as oral narratives that were intended to be heard and read or told. Furthermore, biblical storytelling calls attention to the role of the final editors as storytellers who shaped the final narrative as stories rather than exclusively as theology. The final editors were not writing theology. They were writing story. And their assumption was that their stories would be read aloud as stories. Thus, it is appropriate that we focus on the meaning of their stories as stories rather than exclusively as theology.

Rhetorical Criticism

In his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1968, James Muilenburg proposed that we need to go beyond form criticism and its concentration on types. The weakness of form criticism is its failure to give sufficient attention to the particularity of the use of the forms in individual stories. (Muilenburg, 1-18) What is needed is the study of the patterns and devices by which the units are formulated and ordered into a unified whole. Muilenburg called for the need to pay attention not only to literary types but also to "the techniques of narrative and poetic composition." (Muilenburg, 10) A dimension of Muilenburg's proposal is a call for seeing the forms of biblical narratives as more than an extrinsic factor or cause in their development. The forms or techniques of the narrative are an integral part of the whole narrative to be understood in their particularity.

Biblical storytelling is a development of these emphases of rhetorical criticism. In the learning and telling of biblical narratives, the techniques of storytelling composition can be identified and experienced. Furthermore, these elements of the story are known as rhetorical dimensions of the story.

One of the fruits of rhetorical - critical study of biblical narratives is the identification of the particular units of composition of the narratives. The hypothesis that has emerged from my own research on the units of biblical narrative is that the stories are composed of episodes. The episode is a flexible literary unit of two, three or four sentences with characteristic marks of beginnings and endings. A further hypothesis is that the episode was the primary story unit at all stages of the tradition from the early oral narratives to the final literary stages. Identification of the original episodes, which made it easy for the stories to be remembered and retold, also facilitates the memorizing and retelling of the stories now.

In fact, it was in Muilenburg's introduction to the Old Testament course that I first heard the telling of biblical narratives. He introduced his students to the stories by telling them. I remember vividly his retelling of the creation story in Genesis 2-3. However, rhetorical criticism has developed almost exclusively as a method for the study of narrative and poetic techniques in a documentary medium. There has been virtually no study of the techniques of the biblical narrative tradition as an oral narrative tradition. A goal of this journal is, therefore, to enable an understanding of the rhetoric of biblical narrative to emerge out of telling and hearing biblical narratives as an approach to rhetorical critical study.

Literary/Narrative Criticism

The development of literary criticism in the study of biblical narrative has involved the use of approaches and methods that emerged in the study of literature. In particular, major currents in twentieth century literary criticism shifted from the extrinsic methods of the nineteenth century which sought to explain a work by identifying its causes to intrinsic study of the work itself. Intrinsic study of literature focused on particular works themselves and evaluated a work in its own integrity as more than the sum of its causes. In the study of narrative, this led to a description of the techniques of narrative and of the various ways these techniques can be used for different purposes in particular works: e.g., Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.

In biblical study, this methodology has been a reaction against the evolutionary models of historical criticism which have depended on the identification of the causes of the final work in the various stages of the tradition. Thus, form criticism identifies causal factors from the oral tradition period and redaction criticism from the editorial/documentary stage. Literary criticism of biblical narratives on the other hand has focused on the final form of the narratives such as the present Gospel of Mark and analyzed its characteristics as a narrative. These studies have focused on matters such as the narrator and his attitude or point of view, the characterizations in the narrative, and the plot. Through this analysis, the narratives of the Bible have been understood as narratives that have meaning as narratives rather than as didactic illustrations of theology.

Biblical storytelling is a development of this stream of literary criticism. Rather than beginning with an understanding of the causes of the final narrative, biblical storytelling begins with the experience of the final narrative as a story. Furthermore, biblical storytelling explores and then renders the attitudes of the storyteller, the characters of the story, and the turns in the plot through an actual telling of the story. The meaning of the stories is not then described in theological terms but is known holistically in the experience of the story itself. In this way, people come to know that the meaning of the story is more than the sum of its causes.

In turn, telling the stories sheds light on their characteristic as narratives. A primary problem of literary criticism is the degree to which it becomes trapped in the anachronism of treating ancient oral narratives as if they were modern novels. Indeed, the term "literary criticism" implies a literary culture with its characteristic action of reading a story by sitting alone and looking at the text in silence. Biblical narratives were written for oral performance, to be recited aloud either from memory or with a text. There is a need, therefore, to modify

the methods of literary criticism for the study of biblical narrative. In this process, biblical storytelling is an essential step.

Media Ages and Paradigm Shifts

Another major current in recent scholarship has been the study of the changes that take place in religion and culture with the development of new technologies of communication. Through the research of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, the recognition of the central role of media change in the history of culture has been established. Father Walter Ong and Werner Kelber have extended this understanding in the analysis of the history of Christianity. As a result of this research, we now know that changes in the dominant systems of communication are also periods of great change in biblical study and interpretation.

In fact, it appears that there is a direct correlation between the major changes in communications technology and the paradigms of biblical interpretation. Thus, Jesus' oral tradition interpretation of the tradition was transformed in the highly allegorical and doctrinal methods of interpretation in the manuscript world of the patristic and medieval church. The four-fold exegesis of medieval biblical interpretation was in turn transformed by the literal/figural methods of the Reformers which coincided with the development of the printing press. Historical critical exegesis and meaning as reference developed in the period of silent reading when documents were studied in silence rather than read aloud. Thus, we now know that media change creates radically new situations for biblical study and interpretation.

On the one hand, therefore, biblical storytelling can be a resource for biblical interpretation by making it possible to experience biblical materials in their original medium to some greater degree. This is needed because of our tendency to read back into the ancient world our media presuppositions and experiences. Thus, the notion that the so-called editors of the Pentateuch and the Gospels functioned like nineteenth newspaper editors clipping or copying materials from various documents to mock up the daily newsheet is clearly anachronistic. However, apart from experiences of the material in its original medium, it is hard to conceive the character of ancient composition.

Another potential contribution of biblical storytelling, however, is to provide a framework for the interpretation of the Bible in an electronic age. We now live in the period of the highest degree of change in communications technology since the first century. The problem is that we continue to use the methods of interpretation that were developed for the silent print world of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The shift from the predominantly oral culture of the biblical period to the literate culture of the Hellenistic world was an enormous transition. The shift from the literate culture of the modern world to the post-literate post-modern electronic world is at least as major a transition. The reappropriation of the original oral character of the Bible may be an essential step in making it possible to get some distance on the Bible in the world of reading and writing and to interpret the Bible faithfully in radio, television, and film.

The establishment of a journal to accomplish an electronic agenda is in one sense a contradiction. Why publish a journal about oral and electronic interpretation of biblical

stories? The reason is that it is needed for detailed sharing of research results, for critical reflection on biblical storytelling, and for the extension and resourcing of a network of biblical storytellers. However, this journal will take a very different form than that of academic journals in the past. Both its format and its contents will reflect a new agenda for the study of biblical narrative. But this agenda is in direct continuity with the major developments in historical critical biblical study during the last century.

The hope is that this journal will contribute to the reemergence of biblical narrative from behind the shadow of the reduction of its meaning to a reference source for the construction of history and theology. The recovery of the vitality of the biblical storytelling tradition in the context of the electronic age may be one way that this reemergence can take place.

However, this will only emerge from the rediscovery of the oral sources of the tradition. A dimension of the development of The Network of Biblical Storytellers is then to enter into that experience of the narratives of the Bible as narratives to be memorized, heard, and experienced in community. Thus, the basic principles of form criticism are being continued in the work of NOBS.

This journal will also seek to encourage and make available a new relationship between historical critical studies of biblical narratives as narratives and the church. It will do this by encouraging the publication of the stories of appropriate connections that have emerged in the telling of biblical stories with the stories of persons and communities in the modern world. The journal will thereby include contributions from the people of the faith community as well as pastors and scholars.