



## Desire and Promise in Genesis

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If we happen to pick up the bible and begin reading Genesis just after finishing a novel, we are immediately aware that we are in a radically different literary world. It is difficult to say exactly what the difference is, however. People describe the style of the biblical narrative as “economical,” or “epic,” or perhaps as “realistic,” but none of these terms assists us much in bridging the gap between the experience of reading the typical modern literary work and the experience of reading Genesis. I would like to attempt to bridge that gap by comparing some of the features that engage our reading of modern narratives with their specific counterparts in Genesis. In this way perhaps it will be possible to see more clearly how we have to adjust our expectations as readers when we pick up this ancient text. Perhaps it will also help us see more clearly the extent to which modern narratives have carried forward some of the features of biblical narrative writing.

### I. THE LURE OF DESIRE

Desire is the engine that moves most narratives. This is because, as one recent literary critic puts it, “to be in a body is to experience desire.”<sup>1</sup> We, as readers, learn of desires when the narrator presents an appealing object to the protagonist and relates how that object seduces the protagonist into an adventure. Along with the protagonist, the reader is similarly seduced into the adventure of reading. Since

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<sup>1</sup>Philip M. Weinstein, *The Semantics of Desire: Changing Models of Identity from Dickens to Joyce* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1984) 3.

some of these dynamics are evident in the early narratives of Genesis, it is illuminating to view them in the wider context of other more recent narratives in western literature.

A classic example of how the mechanism of desire works in narratives is found in Tolkien’s beloved tale, *The Hobbit*.<sup>2</sup> After the narrator establishes the comfortable and secure domestic world of Mr. Bilbo Baggins, the protagonist, a wizard and twelve dwarfs pay him an unexpected visit for tea. When he hears their song of adventure to regain “the pale enchanted gold” from the evil dragon Smaug, the narrator tells us that he “felt the love of beautiful things made by hands and by cunning and by magic moving through him, a fierce and jealous love, the desire of the hearts of dwarves.”<sup>3</sup> The passion of the dwarves, inspiring imitation, swept through him upon hearing their song and his long dormant lust for adventure is reawakened. After a promise that a portion of the treasure will be his, the remainder of the narrative is given over to Baggins’s adventure to fulfill this passionate desire by assisting the dwarves to regain their stolen

treasure. The words which the narrator uses to describe the seduction of Mr. Baggins into this adventure have the same effect on the reader, and we are off with him on this crusade to right an ancient wrong and gain glittering treasure.

Of course, the desire driving the protagonist is not always portrayed by narrators in such positive light. Mary Shelley's story of Dr. Frankenstein provides us with a marvelous example of a narrative driven by desires the narrator rejects as Promethean.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Frankenstein, who is made to narrate his own story retrospectively, tells us how he was consumed by the question, "Whence...did the principle of life proceed?" His courageous research soon led him to the knowledge which was, "the summit of my desires." He then tells us that he was consumed with the desire to use this knowledge to achieve a godlike power by the creation of a human being: "No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through....A new species would bless me as its creator and source."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the author/narrator, writing retrospectively, intends to show the reader how the consummation of his transgressive desire becomes the occasion for great pain and disillusionment. After the quick fulfillment of this initial illegitimate desire, Dr. Frankenstein's ungainly creation escapes the laboratory and is responsible for two deaths from among the ambitious doctor's family. Mary Shelley then fills her protagonist with a second consuming desire arising out of remorse over the great mistake he has made—the desire to find this monster he had created and wreak vengeance upon him so that he would not continue to prey upon humanity.

<sup>2</sup>J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (1937; reprint, New York: Ballantine, 1973).

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 27, 28.

<sup>4</sup>Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1831; reprint, New York: New American Library, 1965).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 52.

The narrative then comes to be shaped by this new desire as Dr. Frankenstein pursues his misbegotten creation.

This desire is not to be fulfilled, however, since part of Shelley's purpose is to explore the tragic implications of both of Dr. Frankenstein's desires, rather than to satisfy him and the reader with their consummation. Nevertheless, the dynamics of his conflicting desires drive the action and attract the interest of the reader to the end.

Some of the same dynamics in these novels are to be found also in Genesis, beginning with the narrative of the garden of Eden in chapters 2 and 3. We learn at the outset that the mode of the human characters' relation to the trees of the garden will be that of desire. The narrator tells us in 2:9 that Yahweh Elohim has placed trees in the garden that are "desirable [*nehmad*] to be seen [*lema'reh*]" and good for eating. Among these are the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Later, after the serpent's seductive speech to Eve, the narrator portrays her as "seeing" [*watere'*] that the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was "good for eating" and also "desirable" [*nehmad*] "to behold" [*lehaskil*].

The problem is, of course, that a divine prohibition against eating from this desirable tree of knowledge has been given in the interim, distinguishing this tree from the others of the garden.

The reader knows that Eve's seeing and desiring are displacing the prohibition in her consciousness. Her transgressive desire will now become the motive force which drives this narrative forward. But the reader also is a silent witness, subject to the same thoughts as she. As we are seduced into reading on, like Adam, we silently show our readerly susceptibility to the forbidden fruit.

Already we can see that this is a narrative which has more affinity with Shelley's novel than Tolkien's. Desire, for Shelley, is tragically Promethean and not the springboard to heroism. Though it serves as the engine driving the plot, Shelley does not heartily embrace it as does Tolkien (after only an amusing effort by Baggins to resist).

But if a narrative takes a disparaging view of desire, how can it motivate the protagonist in a way that will retain the interest of the reader and lead to a satisfying closure? To be sure, this is a serious problem for both the writer and reader of this type of narrative. Mary Shelley, after showing Dr. Frankenstein's quick success in achieving his transgressive object of desire, is left with a protagonist with whom readers cannot identify. So after showing the dire consequences of Dr. Frankenstein's action both for himself and others, she partially solves this problem by having the monster move into the protagonist's position and tell his own story. This murderous, loathsome creature that we have learned to hate through Frankenstein's eyes then turns out to be extraordinarily eloquent in presenting the pathos and injustice of his own situation. In his Adamic plea for a companion, he is more capable of eliciting the sympathy of the reader than Dr. Frankenstein. Yet he is a multiple murderer, and thus cannot be permitted actually to displace Frankenstein as the protagonist.

Mary Shelley thus presents us with two tragically flawed central characters

neither of whom can be allowed to see their desires happily realized. But with a monster loose, some kind of decisive closure must be achieved. This type of dilemma lends itself to a melodramatic and contrived ending. Dr. Frankenstein pursues his enemy into the arctic wastes where he loses him and dies in anguish over his failure to wreak revenge upon his creation. The monster, despairing over his impossible situation, finally disappears into the arctic wilds intending to immolate himself. Fortunately, but most improbably, a ship appears amidst the vast ice floes of the arctic circle at just the right time for each to tell his story to the ship's captain before he dies.

How then does the book of Genesis present a coherent plot that avoids such a melodramatic ending when the human desire motivating the action is presented in a similarly negative light? At first we are treated to repeated and escalating examples of the tragic consequences to which transgressive desire quickly leads for the family, for society and nature, and even for language. But, unlike Shelley's narrative, the span between the entrance of the motivating desire and its tragic culmination is extremely short—only one verse in the Eden story, about three verses in the Cain and Abel story, one verse in the flood story, and two verses in the story of the tower of Babel.

This rather brief trajectory of desire, from emergence to culmination and tragic consequences, shows that the biblical writer is not going to use the movement of desire from inception to fulfillment as a fundamental strategy for presenting an extended tale. Though initially seducing the interest of the reader by briefly representing the desires of the protagonists,

he is not going to tantalize the reader again and again by deferring the acquisition of the object of desire with the introduction of a series of clever evil opponents and physical obstacles that must first be overcome. But neither is he going to prolong the ending by tracing the plight of the protagonist through a lengthy pursuit of an evil desire only to reach a tragic end, as Mary Shelley does in *Frankenstein*.

The parts of the narrative that are extended and elaborated are the investigation of the crime (Gen 3:8-13; 4: 9-10) and to an even greater extent the description of the punishment (Gen 3:14-24; 4:11-16; 6:13-8:19; 11:6-9). In the flood narrative the punishment becomes very lengthy and so devastating in its cosmic scope that it has required the emergence of a positive distinguishing role for a human character (Noah's building of the ark) to avoid having the story reach a premature end. The negative divine covenant at the conclusion of this story, assuring humanity that there will not be a second watery apocalypse (9:8-17), foreshadows the new plot to follow, one founded on a positive promise rather than a negative prohibition.

The phase of desire in these stories is thus overshadowed by the early introduction and extended description of the tragic consequences to which transgressive desires lead. Rather than being urged forward by desire, the reader, after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, is rather motivated by curiosity about how much worse things can get as a consequence of escalating transgressions. Since they get worse fast, this is obviously not a narrative strategy that can be sustained very long. The heavy moralism of escalating divine judgements exhausts

itself rapidly to make way for a new type of plot that transcends the tragic dynamics of plots driven by transgressive desires.

## II. THE WAY OF PROMISE

The new motivating factor is introduced in Genesis 12 in the form of a divine promise coupled with a mandate. This intrusion of the divine promise reconfigures the fundamental dynamics of narrative development. The prohibition in Genesis 2 makes the restraint of human desire the central issue of the plot. Transgressive desire that violates the prohibition is thus the type of action that enables the plot to unfold. The plot is thus structured so that the positive, assertive, individuating aspects of the human character find expression only in transgressive acts which bring the human character into conflict with God. Faith in the prohibition would only lead to passive obedience—hardly the type of response which can set a plot in motion.

Now this divine voice enters the world of the narrative again, bearing a promise coupled with a positive mandate. The positive human desires for children, posterity, security, and a great name are now made the contents of the divine promise that will become effective if Abram leaves the security of his homeland and enters upon a life of wandering under the direction of the divine voice (Gen 12:1-3). In contrast to the previous prohibition, this promising voice opens a new possibility that the narrative may move forward on the basis of a positive act of faith.

Individuation now becomes possible within a positive relation to the divine word. Rather than being driven by desire for the forbidden objects present in his imagination, Abram's action will arise from his relationship of faith with the God who promises. Faith in the word of promise thus displaces the objects of a transgressive imagination at the center of the protagonist's motivations. But desire for material objects is not totally suppressed or sacrificed in the interest

of pure spirituality, as happened sometimes in other religions. Spirituality and materiality are not juxtaposed as opposites. The fulfillment of the promised material desires now represents the consequence of the life of faith. Genesis thus locates the subjectivity of faith in the ambiguous space between materiality and spirituality, between sensuality and asceticism, between presentism and eschatology. This ambiguity is rooted in the paradox of the experience of a promisee who lacks the objects of his desire in the present, and yet already possesses them “in faith.”

It is the tension created by this paradox and ambiguity, rather than unfulfilled desire, that now serves as the energy driving and motivating the actions of the protagonist and engaging the interest of the reader. But because there is no fantastical object of desire to lure the reader on, the text frustrates the reader’s own desires and demands a different level of engagement with the question of meaning.

Rather than being hypnotically enthralled with the unfulfilled desires of the protagonist, we, as readers, find our need for a desiring protagonist thrown into question and the process of reading begins to provoke self-examination. Thus

what appear to be rather simple stories have the annoying affect of leaving readers with the feeling that we have missed something. We return again and again to these stories looking for something to engage our desires, even our desire for a simple moral example, only to be continually frustrated in a way not unlike a koan that frustrates a Japanese Buddhist seeking its meaning. At their center is ambiguity and paradox.

But there may be a reason for this frustration of our normal reading patterns. The narrative that relies primarily on appeal to the reader’s own desiring imagination confirms our narcissistic tendency to view the world as an extension of ourselves, and to find evil largely embodied in those people and circumstances that are opposed to our wishes. But as one critic acutely observes, this “desire is directed toward ideal representations which remain forever beyond the subject’s reach.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps one of the motives generating our thirst to read such narratives is that in a narrative, at least, the world may be bent to the image of narcissistic desires and we as readers can vicariously enjoy the kind of satisfaction that we can never experience in life.

The Genesis narrative does not play upon these hallucinatory desires, but instead provides us with a type of reading that provokes us to reject our enthrallment to our imaginative fantasies. This may account in part for the feeling of many that Genesis reads more like history than fiction. Faith in the promise has thus displaced desire as the fundamental motivating force of the narrative, though desire is still present as a counterpossibility to faith. No longer does the plot require that the protagonist give himself over either to socially approved desire for glory and material reward or to transgressive desire in the pursuit of socially condemned ends. Desire is now to be played off against faith within the protagonist. This transforms the crucial battleground from that of an external conflict with opponents to one of an internal struggle between faith and desire. The protagonist is no longer either a virtuous hero or an evil villain, but an ambiguous human being shaped by a great promise.

### III. A NEW TYPE OF HERO

It is in the figure of Abram that we find this new type of hero most completely realized. Abram is a character “fraught with background,” as Eric Auerbach put it.<sup>7</sup> He is inwardly conflicted as faith struggles with the impulses of desire.

Abram moves from desire to faith accepting the objects of desire given him in the divine promise as, in a sense, already his possessions. By possessing them in faith he does not experience life as empty and is not therefore driven by the anxiety to fill this emptiness, as are characters in the average novel or even the protagonist of the average folktale. Rather than seeking to secure his identity through actions

<sup>6</sup>Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University, 1983) 176.

<sup>7</sup>Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957) 9.

that will retain and enhance his material power, his action in obedience to the divine mandate is to renounce nearly all the present material security in his homeland and to go forth toward an unknown destination with his direction and future destiny to be revealed to him by this promising voice.

His actions flow out of the fullness of faith rather than out of the emptiness of desire. The positive action which accompanies faith is the opposite of that which arises from desire. Whereas the “promise” of action based in desire is to fill the inner void with some form of external security, promissory faith requires action which puts external material security at risk on the basis of an uncertain promissory word. The hero of faith is not the one who risks everything to gain the prize through an exercise of power, but one who, because he already possesses the “prize,” in faith, risks everything by giving up his security, thereby moving to the vulnerable margins of society. By vesting his security in promissory faith rather than structures of power or the pursuit of power, his story often arises from tensions caused by vulnerability, marginality, and doubt.

This produces a protagonist with a degree of ambiguity in his character. When he lies to the pharaoh about his wife’s identity (Gen 12:10ff.), is this already a loss of faith, as some commentators have argued? Has desire for survival triumphed already over faith in this prototype of the man of faith? Or is a troublesome distinction being made between the desire for survival on the journey of faith and the transgressive desires of the narcissistic imagination?

It is the ambiguous intermixture of faith and desire that defines Abraham in this story, and it is thus to this ambiguous inner condition of the reader that the story can speak. No clear and simple moral examples are offered. The more we examine this story the more Abram withdraws into the concrete uniqueness of his situation leaving us similarly with the uniqueness of our situation where desire and faith are inextricably intertwined but demanding decision.

The movement of this narrative is thus not the movement of a tightly woven, desire-driven plot centering on a conflict between heroes and villains and climaxing in a denouement predetermined by the author. Starting with Genesis 12, the reader is not led forward by the keen passion to see desire reach its fulfillment. Though the hero does face threats and obstacles, we do not race through the pages to see how he escapes the next threat or overcomes the next opponent in his struggle to attain his goal. The writers have not made it so easy for us. This is, as the literary critic Roland Barthes has described, a “writerly text,” i.e., a more loosely

organized and open text that requires a deeper level of participation on the part of the reader to fathom its meaning. The question is rather how can this protagonist resist taking more forceful action to fulfill his desires (Genesis 13)? Or why does he adopt such a suspicious strategy in order to save his life (Gen 12:10-20)? What is he thinking about this promised end as he waits through the decades with not even the flicker of a sign that the fulfillment is beginning (Gen 15:1-6)? Why doesn't Yahweh fulfill his promises?

The interest of stories such as these is in the inwardness of Abram, in the understanding that leads him to scheme and to make risky decisions, as well as in

the enigma of this promising deity who delays so long the fulfillment of his promises. The mysterious character of this protagonist and the voice which speaks to him is developing before our eyes as we read. And when we get to Genesis 22 and find that the first sign of that fulfillment, a son, must be sacrificed in obedience to the command of the deity who promised such a son, we are thrown into even more of a quandary about both parties.<sup>8</sup>

We thus encounter here a new narrative strategy by which the end of a story may be extensively delayed without interposing a series of enemies and obstacles between a desiring protagonist and the objects of his desire. Instead we are led on as readers by a twofold uncertainty regarding both the protagonist's faith and the reliability of this mystical promise embodying his greatest desires. In the same way that obstacles and enemies delay the attainment by the protagonist of her objects of desire in some narratives, here the end is delayed by the failure of the promising divine voice to fulfill what he has promised the protagonist and by the actions taken by the protagonist and other figures that threaten the protagonist and the faith-relation with the promising deity. The narrative can be extended as long as the divine does not fulfill the promise, and as long as the protagonist survives and maintains faith in the promise in spite of the delay in fulfillment. But such a lengthy deferral of the end subtly shifts the center of the narrative away from the fulfillment time to the deeper inner struggles of life lived amid the ambiguities and uncertainties of the present. In this way the narrative form is brought into the service of a deeper religious vision of history.

Reading Genesis thus requires the reader, as it does the protagonist, to defer the need for objects of desire to tantalize us and for wicked opponents to make us fear. Rather we are drawn into faith's inner struggle with the desire for action and immediate gratification, its struggle with the deeper uncertainties posed by the ambiguous form of spirituality—between the spiritual and the material, the temporal and the eternal—called forth by this promissory voice.

<sup>8</sup>For a more complete treatment of this passage and others, along with an explanation of the theoretical basis for this type of analysis, see Hugh C. White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991).

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