

Exploring the Use of Narratology for Narrative Preaching

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Abstract: *Although narrative preaching as a movement may have gone out of fashion in North American homiletics more than two decades ago, there has since been a resurgence of interest in the rhetorical function of biblical narratives along with the continuing exploration of more democratic, dialogical and open-ended homiletical forms. This study, therefore, suggests that the discipline of narratology can potentially combine these two elements by replicating the dynamics of biblical narratives in a variety of narrative sermon formats. By providing an examination of the elements of narratology, this approach seeks to reunite the often-separated elements of textual and homiletical form and function. The use of these narratological exegetical tools can then allow biblical narratives to assert a greater influence upon the form of the sermon itself, create an experience of the text for the listeners, and enable them to enter into the “world of words” of biblical narratives.*

Introduction

How is it that narratives actually “work”? In other words, how do authors create experiences and convey meaning to their readers simply through the telling of a story? Since a large portion of the Bible is made up of narrative¹ it is incumbent upon careful readers and preachers to understand just how it is that narratives function rhetorically. Preachers seeking to convey some sense of comprehensible meaning from biblical narratives to their audiences may struggle to do justice to the original literary form of the text. Representing perspectives strongly grounded in the world of modernity, traditional preaching forms often sought to “mine the text” in order to extract and proclaim propositional truth statements regardless of original literary form. This approach set up the text as a problem to be solved and resulted in a homiletical method whereby “the content of texts could be separated from the form and made the subject of some other form of communication.”²

The approach explored here seeks to reunite the often-separated elements of form and content in both the exegesis and proclamation sides of preaching.³ Such an approach can not only aid preachers in more effectively assessing how biblical narratives function rhetorically, but also can serve to replicate aspects of those functions in the sermon event. Such preaching seeks to create an experience of the text for hearers rather than utilizing a traditional homiletical approach seeking to interrogate and then explain the Bible propositionally using traditional preaching modes of third-person referential language.⁴

¹ According to Lubeck, the Bible is comprised of 44% narrative, 33% poetry and 23% discourse. See Ray Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change* (Waynesboro: Authentic Media, 2005), 14. Eslinger believes that it is more like 70% narrative; see Lyle Eslinger, “Narratorial Situations in the Bible.” In *Mappings of the Biblical Terrain: The Bible as Text*. Vincent L. Tollers and John Maier, eds. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990), 87. Here “Discourse” refers to a literary type such as the books of Romans, Ephesians, etc. and is not to be confused with the use of the word “discourse” as used later within this paper.

² Charles H. Cosgrove and Dow Edgerton, *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 24.

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Calver: Cliff College Publishing, 1995), 72, 65. He points out that rather than seeking to define “biblical preaching” as merely presenting content *from* the Bible in substantive ways, preachers ought to explore the notion of “how does the Bible itself preach?”

⁴ The creation of an experience in the sermon event is one of the central concepts of the New Homiletic. Craddock comments that “it is the method that effects the experience. The method is the message. So it is with all preaching; *how* one preaches is to a large extent *what* one preaches.” Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Revised and With New Sermons* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 44, italics his.

In order to determine both the nature and rhetorical function of narrative texts, this study will provide an overview of the following narratological elements: narrativization and narrative levels; narrative order, duration and frequency; types of biblical narrators; point of view, characterization, plot and setting. It will also analyse relevant examples from biblical narratives in order to illustrate these various narratological aspects. The paper will conclude by suggesting briefly a few values of narratology for homiletics, suggesting three implications for narrative preaching that make use of the approach advocated within this essay.

The operative value driving this study forward is the notion that the forms of preaching should be as varied as the forms of literature located in the Bible.⁵ In this connection Long points out that preachers tend to fall into the habit of creating sermon forms based upon their own preferred listening and learning styles and thereby gravitate toward a narrow range of sermon patterns. The attempt to integrate biblical narratives and homiletics can ideally help avoid such habits by creating sermon forms that do not divorce the content of the sermon from the original rhetorical form in which it is found.⁶

It has long been observed that human experience itself is inherently narrative in form.⁷ In his now-classic article exploring this idea Crites maintained that “stories give qualitative substance to the form of experience because human experience is itself an incipient story.”⁸ Interaction with biblical narratives, therefore, can help readers discover a newfound sense of self-identity. This takes place when readers of narrative texts—and hearers of narrative sermons—step into the world of biblical narratives and choose to identify with or against certain characters. Readers can therefore enter in “not merely as observers but as active participants and actors within this great drama.”⁹

Similarly narrative sermons that take their cues from the form of biblical narratives “both enable and demand a high level of involvement on the part of those who hear them. Stories ‘create a world’ and invite the listeners to enter that world and participate in it.”¹⁰ Gilmore comments that “the task of the preacher, like the playwright, is not so much to *invite* response as to *achieve* response.”¹¹ Narrative preaching that is faithful to the rhetorical dynamics of the biblical narrative itself is one potentially effective way in which to invite just such a response.¹² Furthermore, in addition to creating the potential for an experience of the text, sermons that model the oftentimes open-ended nature of biblical narratives can not only encourage further exploration and dialogue but also provide necessary space for listeners to make their own discoveries. Craddock maintains that while preachers can only break and offer the bread of life to their audiences, ultimately “the hearers must be allowed to chew for themselves.”¹³ Embracing more dialogical and democratic homiletical forms offers the

⁵ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 45.

⁶ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching Second Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 42, 169.

⁷ Terrence W. Tilley, *Story Theology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1985): 23.

⁸ Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 39 No. 3 (1971): 297.

⁹ Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change*, 96.

¹⁰ Long, *The Witness of Preaching Second Edition*, 42.

¹¹ Alec Gilmore, *Preaching As Theatre* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 3, italics his.

¹² Craddock points out: “If the speech-forms of the Bible were adopted, sermons would be strengthened by the fact that the text would not be forced to fit a new frame. In other words, narrative texts would be shared in narrative sermons, parables in parabolic form, biography in biographical sermons, and similarly in other speech models” (*As One Without Authority*, 141).

¹³ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 64.

possibility of creating a listener-culture in which increased participation and ownership of application can occur. Using narrative elements carefully to manage a multiple point-of-view narrative sermon, for example, can create a potentially “heuristic form that allows the worshipers to overhear multivalent proposals, interpretations, or wagers and, by the aid of the Spirit, decide their own conclusions.”¹⁴

Narratology and Narrativization

As a theory for evaluating narrative texts, the discipline of narratology enables readers to understand, analyse and evaluate narrative texts¹⁵ along with their various rhetorical functions and dynamics. Narrative analysis involves studying both the “what” and the “how” of the ways in which a narrative is presented by the author (and the narrator of the story) to the reader. In its simplest definition a narrative is a story that is told *by* somebody *to* somebody else: a narrator to a hearer. A good narrator can create an experience in the hearer simply by relating the story while withholding the “moral of the story.” With his often-confusing parables, Jesus was the master of such open-ended narrative preaching and the rhetorical strategies of his parables concealed as much as they revealed.¹⁶ In order to “get the point” of the story, the hearers wrestle with the various aspects by which the narrator presented the narrative – they become participants in creating the “meaning” of the story. Without knowing it, they are caught up in a powerful set of rhetorical dynamics within narratives involving a variety of factors: the type of narrator, characterization, plot, setting, dialogue, etc.

Several narratological terms can help us to understand how narratives function. The first term is “narrativization.” Narrativization is a process that occurs whenever a storyteller (or an author) creates a narrative text with the specific aim of relating that story to others. The tendency toward narrativization is common the world over: every human culture displays the tendency to communicate to others occurrences of real events using a narrative format. Narrativization allows human experiences to be understood, shared and identified with by others by fashioning them into a comprehensible narrative structure.

Throughout the course of history, people have been able to transmit understandable messages of events and experiences to one another through the use of this shared narrative reality.¹⁷ Lubeck points out that “stories do not merely tell us about life; stories are the essential means for us to experience life.”¹⁸ As Barthes notes there is a difference between our *experiences* of the world on the one hand, and our efforts to *describe* that experience in language.¹⁹ Whenever a person relates in a narrative fashion any past experience to another person, she is engaging in the process of narrativization.

The very process of re-telling these events to another person thus imposes a particular *form* and *arrangement* upon them (a beginning, middle and an end) that is normally associated with a narrative format. This then becomes a narration of one’s accounts of the reality that she perceived or thought she perceived.²⁰ Because of this, narrativization is ultimately defined as “imposing the form of a narrative upon real events or experiences for

¹⁴ Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 7.

¹⁵ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 3.

¹⁶ See Matthew 13:13-14.

¹⁷ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality.” In *On Narrative*, Mitchell, W.J.T., ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3.

¹⁸ Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change*, 96.

¹⁹ White, “The Value of Narrativity,” 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

the purposes of relating those events or experiences to others.” Narrativization creates a comprehensible “narrative world” accessible to listeners and allows them to identify with, and potentially share, the experiences being described by the narrator.

Narrative Levels: Story and Discourse

When an author utilizes the process of narrativization in order to produce a narrative, this immediately creates two “narrative levels.” The first level is referred to as the *story*. The second level is referred to as the *discourse*.²¹ The qualitative differences between narrative levels are what Genette refers to as “diegetic levels.”²² The first level, “story,” refers to the actual chronological events that occurred in real space-time. The second level, “discourse,” relates to the way in which selected elements from the story are presented to the reader by the author and narrator within the narrative account itself. This is how “what actually happened” in space-time is presented to the reader in the discourse by the use of a narrative format. It is crucial to note the distinction between the chronological sequence of events (story) and the way in which those events are presented to the reader (discourse).²³ In other words the story refers to the narrative *content*, while the discourse refers to the narrative *presentation*—the story as it is told in a discourse.²⁴ On the diegetic level of the discourse, in order to accomplish a purpose, the author has the freedom to manipulate the narrative content—the actual sequence of events—into a different chronology, ordering and narrative pace than what took place in linear, chronological real-time.

To illustrate the distinction between story and discourse an analogy can be drawn from the world of movie-making. On various filming locations the filmmakers shoot hundreds or even thousands of hours of footage in real-time. This corresponds to the story level. Following the filming of this raw footage, at some later date editors selectively edit it to produce the final movie—approximately 90 minutes long. This corresponds to the discourse level. In this editing process the editors have selected only what they deem to be the best or most relevant scenes from the raw chronological footage (story level) that will make up what they consider to be the best movie (discourse level). The remaining footage ends up discarded on the cutting-room floor since it is deemed irrelevant to the final product.

This illustration clarifies not only the process of narrativization but also the distinction between the two diegetic levels. Using the principle of selectivity, the author selects key elements from the story level and narrativizes only those elements deemed important to convey meaning. The author has the freedom to rearrange those selected elements into some type of discernible narrative format. Thus in the process of narrativization itself one can begin to see the two operative narrative levels of story and the discourse. Story-time is measured linearly: in seconds, minutes, hours, months, and years, while discourse-time is measured “on paper”: words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages. Figure 1 illustrates the differences in these diegetic levels.

²¹ For the sake of clarity this paper will consistently use the terms “story” and “discourse” respectively. Bal, for example, utilizes the term “fabula” rather than discourse (Bal, *Narratology*, 6), and Fokkelmann uses “story” when referring to the narrative discourse. See J.P. Fokkelmann, *Reading Biblical Narrative: A Practical Guide*, Ineke Smith, trans. (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 1999): 65.

²² Genette explains that “*any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act of producing this narrative is placed.*” See Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980): 228, italics his.

²³ Bal, *Narratology*, 6.

²⁴ Patrick O’Neill, *Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 3.

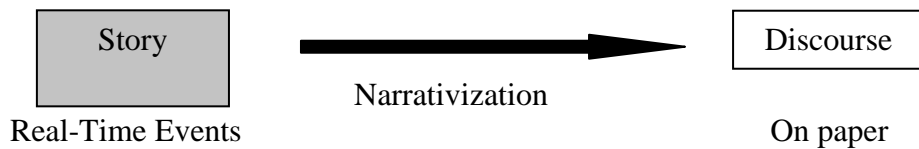


Figure 1.

Story-Time and Discourse-Time

Once key elements from the story have been selected and narrativized into a narrative discourse, the author now has the freedom to rearrange them in whatever order desired. These events are then narrated to the reader through the creation of a narrator, discussed in more detail below. Distinctions in the way that elements are arranged become more obvious when comparing the differences between story and discourse levels. This comparison is crucial because the way in which an author arranges and presents the materials to the reader begins to reveal his or her purposes in writing. In this connection Bal observes that order within the discourse is significant:

Playing with sequential ordering is not just a literary convention; it is also a means of drawing attention to certain things, to emphasize, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of an event, to indicate the subtle difference between expectation and realization, and much else besides.²⁵

Three manipulations of discourse-time become important to observe: *order*, *duration* and *frequency*,²⁶ and the comparison that inevitably arises when comparing the events of the story to the written text of the narrative discourse.

1. *Order*

This first manipulation of the events on the story level relates to the temporal succession of events as they occurred chronologically on the story level, and then the order in which they are arranged by the author on the discourse level as displayed in Figure 2.

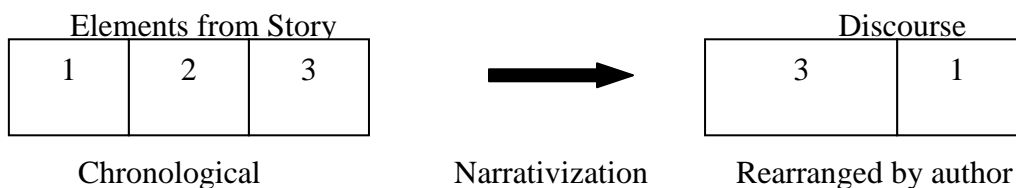


Figure 2.

As noted in the analogy earlier, in filmmaking movie editors rearrange the raw film footage into a completely different order than it occurred when it was filmed. These *differences in order* arising chronologically between the story and the discourse levels are termed *anachronies*.²⁷ Anachronies refer to instances where an event is narrated out of chronological order in a comparison between the discourse-time and the story-time. They are

²⁵ Bal, *Narratology*, 82.

²⁶ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

thus discordances between the temporal orderings of narrative discourse and the chronological and linear events of the story level. Here the author can make use of flashback (referring back to an event occurring in the past), or flash-forward (moving ahead to refer to an event that has not yet happened at this point in the discourse).²⁸

The book of Jonah provides a good example of the use of anachrony within biblical narrative. The book unfolds chronologically as the events narrated appear to unfold in real-time. From the opening sequence, however, the reader encounters a major interpretive problem: identifying Jonah's motivation for his lack of obedience. Why did he not go immediately to Nineveh? The differences in chronological order between the story and discourse levels are not easily discernible. In 1:10b, however, the narrator inserts a brief comment that gives the reader a brief insight: Jonah had earlier admitted to the sailors that he was fleeing from Yahweh. Still, no indication of motive is given. Later, however, Jonah provides his own "flashback" statement (4:2) regarding his motives prior to his abortive flight to Tarshish. Again, after his encounter with the fish, he provides some additional justification for his behaviours that provides the reader more insight as to his motives. At the beginning of the book, however, and throughout much of its narrative chronology, readers are left in the dark. Why did Jonah flee from his mission? Jonah's extreme rage over the subsequent repentance of the Ninevites, his arguments with Yahweh and his eagerness for death send the reader seeking for bits and pieces of the scarce information concerning his motives provided within the discourse. These bits and pieces, however, are provided to the reader somewhat "out of order."

Flashbacks and flash-forwards can project either a short distance or quite far into either the past or future. An example of a flash-forward into the distant future can be found in Jesus' ministry as narrated in John 2:19-20. In conflict with the Jews, Jesus makes a cryptic statement about destroying the temple and raising it up in three days. The narrator intrudes and points out that Jesus' audience misunderstood a reference to the destruction and razing of the physical Temple in Jerusalem. The narrator comments in 2:21-22 that Jesus' disciples later remembered what he had said—after his resurrection!

2. Duration

Duration consists of the speed at which events in the discourse are narrated to the reader. In the manipulation of elements selected from the story level the narrator can choose to compress discourse-time, slow it down or speed it up by inserting large gaps into the narrative discourse. This creates the effect of jumping ahead in time. The insertion of a gap into the discourse-time is referred to as an *ellipsis*.²⁹ There are two types of ellipses: *explicit* and *implicit*. Explicit ellipses occur when the narrator explicitly mentions the passage of time in the discourse. Looking again at Jonah, the narrator mentions the three days Jonah spent in the belly of the fish (2:17), and notes Jonah's single day's journey into Nineveh (3:4). While such insertions in the text explicitly indicate the passage of time they can be either definite or indefinite. For example, the narrator does not indicate how long it took for the plant to grow over Jonah's head as he sat outside Nineveh (4:6): an indefinite period of time. But in 4:7 there is a definite mention of time passage ("the next day" the worm ate Jonah's shade-providing plant).

Implicit ellipses, on the other hand, are gaps in discourse-time *not* specifically mentioned by the narrator. They must be inferred by the reader. For instance, how long did it take Jonah to travel from his home to the port of Joppah? How long was he on the ship prior

²⁸ The more precise narratological terms for these are *analepsis* (flashbacks, something narrated from the past) and *prolepsis* (flashforwards, something narrated from the future). See Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 40.

²⁹ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 106.

to the arrival of the storm? How long did the storm last? How long did it take him to travel to Nineveh after being vomited up by the whale? How many days/weeks/months did he sit sulking outside Nineveh? The text does not explicitly contain this information, but obviously certain lengths of time passed. What is important to note is that the author/editor deemed these details unimportant for achieving the rhetorical strategies of the discourse.

In addition to using ellipses authors can also choose to speed up discourse-time or slow it down. In the first chapter of *Jonah*, time proceeds at what appears to be a relatively “normal” narrative pace. Although one can detect certain implicit ellipses as noted earlier, its chronological forward-movement appears to correspond with the linear movement of story-time. In the second chapter, however, where the reader encounters the prayer of Jonah from the belly of the fish, the pace changes. Several things occur. First there is a change in literary form from narrative to poetry. Second, the speed of narration is slowed down in what is referred to as a “descriptive pause.”³⁰ This change of both form and pace encourages the reader to focus on the content and motives of Jonah’s prayer. Is Jonah’s apparently sincere prayer of repentance legitimate, signalling a true change of heart and mind? Or is he merely paying lip service to get out of trouble? These questions must be evaluated against the events, actions and dialogue between Jonah and Yahweh later in the discourse. From the third chapter onwards, although there again are implicit ellipses, the literary form changes back to narrative and the discourse-time resumes its more or less normal chronological forward movement.

Finally, it bears brief mention that another way of compressing large amounts of chronological time into a single mention is accomplished by summarizing. The author can summarize in a few sentences or paragraphs large passages of time and omit all details of dialogue and actions, such as the narrator’s brief summary that encompasses a forty-year span of peacetime in *Judges* 5.31. Another example of summary is located in *Ezekiel* 11:25, which involves the merest summarizing mention that Ezekiel re-told to the elders in Babylon the events he experienced in his vision of Jerusalem within chapters 8-11:24.

3. *Frequency*

Frequency relates to the number of times an event taken from the story is narrated in the discourse. Usually this takes place on a 1=1 correspondence level: what happened once in the story is related once in the discourse. But sometimes an event is narrated more than once—and there may be significant differences between the two accounts. Note for example *1 Sam.* 31:1-6: according to the narrator’s account Saul fell on his own sword and died. But in *2 Sam.* 1:1-16, a young Amalekite re-tells the same account to David and takes personal credit for Saul’s death.

The Narrator

Every narrative discourse involves two factors: one is a narrative that is told, and the second involves a teller who relates that narrative.³¹ The narrator is the teller of the narrative, the voice that the reader “hears” when reading a narrative discourse. Because all biblical narratives are mediated to the reader by a narrator, the reader is thus dependent upon the narrator as an interpretative guide. On this point Eslinger observes: “As readers, all that we can know about the fictional story world is already filtered and interpreted for us by our ears, eyes, and nose—the biblical narrator.”³² The type of narrator chosen to present the narrative

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 93–94; Genette notes that this is a case “where some section of narrative discourse corresponds to a nonexistent diegetic duration.”

³¹ Eslinger, “Narratorial Situations,” 74.

³² *Ibid.*, 78.

discourse to the reader is the one that best serves the author's purposes. By creating a narrative discourse and presenting it to the reader using the vehicle of a narrator, authors are essentially constructing a "world of words."³³ These are narrated "worlds" into which we as readers are invited, such as for example Tolkien's Middle Earth or C.S. Lewis's Narnia.

In the process of analysing narratives, readers need to keep an open mind and continually ask questions of the text to understand how it operates on its own terms as a "world of words." In relating this world of words to readers there are two types of narrators authors typically utilize as rhetorical devices when creating a narrative discourse: external third-person or internal first-person narrators.

1. *External Third-Person Narrators*

External narrators occupy a higher diegetic level than characters on the discourse level. They inhabit a position effectively "above the discourse looking down" and are omniscient, omnipresent and privy to information no human could possibly know. Fokkelmann clarifies this separation of levels between that of the characters and the narrator by stating that

...there is an essential, even radical difference between narrator and character. This is a hierarchical difference, as the two parties move on totally different levels. In terms of communication, the narrator is above the narrative material and outside the story [discourse], as the transmitter of a message of which we are the recipients. The characters only live inside the story; they are part of that world that by virtue of a string of language signs is said to have existed then and there.³⁴

External biblical narrators are separated from the discourse on a higher diegetic level because they possess key information about the thoughts, motives and actions of the characters within the narrative. Importantly, they also have access to the very mind, thoughts, actions and motives of Yahweh. For example the external narrator of the book of Job provides the reader with critical information regarding the nature of the "cosmic bet" between Yahweh and Satan. However, Job and the other characters within the discourse, who operate on a lower diegetic level, are never privy to this information. Thus the reader "watches from above" as each character explores the reasons behind Job's suffering. That the reader is privy to this information that the characters do not know provides a fascinating interpretative insight relating to the rhetorical purposes of the book itself.

Because they possess so much information, external narrators appear to the reader to be entirely reliable, objective and trustworthy. Most biblical narratives are narrated in this fashion. (cf. Genesis and the four Gospels). The fact that the narrator of Genesis, for example, possesses specific information about the creation event in the first two chapters becomes significant in terms of the narrator's "insider knowledge" and therefore apparent reliability.

External narrators can be more or less involved in the presentation of the discourse, choosing either to stay "out of the picture" or intruding with narratorial comments to the reader. For example, the narrator of John constantly intrudes into the narrative discourse (2.22-25; 4.2, 54; 5.3b-4; etc.). This type of narrator is existentially "close" to the reader by constantly "whispering in the reader's ear" comments to guide interpretation. The third-person narrator of Genesis, on the other hand, intrudes much less frequently (cf. Gen. 1:24).

³³ Fokkelmann, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 207.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

There is a much wider existential gap between this type of narrator and the reader. Distant narrators leave more interpretative room for the reader, whereas intrusive narrators consistently guide the reader along by providing explanatory comments.

2. *Internal Character-Narrators*

The second type of narrator is an internal first-person character-narrator who operates on the same diegetic level as the characters in the narrative discourse. Such narrators are those who in one way or another participate in the action that the narration describes.³⁵ David Balfour in *Treasure Island* or David Copperfield are good examples of this sort of narrator. The narrator identifies him/herself as one of the characters and claims to recount true facts about him or herself.³⁶ A character-narrator of this sort shares or has shared either space or time with his fellow characters, and is conditioned by the same environmental constraints and existential limitations as the other characters.³⁷

Very few biblical narratives are narrated from a first-person perspective. Ezekiel is the only book narrated consistently throughout from this point of view. This is unique since the entire discourse is presented in a first-person narrative frame that puts forth the self-presentation of the prophet.³⁸ Much of Nehemiah is narrated in the first-person, while sections within Acts seem to indicate that Luke is the narrator. Existentially limited and conditioned like real humans, first-person narrators do not know what is happening in other places, are unaware of the motives of other characters, and do not know what others are thinking or doing when they are not present. Character-narrators simply do not have access such information.

First-person character-narrators such as Ezekiel reveal that they are inevitably tied to the discourse level by mentioning specific dates, times and locations, as well as by demonstrating their clear involvement in the events on the story level. For example, at the beginning of his narrated account Ezekiel physically places himself in Babylon by the Chebar River along with his fellow-exiles in the thirtieth year on the fifth day of the fourth month (Ez. 1:1-3). The discourse begins at this point and advances forward basically chronologically, although at times there are large ellipses. Within the discourse most of Ezekiel's oracles are specifically dated, but between the oracles he received there are often large chronological gaps where the text gives no indication as to what has happened in the interim.³⁹

Significantly, although the character-narrator Ezekiel is limited by all normal human limitations, he nonetheless possesses one critical advantage: due to his unique relationship with Yahweh he is privy to information that other characters cannot possibly know. Because the omniscient character Yahweh reveals it directly to him, Ezekiel knows for example what the future will hold regarding the fate of Jerusalem prior to its destruction (Ez: 15.8), what other characters are saying about him behind his back (Ez. 33:30-32) and what the future holds in store for the nation of Israel years into the future (Ez. 37: 40-48). This added

³⁵ Bertil Romberg, *Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First-Person Novel* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1977), 4.

³⁶ Bal, *Narratology*, 22.

³⁷ Eslinger, "Narratorial Situations," 79.

³⁸ Ellen G. Davis, "Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy." PhD Dissertation (Yale University, 1987), 120. Davis also argues that another unique element of the first-person frame is the evaluative structure Ezekiel establishes for his readers.

³⁹ For example, the oracle of Ezek. 20 is dated precisely at the seventh year, in the fifth month on the tenth day. He then receives three oracles that are undated but are placed in Chapters 21-22-23. The next dated oracle is in Chapter 24 at the ninth year, in the tenth month on the tenth day. What happened during the intervening years?

advantage lends credibility to his words since much of the discourse involves Ezekiel mediating the oracles of Yahweh directly to his exilic audience.

First-person narration carries with it both negative and positive aspects. Negatively, because they are limited and conditioned, character-narrators are open to the charge of unreliability since they only know what other characters tell them or what they discover in the process of events. They may have their own agendas and may not be reporting elements of the story to the reader in a trustworthy manner. For example, the unreliable narrator of the movie *Fight Club* is revealed (at the end of the narrative) to be suffering from schizophrenia. This revelation throws into question everything viewers may have believed about his earlier self-portrayal and point of view regarding his experiences and personality.

Positively, because first-person narrators narrate the discourse *after* the events have taken place, this gives them the advantage of retrospection. Eslinger points out that the internal narrator “can only give the reader a common, limited view of the interaction. His narratorial point of view is superior to that of the other characters’ only by advantage of hindsight.”⁴⁰ Importantly this aspect helps to establish the narrator’s credibility since the character-narrator already knows how the story ended before beginning to relate it to the reader.

The character-narrator’s *epic situation*—the actual point in time that the narrator is narrating the story to the reader—becomes a key to understanding first-person narratives.⁴¹ Looking again at Ezekiel, although his specific epic situation is never revealed to the reader, one can reasonably infer that he must be narrating the discourse from a point *after* these events occurred and is looking back upon them. In other words when he begins to narrate to the reader at the beginning of the discourse, Ezekiel the character-narrator already knows how the story ended. Although internal narrators are on the same level as the other characters, having the advantage of hindsight not only separates them from the other characters in the discourse but also adds to their credibility. This leads to what Romberg refers to as “natural dualism” on the part of the narrator who both narrates and experiences, who is simultaneously both old and young; it is a case of identical persons, and yet not the same person. Although Ezekiel is the same person *biologically* at the beginning and the end of the discourse, he is not the same person *ideologically* due to the changes he has undergone precisely because of his experiences.⁴²

Point of View

The discussion of differing narrators leads directly into a discussion of *point of view*. When reading a narrative discourse we the readers are exposed to one or more points of view. Also termed *focalization*, point of view involves the particular perspective or angle of vision from which the narrative is being told to the reader. Identifying the various points of view in a narrative becomes especially relevant for narrative sermons because it is important for preachers to distinguish between the various “voices” encountered within the biblical narrative. As discussed later, the particular point or points of view the preacher chooses to represent in the narrative sermon is of critical importance.

In order to determine point of view the reader can ask the following questions of the discourse: who is speaking at any given time, and to whom? Is the narrator’s voice being

⁴⁰ Eslinger, “Narratorial Situations,” 78.

⁴¹ Romberg, *Studies in the Narrative Technique*, 33. Understanding the epic situation of the narrator is important because one can track the various changes the narrator undergoes during the time span of the discourse (36).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 36. Although one today may take issue with levels of scientific precision regarding biological makeup, the point nonetheless stands in terms of the physicality of the character-narrator versus ideological changes due to experiences, etc.

heard—in which case the addressee is the reader—or is a particular character’s voice being heard? In that case, perhaps the addressee(s) are other characters within the narrative. In the field of narratology this is referred to as establishing the “voice hierarchy.” The reader must discriminate what is termed “definiteness of the address”—in other words, somebody is speaking *to* somebody else within the discourse.⁴³ It is crucial that readers establish exactly whose voice is speaking at any one time as this determines point of view.

Typically within narratives the point of view (or “voice”) heard telling the narrative to the reader belongs to that of the narrator. Whether internal or external, the narrator serves as the reader’s guide to interpreting the events being related within the narrative itself. But it is equally important to realize that *whenever one or more of the characters within the discourse speaks, the readers are being exposed to another point of view different than that of the narrator*. Fokkelmann warns readers on this point: “Our knowledge of a narrated situation expands if we keep asking ourselves whose perspective we are actually being given.”⁴⁴

The point of view of the narrator and that of various characters within the discourse may not necessarily be the same, or be in agreement. This is important to bear in mind. Moreover, the reader must be careful to weigh a particular speaker’s actions against his/her words, and observe what types of narrative comments the narrator may make *about* a particular character. As an example the narrator of Jonah makes a comment about his fleeing from Yahweh in 1:10b, but this statement must be compared to Jonah’s own point of view as he describes it throughout the rest of the discourse.

Narrators have two options when narrating the speech of a character: *direct* (“He said to her”), or *indirect* (reporting what a character said without directly stating it: “He told her what happened.”). The reader must always keep the following point in mind, as Bar-Efrat points out in this extended quotation:

Whenever the characters use direct speech in the narrative their point of view is, naturally, reflected. In these instances the narrator’s existence is least apparent, being pushed aside and becoming practically imperceptible. When the characters’ voices are heard the narrators’ voice is silent; and then to all intents and purposes the narrator is absent. In actual fact, however, the narrator is never absent from the narrative, for when the characters speak in their own voices, their speech does not have the same independence as that of characters in a play, because in narrative literature...the narrator prefaces the characters’ speech with a phrase, such as: ‘And he asked,’ ‘And she replied,’ ‘And X said to Y’ etc., making it clear that we hear the characters’ conversations only by virtue of the narrator’s assistance. The protagonists’ speech is always imbedded in that of the narrator, who gives them the floor. The narrator not only informs us who is speaking and to whom, but also sometimes defines the nature of the speech.⁴⁵

As readers we can be aware that biblical narratives are not static texts but dynamic texts that seek to influence the reader in a wide variety of ways. Among other influences, texts may be encouraging readers to adopt particular values or ideologies, change behavior, or establish new frames of reference. Within a narrative, the narrator generally strives to accomplish this rhetorical function. Eslinger observes in this connection: “All biblical narrative is mediated

⁴³ James Craig La Driere, “Voice and Address,” In *Dictionary of World Literature: Criticism-Forms-Technique* (New Revised Edition). Joseph T. Shipley, ed. (New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams & Co. 1960): 443.

⁴⁴ Fokkelmann, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 139.

⁴⁵ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 41–42.

by a narrator. The narrator is the reader's guide, a medium for the duration of the story."⁴⁶ He further states that the reason so much of the Bible is narrative is because it "is the genius of biblical authors to have developed a narrative vehicle — the external, unconditioned narrator — to explore what would otherwise be a no-man's-land of misconception and ignorance."⁴⁷

Biblical narrators play a critical interpretative role by helping the reader to negotiate the wide existential gap between humanity and God. External and omniscient narrators, by far the preferred narrative vehicle in the Bible, have apparently unlimited access to all sorts of information, including the thoughts, motives, words, and actions of Yahweh and of characters alike. The narrator then relates these elements to the reader within the narrative discourse and the task of the reader becomes to interpret what all of it means. However, despite this guidance Fokkelmann notes that most good narrators are

...rarely willing to disclose the "moral of the tale" at the end of his story. Good narrators are usually frugal with this; something should be left to guesswork. In fact, this process of weighing and guessing might be the very job the writer wants us to do. This draws us more actively into the story, so that we participate in the never-ending debate between various interpretations. In this way, we educate ourselves further, while the story, through the moral, legal and religious challenges arising from its unique events, confronts us with the question of what we are prepared to accept, and what not. So, the world of the text and that of the real reader touch, and regularly even collide for the benefit of our progressive awareness.⁴⁸

Characterization: Actors and Characters

It is important to distinguish between *actors* and *characters* when exploring the issue of characterization within narrative texts. Actors are agents (human or otherwise; it could be a dog or a machine) who perform certain actions on the diegetic *story* level in real space-time, whereas characters are located on the diegetic level of the *discourse*. In the process of narrativization, the effect of a character is created when transitioning from story to discourse level. For example, in the television show *Friends* the real-life actor David Schwimmer (corresponding to the *story* level) became the character Ross Geller (corresponding to the *discourse* level). Actors become characters when the narrator provides them with certain distinctive characteristics. Narrative character is essentially an image of an actor that the author wants the reader to reconstruct. *Characterization* therefore refers to the way in which authors creatively shape the way readers perceive each character in the narrative discourse.⁴⁹ Bal explains how characterization functions in narratives:

When a character appears for the first time, we do not yet know very much about it. The qualities that are implied in the first presentation are not all "grasped" by the reader. In the course of the narrative the relevant characteristics are repeated so often—in a different form, however—that they emerge more and more clearly.⁵⁰

There are basically two ways in which the narrator constructs a character for the reader: *directly* and *indirectly* (see Figure 3). Direct characterization occurs when the narrator

⁴⁶ Eslinger, "Narratorial Situations," 78.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁸ Fokkelmann, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 148–9.

⁴⁹ Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change*, 101.

⁵⁰ Bal, *Narratology*, 125.

straightforwardly informs the reader with a direct statement about certain traits of a character in the discourse. As an example, the narrator of John makes a direct statement concerning Judas being a thief in Jn. 12:4-6. This aspect of character definition lends itself to interpretative closure and definitiveness and moreover puts the reader in a more passive role because the narrator provides the information in a straightforward fashion.

When characterization is indirect, the narrator may portray a character indirectly in terms of actions or dialogue without any direct commentary. Rimmon-Kenan notes that “a presentation is indirect when rather than mentioning a trait, it displays and exemplifies it in certain ways.”⁵¹ In the Book of Ezekiel, for example, this is mostly what the reader finds of the character-narrator: his characterization is revealed indirectly by his actions. Mostly he obeys Yahweh, but at times Ezekiel disputes with him (as in Ezek. 4:14-15). Other aspects of his characterization are revealed indirectly by suggestions embedded within his scarce dialogue with Yahweh or other characters, his fellow-exiles.

Biblical narratives typically involve characterization utilizing the following five possibilities: 1) the actions of characters, 2) their speech, 3) their external appearance, 4) their physical environment and 5) analogously by comparing characters with other characters.⁵² For example, the way in which the narrator characterizes Jonah utilizes many of these attributes. Readers note his actions (evading his responsibilities by fleeing to Tarshish, 1:1); his angry disputation with Yahweh over the fate of the vine and the city (4); his physical environment east of Nineveh (4:5-6); and finally, by analogy the other characters in the discourse appear far more willing to repent than does Jonah (the sailors, 1:16; Ninevites, 3:6-9).

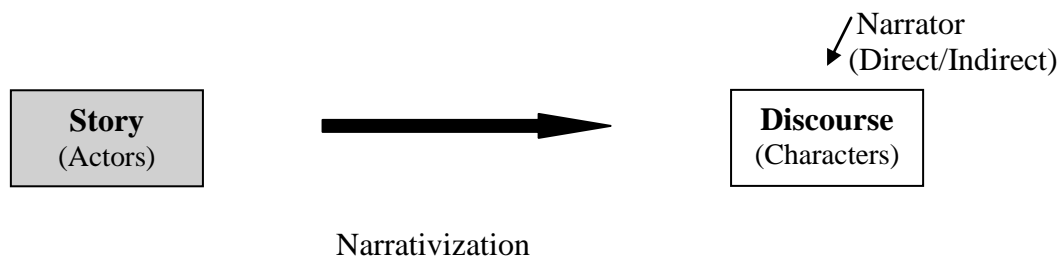


Figure 3.

Plot and Setting

Two final elements of narrative remain: *plot* and *setting*. Plot is a rhetorical device that helps to move the discourse-line along and is usually centred upon a conflict of some sort. There are many different types of potential conflicts: humans vs. humans; a person vs. God; a person vs. nature; a person vs. an animal; and a person vs. him/herself. Typically the plot conflict progresses along six stages. First, the narrative opens, typically with a description of the setting and the introduction of one or more characters are introduced. Second, there is the introduction of some sort of conflict whereby the protagonist begins to encounter a problem or undergoes a task. Third, the plot intensifies as more complications arise, thus making the task or conflict more difficult. Fourth, a climax occurs, the “turning point,” or crux of the story. Fifth, there is a resolution of the conflict or *denouement*. At this stage the conflict is either successfully completed or perhaps ends in abject failure. The sixth and final stage is the ending, which may include comments by the narrator evaluating what

⁵¹ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 61.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 70. She notes that “When two characters are presented in similar circumstances, the similarity or contrast between their behaviour emphasizes the characteristics of both” (70).

just happened, or an evaluation of what the protagonist may or may not have learned from the experience with the conflict. Perhaps others have benefited from the conflict or its resolution.⁵³

R. Alan Culpepper points out that within narrative discourse, plot functions “to establish internal coherence and convey the significance of the story... [therefore, the author] selected, shaped, and arranged materials so that its sequence established a certain progression and causality.”⁵⁴ The narrator has narrativized the raw materials from the story level by selectively arranging the elements drawn from the story level into the narrative discourse. This serves rhetorically to give the reader precisely the right amount of information in the right order and at the right time.⁵⁵ Readers are drawn into the story by identifying with characters as they experience conflicts: readers may root for, sympathize with or boo a particular character. All these responses are accomplished through use of a careful narrative strategy that guides the telling of the narrative.⁵⁶

When considering the way conflict functions within plot, the book of Jonah demonstrates a multiplicity of narrative conflicts. The character Jonah has conflicts with nature (the storm, the fish, the sun, the worm and hot wind); conflicts with Yahweh (fleeing in 1:1; arguing with Yahweh in 4); and finally possibly internal conflicts within himself that reveal his motives (his apparently “sincere” prayer within the fish, chapter 2; and his motives for fleeing to Tarshish are finally revealed in 4:1-3).

Setting is the second element of plot and involves a physical place or space, in effect the “stage” on which the various elements of the narrative discourse take place. Setting involves two elements: *place* and *time*. The reader should also be aware that while in biblical narratives this involves not only actual physical places (Egypt, Jerusalem or Babylon) often these can also convey theological meaning. Places like Jerusalem, Zion, the temple, Babylon, the East, and “the land” all seem to represent elements of theological significance. Time, on the other hand, involves both the time the particular narrative took place (cf. at night, John 3:2; or a season such as Passover in the Passion narratives), as well as the movement of time within the discourse itself (days, weeks, months, years).

Again, Jonah provides excellent examples of these elements of setting. At the beginning of the discourse, Jonah was at home in the Promised Land (theologically a good place) and was told to go to Nineveh (a theologically and physically bad place inhabited by cruel pagans). The Jews were not a seafaring race, and moreover, within biblical literature the sea is typically characterized as a threatening, unpredictable and dangerous place (Ps. 107:2-32). Being east of Nineveh is associated with those in the biblical narrative fleeing east who typically end up outside the land and away from the presence of God.⁵⁷ The reader also encounters internal time movement (three days in the fish; one day of a three day journey into Nineveh).

Implications for Homiletics

This introduction to the discipline of narratology has identified and explored certain basic elements of how narratives function. By learning to study narrative texts while looking for these elements, one can begin to understand how meaning is produced through the means

⁵³ Adapted from Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change*, 106–107.

⁵⁴ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 85.

⁵⁵ Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change*, 106.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁷ This pattern is established in Genesis: Cain murders Abel and goes east (4:16); Lot went east and got into trouble (13:11); Ishmael’s descendants go east and live in hostility (25:17–19).

of a narrative discourse. Through the process of narrativization, in the movement from story to discourse and the creation of characters from actors, an author constructs a “narrative world of words.” The author then invites the reader to inhabit this world; but in order to understand its meaning this world must be encountered on its own terms.⁵⁸ As Culpepper points out:

Meaning is produced in the experience of reading the text as a whole and making the mental moves the text calls for its reader to make. . . . As one reads [a narrative], the voice of the narrator introduces the narrative world of the text, its characters, values, norms, conflicts, and the events which constitute the plot of the story.⁵⁹

The authors of biblical narratives effectively make the claim that the narrative world they have fashioned is, or at least reflects, something that is more ‘real’ than the world the reader has encountered previously. The text is therefore a mirror in which readers can ‘see’ the world in which they live.⁶⁰ Creating an experience for the listeners from a narrative text invites them to participate in that world of words. Such a homiletic potentially elevates the role of the audience to that of active participants in the making of meaning. In this connection Long believes “that the best stories, the ones most faithful to real experience, have enough ambiguity built into them to force the hearer to make a decision about the story’s meaning and application. The idea is that a story listener cannot be passive but must participate with the narrator in creating the world of the story.”⁶¹

Homileticians have long observed that much of contemporary preaching involves third-person observational language: the preacher speaks about God objectively or explains (ostensibly objectively) what they believe the Scriptures mean. Preachers have tended to explain narrative texts by reducing them to objective propositions or abstract principles that are then illustrated and applied to the hearers’ lives. Such practice not only potentially does violence to the text by changing its rhetorical form from one type to another, but also can objectify biblical narratives and turn Christianity into a formulaic faith. Worse still, as David Buttrick notes: “The grave difficulty with a third-person observational language in preaching is that it usurps God’s position and, in so doing, turns God into an ‘object,’ and God’s Word into a rational truth.”⁶² Because the form of the sermon shapes the faith of the listeners⁶³ it is important for preachers to explore the purposes of preaching itself.

Suggestions for Narrative Preaching Models

There are at least three implications of this outline of narratology as it relates to narrative preaching. First, understanding and employing these concepts explored within this study can aid in the tasks of biblical exegesis. Understanding and analyzing the “world of words” of biblical narrative texts on their own terms can give preachers greater facility to re-create that world and then invite listening audiences into it.

Second, the tools of narratology can suggest ways in which the form, rhetorical dynamics, and rhetorical function of the biblical narrative can exercise a greater influence

⁵⁸ Fokkelmann notes that readers are invited into this “narrated world” of narrative texts. Through the process of reading, this world “and that of the real reader touch, and regularly even collide for the benefit of our progressive awareness” (*Reading Biblical Narrative*, 148–149).

⁵⁹ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

⁶¹ Long, *The Witness of Preaching Second Edition*, 40–41.

⁶² David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 56.

⁶³ Craddock, *Preaching*, 174.

upon the ultimate form of the sermon. In this way, form and function are united both in the exegesis and proclamation phase of sermon preparation and delivery. This brings the added value of sermons that replicate the open-ended nature of many biblical narratives. As Long points out open-ended narrative sermons require listeners to “have to roll up their sleeves and get involved in the project of making meaning in the sermon.”⁶⁴

A third and final suggestion focuses in on one such narratological element: point of view. When preparing a sermon from a narrative biblical text, preachers typically have the tendency to identify with certain characters or points of view in the text and against others. On this tendency Craddock observes that “usually in the course of intense engagement with a text the interpreter, quite unconsciously, identifies with or is against particular persons or actions in the text.”⁶⁵ Craddock cautions that preachers should make a conscious effort to turn away from the tendency to identify with what he terms are the “best seats in the text.”⁶⁶ Preachers might instead make the effort to discover and articulate alternative points of view from the text. For example, should not the listeners be exposed to the points of view of the priest and the Levite who (with apparently clean consciences) passed by the beaten man who was left for dead in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10. 25-37)? How difficult would it be for the preacher to give Judas a voice in the sermon to explain his point of view? Would it be possible to construct a sympathetic reading of Potiphar’s wife in Gen 39, who is so often negatively characterized as a seductive and scheming *femme fatale*? Narrative analysis invites preachers to identify to some extent with the actions and motives of these and other characters.

Pushing still further, Buttrick argues that “our pulpit language must relate to a new twentieth-century consciousness that is simultaneous, perspectival, and complex.”⁶⁷ Homileticians have noted that biblical texts are often interpreted and preached from a white, Western, male and Protestant point of view. However, in the current Western tradition preachers are proclaiming biblical messages to increasingly postmodern audiences who quickly tire of the same interpretative or theological angle of vision presented week after week. These audiences are capable of holding in tension multiple points of view on reality.

One possible way forward, therefore, involves multiple point-of-view narrative sermons. Such sermons are difficult to manage and often discouraged for splitting rhetorical and cognitive focus. But if the preacher understands how to use narrative elements to *glue these perspectives together narratively*, that is, in service to narrative meaning or function, it is possible that more of the postmodern complexity around us can be welcomed into our sermon preparation and delivery without sacrificing clarity or homiletical focus. Such sermons would invite the audience to experience—and to wrestle with—previously-unheard points of view. Such preaching would become more open-ended trusting the audience with the freedom to exercise their own narratology – placing multiple points of view into conversation and finishing the sermon with the aid of the Spirit. Creating this type of homiletical culture may be difficult to establish in practice but it brings the distinct possibility of increased dialogue, participation and much higher ownership over potential applications. Such sermons can enable the listener to form a sense of identity by means of identification with, and theological exploration of, the points of view represented by many characters within the biblical narratives. This outcome becomes a distinct possibility when listeners grapple with potentially new understandings from what may be familiar biblical narratives.

⁶⁴ Long, *The Witness of Preaching Second Edition*, 41.

⁶⁵ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 119–120.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶⁷ Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 56.