Walsh, Jerome T.

*Old Testament Narrative: A Guide to Interpretation*


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Within the last thirty years, biblical studies has quietly undergone an evolution in matters of method. Whereas historical-critical methodologies used to reign supreme, their hegemony can no longer be so easily assumed. The advent of literary criticism and literary approaches to the Bible has allowed for a number of new interpretative postures that commentators may assume. It is not enough now to probe *behind* the text to an oftentimes numinous history of the text or its various traditions. A number of interpreters are now probing *within* the text, reading it closely as an intentional narrative, and interpreting the world *in the text* rather than the world *behind the text*.

process of examining how a text means. That dearth has begun to be remedied by the volume presently under review.

Jerome Walsh, Professor of Old Testament at the University of Botswana and the University of Dallas, endeavors to provide a readable guidebook for how one interprets Old Testament narrative from a literary perspective. Paying particular attention to matters of plot, characters and characterization, point of view, ambiguity, repetition, among a host of other literary conventions, Walsh introduces his audience to the rich and multifaceted literary character of the biblical text, specifically Old Testament narrative. Walsh states in the introduction that he presumes his readers have no level of facility with literary criticism, biblical languages, or classical biblical criticism. Rather, as has increasingly been the case in the development of literary approaches to the text, Walsh foregrounds the experience and assumptions of the reader who reads the text. Two assumptions related to the reader typify his study: “narrative texts attempt to evoke responses from readers” (xii), and “readers are not unworked clay that authors can sculpt into any shapes they choose” (xii). These two notices, says Walsh, unlock the proper way to do narrative analysis; it is incorrect simply “to learn a catalogue of narrative techniques, search for their presence in the text, and in that way figure out what response the author is seeking to elicit from a reader” (xii–xiii). The reader, conversely, must remain open to the transformative and world-making power of the text itself; in so doing, says Walsh, we are reading the text, but the text is also reading us.

The book is divided into eleven chapters and three appendices. Each chapter addresses a particular component of the narrative-critical enterprise, and the three appendices contain sustained examples of how to do literary criticism of this sort based upon three differing biblical texts: the Jeroboam story (1 Kgs 11:26–14:20), the Elijah story (17:1–19:21), and the Ahab story (20:1–22:40). At the conclusion of each individual chapter, Walsh presents a list of guided/guiding questions to his reader—who presumably is reading with a biblical text also in hand—that covers the particular topic he treated in that chapter and invites the reader to put into practice what she or he has just learned in relation to each of these three texts. Additionally, Walsh utilizes the story of Solomon—when an example can be found—to illustrate how these particular tenets of narrative criticism are to be done. In the following review I have consciously bracketed out discussion or analysis of Walsh’s narrative-critical insights about each of these stories, not because they are unimportant but because that is not the purpose of this volume. I will instead focus most basically on what he says in reference to each piece of the narrative puzzle, then conclude with some evaluative comments.

Walsh treats two theoretical preliminaries in chapter 1. The operative question here is where meaning resides. Is it with the author (authorial intent), the text (the text means
what it says), or with the reader (the contemporary relevance and impact)? Walsh astutely
and rightly states that successful interpretation does not engage in a picking and choosing
of one of these over the other; all contain viable meaning and are worthy of investigation.
In this particular volume, however, Walsh emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between
the second and third: the interaction between text and reader (with a particular emphasis
on the text itself and less on the contemporary import of what such readings can
contribute, though such assumptions clearly buttress Walsh’s work).

Focusing upon the world in the text, Walsh distinguishes the world of the story (where
characters reside and events unfurl), the world of the narrative (where the narrator relates
the story to the narratee), and the world of the text (the primary world, including the
implied author and implied reader). The implied author and reader are constructs of the
real reader, and the implied reader is one “who understands perfectly and precisely what
the implied author is saying, and brings nothing extraneous to that understandi
(8). Of course, this is but a posture real readers can only approximate, which leads to Walsh’s
emphasis on the importance of reader-response as a necessary vector in the equation
pointing to meaning.

Chapter 2 treats plot. Walsh describes plot simply as a movement from (relative) stability
to tension/destabilization to new (relative) stability (14). Tension is that which drives the
plot forward. Where one can discern this pattern in miniature, says Walsh, one finds
scenes. Another important facet of plot involves its linearity. The author carefully
sequences the story as he or she sees fit and in so doing exerts a level of control over what
and how the reader perceives things. This “contest” between reader and author is what
gives life to literary narrative criticism and imbues the text with even greater, more
profound meaning.

Chapter 3 looks at characters. In the world of the story, the reader perceives the
characters and their world as real; the story comes to life (a point I trust we can all
appreciate if we have read a great novel or seen a stellar movie; while Walsh does not use
such language, this is ultimately suspension of belief, allowing oneself to be drawn into
the reality and world-making power of the text). One can identify two types of characters:
flat and round (24). Flat characters are those who change very little or not at all over the
course of the narrative; they may indeed be ancillary to the overall plot. Round characters,
however, are more robust and complex. They are highly developed and oftentimes
undergo changes that may result in tensions. Both types of characters are needed for a
successful story. As Walsh profoundly states, “If everybody is important, nobody is
important” (24). There are certain anomalies in this pattern that can frustrate readers’
expectations: secondary characters may be overdeveloped and main characters
underdeveloped. Where such innovation occurs is often the locus of meaning, and
readers are encouraged to be on alert. Walsh also discusses briefly how ancient literature prefers to have no more than two, but sometimes as many as three, characters on stage at a time. Anything more becomes cluttered and the narrative potentially cumbersome.

Walsh continues to treat characters by discussing characterization in chapter 4. Characterization entails how the author constructs a given character. This can be achieved by the narrator either telling something about the character, showing that character speaking and acting (direct showing), or having other characters speak and act in reference to that character (indirect showing). Telling often entails a simple statement about what qualities the character possesses. Direct showing leaves the reader to deduce what a character is like based upon that character’s words and actions. One way of doing this is when the narrator provides a glimpse into what the character is thinking. Indirect showing compels the reader to infer aspects of a given character based upon the interaction between that character and others. Wrestling with characterization requires a great deal of work from the reader.

Chapter 5 looks at point of view. The central idea in this chapter is that the narrator is almost always (assumed to be) omniscient. At times the narrator shares this information with the audience and at others opts to withhold vital information for the sake of the story. The narrator controls the reader’s point of view in three ways: the reader can know as much as the narrator and thus more than the characters, the reader’s point of view can be among the characters (an observer of what is said and done), or the reader’s point of view can be identical with a particular character (which focuses the reader’s attention on what that character is observing).

In chapter 6 Walsh focuses upon how the narrator manipulates time. One may deduce two timelines: the story’s time (containing the events of the plot) and the narration’s time (the time in which the narrator relates these events to the narratee). Walsh isolates three specific ways the narrator may choose to tempo a story. First, events may take longer to occur than to read about. The ratio of action verbs to other types of verbs and nominal clauses is key here. Action verbs impel the story forward, while nominal clauses delay the action. Second, the event’s occurrence and reading about it can be nearly identical in time. Dialogue and direct discourse are often on display here, and the narrative effect is that it “enhance[s] verisimilitude” (56). Third, the event may take longer to occur than it does to relate to the reader. Numerous examples or detailed descriptions often proliferate here, bringing the plot to a near standstill and delaying the expected resolution. Order is also a necessary component of time and underscores the narrator’s freedom in shaping the story. Flashback and foreshadowing are two ways a narrator may deal with order.
Chapter 7 covers gaps and ambiguities. By employing gaps and ambiguities, the narrator gives up a certain amount of control and instead opens up the potential for a multiplicity of meanings. Gaps are the ellipses points of a story; it is where the story leaves out information. Walsh isolates three types of gaps: gaps of fact (withholding some vital piece of understanding the plot), gaps of motivation (withholding the express motive behind a character’s actions), and gaps of continuity (instances where the connection between consecutive passages appears illogical or cumbersome. Ambiguity differs from gaps. Ambiguity is not the absence of information but occurs rather when one may construe the text in multiple ways that make sense. There are two types of ambiguities, according to Walsh: semantic (a word has two different and possible meanings) and syntactic (awkward or unexpected Hebrew syntax). The narrative effect of gaps and ambiguities achieve a twofold purpose: pressing the reader to make sense of the text, and allowing for a layering of meanings to a story, all of which may be valid.

Walsh treats repetition and variation in chapter 8. These are of two types: strict repetition and other repetitions. Strict repetition occurs “when a specific piece of information or a particular event or a single speech is recounted more than once” (82). Such repetition is vital to meaning given the terse nature of Hebrew narrative. Strict repetition may occur in four ways: the narrator may repeat the same information twice, a character’s earlier speech may be repeated by the narrator, a character may repeat what the narrator has earlier said, or a given character may repeat an earlier speech in a new context. In all of this, the omniscient narrator is also assumed to be reliable; if the narrator says it, it must be accurate. The narrator’s voice serves as the barometer, argues Walsh, as to the reliability of that which is repeated with some variation. Other repetitions involve Leitwörter and the Leitmotiv, analogy and allusion, and the more subtle echo.

Chapter 9 addresses the role and voice of the narrator. Three qualities typify the narrator: the narrator is reliable yet not required to reveal to readers everything he or she knows, is not a neutral or disinterested bystander in telling the story (the narrator has a perspective to share), and may share—depending upon whether the author has imbued the narrator with omniscience—an incomplete story. This distinction between author and narrator is an important and oft overlooked one. Walsh puts it simply, “the narrator is not the author” (100). Just as the characters are under the control of the author, so also is the narrator. The author may shape and create the narrator any way he or she sees fit and may make the narrator privy to the wealth of information known to the author or limit the narrator’s perspective as with the characters. The narrator may even serve as a foil for the author, who may set out to subvert the narrator’s particular point of view. It should not be assumed that the author and narrator speak with the same voice, let alone that they are the same “person.”
In a chapter that would make more sense had it occurred earlier in the book (with the final two chapters devoted to the narrator and reader, respectively), chapter 10 deals with structure and symmetry. These features, which include repetition, inclusion, and chiasm, are attributed to the aural nature of these texts. For instance, inclusion can demarcate a textual unit or episode for a listening audience, who would then be signaled by these aural structures to anticipate the next scene. In a culture where very few were literate, Walsh maintains, these stylistic elements are a remnant of the communicative process of these texts for ancient audiences. Relatedly, asymmetry can function with great meaning. Where the expectation for symmetry is not met, there is a narrative effect on the reader.

The final chapter, chapter 11, deals with the responsibilities of the reader. In order to be a successful reader, one must achieve two specific roles: the reader must allow herself or himself to hear the story with an openness to the way the narrator has chosen to tell it, and the reader must enter the world of the story and accept it as (secondarily) real (122). In short, readers need to grant the story its own integrity. This openness to the narrator’s rhetorical purposes, however, does not necessitate the need to accept the same values and points of view as one’s own. Walsh, however, points out a worthwhile caution here. Readers are not truly being readers if they simply accept that which the narrator says that resonates most with them and dismiss that which does not. Doing so misses the transformative power of the text and robs readers of what Walsh identifies as the “greatest gift” a reader receives from such literature: “the opportunity for self-knowledge” (126). Walsh concludes this chapter with brief discussions of how readers—who are now versed in the art of literary criticism!—can employ this art of reading in a way that enriches both self and others.

Rounding out the book are three appendices that treat the Jeroboam, Elijah, and Ahab stories using the techniques outlined earlier in the book. Walsh is careful to remind his own readers that these appendices do not purport to offer the definitive answers for what one should see but are rather meant as a guide for the “sort of answers you might have found” (133). Each appendix begins with this same disclaimer paragraph and proceeds to deal with each narrative technique under a bolded heading.

Walsh is to be commended for producing a volume that introduces the basic tenets of literary narrative criticism in a readable way. His own reader is never left without guidance as a wealth of examples from the biblical text pervade each chapter. The guided/guiding questions in relation to the three biblical texts in the appendices are also tremendously worthwhile in helping beginning students hone their craft as narrative critics; his questions are specific enough as to highlight the presence of a particular literary phenomenon in the text yet general enough so as not to overshadow or
marginalize the unique eye and interests of each individual reader he has been at pains to emphasize throughout.

The greatest strength of this volume is also one that makes it unique in comparison with other treatments of narrative-critical methodologies: the three appendices that allow students to see the method put into practice across several different texts. Just as Steck displays the exegetical process (comprised of form criticism, tradition history, and the like) using Gen 28:10-22 (Steck 173–202), Walsh provides three sustained examples. This presentation may have been strengthened had he limited himself to a single text from 1 Kings and taken the two other texts from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, perhaps one of the ancestral narratives in Genesis or one of the Judges cycles. While the three texts taken from 1 Kings are sufficiently different from one another, presenting a diversity of texts would have afforded his readers a bit more diversity and allowed them to see how each biblical book has its own unique literary features and techniques that are emphasized.

Walsh’s emphasis not merely on the what of the method but also the how is of tremendous value as well. This careful focus should serve as a ready reminder to interpreters of the importance of the requisite question, What does this literary construction achieve? or How does it contribute to meaning? For example, Walsh writes of the implications of direct-showing characterization: “not telling the reader about the character’s qualities makes it necessary for the reader to think about and draw out the implications of the character’s speech or action. The reader thus actively collaborates with the narrator in construction the character” (37). Another example: Walsh rightly recognizes that gaps of continuity need not be read as sloppy editing or only as evidence of a literary seam where two earlier sources or traditions have been merged but rather, for the literary critic, as a nexus of meaning (68). What Walsh says about symmetrical structures is actually applicable to all techniques he treats in this volume: “The interpretive dynamics differ for each type” (111).

Two additional strengths must be noted. First, the importance placed on the reader in construing a text’s meaning is an important accent. In a way, all interpreters are doing some form of reader-response criticism, whether it is admitted or not. Second, Walsh’s insistence that God, too, is a character in the narrative, one who is susceptible to the same narrative requirements, techniques, and shaping as all other characters in the text, is a notice that all too often is unappreciated within the interpretive task. Walsh advances another vitally important caution that all interpreters should heed: “we have no guarantee that our understanding of God is identical to the one the implied author expects the implied reader to bring to the text” (36). Where a discontinuity exists between the God in the narrative and the God of the reader, the narrative pushes the reader “into serious (and
at times unsettling) theological reflection” (215 n. 3). Literary criticism, then, is not inimical to the theological task but is a fundamental aspect of it.

Despite these strengths, there are some areas of weakness. First, while the discussion of the method itself is quite thorough, it appears some important things are missing. For example, Walsh never discusses what Robert Alter calls the biblical type-scene (The Art of Biblical Narrative [New York: Basic Books, 1981], 47–62); some of his analysis surely seems to presuppose this idea, but it would have proven advantageous to devote even a small section to this topic, most likely in chapter 8, on repetition and variation. Similarly, Walsh could have offered a more robust discussion of gaps and ambiguity, especially as they are articulated most famously in Meir Sternberg’s The Poetics of Biblical Narrative ([Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], 186–229). Second, as has already been hinted at, the volume would only have benefited if Walsh chose to press beyond 1 Kings for his examples. On one occasion he stretches all the way to the New Testament (in a book about Old Testament narrative) to provide an example of double entendre. A better example can easily be found in Gen 27:11; Jacob’s description of himself as a “smooth man” (אָישׁ חִלֶּךָ) refers at one and the same time to his hairlessness in comparison with the hirsute Esau and also to his clever and shrewd character that will become most manifest as Gen 27 continues. Third, regardless of the value in their mere presence, the final three examples in the appendices may appear too rigid and compartmentalized in structure. To be fair, this volume is meant to introduce its readers to the task of interpreting Old Testament narrative, but treating each technique under a bolded subheading, in isolation from other techniques, runs the risk of failing to show the rich and multifaceted interaction between the various types of techniques.

The last issue is less a direct critique of Walsh and more an attempt to offer my own caution to narrative critics. From my perspective, the assumption that the narrator is reliable and must be trusted is problematic for a variety of reasons. Most germane to Walsh’s own discussion, however, is the interesting comment that the author exercises absolute freedom over how much even the narrator can know (99). Walsh has also said the author can at times endeavor to subvert the narrator’s own position on a topic. If it is possible that the narrator’s knowledge is not absolute but is rather imperfect, that the author may have given us a narrator with a limited perspective, and that the narrator may be the object of authorial subversion, then the assumption that the narrator is trustworthy begins to delve too deeply into the increasingly murky realm of authorial intent at the expense of foregrounding the biblical text itself. Instead, the narrator, too, should be treated with caution, and where the narrator’s words are in discontinuity with those of another character, the reader must focus upon context and other textual indicators to adjudicate the truth.
At bottom, Walsh’s *Old Testament Narrative: A Guide to Interpretation* is an excellent and welcome primer text for those who wish to learn the craft of literary narrative analysis. His healthy use of examples and inclusion of three appendices that show the various techniques as they appear in the biblical text make this volume a valuable prerequisite to reading Old Testament narratives responsibly.