



Literary Competence and Biblical Authority

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The story is told of a young boy who returned home from church one Sunday morning and, over lunch, talked with his parents about the events of the day. “And what did you study in Sunday school today, John?” asked his mother. “We learned about Daniel,” he replied, “about Daniel and his houses.” The devout lady knew quite a bit about the book of Daniel, but she had never heard of Daniel’s houses. She inquired further. “You know, Mom,” urged the boy, “Daniel and his houses—my shack, your shack, and a bungalow.”

We may only imagine whether the life of this devoutly Christian family was changed forever by the revelation that, unexpectedly, the Bible had something definitive to say about appropriate Christian housing. More likely, a better reading of the Scriptures ultimately prevailed, once the parents had recovered their composure and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were restored to their rightful forms and significance. I mention the story only because it illustrates an obvious truth about biblical interpretation: that those who care greatly about the Bible’s *authority* must necessarily care greatly about the Bible’s proper *meaning*. They must think carefully about how this “proper meaning” is to be arrived at, so that they are found to be giving the biblical text its own voice rather than simply reading *out of* the Bible what they have first brought *to* it. Only thus can the Bible have authority over the reader, rather than vice versa.

If we care greatly about the Bible’s authority, we must also care greatly about the Bible’s proper meaning. Appropriate authority is dependent upon competent reading.

It is of course for this reason that over the course of time various rules of Bible reading have been developed that are designed to guide Bible readers as to proper and improper ways of reading the Bible. Such rule-governed biblical interpretation has in turn been given a name: “hermeneutics.” We hear God’s word addressed to us through the Scriptures, which represent (if we are Protestant Christians) our final authority in all matters of Christian faith and life, as we bring our hermeneutics to bear upon them in dependence upon the Holy Spirit and in the context of the community of faith.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

At the heart of the discipline of biblical hermeneutics lies what we may call “literary competence.” The Bible that speaks to us from God is literature. More precisely, it is a *body* or *library* of literature. It is one book, and yet also many books; and the many books are of many different types or genres. The Bible is narrative, yet it is also poem and proverb. The many different types of books contain within them many different kinds of individual texts, and they employ a great diversity of literary conventions. To hear God speaking, all these texts must be understood for what they are—and for what they are *not*. We affirm, for example, that Ps 98:8 is part of Holy Scripture: “Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy”; but we do not wish to find ourselves also affirming that we encounter here factual information about the physical anatomy of floods or hills, or about their capacity for participation in our Sunday worship services. We do not wish to find ourselves misunderstanding what is *meant* as a result of adopting an insufficiently curious attitude toward what is *said* and *how* it is said (in this case, metaphorically). Biblical hermeneutics must therefore give careful attention to the type of text with which it is dealing, as it seeks to affirm what God is saying (and meaning) through the human words on the pages of this literature.

This inevitably involves biblical hermeneutics in historical study; for the many-books-in-one were written in places that are foreign to most of us and over a lengthy period that predates our own history by between two thousand and four thousand years; and language is always intrinsically connected with time and place. We cannot assume that the literary conventions of the ancients, their mode of writing—indeed, even their view of authorship and books—were the same as ours. Only historical study brings clarity here, as the biblical texts are considered together as ancient texts and located within and measured against their times and their cultures, and their similarities to and differences from comparable texts come to full light.

This kind of study has often been called “historical-critical” study, and the label has caused discomfort among Christians who think that it is wrong to “criticize the Bible.” In its proper sense, however, “historical criticism” refers simply to the employment of the mind in inquiring into the nature and meaning of the biblical texts as historical artifacts. It would be quite wrong to be “against” historical criti-

cism thus conceived, for “to deny that the Bible should be studied through the use of literary and critical methodologies is to treat the Bible as less than human, less than historical, and less than literature,”¹ and it is not clear on what grounds one would wish to do that. One would have thought, on the contrary, that Christian readers of the Bible would wish to discover as much as they can about the biblical texts in their historical context precisely in order to hear God speak more clearly through them and to avoid misunderstanding God’s word. The Bible is of course *more* than “literature,” in terms of how Christians regard it, but at the same time, it is not *less* than “literature”—and the literary competence that we require to read it

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well is the same kind of competence that we require to read any literature well. It is just that it is particularly important to read the Bible well because of what we believe about its status as Scripture; and historical criticism is a necessary tool in the pursuit of such literary competence with respect to the Bible, on the way to solid biblical interpretation. For example, the modern reader faced with Josh 10:40—Joshua “left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed”—might well wish to insist that this text authoritatively establishes that Joshua did indeed, quite literally, leave no Canaanite alive in the Promised Land as he marched through it and fought battles in it. This reading of the text then causes great difficulty for the person who knows enough to know that other biblical texts (including other parts of Joshua!) suggest that many Canaanites in fact survived his onslaught. Our modern reader has paid attention to the words on the page but has not taken sufficient time to reflect on how those words are to be properly understood in terms of what the original author meant by them back in an earlier historical period. Both the biblical and some extra-biblical texts suggest, in fact, that we must understand such language as the customary language of ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts, which tended toward the hyperbolic.² This apparently sweeping statement should be understood to mean simply that “Joshua won a massive victory”; and read in this way, the problem of correlating Josh 10:40 with other biblical texts disappears.

LITERARY COMPETENCE AND OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE

Remaining with Old Testament biblical narrative by way of example, a good starting point in pursuing literary competence might be to ask this question: What is the general character of Old Testament narrative? Not all narrative has the same

¹David A. Black and David S. Dockery, *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 14.

²K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990).

character, as we can readily understand simply by considering our own experience of reading different narratives. It is important, then, to ask about the overall character of Old Testament narrative, so that we do not bring mistaken expectations to our reading of it and do not misunderstand particulars through misunderstanding the general. In this regard, three things stand out about Old Testament narratives in general. They are scenic; they are subtle; and they are succinct.³

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Old Testament narratives are scenic in the way that a stage play involves scenes; they do more showing than telling. Readers are seldom explicitly told by the biblical narrator how characters or actions are to be evaluated, but are rather shown the characters acting and speaking and are thereby drawn into the story and challenged to reach their own evaluative judgments. That is, the reader gets to know the characters in the narrative in much the same way as in real life, by watching what they do and listening to what they say.

Old Testament narratives are subtle in that, reticent to make their points directly, they employ various more indirect means in developing the narrative’s characterizations and in focusing readerly attention on the aspects of the narrative that are most important. Mention of physical details, for instance, is seldom random (for example, that Absalom was a very handsome man, 2 Sam 14:25–26), and we should anticipate that such details in some way serve the characterizations or the action of the story. Sometimes the words or deeds of one character serve as indirect commentary on those of another. Sometimes even quite small changes in the narrator’s commentary on events have far-reaching implications.

Old Testament narratives are succinct in that (to use the analogy of painting) biblical narrators tend to try to accomplish the greatest degree of definition and color with the fewest brushstrokes. Their economy of expression is illustrated among other things by their use of repetition—of words and word stems, motifs, similar situations (sometimes called “type-scenes”), and the like. The effect of repetition is often to underscore a central theme or concern in a narrative. The reader of the book of Jonah, for example, is bound to notice the constant recurrence of the Hebrew word גדול, “great, big,” which occurs fifteen times in the book. The city of Nineveh is big (1:2; 3:2, 3; 4:11); so is the wind that blows up to threaten Jonah’s boat (1:4), the fear that the pagan sailors display (1:10, 16), and the storm itself (1:12). The fish is also large (1:17). Jonah’s anger is great (4:1), and so is his joy at the plant that provides him shade (4:6). A considerable number of

³This section of the essay draws heavily upon Iain W. Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 91–93. Readers will find the entirety of chap. 4 of that book helpful with respect to the current discussion.

things are “big” in the book of Jonah! How are we to explain the liking for this adjective? Does it have a point? The competent reader will at least need to ask such questions, even if no answer is forthcoming.

Such is the general character of Old Testament narrative.⁴ This being so, Old Testament narrative is exhausting, but also engaging. It is *exhausting* because it requires our careful attention as readers. We need to give attention to the development of characters in the narratives so that we understand each part of their story in relation to who they have been before and where they are heading. We need to give attention to their words and to how those words are to be understood in relation to the words of other characters and in relation to the view of the narrator. We need to pay attention to what is implicit in the narrator’s words, as well as explicit. We need to consider the possible implications of such things as repetition and the possible significance of allusion. It requires hard work. But it carries its own reward, for Old Testament narrative is also thoroughly *engaging*. In its scenic, subtle, and succinct nature, it draws the reader into dialogue with it, asking: What do you make of this speech? What do you think of that person’s action? Do you hear that allusion, and what do you think it means? It is the very artistry of the text that thus engages the reader; and once this kind of process of reading is begun, it is borne along by its own momentum and indeed excitement at “making sense” of the story.⁵

LITERARY COMPETENCE AND THE BIBLICAL BOOK

Literary competence of the kind just illustrated in respect of Old Testament narrative is necessary not only at the level of the individual text or passage. It is also necessary at the level of each entire biblical book; of each individual Testament as a whole; and of the Christian Bible as a whole. Let me address each of these briefly in turn, from my own perspective as a teacher (mainly) of the Old Testament rather than the New.

Many of our biblical books evidently have a history to them, in the course of which the way individual texts were read undoubtedly changed; and the true meaning of individual texts is certainly bound up with their context. The book of Psalms, for example, evidently came into its present form over the course of considerable time and contains texts from the monarchic (e.g., Ps 2) as well as the exilic period (e.g., Ps 137) and perhaps beyond. Whereas a sentence in a psalm meant what it meant first to the author of that psalm, it may not have meant exactly the same to the compilers of the section of the Psalter in which the psalm now sits—and to the compiler of the whole Psalter. If Ps 1:3 proclaims, for example,

⁴For a broader introduction to the literary interpretation of the Bible, see Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1987). A useful reference book is Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III, eds., *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

⁵See further J. P. Fokkeman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), which helpfully presents a list of ten (groups of) questions designed to facilitate careful and competent reading of biblical narratives. These questions are also cited in Provan et al., *A Biblical History*, 90.

that in all that the righteous do they prosper, the meaning of that sentence for the first author of the psalm might reasonably be suggested to have been just that—in all that the righteous do they prosper. The meaning of the sentence for the compilers of the Psalter, on the other hand, is only arrived at via reflection on the present suffering of the righteous and the present prosperity of the wicked in other psalms (e.g., in Pss 37 and 73). Read with attention to its entire context in the Psalter, in other words, Ps 1:3 cannot be understood as telling the whole truth of the matter, at least in the sense that the reader might first have taken from it. The verse now affirms as a general truth that those who are obedient to God are blessed, but in a context which acknowledges that the obedient life all too often exists amid the reality of lament and complaint. Likewise, the proverb in Prov 26:4 (“Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself”) taken by itself might be understood (and perhaps once was meant) to prohibit the wise from answering fools according to their folly. It is currently followed in the book of Proverbs, however, with the advice: “Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes” (26:5). The whole truth of the matter from the perspective of the compilers of the book of Proverbs is that one must make a judgment in each case when asking whether one should answer a fool—for there are risks on all sides. The whole truth is, however, only perceived when one considers not just the single text, which offers only a limited perspective on the matter. A competent literary reading will take account of such things.

LITERARY COMPETENCE AND THE LARGER BIBLE

There is considerable evidence within our Old Testament, secondly, that as our biblical texts were coming into being, they were already being reflected upon and shaped in such a way as to encourage cross-referencing by future readers. Another way of putting this is to say that we find in the Old Testament a pronounced and obvious *intertextuality*, one text speaking to another and filling out another’s meaning and thus drawing the entire Old Testament story together into one cohesive unity. This means that in our reading of individual Old Testament texts and books, we must constantly be giving attention to the larger context—the Old Testament context—in which the texts and books are found. For example, 1 Kings 12 encourages the reader to read it against the background of the exodus narrative.⁶ The people have become once more a people under harsh labor, as they were in Egypt (Exod 1:14; 2:23). Rehoboam, king of Judah, takes a hard line in response to their complaints (1 Kings 12:8–11), behaving exactly as Pharaoh had behaved before him by increasing the oppression (cf. Exod 5:1–21). It is divinely ordained so. In the midst of all the human decisions, God’s decision is being carried through (1 Kings 12:15; Exod 4:21; 7:3–4, 13). Jeroboam, a second Moses, leads his people out from slavery. No sooner has the new exodus taken place, however, than it leads (like the first) to sin—to the worship of golden calves. Jeroboam, like Aaron (Exod

⁶See further Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 103–112.

32:1–35), makes gods for the people to worship in defiance of the Lord’s words at Mount Sinai (Exod 20:4). His words to them in 1 Kings 12:28 are almost exactly the words with which the people greet the construction of the first calf in Exod 32:4. His subsequent actions also recall Aaron. For Aaron, too, having made his golden calf, built an altar and announced a festival on a date of his own choosing (cf. Exod 32:5). These various allusions are designed to make us think about the significance of the division of the kingdoms in Israel in the context of earlier Israelite history, and to understand that Jeroboam’s “exodus” was really no journey to a promised land at all, but a dead end that resulted in the northern people of Israel being trapped in idolatry and political instability for generations. A competent literary reading will point out such realities and will thus help us to know how to *live*; for the larger Old Testament context helps us to know, for example, which aspects of a biblical character’s life are really designed for our imitation and which are not. Abraham was a man of faith—and also a polygamist and a slave owner. The wider Old Testament context of the Abraham narratives suggests that neither of the latter two aspects of Abraham’s life is intended for our imitation, but only his trust in God. Nehemiah was also a man of faith, but frankly somewhat of a tyrant when it came to enforcing his own interpretation of God’s law on the people of God and dealing with those who opposed him (Neh 13:25). This must be borne in mind as we plan our next sermon series on “seven steps to biblical leadership drawn from Ezra-Nehemiah.”

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The Old Testament, thirdly, is not for the Christian reader the largest biblical context in which reading must be competently carried out. Christian reading must read the Old Testament and the New Testament together. A competent reading of the book of Jonah, for example, begins (in my view) with the notion that it is a satirical tale about a prophet, and indeed about Israel, designed to provoke questions in the reader about Israel’s mission in the world, particularly with respect to her enemies. The book challenges Israel to be as gracious toward the world around it as God is. A fully canonical reading, however, needs to take account of the fact that history has moved on and that God’s New Testament people are not now a national entity but an international entity, both Jew and Gentile. As we read the text to hear God speak to *us* through its story, we need to keep that fact in mind. Now in fact, in the case of the book of Jonah, nothing much results from keeping that in mind. The people of God, the church, is still called to fulfill its mission in the world, which includes loving its enemies; it is still called to be as gracious toward the world around it as God is; and it still fails. There are other stories in the Old Testament, however, where remembering that we stand after Christ and not before him turns out to be more important. The life of the prophet Elijah, for example, is

in many ways a wonderful study of the life of faith; yet it is a life lived in a certain time and place that is not our time and place. Although there are many things to be learned from Elijah, therefore, the execution of our enemies (1 Kings 19) is not one of them.

To sum up: those who care greatly about the Bible's *authority* must necessarily care greatly about the Bible's proper *meaning*, and the elucidation of that meaning requires literary competence at various levels of Bible reading—at the level of the individual text or passage, whose general character must be grasped and its specificities identified against its historical background; at the level of the individual biblical book, within which context the individual text or passage must first be read; and at the higher levels still of the individual Testament and the whole Bible, which set the parameters ultimately for faith and action. All of this implies, of course, that to interpret the authoritative Scriptures well the interpreter must be *literate*, in the broadest sense—that is, she or he must have a capacity to read, and to read well, the different sorts of biblical literature encountered. This comment raises the prospect of a different essay, which I have not on this occasion been invited to write: an essay on biblical authority and Christian education. It is not by accident that the churches arising out of the Reformation, with their emphasis on *sola scriptura*, have historically been primary advocates and organizers of education for everyone. The Reformers understood that reading the Bible well required education—not least because the ability to read itself was the necessary prerequisite of Bible reading. We now live in a world, on the other hand, in which many factors currently conspire against literacy in general, even where people are technically capable of reading words on pages. Literary competence certainly cannot be taken for granted, even in general terms; and if people cannot read well in general, it stands to reason that they will not be able to read the Bible well in particular. In such a situation there is a need for the revival of serious Christian education—education that will not so much tell people what to think *about* the Bible, but will rather enable them to reengage *with* the Bible along the lines pursued in this essay. If, for example, Old Testament narrative is exhausting but also engaging, it is surely no part of the minister's task to try to intervene between the Bible and the congregation in order to make it less so. The task is surely to facilitate the exhaustion and the engagement, so that God may speak to people through the Scriptures as they experience both realities. The task is to teach literary competence with respect to the Bible as much as it is to preach the Bible's message, so that the sheep in our various flocks are not only hearing the word but also themselves reading it with understanding. ⊕

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