When thinking about literary criticism and the Old and New Testament, we looked at some of the characteristic features in the last section of literary criticism, and the primary point to try to get across is that literary criticism is a text center approach that traditionally has found meaning located in the text itself, at times bracketing historical questions as far as authorship, sources, forms, the historical context, and even the external world outside the text in exchange for a focus on the world inside the text, and looking at the text solely in its structure, and its inner workings as determinative of meaning.

New Testament Literary Criticism Example: Romans 1-8

We’ve looked at a number of examples in the Old and New Testament as far as what kind of questions the literary approach might ask and what types of conclusions and results might come about from that as well. To give one more example, we ended by looking at the parables as an example of how literary criticism might work analyzing the parables as fictional literature and analyzing it in terms of the structure of the parables, the characters, and main features within them. But, to give one more example, interestingly, to go outside of narrative, and look at an example from an epistle, one individual named, Gustav Freytag, has suggested that Romans chapters one through eight, he uses an example from Paul’s letters. Freytag has suggested that we can break Romans one through eight down into a five-part drama. He analyzes Romans from the perspective of a drama and he suggests for example, that chapter one, verses sixteen through seventeen, which we usually see as the theme of the letter, when Paul introduces justification by faith, he suggests is sort of the “in sighting action,” the initial action of the drama. Then, in Romans 1:18 all the way through chapters 4:25, he sees as the increasing tension. Then chapter five is the climactic turning point of the narrative, and chapters six and seven is the falling action. Finally, chapter eight is the resolution of the
So, Freytag sees Romans chapters one through eight as being able to be analyzed, not just according to the common conventions of a first century letter, but he analyzes it according to a drama. One interesting feature of his analysis is the suggestion that chapter five is the turning point of the letter, while some modern outlines of Romans see a new section beginning at chapter six, with chapters one through five dealing with justification and chapters six through eight dealing with sanctification. But according to this analysis, chapter five, is the main focal point, the main point, beginning a new section of Romans chapters one through eight.

In contrast you see chapter three, or perhaps chapter eight as the main section and point of the letter. So this is one example of an attempt that in some respects is somewhat intriguing and compelling of applying dramatic literary elements to a New Testament epistle.

**Evaluation of Literary Criticism**

So, having looked at a number of approaches, literary approaches, to Old and New Testament texts as examples, let me just in conclusion, mention a couple of issues in applying literary analysis to biblical text. First of all, is the issue of imposing modern structures or simply imposing structures or categories on the ancient text that may or may not belong there. Certainly it is not objectionable, in and of itself, but still, our understanding, our literary analysis of the text must be grounded in the text itself, rather than imposing structures or imposing categories on the text that really don’t fit and don’t work. So, number one, be aware of imposing, or those who impose modern structures and categories on ancient texts. Any structures or categories must be grounded and arise from the text itself.

A second issue to be aware of is the danger of ignoring the historical and theological dimensions of the text. As we have seen, sometimes literary criticism tends to bracket, or even jettison historical issues or historical questions related to authorship and the historical cultural background of a text which was produced. Issues of
referentiality outside of the text, especially for Christians who claim that the Bible records God’s redemptive activity in history and dealing with people in a historical context and revealing himself in historical acts, historical and theological questions cannot be ignored. So, literary criticism has much value in that it deals with the text itself, in that it forces us to pay close attention to the text rather than hypothetical reconstructions behind the text, or focusing on our own theological agenda. Literary criticism allows us to encounter the text in new ways; it allows us to be in touch with the text itself. But at the same time we need to be aware that it is simply one facet of the “hermeneutical enterprise” in that historical and theological questions must also be considered and cannot be ignored.

**Narrative Criticism: Introduction**

Now, one perhaps, subset, facet of literary criticism, more specifically would be narrative criticism. Narrative criticism again is the study of a narrative text from the standpoint of the kinds of questions that one would ask of any narrative literature in literary type studies. It asks the question of what the plot is of the story. It asks questions about the characters, how the characters are portrayed, how they develop, how they interact with each other. It asks about things like the story time as opposed to narrative time, and asks questions about the point of view of the narrative. These kinds of questions have also been applied to biblical texts. For example, one common, explanation of the text from a narrative standpoint is to talk about instead of traditional categories of the author, the historical author’s circumstances and who are the readers, is to frame it in terms of the narrator and the narratees [those receiving the narrative as readers or addressees]. That is, the narrator would be the person telling the story in the text, not necessarily referring to the historical author, but who is narrating the voice of the text itself. Then the narratees are those who are hearing the text, that is, the person that is to be identified with the person who is being told the story or the narrative. Things like “point of view,” would be the perspective the author takes on the events, what is the perspective of the author as he tells the story and as he narrates the events? Then, one of
the more interesting ones, and significant ones, is the plot of the story. Most narratives, in terms of narrative criticism, are usually seen as moving along a plot that begins with the introduction or the setting that introduces one to the main characters, and introduces one to the story, it’s the “in sighting action” of the story. The next element beyond the introduction or the setting would be the conflict or the crisis in the text. Then third, that causes a rising tension; there is a rising tension in the story that then reaches a climax, which then experiences a resolution. The resolution then brings the solution to the rising tension that is created by this climax or this crisis. Then the conclusion, which simply ties together all of the lose threads, and brings the story to its proper end. 

So Old and New Testament narratives then, in particular, have been studied from the standpoint of the literary workings of the text. Again, asking some of these questions about the narrator and the narratees, and the plot of the story, and the characters, how they develop, and how they are presented, and how they interact with each other? Again, it is sometimes at the expense of bracketing historical questions and historical concerns as well, though again that’s not necessarily the intent of this method, but often accompanies it.

**Examples of Narrative Criticism**

Once again, let me give you some examples of the usage of narrative criticism in analyzing biblical texts. First of all, to give you an Old Testament example, let me give you one from Genesis chapter 22, the well-known Akedah, the sacrifice of Isaac, or the attempted sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in Genesis 22:1-18. As the story goes, God comes to Abraham and asks him to take Isaac and present him as a sacrifice. Abraham does that, and he takes Isaac up into the mountains. Isaac himself wonders, “Where in the world, where are we going to find the sacrifice…the wood, we’re all ready to go, where is the animal for sacrifice?” Abraham ties up Isaac and puts him in the altar, and is ready to let the knife fall, and an angel, the voice of the LORD stops him, and God then provides a ram for the sacrifice. The story concludes there.

One can analyze this according to the narrative technique, especially plot. For
example, the exposition, or the setting, is found in verse one, where the narrator clearly indicates God’s intention to test Abraham. So, this entire story at the very outset, at the very beginning, is intended to indicate that God is testing Abraham in the rest of the story. The crisis arises in verse two where God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Now, to most of us, that might not seem like a crisis, except for the fact that we might interpret the crisis more existentially or psychologically. The difficulty is that Abraham is being called to execute his own son. How would we feel if we were called upon to take the life of one of our children? So we see this problem as mainly, sort of and existential one, which no doubt has some of those dimensions. But, when you look at the larger context of Genesis, the primary difficulty here is that this is a threat to God’s promise. Isaac is not just Abraham’s son, Isaac is the promised seed, the continuation of God’s promise, and now, Abraham is being told to kill the promise. So in this story, the crisis is a threat to the very promise of God.

The rising tension occurs then in verses three through ten, where Abraham responds in obedience. He is going to go ahead and kill the promise. Again, even Isaac asks about the ram that is going to be slaughtered, “where is the animal that is to be slaughtered?” which makes the story even more intense. The tension rises to the point that Abraham has the knife raised above his head, and then comes the resolution in verses 11-14, where God stops Abraham from dealing the death blow and then provides an animal to be sacrificed. Then verses 15-19 are the conclusion, the promise of God. God’s promise and blessing to Abraham is reaffirmed and then the story comes to its conclusion. That is more of a micro level, just one section of the book. Even entire books could be analyzed according to typical narrative structures such as its setting, a crisis, followed by a rising tension, reaches a climax, followed by a resolution to the tension, and finally a conclusion to the narrative.

One can also analyze Old Testament characters in a variety of ways. Some narrative critics have expressed interest in classifying characters as to whether they are round characters that develop fully even as they describe their physical characteristics as well as their psychological characteristics, or whether they are flat characters that don’t
get much development at all. Some are comic characters, and by comic characters we
don’t mean necessarily that they make you laugh, but comic meaning that the story has a
happy ending or a positive ending in terms of the character. Whether the character is a
tragic one, that is, the story takes a down turn where the character meets a negative or a
tragic end. Again, is the character is a main character or a peripheral one? Scholars have
shown interest in analyzing characters according to those perspectives: how the
characters relate to one another and whether the character is a foil.

For example, in the story of Elisha, the Elisha narrative in the Old Testament,
some scholars have characterized him as a round character and a round figure because he
is described and develops rather than being static. Saul is often deemed a tragic figure, in
that Saul’s career seems to have an upward turn, but in the end seems to take a tragic
down turn. In the story of David and Goliath, when you read the narrative more
carefully, the real conflict is not between David and Goliath, the real conflict is between
David and Saul. Goliath seems to be a foil that both David and Saul confront. Saul
clearly is the king of Israel and in charge of the army. Goliath is Saul’s problem and Saul
does not know what to do. Saul is portrayed as responding in fear and not knowing what
to do, but when David confronts Goliath, with God’s help, David slays the arch enemy of
Israel. Goliath is really a foil to highlight the true conflict between David and Saul. So,
the real story is not about David and Goliath, it is about David and Saul.

So, I wanted to look at a number of Old Testament texts and apply the
characteristic methodology of analyzing it in terms of common narrative features, such as
plot, and characterization, and point of view, narrator, narratees, etc.

**New Testament Examples of Narrative Criticism**

To give a couple of New Testament examples, we’ve already looked at the
parables, so I don’t intend to go into any more detail there necessarily. A lot of fruitful
narrative work has been done in analyzing, especially entirety of Gospels, Matthew,
Mark, Luke, and John. But again, even parables, as we’ve said, could be analyzed
according to their plot whether they have one main character, or two, or three, and how
they interact. Parables have often been analyzed in terms of the “U-shaped” plot. Whether they are comic, or whether they are tragic, that is the plot takes a downward turn. Several have analyzed parables according to that perspective. One of the earliest attempts to apply narrative criticism, or analyze the gospel from the narrative or story perspective was an interesting book that has been updated, but was produced by three individuals named Rhoads, Dewey and Michie. They produced a book called, *Mark as Story*. And what is interesting about this book is that it is co-written by a scholar and an English professor and scholar. They demonstrate that Mark is a consistent story, with a consistent plot, and consistent characterization, and they apply some of the methods of narrative criticism and story analysis to the gospel of Mark.

The Gospel of Matthew could be seen as developing along the lines of growing hostility. There seems to be a rising tension or a plot that emphasizes the growing hostility between the religious leaders and Jesus himself. Beginning all the way back in chapter two, where Herod tries to stamp out Jesus, from that point on, the plot increases and the tension develops, as again, the religious leaders increasingly become more hostile towards Jesus. The narrative of Matthew seems to be structured, among other things, to emphasize this.

**Characters in John: Barabbas**

In the gospel of John, Jesus functions, obviously as the primary protagonist, or sort of the hero of the gospel. The rest of the story has to do with how Jesus interacts and relates with a number of other people. Jesus is portrayed as interacting and relating with God himself. Jesus is portrayed as interacting and relating to the disciples, and interacting and relating to the Jewish leaders, and other minor characters including Satan himself. The Gospel revolves around the responses either acceptable or unacceptable to Jesus. Jesus’ character is spelled out in relation to his interactions with other characters in the Gospel. Then, it draws attention to the different responses, especially in the sections of chapters seven, eight, and nine of John, featuring the different responses of Jesus that call the leaders to align with. It asks the readers to align with appropriate responses in light of
the consequences of those responses.

So, one can examine the characters of the Gospels. At this point, I’ll slow down, and talk about that just a little more. In terms of demonstrating how a couple of the characters function in the gospel of John. Actually, both of them are relatively minor characters. The first character that I want to discuss, is probably the most minor character, or at least gets the least attention in the Gospel, and doesn’t appear to play a significant role, and that is the character of Barabbas, who actually occurs in all three Gospels. But, it’s interesting the role that he plays in John. One of the ways to examine characters in literature, especially in the Gospels that I think is helpful is to examine their function in the broader discourse by noting what role the author gives them grammatically in the text. That is, to ask questions like this: Does a character play a significant role throughout the entire work or does the character only emerge in one place? Does the character emerge all throughout the Gospel, such as Jesus, or the religious leaders, and the disciples?” These are obviously major characters and major players in the Gospels. Or, does the character only emerge a couple of times only in specific places in the Gospel?

Second, when the character is mentioned, how is the character referred to? Is the character the subject, the subject of verbs? Is the character presented as actually performing the action of verbs? Or is the character only the object? Is he acted upon by someone else or does he do his own action? If he is the subject of a verb, is he the subject of only verbs of “being” that identify him? Like, “Barabbas is…” or “Barabbas was an insurrectionist” or “Barabbas was a robber…” That word, “was” is not an action he performed, it is simply an action that identifies who he is. Or again, is the actor a subject of a verb of action? Is the actor actually doing something in the narrative? Or again, is the actor only referred to as an object of a verb, or a modifier of something else. Again, is the actor merely referred to in speech of another individual as opposed to being an actual participant in the narrative? Again, what type of actions are associated with the character or participant? Are action type verbs? Are they doing things or are they only being linked to a verb that identifies who they are. Adding all of that up, one can begin
to understand what role the person plays. You find Barabbas mentioned only a couple of times in the Gospels, in the Gospel of John. What is interesting is that very little is said about him. We find in verse 40 when Jesus is on trial, the crowd is asked by Pilate, “Do you want me to release the King of the Jews?” And verse 40 is the response of the crowd. They shouted back, “No, not him, give us Barabbas!” And the author says, “Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion.”

Now this is a little bit easier to tell in terms of the function. Number one, you will notice that Barabbas never occurs anywhere else in the narrative. Furthermore, notice how he is referred to. First of all, he is the object of the verb, “give”, and second, when Barabbas is the subject, he’s the subject of a verb of being. He’s simply identified. The text says, “Now Barabbas was a rebel, or a robber,” there are different ways to translate that, but the point is that Barabbas doesn’t seem to do anything. He’s not developed, he is not an actor in the narrative, he is only mentioned by way of identifying who he is, and he is only mentioned as the object of a verb.

So, in conclusion, Barabbas does not appear to be a significant person in the narrative. Instead, he probably stands as a foil. Number one, to further emphasize the innocence of Jesus that the crowd would prefer an insurrectionist, a robber, a rebel, that they would prefer him to be freed over Jesus, whose innocence is clearly demonstrated in chapter 18. So the irony is that they would prefer the death of an innocent person over the death of a person that is an insurrectionist rebel.

But, second, Barabbas also seems to, by calling him an insurrectionist rebel, the difficulty is the crowds then, by asking for his release, seem to fall in that same category. That is, they now also become involved in this illegitimate plot. They become involved in what is an illegal activity. Not just Barabbas, but the crowd is now participating in this. So when you look at chapter 18, Pilate, the crowds, and Jesus, seem to be the main characters. Barabbas is only a minor character that again, only emerges in this section and doesn’t play any roles as far as performing actions. He’s actually the object of a speech. He is embedded in a speech, and even in that speech, he is an object of a verb. He’s not doing anything. Then when John mentions his name again, it is simply to
identify his character.

So, in looking at characters and how they seem to be referred to, the different participants and how they seem to be referred to in the text, says much about how the author sees them functioning.

**Satan/The Devil/The ruler of this World in John**

Another example of a character in John that I have been working on is Satan, or “the devil”, and how he is characterized throughout the Gospel of John. At first glance, it may appear that Satan plays a rather intense role and rather significant role in the gospel of John. He is referred to several times in several crucial places. But, once again, what we need to do is ask the question, how is the character of Satan or the Devil referred to? There is one term that is used to refer to the same individual, “the ruler of this world” three times. Actually he is called “the Devil” three times, and “Satan” one time, and then “the ruler of this world” three more times. So seven times in all, Satan is referred to. So Satan does not overtly get mentioned frequently in the Gospels which might suggest he is not a main character or primary character.

But second, it is important to notice how he is referred to. Number one is to notice, in a text like John 6:70. Then, this is the first time that we see the mention of the name, “Devil” or “Satan”, and Jesus replies, Peter has just told Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of life.” And then Jesus says, “Have I not chosen you [the twelve], yet one of you is a devil.” Or it could even be translated, “One of you is the devil.” Jesus is referring to Judas. Again, what is interesting to note here is that Judas is identified as a devil. The devil does not play a role here in doing anything or performing any actions, but he simply is a term used to identify Judas. Furthermore, the devil is couched in a speech of Jesus. So again, the devil plays no part in the narrative except to identify Judas.

The next place that he is mentioned is in John 8:44, where Jesus is in conflict with the Pharisees. The question gets raised in a context of different responses appropriate, and inappropriate to Jesus. Now, Jesus, in his high point with his discussion or debate
with the Pharisees, is found in verse 44 with the question of, “Who is the true father of the Pharisees?” Jesus is working with a common idea or metaphor that one’s origin determines one’s character. The Pharisees are claiming, “We are children of Abraham”. Notice what Jesus says in verse 44. “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth. There is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks in his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” Again, what I want you to note is that the Devil is referred to here several times as “the Devil,” as “the father,” but also with pronouns such as “he” and “him.” Then again, I want you to notice that in the narrative, Satan doesn’t do anything. He is simply characterized as the father of the Pharisees. Even when it does describe him, once again, it’s identifying him as a murderer. When he does do something, he speaks lies. But again, all of this is embedded within a speech of Jesus. So if Satan isn’t doing anything, Jesus is simply referring to him and talking about him in a way to demonstrate the true source of his conflict with the religious leaders, with the Pharisees. So, here, Satan primarily plays the role of inciting or instigating the activities of the Pharisees, or the religious leaders.

If you read the context more clearly, the problem with the Pharisees is that they refuse to listen to Jesus, who speaks truth, and they want to kill him. Because of those two activities, failing to believe the truth and wanting to kill Jesus, Jesus can say, “You are of your father the Devil who is a liar and who is a murderer.” So, Satan functions here, not as a main character in the narrative, but to demonstrate the true source behind the main participants, the main actors, who are the religious leaders or the Pharisees.

Satan is referred to as “the devil” in a couple of other places. In chapter 13 verse 2, the evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot’s desire to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that God the Father put all things under his power. Here the devil is again mentioned, not as a primary actor in the narrative, and notice again, that he is presented in relationship to Judas. He has already influenced Judas. But, again, the main character in this story is Jesus. Grammatically, this statement about saying the devil is already prompting Judas, is simply a backdrop to what Jesus
does in verse four. In verse four, Jesus is going to take a towel and wash the disciple’s feet. So, once again, Satan plays a rather minor role and an insignificant role in the narrative. Again, not that he is an unimportant or not important himself theologically, but we are asking, what role did he play in the narrative? How does Satan function? How is he referred to? How does the author present him as acting in the story and in the narrative?

The last place that Satan is referred to is in verse 27, towards the end of the sentence, in the same story, after Jesus had washed the disciple’s feet, and after his betrayal. In verse 26 Jesus answers when they ask, “Who is going to betray you?” Jesus says, “It is the one whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.” This is the first place where Satan is a subject of a verb of action or doing. This is the first and only place that he actually does anything in the whole Gospel of John. Everywhere else until this point, Satan has simply been referred to in speech by Jesus. Or, in verses 15, he is identified with Judas as a backdrop for Jesus performing the action of washing his disciple’s feet. Now for the first time, Satan actually does something.

Now, Satan is referred to three more times throughout the Gospel with another designation or phrase, and that is, “the ruler of this world.” Satan is three times referred to as, “the ruler” and some translations have, “the prince of this world.” So, for example, chapter 12 verse 31, Jesus said, “this voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world. Now the prince of this world will be driven out.” The “prince of this world” or “ruler of this world” is referring to Satan. He is referred to twice more in chapter 14 and then twice more in chapter 16 verse 11 in regards to judgment because the “ruler of this world” or “the prince of this world,” Satan, now stands condemned.

Now, what is intriguing, again, is that in all of these instances where Satan is called, “the ruler of this world” or labeled, “ruler of this world”, first of all, note again that all of these names, all of these references as Satan as the “ruler of this world,” occur
in the speech of Jesus. They are embedded in the speech of Jesus. So again, in the narrative, the “ruler of the world,” does not do anything. He is simply referred to in the speech of Jesus. And furthermore, in all of the references to “ruler of the world,” Satan is portrayed as being judged. He is the one, he is rendered powerless. In all of these references, he now stands condemned, or he now stands judged. He is a defeated foe. What is interesting, number one, notice the irony of how Satan is portrayed. The very thing that Satan insights other people to do, like Judas, and the other religious leaders that betray and kill Jesus, that ironically, turns out to be Satan’s judgment and his downfall. So, in these cases where Jesus refers to Satan as “already being judged,” or “now the prince or ruler of this world is condemned or judged,” that’s because that’s in a context of reference to Jesus’ death and his glorification. So, ironically, the very act of Satan, remember we saw the very reference to the devil or Satan is in connection to Satan entering and influencing Judas and being the father, the true source, the origin of the murderous, deceitful activities of the religious leaders, the very thing that Satan does, turns out ironically to be his downfall and his judgment.

But another interesting thing, notice that in the names there is a pattern in the way that Satan is presented. When Satan is called, “the devil,” or the one time that he is called “Satan,” it’s always with reference, with relationship, to other human actors, namely, Judas and the other religious leaders. So, when Satan is discussed in relationship to other human actors, such as Judas and the other religious leaders, he is depicted as Satan and the Devil and that seems to be a very apt correlation. The devil, meaning “the accuser,” or Satan, meaning “the adversary” and “enemy.” This is the role of Satan. Probably both the words “devil” and “Satan” stem from, according to the text of Revelation 12 verses 9, the creation narrative in Genesis chapter three, where Satan deceived, and killed, and brought death to Adam and Eve. So now, Satan or the Devil is an appropriate name to use for Satan’s activity of inciting or influencing Judas and the religious leaders to believe a lie and to kill Jesus.

It’s interesting though, that whenever you find Satan in relationship to God or Jesus; he is referred to as, “the ruler of the world” or “the prince of the world” probably
for a couple of reasons. Number one, the issue is one of: who is really in control? Who
is truly the king of the world? There is a cosmic battle or cosmic conflict, and now,
Satan, as “the ruler of this world” bows to another ruler and is defeated and rendered
powerless by another ruler, who is Jesus. So, the issue is one of power and one of
kingship, so Satan is described as “the ruler of this world.” Also, perhaps, the title is
used because several times, Jesus is described as “not of this world” and Satan is seen in
contrast as, “ruler of this world.” So, even the ways the names are used, there is a
pattern. When Satan is seen as interacting with and in relation to human beings, as in
Judas and the religious leaders, he is portrayed as Satan or the devil who deceives them
or incites them to believe a lie and to murder. When he is depicted in relationship to God
or Jesus, other supernatural beings, he is depicted as, “the ruler of this world.” That
demonstrates his defeat, his loss of power, and his bowing to another ruler, and his losing
the cosmic war and the cosmic battle.

So, by looking at the way that a character is portrayed in a gospel, even
grammatically, what role they play, if they are a subject, if they are actually doing action,
or are they merely the objects of verbs, merely identified, are they merely modifying
something else, are they embedded in the speech of someone else, or are they actually
playing a role in the narrative? How frequently across a narrative does a person emerge?
All of that indicates a role that an actor or participant plays. Based on that in John, I
would conclude that Satan, although important, is a minor character as far as the role that
he plays in the narrative. That doesn’t mean that he is minor theologically, or he is minor
in his influence or importance, it means that in the narrative as far as how he is portrayed
in acting and as a participant, he plays more of a supporting role in inciting and deceiving
other human actors into killing Jesus rather than playing a major role in acting throughout
the narrative itself.

So, narrative criticism can frequently tell us about how characters function, how
the plot of the story might be put together, the point of view of the author, and all of that
again helping us come to grips with the text itself. How might the text be working?
What might be the author’s strategy in communicating?
Narrative Criticism and Modern Movies

As kind of an aside, not to get too carried away with it, but one interesting thing that is interesting in and of itself in comparison to how narrative works, but what also might be significant in helping persons understand how stories and narratives work, is often to watch movies. Notice how the plot develops in movies, how the characters are portrayed, how there is often rising tension and it gets resolved, and how then the story is brought to a conclusion. How do things like characterization or type scenes or repetition or important and crucial speeches all function to reveal the significance of a narrative or a story?

One movie that I think of, and hopefully some of you can identify with is, this is an older movie, but my wife and I were first dating, the very first movie we went to was a movie called, “Back to the Future” I think there are three of them now, Back to the Future I, II and III. But it’s a story of a teenager, portrayed by Michael J Foxx; some of you are familiar with him. He actually travels in a time machine back in time, and certain things happen that threaten to undo and alter the course of time. So, he goes back in time, and fortunately he is able to rectify things, but when he comes back to the present after being in the past, he does see that things are altered, but in a rather surprising and pleasing way to him. But, one of the interesting things to understand about that movie is: what is the point of view of the narrative? What might be the main message, the main perspective and point of view of the story?

There are a few important things that happen in that movie. Number one, there are a couple phrases that get repeated two or three times right at the end, and that is, “you can do anything, if you just use your head.” But, along with that, is if you watch the movie carefully, notice how many times this phrase is buttressed by scenes where the physical head is featured. Particularly, at the end of the story, the character who is played by Michael J Foxx, who is back in the past, he needs to get back into the present, and he is in a car, a DeLorean, that is able to do that, and the problem is that the DeLorean stalls. He needs to reach a certain speed, at a certain time, so that he can get transported back into the present, but the car stalls. So what does he do? He bangs his head on the steering
wheel and the car starts. That type of scene, where the physical head is involved is
featured several times throughout the movie. So, putting that all together, the main
perspective or message that the movie is trying to communicate is that, “you can do
anything, if you just use your head.”

So, again, narrative works that way. By examining the plot, examining the way
characters are developed, how they act, by looking at crucial speeches and things that are
repeated, asking the kinds of questions that you would of any narrative or story, is
beneficial in having us come to grips with narrative literature.

Evaluation of Narrative Criticism

Now, let me end by just relating several issues regarding strengths and weaknesses
of especially narrative type approaches to the Old and New Testament. First of all, as far
as the strengths of narrative approaches, narrative approaches are helpful in that they pay
close attention to the details of the text. In the past, especially for Evangelical scholars
who hold to the Bible as the inspired word of God, which I do, narratives were seen as
merely “containers” from which to extract the main truth. So narratives were seen in
having value that you would mine it to pull out just what was the theological,
propositional truth found in the narrative. But, narrative approaches help us to see that a
narrative is not just a container of the truth, but communicates the truth itself. So,
narrative approaches help us to pay attention to the details of the text, by looking at the
plot, which is again the exposition and crisis, rising tension, the resolution, et cetera, how
the characters are developed, et cetera. It helps us to focus on the details of the text.
We’ve said that any approach that helps us focus on the detail of the text itself is to be
welcomed, especially for those who hold the Bible as nothing less than the word of God,
anything that brings us into contact with the details of the text.

A second value to the narrative approaches, is that they focus on the text as a
whole, the final form of the text, rather than a preoccupation with the previous forms
behind the text, or reconstructing the sources, whether hypothetical or not. Instead, once
again, this is consistent with an understanding of inspiration. Narrative approaches help
us focus on the text as a whole, the final form of the text, rather than dissecting it and asking about the origins and the sources, not that that cannot be valuable, but ultimately we finally have to deal with the final form of the text, the text as a whole as it stands. Narrative criticism can help us do that. In fact, sometimes, narrative criticism can help us see unity in the text where previously there was thought to be disunity, or conflicts, or contradictions, or maybe a kind of “scissors and paste” kind of origin of putting the text together. Sometimes narrative approaches and literary approaches can help us see how the text is actually a coherent unity.

Number three, is narrative approaches and narrative criticism reminds us again, related to number two, that the text itself is the locus of meaning, not the activity behind it. Once again, this should be welcomed by Evangelicals for whom the scriptures are inspired texts the word of God. So as much as asking questions about the origin of the text, the background and production, ultimately, we need to focus on the text itself.

Number four, is to remind us that texts come before theology. New Testament and Old Testament texts are not only pretexts for our own theological themes and to support our own theological constructs. Instead, theology is dependent on the analysis of texts. Because of that also, narrative and literary approaches remind us then, that our theology must account for all the data and all the details in the text, not just ones that we select.

In the past, when I was taught hermeneutics and biblical interpretation very early on, I often heard something like this, “you shouldn’t base your theology on stories and narrative.” The problem is, most of the Bible is in the form of story and narrative. The problem is not basing my theology on narrative and story; the problem is they didn’t know how story and narrative work to communicate theology.

Number five, is that narrative approaches help us focus on the aesthetics and the effects of the text. It is sometimes valid to read the text, and I’m convinced that sometimes the biblical stories are told in such a way, not just to communicate theologically, but because of the effect. So, again, narratives are not just “containers” for theological and propositional truth. Sometimes the stories are there for the effect, and for the intrigue, and for the literary impact they have.
And then, number six, I think one of the strengths of the narrative approach is that it opens us up to new insights in the text that we may not have seen before, or that we may have overlooked.

To mention just a couple of weaknesses of narrative approaches that seem to overlap with what we’ve already said, number one, sometimes narrative approaches are in danger of ignoring the historical dimensions of the text. One cannot emphasize the plot, the character, and lose the historical background or the historical referentiality of the text, especially for Evangelicals that are convinced that the Bible is nothing less than a record of God’s acts in history on behalf of his people, God revealing himself in history, so that the history of the text is lost. Instead, we must be reminded that the text has an author that produced it, they were produced in a language for people to understand it, and they were produced in a specific historical context. So we need to be aware of not losing the history or the historical dimensions of the text.

Number two, there are dangers to losing or ignoring the theological dimensions of the text. That is, not only do we have to remember that this is the inspired word of God, but we have an entire collection of Old and New Testament documents that the church claims as its scripture, as the very word of God. It testifies to God’s redemptive activity for his people, ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ.

And then, finally, third, some of the methods and categories may be in danger of being imported into the text, and we always have to raise a question of: Can we use categories of modern fiction and modern literature to analyze and understand ancient texts? This is not to say that we can’t, it is merely to make sure that the text itself determines how we analyze it and must control the kinds of questions that we ask and the kinds of categories that we bring to it.

So, given those caveats, those weaknesses, the text-centered approaches of literary and narrative criticism can be valuable tools in helping us see the texts in new ways, looking at the text as a whole, looking at the details of the text, understanding how it works and how God reveals himself through story and narrative to his people today.

The next session, we will look at two more literary approaches, or as I should say,
“text centered” approaches, approaches that give precedent to the text itself. That would be structuralism which we will treat very briefly, and I’ll explain why. And then, rhetorical criticism or rhetorical approaches that are not completely divorced from historical questions and author questions, but again, focus on the text as a whole and look at the inner workings of the text, and look at the text primarily as the locus of meaning, or the place of interpretive activity.

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